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CRITICAL NOTICE OF JOEL J. KUPPERMAN,
*LEARNING FROM ASIAN PHILOSOPHY*¹

Some years ago, a graduate student of mine began research in Confucian philosophy armed with the resolve to understand Confucian thought from 'within its own frameworks and reasoning methodologies'. The rationale for this decision was a rather admirable one: it aimed to uphold the intellectual integrity of the Confucian tradition as separate and distinct from her own philosophical background, mainstream Western philosophy. In other words, the student was concerned that particular biases and assumptions she may have acquired through her training predominantly in Western philosophical streams would distort or restrict her understanding of Confucian philosophy.

My student's resolve, though apparently important, placed her study of the Confucian tradition in a rather precarious position. The study of a traditional philosophy is inevitably set against a backdrop of whether, and if so, how much of the integrity of the tradition should be preserved. This methodological issue is associated with difficulties in translation of key terms and concepts, interpretation of a classical language, the nature of the project, its socio-historical background, and the authenticity of texts.

This does not mean that such projects are impossible, nor that they should not be attempted. Many scholars have found engaging in comparative philosophy an enriching and worthwhile task because insights may be fruitfully adapted across cultural and social boundaries to question existing assumptions and to arrive at effective and plausible syntheses of ideas or concepts from different traditions. An inherent difficulty of engaging in comparative philosophy is described in terse fashion by Kupperman. On the one hand, any approach that says Asian philosopher X is just like Western philosopher Y is overly simplistic. On the other hand, Western

¹ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, viii + 208.

philosophers approaching Asian philosophy are normally encountering a second (philosophical) language, for which at least some rules of translation into familiar terms would be useful (pp. 80-81).

Kupperman points out an even deeper problem: if one has already been thinking about a problem (in one's own context) then one tends to be better able to see the point of various remarks and assumptions (in Asian philosophy). However, use of an 'alien philosophical framework' to interpret philosophy from another tradition—a strategy that my graduate student was attempting to avoid—brings mixed blessings. Kupperman has captured one of the dilemmas in comparative philosophy. For instance, an understanding of Aristotelian virtue ethics may assist in and deepen one's readings in Confucian and Mencian moral development. If one is not careful in one's earnestness to draw similarities, however, the risks of error and distortion may be multiplied (p. 81).

A scholar in comparative philosophy needs to be armed with the motto not to be overly enthusiastic in finding differences or similarities between different traditions. To overstate differences would result in a self-defeating dead end: for what is the aim of comparison and dialogue, if the two traditions have little or nothing in common, and if the point of discussion is to dwell on their irreconcilable differences. Surely, as scholars have noted, time and again we do see interestingly different answers to the same questions, and we benefit from bringing the different perspectives to bear on these questions, or we detect differences in philosophical traditions that are brought about by their different emphases, rather than their absolute oppositions. On the other hand, to exaggerate the similarities between two traditions such that their structural frameworks are ignored or their basic assumptions neglected would result in an insipid thesis that lacks intellectual integrity.

It seems that what is needed is some kind of balance, a mean, that seeks to highlight significant similarities without compromising on basic or structural aspects of the philosophies. How might this be achieved, for example, in Confucian philosophy? Many contemporary scholars of Confucian thought feel the need to justify their field in response to the criticism that Confucianism is a philosophy fit

for life in ancient China and has little to offer to the contemporary reader. In that regard, one of the key targets is the concept *li*, referring to normative social and religious ritual behaviour.² Defenders of the applicability of Confucian thought to modern life have invariably had to deal with this concept. Many argue that, from the accounts in the *Analects* of Confucius, these practices may be modified—as Confucius himself did modify them (see *Analects* 9:3)—in order to suit changing needs.³ However, one has to be careful not to carry this ‘flexibility’ too far, resulting in a philosophy that is unrecognisable as Confucian thought. One needs to be sensitive to fundamental features of a philosophical tradition, and hence should not be too keen to explain away or disregard the conservatism inherent in Confucian thought.⁴

There are a number of methodological resources available to those who seek to achieve a middle way in comparative philosophy. One strategy is to engage in the analysis of concepts in the original language. Indeed, some would argue that the study of a traditional philosophy ought to include a close study of the classical language itself. In Chinese philosophy, for example, it has been argued that the use of philological analysis is crucial to an understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy, and that this is necessitated in part by the symbolic nature of Chinese characters.⁵ However, while this is an important methodological tool, there is ongoing debate regarding the extent to which philosophical conclusions are to be dictated by philological analysis.⁶

Another strategy for successful engagement in comparative philosophy is the exercise of sensitivity to the reasoning styles and to what may count as reasonable argumentation in classical Asian texts. Kupperman is well aware of this need and

² See, for instance, Michael Martin, “Ritual Action (*Li*) in Confucius and Hsun Tzu”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 73, No.1, 1995, pp. 13-30.

³ See, for example, Cua, Antonio, “The Concept of Paradigmatic Individuals in the Ethics of Confucius”, in *Inquiry*, 14, 1971, pp. 41-53.

⁴ Shun, Kwong-loi, “*Jen* and *Li* in the *Analects*”, in *Philosophy East and West*, 43 (3), 1993, pp. 457-479.

⁵ See Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987) and Hall and Ames “Against the Greying of Confucius: Responses to Gregor Paul and Michael Martin”, in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 18, 1991, pp. 333-347.

⁶ Michael Martin, Review of David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 17, 1990, pp. 495-503, and Michael Martin, “A Rejoinder to Hall and Ames”, in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 18, 1991, pp. 489-493.

emphasises the importance of a broader view of philosophical reasons than the Anglo-American philosophical tradition would normally allow (pp. 9ff). His treatment of this topic is thoughtful and convincing. For instance, he establishes three particular points relating to what can count as reasons in philosophy. First, “.. part of the reasonable support for a philosophical position may lie outside of the reasons contained in the philosophy.” (p. 10). Secondly, “.. a coherence that cannot be explicated in terms of deductive reasoning can count heavily in favor of a philosophy.” (p. 10). Finally, “if a philosopher refers to phenomena or to aspects of the world that lend support to the philosophy, this reference counts as a reason in favor of the philosophy.” (p. 11). On this note, Kupperman suggests that

there are more reasons and arguments in philosophy than those that are clearly presented on the page as such. This character of reasons and arguments has implications for the ways in which a philosophy communicates to a reader. .. Philosophy that is intended to be perspicacious about the world, or especially about human lives, will not be self-contained. The reader’s mind must leave the page and make appropriate connections between the work and the real world. [Kupperman 1999: 11]

Kupperman’s exploration highlights the richness of reasoning styles and content across the different philosophical traditions. From a practical point of view, it follows that the recognition of the diversity of what counts as philosophical reasons would enrich and broaden one’s perspectives and thinking. Few would doubt that this is a primary objective of philosophical inquiry.

A third methodological resource, one that Kupperman exploits successfully in this book, is that of hermeneutic interpretation. Kupperman is careful to point out that the content of the classical Asian philosophies may be somewhat different from that of mainstream Western philosophy in that the former almost inevitably deals with life experiences. Furthermore, many of these texts are cryptic and contain intricate structures of argument. Hence, there is room for more interpretive work in traditional Asian philosophy.

It is obvious that there are limits to how these traditional philosophies may be adapted. Of course, no one is going to suggest that the customary social and religious rituals which are part of the lattice of Confucian thought, or the social caste system in Hindu thought, is or ought to be relevant to life in contemporary liberal democratic societies.

There is, however, some room for hermeneutic work in understanding these traditional philosophies, over and above what may be read into translations of particular concepts. Debates about emphases in traditions—for instance, regarding the nature of the Daoist project, or the tension between the Mahayana and Theravada Buddhistic traditions—lead to significant differences in how the philosophies are to be understood.

The creative adaptation of some of the Asian philosophies is the feature of Kupperman's book that most recommends it. Like many scholars in this field, Kupperman is interested not only in the intrinsic value of these classical philosophies but also in the insights that may be drawn from them to address some problems or gaps in contemporary Western thought. In this book, he applies interpretive strategies creatively at various points to allow important insights to be drawn from these traditional philosophies.

Kupperman uses the interpretive, hermeneutic strategy most effectively in three of his arguments in the book. The first is the argument for naturalness in Confucian moral practice and cultivation, the second a discussion on moral progress and the third an exploration of the nature and domain of religious ethics.

In his discussion of Confucian morality, Kupperman makes a convincing case for the relevance of Confucian insights into moral practice and development. He argues that Confucius' naturalness is not only the key to an ideal moral nature but also to an ideal psychological harmony. The Confucian superior man is one who participates in social ritual with ease and spontaneity. Within this framework, there is a role for tradition and community as constitutive factors

I want to suggest ... that Confucius is uniquely good in his articulation of a moral psychology that explores the role of both tradition and community in

the advanced stages of development of a very good self. He also offers a model in which tradition and community are not merely causal contributors but also are constitutive of the self that develops. [Kupperman 1999: 47].

In chapters 2 and 3, Kupperman's discussion of the Confucian conception of self and of moral development is sensitive, at various points rightly preferring to maintain a certain ambiguity about factors which constitute the self, rather than strive for precision.

Furthermore, his attempt to weave a view of the self, which he terms the 'self-as-collage', with notions of character and the cultivation of an integrated self, is both novel and creative. Notable scholars such as Herbert Fingarette have, rather successfully, attempted to render accounts of Confucian thought accessible to a general readership.⁷ In *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, Fingarette reminds us that the Confucian focus on social ritual is indeed not alien to a modern readership; much of what we are used to, such as handshakes and favours, assumes a 'magical' quality because there are aspects of culture and tradition that we all subscribe to and can take for granted. In that connection, the ease with which one engages in these social rituals is a mark of one's success, so to speak, as a cultivated member of the community. Kupperman's analysis of naturalness transcends the topic of social ritual, however. He takes the discussion to the more profound level of character development. Here, he argues persuasively, very much retaining the tenor and feel of Confucian thought, that the Confucian vision of the gentleman is as one who is naturally at ease in a range of situations and who both manages to integrate the various demands and obligations cast upon him and to successfully maintain a deeper psychological unity.

The second theme that Kupperman successfully works through is that of moral progress (Chapter 13). He argues that, in the case of moral progress, what we are looking for is not merely an improvement in the actual behaviour of persons. Rather, we also want to focus on the 'stock of ways that are readily available to cultivated people for thinking about moral issues' [135]. A primary constituent of

moral progress is that, with increased knowledge, certain things become unthinkable, e.g., slavery.

Kupperman's definition of moral progress effectively redirects the reader from the accidental features of moral progress—improvements in behaviour—to its more fundamental characteristics. He forces us to look at the moral tradition in which behaviours as well as moral sensitivity and vision are integral. In Kupperman's words, 'moral traditions inevitably involve selective vision and sensitivity' [138]. Given this thesis, we are urged by the argument in this chapter to avoid one-sidedness in one's moral vision [139]. Characterising the emphases in the different traditions as justice-centred (Western philosophical tradition) and as connectedness-centred (Asian philosophical tradition), Kupperman makes the point that both traditions should learn from each other. He states, though, that his emphasis would be on the improvement of Western traditions through learning from Asian traditions [164].

Thirdly, in Chapters 17 and 18, Kupperman provides a fresh and enlightening interpretation of the nature of religious ethics. Here, he moves beyond the overlaps between religious ethics and some key identifiable core features of morality. According to Kupperman, the distinctive feature of religious ethics as contrasted with the core of normative morality (which generally focuses on rules that make human society possible) is its supra-moral dimension [171]. This suggestion is, in itself, not novel. What is interesting about Kupperman's analysis, however, is the application of the notion of prescriptivism (inspired by moral philosopher Richard Hare) to religious morality. On Kupperman's view, ordinary morality may prescribe injunctions, coupled with social pressure to fulfil these as well as incitement to the agent to feel guilty in the event of a transgression [172]. However, it is rare for ordinary morality to prescribe how a person should live his or her life or to provide prescriptions for acceptable or correct desires and thoughts. By contrast, the supra-moral dimension of religious ethics demands that we pay heed to a person's thoughts and desires. Hence, it runs far deeper than most ordinary accounts of morality which focus on particular actions or behaviours

⁷ Fingarette, Herbert, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, (New York: Harper, 1972).

which are considered specifically 'moral' ones, such as decisions whether or not to steal, or to fulfil an obligation, and so on. Drawing briefly from Buddhist thought, Kupperman argues that what is characteristic of religious ethics is that it 'typically does not leave people alone most of the time' [175].

Kupperman's distinction between the supra-moral dimension of religious ethics and the characteristic core of ordinary morality is perhaps too clean. A central component of most, if not all, versions of virtue ethics, is the development of character or virtue. This point aside, however, the suggestion that religious ethics, as defined in the book, refuses to see the moral development of persons merely in terms of isolated or fragmented decisions or actions is a thought-provoking one. It forces the reader to rethink the nature and domain of ethics. It also provides a richer and more complex view of human behaviour, seen in terms of a person's capacity to integrate various aspects of life, grounded in a psychological unity – or disunity, as the case may be.

In spite of the various achievements of this book, there are some shortcomings. At points in the book, Kupperman's references to traditional sources is rather cursory. For instance, in his discussion of flexibility in Confucian ethics, recent debates on the concept *yi* are, rather surprisingly, not mentioned.⁸ In the discussion of the supra-moral in Buddhism (in Chapter 18), he does not move beyond the articulation of two goals in Buddhism in very general terms. In addition, in his exploration of the topic of moral tradition and progress (Chapter 13), one wonders why he does not mention insights that may be drawn from philosophical Daoism, in both the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* philosophies, that are knowingly critical of tradition and received knowledge; the texts in this tradition are renowned for their penetrating discourses on this subject matter.

One might be prepared to overlook the summary references to the primary sources on the basis that that may even be intended; Kupperman's project in *Learning from Asian Philosophy* is, as he argues, not a 'normal scholarly book in Asian philosophy' in that a book of that sort would provide a balanced and

⁸ Literature in this area is abundant; Hall and Ames' *Thinking Through Confucius* (*op.cit.*) is a good starting point.

comprehensive survey of the major traditions [3]. Furthermore, the book is intended for a readership trained predominantly in 'Western philosophy', with a view to informing or enriching views held within western philosophical streams. Kupperman states plainly that there will be 'little attempt at balance or comprehensiveness' [3].

With this aim of the project in mind, we could see the brief accounts of the traditional philosophies functioning as inspirational strategies, inviting its readers personally to delve into the substantial and intricate aspects of Asian philosophies. If that were Kupperman's intention, the book may be considered a success.

Notwithstanding its strengths, however, a conspicuous weakness of the book is a tendency to generalise rather broadly over the different philosophical traditions. This is surprising, given that the book is, at various points, introspective and self-aware regarding potential problems in comparative philosophy. For example, at one point, we are reminded of three common oversimplifications in comparative philosophy. The first kind to avoid is overly stark contrasts between East and West, the second is generalising broadly over Asian or Western thought, and the third is a tendency to assume that all of the advantages will be to one side or the other of two contrasting approaches [123-5]. In view of his own warnings, Kupperman carefully states that what he terms 'Western philosophy' is not necessarily uniform, and that some of the ideas supplied by the Asian traditions may already be provided, though to a lesser extent, by one or other of the philosophers belonging to the so-called Western tradition.

Given these explicit reminders, it thus comes as a surprise when, at points, Kupperman seems to forget (in particular, the second kind of) oversimplification in his own work. In his *Introduction*, he describes how Western philosophy can benefit from insights shed by Asian traditions of thought [4]. In view of this aim, he sets up as a foil (to be contrasted with the richness of ideas in the Asian traditions) what he terms 'CWPCS' – 'contemporary Western philosophical common sense' [5]. Given Kupperman's emphatic note that it should not simply be assumed that so-called Western philosophy is uniform, the reader is left rather puzzled regarding the coverage intended by CWPCS. Are there any common features one can confidently

identify, across the range of styles, reasoning structures and content, in the philosophies that are normally assumed to come under the umbrella term of 'Western philosophy'? What are the shared characteristics of ancient Greek, Anglo-American, Renaissance, Enlightenment and contemporary European philosophies, if any? Clearly, the generalisation is problematic, as are Kupperman's frequent references to 'Western philosophy' through the book.

The most serious objection to Kupperman's project, however, will come from those who work in the area of Indian philosophy. For it is here that we find his most flagrant generalisation: the book, contrary to its title, *Learning from Asian Philosophy*, includes relatively few references to the Indian philosophical traditions. While there is one chapter (out of a total of twenty-two) that deals at length with Buddhist thought—albeit in a very general way—all of the other chapters contain only passing references, if at all, to concepts or ideas from the Indian philosophical traditions.

This is noticeable and unfortunate as, at points in the book, the analysis would have benefited greatly from reference to these traditions. In the discussions in Chapters 5 and 6 on the fluid self, and in Chapter 10 on choice, decision-making and responsibility for example, references to various themes and ideas in the Indian philosophical tradition would have significantly enriched the debate. At a very general level, unpacking some of the subtle distinctions in the concepts of self in Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism would have benefited this project. More specifically, however, treatment of the Buddhist idea of the composite self, constituted by the five components constantly in flux, would have enhanced the notions of the fluid self and the self-as-collage that Kupperman upholds. Similarly, the comprehensiveness of the Hindu four ends of man, and the heavy burden of ethical responsibility for all other forms of life in Jainism could have played key roles in the investigations into notions of choice and responsibility. In other words, these various Indian philosophies could have been used effectively to advance Kupperman's stance against the fragmentation of self and the compartmentalisation of ethics, two connected key themes that are reiterated through the book. This

neglect or omission is regrettable, given that the promise of the book is to learn from 'Asian traditions'.

Another shortcoming of the book is its fragmented nature. As noted in the *Preface* to the book, reprints of earlier articles written by the author constitute a significant proportion of this book, the earliest dated 1968. This in itself is not unusual in a book of this sort; Kupperman notes that significant changes have been made to some of these earlier articles. Nonetheless, he should have taken more care to integrate the different papers within the book. As it stands, the book presents as a loose collection of papers, rather than as a monograph. While Kupperman does not pretend that the book is a coherent treatise, it would have been more satisfying had it been composed in such a way. Furthermore, it would not have been too difficult to unify the chapters under a number of general themes, one of them being the ethical self.

The lack of integration between chapters is most obvious where Kupperman discusses notions of choice, decision-making and responsibility (Chapter 10). Here, the discussion would have benefited from an additional layer of complexity had Kupperman interwoven discussions in this chapter with his earlier conclusions (in Chapters 5 and 6) on ideas of the fluid self. For instance, if one begins with the assumption of a fluid self, the idea of personal responsibility is cast into doubt at the outset; it would immediately appear more complicated, and perhaps more interesting and realistic. Surprisingly and rather frustratingly, Kupperman does not integrate these themes in his discussion.

In spite of these limitations, *Learning from Asian Philosophy* is most effective in demonstrating to readers trained predominantly in Western philosophical traditions, the interpretive nature of research in Asian and comparative philosophy. In view of that, perhaps my graduate student should be encouraged to read this book. Perhaps she might then realise that, while it is important to preserve the intellectual, social and historical integrity of traditional philosophies, we cannot, as it were, get into Confucius' head to work out what his 'original' philosophy or intentions may be. This student may achieve more fruitful and satisfying research outcomes with a balanced procedure, working with, rather than against,

interpretative and creative approaches. This is a valuable point she could learn from Kupperman's book.

Finally and importantly, Kupperman's book is successful in casting into doubt a perception that research in Asian philosophy is only intended for those few who maintain interest in these ancient systems of thought. The book manages to establish that much of the interest in and continuing significance of, Asian and comparative philosophy rests in its relevance to contemporary life and thought. His exploration of issues within the field of moral, religious and social and political philosophy will perhaps serve as a catalyst in prompting scholars to look again to traditional philosophies, and even to take their insights further afield, into other major philosophical areas such as metaphysics and epistemology.