

## **Report on**

### **The 3rd Rutgers Workshop on Chinese Philosophy (RWCP)**

#### **CONVERSATIONS WITH WESTERN PHILOSOPHERS**

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The 3<sup>rd</sup> Rutgers Workshop on Chinese Philosophy (RWCP), organized by Tao Jiang (Rutgers), Ruth Chang (Rutgers), and Stephen Angle (Wesleyan), continued the success of the RWCP conferences of the past two years. This year, the workshop included four sessions. Each presenter had been asked to find a Western philosopher to conduct a dialogue on a common theme in Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy. That resulted in four highly suggestive and fruitful conversations: the importance of studying non-Western philosophy, theories of truth, yuan and the “bourgeois predicament,” and the foundations for moral relativism.

#### **Wagging Tails and Riding Elephants: Why Study Non-Western Philosophy?**

Philip J. Ivanhoe (CUHK) gave the first talk titled “Wagging Tails and Riding Elephants: Why Study Non-Western Philosophy?” He advanced two arguments for why we should study non-Western philosophy. First, philosophers, at least those working in ethics and political theory who advocate the principles of a wide “reflective equilibrium,” are not being true to their principles or are assuming, irresponsibly, that there are no wise views outside the Western canon. Nowadays in philosophy and political science departments, the survey classes discuss more or less only the works in the Western canon. This seems to suggest that one ought to begin one’s study of these disciplines from these sources. If one were to take, as many in ethical and political theory would, the work in the social sciences to be necessary for a wide reflective equilibrium, then one should incorporate non-Western philosophy (which includes the values and norms that people actually had and practiced) in one’s reflection and theorizing.

Ivanhoe then turned to Owen Flanagan’s (his conversant) approach to philosophy as particularly revealing for the benefits of exploring the connection between Western and non-Western philosophy and as exemplifying an authentic wide reflective equilibrium. In his discussion, Ivanhoe focused on Flanagan’s work on the Moral Modularity Hypothesis, which draws resources from ethics, neuroscience, and non-Western philosophy (Buddhism, Mohism, Legalism, and Chinese and Korean Confucianism). He compared Flanagan’s approach to the method of saving the phenomena as described and employed by Aristotle. In contrast, it is astonishing that so few people recognize that careful and sympathetic consideration of other traditions is imperative for anyone advocating a more naturalized method in ethics and political theory. Moreover, human beings across different times and cultures have worked on the same problems in ethics

and political theory, and they have produced many successful societies and cultures, all of which should be and can be taken as data in our theorizing. Hence, the fruitfulness of Flanagan's approach underscores the importance of "going empirical," "going comparative," and "going beyond the comfort of one's home traditions" and "deeply and sympathetically...engaging other traditions and points of views and to work on developing the knowledge, skills, and virtues needed for productive engagement with alternative points of view."

Ivanhoe's second argument was based on a case study of Jonathan Haidt's use of metaphors in his work on the relationship between reason and emotion in ethical justification. In his work on social institutionalism and Moral Foundations Theory, Haidt employs two metaphors to represent the relationship between reason and emotion: (1) "(the emotional) dog and its (rational) tail" and (2) "(the emotional) elephant and its (rational) rider." But these metaphors seem to rely on, according to Ivanhoe, a "fundamental dichotomy between reason and emotion." However, East Asian traditions as well as some parts of the Western traditions have rejected such a dichotomy and conceived of reason "in the form of a guide, organizer, contributor, and molder of emotions...always and in various ways deeply involved with orienting, augmenting, extending, and shaping our emotions." Confucianism provides a clear example of such ideas: Mengzi often uses metaphors of taste to describe the development of moral understanding; *Great Learning* compares moral insight to "disliking a bad odor or liking something beautiful." The upshot is that Haidt's work, and many other works in the area, can benefit from engaging with non-Western traditions as they can bring "something quite new and important to the table."

Ivanhoe's talk was followed by a response from Owen Flanagan (Duke). Flanagan thanked Ivanhoe's discussion of his work and emphasized the importance and necessity of comparative philosophy in the modern cosmopolitan world. He observes that much work in empirical psychology is based on North American students WEIRD descriptions: Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic. But that is not representative of the human condition for the past five thousand years. We have to look into the multicultural world and make sure our sample is truly representative. Nevertheless, Flanagan raises some concerns about applying the principle of wide reflective equilibrium. He distinguishes between narrow v.s. wide reflective equilibrium, and he worries that some cases are too far away to take into the equilibrium. For example, if one were to incorporate part of Buddhist holism and think that Hitler could be one's daughter, it could bring about drastic changes to one's moral theory. Moreover, the differences in the different traditions can suggest that they are really incommensurable---we might be clueless as to how to put them together. Next, Flanagan discussed his own approach to engaging non-Western traditions in the domain of moral psychology. He suggested that moral modularity was really invented by Mengzi, evident in his theory of the sprouts of virtue: the psychological sprouts and the normative sprouts. He noted that the key difference between Mengzi's views and other views is that in Mengzi's theory there is natural teleology associated with the psychological sprouts---with proper cultivation the person with the psychological sprouts will become Junzi.

## A Substantive Pluralist Theory of Truth in Early Chinese Philosophy: Wang Chong on Shi (实)

Alexus McLeod (Colorado State University) gave the second talk titled “A Substantive Pluralist Theory of Truth in Early Chinese Philosophy: Wang Chong on Shi (实).” He first observed that it might seem that Chinese philosophers did not have a conception of truth and did not offer theories of truth. Such an appearance might be due to two factors: (1) their theories of truth are very different from those we find in Western philosophical thought, and there is a cluster of terms and concepts associated with truth (for one thing, Chinese philosophers allow non-semantic notions of truth, such as in “true person” and “true friend”); (2) much attention has focused on the pre-Han philosophers whose principal concerns were ethics and political philosophy. McLeod argued that we can find theories of truth if we look closely at the Han period. He suggested that, in fact, Wang Chong’s *Lunheng* (Balanced Discourses) offered an interesting and substantive pluralist theory of truth. Wang Chong used the term Shi (实), which we can translate as “truth” and interpret his theory of shi (实) as a “substantive pluralist” theory of truth.

At the heart of Wang’s theory, the property of shi is “the property of having properties that we actually do and should seek when we appraise statements.” Such an identification makes truth “rest in part on normativity.” However, according to McLeod, the descriptive element (what we do) and the normative element (what we should do) are both basic facts. Together, they explain what makes a particular statement true (shi). McLeod emphasized that Wang’s theory is pluralist in the sense that a statement is true just in case it has the properties we do and should seek when appraising sentences, but it is not necessary for there to be only one particular property playing the truth role for that statement. This helps Wang’s account to avoid some common objections to pluralism about truth. For example, consider the following mixed conjunction:

(1) Mars is the 4<sup>th</sup> closet planet to the sun and murder is wrong.  
(1) is true when it has properties that we do and should seek, but it is not necessary for it to have a single property to do that job. Each of the conjunct in (1), according to McLeod, can have “lower-level properties we do and should seek.” Since they both possess properties we do and should seek, the conjunction (1) possesses these properties as well.

Wang Chong’s view also avoids the attendant problems of a standard “second-order property” approach, because shi is a substantive second-order property. It is substantive, because the behavioral aspect of truth plays an important role and, in particular, alignment of proper action with Dao. This raises another worry about the “basicness” of normativity. McLeod suggested that a good case can be made for this, and we can take normativity to be metaphysically basic, but not independent or inaccessible to reason. There are some interesting implications of Wang’s account. For example, truth turns out to be “as broad and robust as human activity itself.” One picture consistent with this is that dao (or tian) and humanity co-create reality, which means that human beings play a role in the construction of reality (without completely determining it). McLeod concluded that Wang Chong’s pluralist theory offers an explanation for why we take truth to be so “central, basic, important, and difficult.”

McLeod's talk was followed by a response from Gila Sher (UCSD). She notes that in Wang's conception of truth, truth has a complex structure: there is a general, second order concept: TRUE-FALSE (Shi 1- Xu); there are also particular, first order concepts which vary from domains to domains. For example, in the physical domain, the first order concept (ran – fou) is correspondence; in the moral domain, the first order concept (shi 2 – fei) is moral acceptability, and the truth bearers are persons and actions. Second, she notes that truth is both factual (descriptive) and normative: X is true just in case X has the properties we do and should seek when evaluating X in its designated domain.

Sher also raised several critical questions. First, what is common to being the case and being the right thing to do? In virtue of what are they both truth-properties? Second, is acceptability always associated with truth? It becomes difficult to imagine that especially in the case of mundane conventions: it is not acceptable to drive on the right hand side of the road; it is not acceptable to eat noodles with one's hands; it is not acceptable to say certain things on American campuses. But do they have to do with truth? Third, what is the relation between the normativity and factuality of truth? Fourth, if truth in the physical domain is correspondence, then in what sense is it a normative concept? If truth in the moral domain is rightness (social acceptability), then in what sense is it a descriptive concept? Perhaps we can follow Frege and think that it is not right to say what is not the case. So by the norm of assertion or the norm of belief, truth has a certain moral dimension even in the physical domain. Finally, Sher returned to the contemporary debate on truth, she discussed some similarities and differences between Wang's theory and other substantive theories of truth.

## **Yuan 怨 in Early Chinese Confucian Thought: With Insights into Escaping the Predicament**

Winnie Sung (NTU) gave the third talk titled “Yuan 怨 in Early Chinese Confucian Thought: With Insights into Escaping the Predicament.” Sung sought to respond to the “bourgeois predicament” problem raised by Jay Wallace’s book *The View from Here*. The predicament has its origin in the conflicts between objectionable or unjustifiable events in the past and the agent’s retrospective attitude on those events. For example, an agent lacks justification but the agent later on could not come to regret her earlier decisions (e.g. Gauguin’s case); an agent experiences lamentable personal conditions that later give one’s life meaning (e.g. the hearing-impaired case). This line of thought extends to our affirmation of life in general---we would like to affirm our lives unconditionally, including the social and historical conditions that bring them about. But often they involve objectionable or unjustifiable events. Such conflicts give rise to the “bourgeois predicament.”

Sung drew on insights from the early Confucian conception of yuan 怨, a reactive attitude about certain given conditions of our life, and she proposes a response to the predicament that is broadly consistent with Wallace’s own suggestion. There is one crucial addition: for the early Confucians, “from here, we should direct our eyes outward to others and the world, instead of inward to the conditions we ourselves are in.” Sung highlights seven key observations about how yuan is discussed in early Confucian texts in support of her interpretation of the early Confucian conception of yuan.

1. Yuan is a negative reactive feeling or attitude a subject has towards some inconveniences, disadvantages, or deprivation of benefits to oneself.
2. Even though Yuan is a negative reactive attitude or feeling, the early Confucians do not seem to think that it is always reprehensible for one to have or feel yuan.
3. Although the early Confucians do not condemn those who have yuan, they still seem to view yuan generally with disfavor, for a ren person does not hold yuan.
4. There is something particularly problematic about continually holding yuan and recalling the past event that triggers yuan.
5. Yuan is a specific kind of negative reactive attitude or feeling that is conceptually different from other negative reactive attitudes like anger or blame, even though phenomenally they might be similar to the subject.
6. Yuan is used as a noun to describe the feeling or psychological state that the subject is in and it is not always clear what the object of yuan is. But in instances the object is made clear, the object is often in a hierarchically superior to the subject.
7. Yuan is often a reaction specific to special relationships i.e. a subject tends to have yuan towards those she perceives as standing in special relation to her (e.g. parents or siblings).

In summary: early texts suggest that yuan is not so much the subject’s response to the moral wrongs in what’s done to the subject as it is the subject’s response to the determining role external forces have on an unpleasant condition that she finds herself (e.g. yuan parents). Sung also noted that for the early Confucians, it is good to have yuan,

but it is bad to hold on to it for too long (不宿怨). With respect to escaping the predicament, the early Confucians would add that instead of indulging ourselves on the view that we are passively shaped and swayed by historical forces and conditions, it's imperative for us to shift our attention to other people.

R. Jay Wallace (Berkeley) responded to Sung's talk. He agreed with Sung that the notion of yuan has some affinities with themes from his book *The View from Here*. His response consisted in nine questions, which I shall briefly summarize below.

Questions about yuan.

1. In what sense is yuan "reactive?"
2. If yuan is a negative emotion, is it just as a matter of unpleasant affect or does it have any volitional element, like the wish that things should have been otherwise?
3. Yuan is described as directed just at things outside the agent's control. This distinguishes yuan from regret, which seems more generic. But why should there be a distinctive negative reaction that only takes unfortunate events of this kind as its object?
4. Yuan seems more narrow than regret in another aspect: it is self-directed, in the sense that it seems to be about unfortunate state of oneself and not about any unfortunate state of the world that does not involve oneself in particular.
5. Is it right to think of yuan as a negative attitude that is distinctively about the fact that one lacks control over bad things or that one is powerless or a victim?

Questions about ren.

6. It seems that the person of ren, in so far as they are agents who engage with the social world and take advantages of the opportunities to exercise their capacities for agency to good ends, would not dwell on things that occasion yuan, as they are not under one's direct control.
7. If (6) is right, then what is the connection between yuan and ren (even if one doesn't rule out the other, there is no deep connection between them)?
8. On Wallace's view, there may be a deeper connection between the predicament and our obligation: perhaps the very fact of one's implication in unfortunate past events grounds an obligation to make something of one's life in the here and now.
9. Is there a similar connection (as in 8) for yuan and ren? That is, perhaps in a similar way, expressions of ren can be appropriate ways of overcoming the unfortunate states to which yuan is a response.

## Harmony, Relativism, and Natural Daos

Hagop Sarkissian (CUNY, Baruch College) gave the final talk, titled “Harmony, Relativism, and Natural Daos: Confucian Reflections on Velleman’s *Foundations for Moral Relativism*.” As his title suggests, Sarkissian chose David Velleman (NYU) as his conversant. In the first half of his talk, Sarkissian summarized some important topics from Velleman’s book. According to Velleman, moralities come from “a human drive to sociality---a drive to connect, be in communion with, and otherwise get along with others.” That is, normativity consists of “nothing more than the normative pull one feels to be social and interpretable to others.” Moreover, such a drive leads human communities to adopt certain communal *doables*---shared social ontology that allows for mutual interpretation. Furthermore, Velleman takes a functional view of morality---it serves to coordinate human behavior.

In the second half of his talk, Sarkissian argued that there are interesting parallels between classical Confucianism and Velleman’s theory, and that they can enrich one another. First, Velleman’s *doables* are analogous with the classical Confucian conception of the *li* (禮), or rites, or ritual propriety. (The term *li* has much broader meanings than it seems. It ranges from formal ceremonial rituals to basic rules of personal decorum.) For Velleman, *li* can be seen as a set of *doables*. For the early Confucians, *li* were “a near sacred cultural inheritance constituting the wise practices of ancient moral sages and exemplars filtered down through dynasties of the past.” So they are not just any set of *doables*; they had “a distinctively spiritual dimension.” Moreover, in classical Confucianism, according to Sarkissian, there is “strong aversion to deviation from this social ontology.” The *Analects* display strong ritual conservatism, and the justification comes from the function of *li* in maintaining social harmony. It is in day-to-day mundane situations (e.g. finding a parking spot, or waiting in lines) that “one must regulate oneself and revert to ritualized interactions so as to preserve the possibility of cooperation.” In short, “social harmony requires *overcoming oneself*.” Next, Sarkissian suggested that there are two broad norms in early Confucian ethics: interpret others charitably; be interpretable. His way of characterizing the two norms invoked the notions of discernment (an ability to understand mood, intentions, and preoccupations that other people might have) and self-awareness (an ability to be conscientious of oneself as an actor in the social world and one’s potential to influence others). If everyone is socialized according to *li*, then life is effortless (*wu-wei* 无为). Finally, Sarkissian raised a question about the demarcation of the moral and the conventional. He suggested that the Confucian conception of *yi* (义) or rightness can serve to distinguish and counterbalance the *li*. He concludes that the Confucian notion of harmony (和) might be a fruitful way to expand Velleman’s notion of getting along with each other. He surprised the audience by acting out the epilogue: a dialogue among Velleman, Kongzi (Sarkissian), Mengzi (Flanagan), and Xunzi (Angle). They agreed that Velleman’s way and Confucian way converge; but with one difference: the Confucians are not relativists. It opened up many interesting questions, all of which deserve further explorations. But it was late and the conference was ending. So Kongzi suggested that people go out for drinks and he would pay.

Velleman replied that he thought Sarkissian understood his book thoroughly and provided an accurate and charitable summary. Velleman agreed with the words “Velleman” said in Sarkissian’s concluding dialogue. He agreed that his interlocutors’ absolutism is “the product of historical coincidence, specifically, the coincidence of their lacking familiarity with other ways of life as advanced as their own.” He compared the Confucian absolutism with Aristotle’s absolutism---Aristotle’s meta-theory is relativist but it is combined with “a normative theory that privileges a particular way of life.” To reply to the worry that endorsing such comparisons between ways of life is incompatible with relativism, Velleman answered that even though he denies the existence of universally valid norms, he accepts the possibility of ubiquitous norms or even a necessarily ubiquitous norm---the norm of mutual intelligibility. So he is not a thoroughgoing normative relativist, but he is a *moral* relativist because he believes in no necessarily ubiquitous moral norms. That puts him somewhere between an expressivist such as Allan Gibbard and a Kantian such as Christine Korsgaard. Such necessarily ubiquitous aim of intelligibility is, for Velleman, “a point of reference for comparisons between ways of life as more or less conducive to that aim.” And it guarantees that there can be perspective-neutral comparisons between ways of life.