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Kwong-loi Shun, David B. Wong (eds.), *Confucian Ethics, A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 228 pp

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- 1 The truth is plain: there are no such [natural or human] rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns”¹This old saying of Alasdair MacIntyre underpins the entire intellectual itinerary of this thinker who is one of the principal contemporary critics of liberalism² and the guest of honour in the book under review here. This itinerary, which led him from Marx to Aristotelian Thomism, has seen him in more recent times engage in a dialogue with intellectuals inspired by Chinese thought and, in particular, Confucianism. Indeed, MacIntyre has now become a reference throughout the Chinese world where he is widely read and discussed³.
- 2 *Confucian Ethics, A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community*, is a collective work edited by Kwong-shun Loi and David B. Wong. Following an introduction, it is divided into three parts, the first of which deals with rights and the community, the second with the individual subject and the cultivation of the self, with the final part being taken up by MacIntyre’s response to the preceding contributions.
- 3 The pieces which focus on the subject and the cultivation of the self (chapters 5 to 8) are primarily related to ancient Chinese thought. Joel J. Kupperman shows how Confucius stresses the importance of both the community and tradition in the formation of the subject. Cheng Chung-ying proposes a very interesting theory of selfhood, although MacIntyre unfortunately seems to be ignorant of its context (the relation between Confucianism and Kantism in the twentieth century). Bryan W. Van Norden looks into the “Mencian” virtue of righteousness (yi), capable of manifesting itself in the life of every person through a feeling of shame. His comparative approach

enables him to show, in particular, that the question of shame was of greater significance in ancient China than in Greece and that this was not without an influence on later traditions. This first part concludes with Kwong-loi Shun examining the conception of the person in early Confucian thought, how it was incorporated into society, and the problems posed by the use of Western concepts such as those of “rights” or “autonomy”.

- 4 In the section of the work devoted to rights and the community (chapters 1 to 4), Chad Hansen proposes a methodology for comparative ethics which he illustrates by considering the question of human rights (Chapter 4). This part of the work also contains contributions by Craig K. Ihara, David B. Wong and Henry Rosemont, Jr., which seem to us to bring out the most interesting responses from MacIntyre.
- 5 In the first chapter, Craig K. Ihara attacks the idea according to which individual rights are thought of as being the necessary focus of any ethics. Without denying the operational character of the notion of rights in a complex world, he defends the “Confucian” view of human dignity rooted in a sense of belonging to a community where everyone has a role to play, just like in a sporting team.
- 6 It is common practice to distinguish between two conceptions of morality, the one based on the rights of the individual (rights-centred moralities), the other on the promotion of the good of the community (community-centred moralities). David B. Wong defends first of all the idea that there can also be democratic rights based on the idea of community (even if they may differ from rights in relation to individual autonomy). He then puts forward the view that the very ideas of right and community are interdependent and that both are necessary to realise democratic values. As the notion of a common good is problematic (being subject to competing interpretations), he finally advocates a community that is open to pluralism and capable of settling its differences through mechanisms of arbitration and conciliation.
- 7 Chapter 3 aims to be a “Confucian critique of modern Western liberalism.” In it, Henry Rosemont Jr. regards theories of rights based on the idea of free, autonomous, rational individuals who are motivated by their self-interests as being fraught with problems. To his mind, such views only serve in the end to mask a morally condemnable distribution of wealth. Praising the social, political and economic progress of countries like Malaysia and Singapore, he considers that the “democratic” model they offer may, in spite of its deficiencies, be better than what can be found in the United States. His view is based on a Confucian conception of individuals as being located in a community, to which they have a responsibility, rather than on the idea of autonomy, which merely offers a passive invitation to respect the rights of others. The writer further suggests that we should now go beyond the Western liberal tradition by thinking about the political underpinned by the economy: the American legal system, conceived to protect the rights of autonomous individuals, comes to protect those of major companies (and their abuses) in the same way. Classical Confucianism thus offers an alternative, if one accepts the need for a critique of American ideology.
- 8 MacIntyre’s responses are extremely interesting and relevant, in view of his position as an outsider with respect to Confucianism. Furthermore, beyond China and Confucianism, they allow us to gain insight into some of the major ideas that he has gradually developed over the course of his long intellectual career.
- 9 MacIntyre stresses the fact that the very idea of rights evolved in the West alongside that of the Nation-State. Faced with the growing power of the State and the complex

nature of modern societies, the citizen has needed, and still needs, increased protection. This is true today, in any modern state, whether it is in Asia, the West or elsewhere, failing which the relation of the individual to the state would run the risk of taking on an unbearable, oppressive character (p. 217). It is this assertion that sees him distance himself from Rosemont's remarks, at the same time as he very certainly shares some of the latter's criticisms of the American system and individual subjective rights. We should remember that MacIntyre's intellectual development included an association with the British New Left and therefore with a whole critique of capitalist society grounded in Marxism, where the opposition between real and formal rights was crucial. With the failure of communism, and for want of any foreseeable and credible alternative, MacIntyre was finally won over to the cause of liberal democracy, although he continues to point out its limitations—indeed, he remains fundamentally hostile to it—and assigns responsibility for forms of sociability to the community. According to MacIntyre, therefore, the individual today has a two-fold sense of belonging. This means that classical Confucianism and the type of conception of the person that it proposes cannot for him be embodied in the modern State (p. 217); rather, it is in the community that their relevance today can be found.

- 10 MacIntyre then takes up David Wong's idea about Confucian rights being "grounded in the community," which he associates with the notion of "role" put forward by Ihara. Such rights do not simply correspond to a lack of constraint, but take on a positive dimension, as they are "those that individuals possess qua potential contributors to the goods of a harmonious social order" (p. 215). MacIntyre is at pains throughout his work to reject the notion of formal and negative freedom conceived simply in relation to an absence of constraint; according to him, this can only lead in the end to moral relativism⁴. The fact that his commentary makes no mention of the term "positive freedom" may be due to his caution about Confucianism of which he does not have a full understanding. Yet it is to this very term, that is to say, a freedom that is also bound up with the good and the virtuous, that he appeals. In his view, it is in the community and in tradition that this freedom is most likely to be developed.
- 11 MacIntyre sees the grounding of the practical rationality of the individual in a tradition in which living and thinking are closely associated with each other as something very positive⁵. In Shun and Wong's book he applies this idea to Confucianism at the same time as telling us that it needs reconfiguring as a tradition (p. 214), since the concrete forms of social practices that it might engender cannot be those of the past (he mentions in particular the role of women). In this he echoes another aspect of his commentary regarding the notion of rights. He argues that a precondition of any dialogue with Western theorists would be for followers of Confucianism to discuss first among each other the crisis brought about in their tradition by modernity.
- 12 This brings us to our concluding remarks where we should emphasise one objective limitation of the book. The editors have chosen to give pride of place to contributions that have both an exclusively philosophical approach and a field of reference that is especially that of Chinese antiquity. The historical dimension of Confucianism, its current developments and the impact of modernity are thus largely passed over in silence. This does not take anything away from the interest and quality of the individual contributions, but the overall organisation of the work no doubt limits MacIntyre's possibilities for reacting. In defence of the editors, it can be said of course that it was plainly impossible to cover everything; indeed, the very fact that they have

been able to offer a space for dialogue between specialists of Confucianism and a major representative of present-day Western philosophy is already a remarkable achievement in itself.

13 Translated by Peter Brown

NOTES

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, London, Duckworth, 2004, p. 69. Some sections of what follows are indebted to Emile Perreau-Saussine's excellent intellectual biography of Alasdair MacIntyre. Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre: une biographie intellectuelle*, Paris, Léviathan-PUF, 2005.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-) is often presented as being a representative of Anglo-Saxon "communitarianism," in the mould of Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer or Michael Sandel. This is a label which he rejects, however.

3. The reception of so-called "communitarian" writers in China is a very significant phenomenon which has given rise to a host of exchanges and publications, being also testimony to the dynamic nature of the circulation of ideas between China and North America. As we write these lines, in May 2007, Michael Sandel is on a lecture tour of the major Chinese universities.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 104.