
Scholar's Corner: Confucianism in and for the Modern World

Philosophical Systematicity and Its Implications for Confucian and Comparative Philosophy

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I. Philosophical Systematicity

As someone who often works on philosophical issues in old texts, I have learned to read for something I call *philosophical systematicity*. It is difficult to say what this is, precisely. The rough idea is that it is the cognitive state or disposition of having (1) stable and at least somewhat generalizable views about some particular philosophical issue and (2) some sense of the implications of those views for other issues. It is easier to illuminate philosophical systematicity by pointing to some examples and reliable indicators of it. Some present-day philosophers of language exhibit philosophical systematicity in their treatment of truth. If you ask this sort of philosopher whether she thinks propositions are true in virtue of corresponding to facts, or of cohering with certain other propositions, or of having some sort of pragmatic value or social acceptability, chances are good that she will have views about this question, views that she can describe in their general contours. Perhaps she will endorse a particular theory of truth. In that case we should expect her to have a relatively coherent account of truth, one that is largely consistent with her views about knowledge and mental representation. But even if she does not endorse a theory of truth, she will be far more mindful of the implications of her views on truth (ambivalent or otherwise) for other issues, and that mindfulness will

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make her more inclined to respond to some remarks than others. So when someone suggests in passing that there is no point in debating matters of taste, she will be more inclined to agree, disagree, or fine-tune that suggestion depending on her particular views about truth. Perhaps she will not be mindful of her views on truth in every context. Maybe when talking about a piece of music that she particularly loves, she forgets herself and uses language that is not consistent with those views (all philosophers forget themselves now and then). But still, she lives in a community of inquiry that holds her accountable for her views on truth, so we can expect that her views will be more systematic than ordinary people's views tend to be.

Philosophical systematicity is not a necessary condition for good or fruitful philosophical work. There are thinkers that put forward provocative arguments or lines of thought but do not worry much about how much they hang together with other views. Still, as a general rule of thumb, you are far more likely to find good philosophy on a particular topic where the thinker who produced it had thought about it in a philosophically systematic way. Systematic philosophical thinking is much less likely to arrive at obviously mistaken or indefensible positions, as the thinker has likely had to defend and fine-tune her views in response to major objections or worries. For this reason, among others, systematic philosophical thinking on a particular issue is much more likely to produce subtle or nuanced accounts and arguments, ones that are sensitive to the demands of good living and coherent thinking in many different areas of inquiry. Moreover, having some systematic philosophical views about some topic is part of what it means to "have a philosophy of" that topic. So, whether or not we can find the right kind of systematicity will have implications for questions like, "Did Kongzi (Confucius) have a philosophy about the process-like nature of existence?" or "Did Kant have a philosophy of family relationships?"

II. Philosophical Systematicity in Historical Confucianism

Here is an observation about the philosophical study of Confucianism: there is a good deal of interpretive work that presupposes philosophical

systematicity where there is little evidence for it. To my knowledge, almost none of the influential Confucian thinkers worried much about how one can derive values from facts alone. Some may have advanced philosophical theories or worldviews that are somewhat friendlier to present-day naturalism, but none asked whether their views posited the existence of entities that could be confirmed by the natural sciences. If an interpreter takes some poetic license with the *Analects* or the *Mengzi* (*Mencius*), she might find some passages that hint at or presuppose a pragmatic theory of truth or a process metaphysics, but there are also many passages that assume a claim is true by virtue of correspondence, and many that treat substances as unproblematic metaphysical entities. In any case, there are no reliable indicators of systematic philosophical thinking about these issues. In the classical Confucian tradition, one does not find debates about whether all things that exist (or all the important ones) must exist in a process-like or substance-like manner. There is no Confucian in the autochthonous tradition that saw it as a deep problem to explain whether values as such can be derived entirely from facts alone.

Of course, it might be the case that Mengzi entertained the idea that all existence is process-like, but there is no strong evidence for this, and in any case, finding one or two passages that could be plausibly interpreted as evidence for a process metaphysics in the *Mengzi* is a far cry from showing that Mengzi developed *philosophically systematic* views on this issue. What would count as evidence of philosophical systematicity regarding process metaphysics are things like this: a textual record showing that Mengzi and his interlocutors had debates about the process-like or substance-like nature of existing things or existence itself, historical accounts that show that educated people of his time were expected to have views about this matter, or some technical terms or jargon that help to distinguish process-like existence from substance-like existence. In the absence of this sort of evidence, I would be loath to attribute either a process metaphysics or a substance metaphysics to Mengzi.

A good example of a topic on which Mengzi did have philosophically systematic views is the ethics of special relationships—e.g. to parents, children, siblings, spouses, and close friends. Evidence for this abounds.

By Mengzi's time, Confucians had long been defending the distinctive value and ethical significance of these relationships. As the famous "Upright Gong" (*Zhi Gong* 直躬) discussion in the *Analects* suggests, they understood that some of the feelings and obligations necessary to maintain good parent-child relationships could only be preserved at the cost of some duties to obey political authorities, and they accepted (perhaps embraced) that controversial implication (*Analects* 13.18). When the Mohists made a point of disagreeing with Confucians about the importance of special relationships, they developed an entire doctrine, "impartial caring" (*jian'ai* 兼愛), which quite arguably became the centerpiece of Mohist ethics and one of the two or three biggest points of contention with Confucians.¹ In the *Mengzi*, we see Mengzi engaging in a proxy debate with the Mohist Yi Zhi about impartial caring, one that suggests that both proponents and critics of impartial caring had developed nuanced positions and arguments about it (*Mengzi* 3A.5). Mengzi also shows signs of thinking systematically about the special demands of different kinds of relationships, highlighting different virtues or values that are particularly salient for purposes of realizing and maintaining each sort of relationship—e.g., love or familial affection (*qin* 親) is most important for parent-child relationships whereas trust or trustworthiness (*xin* 信) is most important for friendships (*Mengzi* 3A.4).

The works of the influential Confucians are brimming with philosophical systematicity, but it is striking how little of the present-day scholarship is focused on the issues about which they had systematic philosophical views. As I read Xunzi, one of his great projects is to develop and defend the authority of ethical experts steeped in a time-tested tradition, according to which non-experts defer to the better judgment of recognized experts in the tradition, in multiple ways that are relatively circumscribed by considerations of social and epistemic authority, domains of knowledge, and the demands of good teaching and learning (Hutton forthcoming; Stalnaker 2020; Tiwald 2012). Insofar as Xunzi is concerned with epistemology, he seems most interested

¹ Mozi, chaps. 14–16.

in certain epistemic virtues and the sources of epistemic failure, and to describe the epistemic virtues he borrows three terms—emptiness (*xu* 虛), singlemindedness (*yi* 壹), and stillness (*jing* 靜)—that resonate with usages also found in early Daoist texts.² The Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) arguably have nothing to say about deriving values as such from facts alone, but they developed a vast technical apparatus to account for little-noticed subtleties in moral psychology and the acquisition of moral knowledge, and at least seven centuries of subsequent neo-Confucian philosophers followed their lead.³ They took an interest in and developed special terms for different kinds of empathy or sympathy (Tiwald 2020). They argued about how best to understand the feelings of unity or oneness with others in humane virtue (Ivanhoe 2018). They wrote and talked extensively about all of the ways in which certain virtues can entail or require the instantiation of other virtues (one neo-Confucian philosopher, Chen Chun 陳淳 [1159-1223], tried to catalog the different ways).⁴ And the neo-Confucians participated in a sprawling, unparalleled, centuries-long debate about the particular ways in which virtuous people acquire moral knowledge and become acquainted with its content or objects. Yes, they also cared somewhat about the downsides of testimonial and experiential knowledge, and about the elusive relationship between *qi* (vital stuff that occupies space and time) and *li* (metaphysical patterns or principles that account for order).⁵ In these latter two issues, twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophers rightly see opportunities to ask some of their familiar questions of the neo-Confucian texts. But it is striking how much work there is to do even to have something like a basic grasp of their views on the issues mentioned above, about which the neo-Confucians did so much systematic philosophical work.

² *Xunzi*, chap. 21; see Stalnaker (2003).

³ See Angle and Tiwald (2017), Cheng and Cheng (1981), Zhu Xi (1986, 2019).

⁴ See Chen (1983, *juan* 1) and Ch'en (1986, *juan* 1).

⁵ See Zuo (2019), Ng (2021), and Angle and Tiwald (2017).

III. Implications for Scholarship on Confucian Philosophy

Given what I have said so far, it might be tempting to read this as a polemic against certain kinds of ahistorical scholarship on Confucianism, such as work on Mengzi's anti-essentialism or process metaphysics, or Zhu Xi's response to the fact-value distinction, or Confucian theories of human and individual rights. In fact, that is not my intention at all. Just as philosophy survived and thrived in the medieval European period by developing Jewish, Christian, and Islamic answers to philosophical questions that predated them, so too do Confucian innovations and adaptations help philosophy to survive and thrive in this global era. I think there are many instances in which it is useful to ask, for example, whether a process or substance metaphysics would be more compatible with Mengzi's other views, or what Mengzi might have said about the nature of existence after reading Aristotle and Whitehead, or what Kongzi might have said about rights after reading Locke or Mill.

But I still think that the presence or absence of philosophically systematic thought about a particular topic should have major implications for how we conduct our scholarship. I do not think it is right or particularly helpful to speak about fictional entities like Mengzi's process metaphysics as though they actually existed. Furthermore, because there is no fact of the matter about Mengzi's views on the relevant issues in metaphysics, papers and books on Mengzi's process metaphysics are primarily constructive, not primarily historical or exegetical, and for many reasons it behooves both the scholar and her readers to be aware that the project is primarily constructive.

Another reason to be mindful is that evidence of philosophical systematicity gives us much more license to speculate about the implicit arguments or deep structure of thought that a philosopher might be presupposing. For example, in one memorable but laconic argument, Mengzi suggests that someone who practices impartial caring is, in effect, "without a father" and thus lives like an animal rather than a human being (*Mengzi* 3B.9). We do not know exactly what he meant by this, but I am comfortable piecing together a subtle and largely implicit view about the nature of relationships and their special role in being

human, knowing that the “without a father” argument arises from a lifetime of debate with Mohists and interlocutors informed by Mohist arguments, and that he seemed to think that there is some special significance in having a human nature and yet failing to retain human qualities (*Mengzi* 2A.6, 3A.4, 6A.8). By contrast, I am not comfortable inferring that Mengzi has a process conception of *xing* 性 (nature, natural dispositions) from the fact that some other passages decline to characterize things in terms of essences (which is characteristic of Aristotelian substance-metaphysical accounts of natural kinds).⁶ And even if we did have direct evidence for a process conception of *xing*, there is vanishingly little reason to think that there were deep, systematic reasons for preferring a process conception to a substance conception. According to my sense of good, basic exegetical principles, speculation about Mengzi’s deep reasons for rejecting impartial caring will be disputable but nevertheless vastly better warranted than speculation about Mengzi’s deep reasons for preferring a process conception of *xing*.

A final implication does have something to do with what sort of topics are worth studying in historical Confucian philosophy. One of the arguments for reading old texts from longstanding, philosophically rich, but previously marginalized traditions appeals to the value of considering different conceptual possibilities or lines of argument, especially where those possibilities and arguments come pre-vetted and pre-refined by many centuries of debate. To be sure, this appeal to difference does not provide the only justification for reading historical Confucian philosophy, but insofar as the argument does have some purchase, it is mostly an argument for reading the Confucians on topics that they thought about in a systematic way, not so much an argument for reading them on topics that just happen to interest us. If this sort of difference really is a value worth pursuing, that’s probably because when philosophers engage in wholesale speculation about another person’s views or reasons, they cannot help but import and revisit many of the assumptions that come most naturally to them, so that their speculative reconstruction ends up being much more about them or the

⁶ As does Roger Ames in, for example, Ames (1991 and 2002).

philosophers that they are most familiar with than about the person whose different worldview they are trying to understand. And the record of scholarly work on Mengzi's process metaphysics or Zhu Xi's solution to the fact-value problem bear this out—often, such scholarship ends up reproducing Dewey, Rorty, or twentieth-century metaethics rather than something truly and interestingly different. In contrast, I do not think we have even begun to appreciate the astonishing alterity of traditional Confucian sources on the issues in moral agency and epistemology, which were the beating heart of so much systematic philosophical thinking in Confucianism.

IV. Conclusion

I have made a number of controversial claims. It is controversial, I suppose, that there are certain aforementioned issues about which the Confucians did not have systematic philosophical views (such as the fact-value problem or process metaphysics), and other issues about which they clearly did. Someday soon, I think, this will not be so controversial, but for now there will be scholars who dispute it. Another set of controversies concerns how we should conduct and represent our own research where there is no evidence of philosophical systematicity. I have proposed some general rules of thumb, but I do not expect to see a great deal of consensus about those in the near or even more distant future. Still, it is useful to be aware of the challenges raised here. If nothing else, I hope that more awareness of them will encourage scholars of Confucian philosophy to read somewhat more deliberately for evidence of systematic philosophical thinking. Generally speaking, if you see debate about an issue, or see students or correspondents pressing a philosopher on an issue, or see technical distinctions or terms of art forming around an issue, that is good reason to think that there will be a certain richness and sophistication of philosophical views and arguments to be found by doing close readings of the texts on that issue. In many other cases, I think, what we find is not so much the fruit of close readings but of our own inventiveness as interpreters.

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