
The study of Chinese philosophy, long marginalized, is undergoing something of a boom at the moment. As work on Chinese thought becomes increasingly
philosophically sophisticated, mainstream ethicists are beginning to show interest in this fascinating topic. For the continuing health of this field, it is necessary for philosophers to feel free to vigorously criticize Chinese philosophy and the secondary literature on it, just as specialists on ancient Western philosophy feel free to disagree, often sharply, with Plato, Aristotle, and their leading contemporary interpreters.

Consequently, the critical spirit of Chad Hansen's recent book is commendable. The book is motivated, in part, by Hansen's belief that much secondary scholarship on Chinese philosophy shows a Confucian bias, both in an unwillingness to criticize Confucian philosophers and in a failure to do justice to non-Confucian philosophers (especially Daoists and Mohists) in their own terms. Unfortunately, there are serious problems in Hansen's execution of his critical project.

To begin with, the book simply ignores much of the best recent work on Chinese philosophy (by such philosophers as P. J. Ivanhoe, Kwong-loi Shun, David Wong, and Lee Yearley). Hansen does cite some of the older secondary literature on Chinese philosophy, but he is quite glib in dismissing it. For instance, Hansen mocks (p. 191) A. C. Graham's conclusions regarding the evolution of the notion of xing (nature) in early Chinese thought but never discusses the detailed textual evidence Graham provided for those conclusions. Similarly, Hansen ridicules (pp. 188–93) D. C. Lau's analysis of Mencius 6A1–5, but he ignores most of Lau's arguments and misunderstands Lau's interpretation of the one passage he does discuss. Sometimes Hansen even misrepresents the views of other scholars. Thus, he repeatedly alleges that Graham assumed early Chinese thinkers formulated the notion of a deductive proof (pp. 9 [note], 258, 392 [n. 82]). But Graham explicitly denies that they had such a notion (see, e.g., A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao [La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989], p. 153).

Hansen's book also shows a lack of sophistication in discussing relevant issues in contemporary ethics. This is especially evident in his discussion of the relative merits of Mohism (a kind of consequentialism) and Confucianism (a kind of virtue ethics). For example, he assumes that a normative theory must provide a decision procedure for resolving ethical disagreement (ignoring Nussbaum's arguments to the contrary). He assumes that morality should strive to be radically independent of tradition (ignoring MacIntyre's arguments that it cannot). And he seems unaware of recent discussions of agent relativity and agent neutrality in ethics.

Of course, one need not be a slave to previous scholarship to do good work of one's own. However, Hansen's book is often poorly argued and frequently in error on sinological points. I will list just two of the many examples. First, Hansen argues that Confucius uses the key term dao as a mass noun, by giving examples to show that Confucius sometimes does not use dao as a proper name (p. 84). But this is a non sequitur. The fact that dao is clearly not a proper name in some passages leaves open the possibility that it is a proper name in some other passages. More importantly, even if dao is never a proper name, this does not entail that it is a mass noun. It may be a count or a generic noun.

Second, Hansen spends two pages discussing what he describes as the "slogan" of the Confucian philosopher Mencius that "human nature is
"ben" originally good" (p. 79). But anyone who consulted a concordance would know that Mencius simply never says this.

Finally, while I agree with Hansen (pp. 97–98) that style should be a minor consideration in judging a work of philosophy, as a reviewer I think I should note that many readers will be put off by such things as Hansen's suggestion that he is the reincarnation of Zhuangzi (pp. x–xi), the long footnote in which he blames his word processor for making one of his colleagues angry at him (pp. 378–79, n. 8), his jarring use of long superscripts, and the book's repetitiveness.

Those looking for good general introductions to early Chinese thought are directed to Graham's Disputers of the Tao (cited above) and Benjamin I. Schwartz's The World of Thought in Ancient China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985). Although neither Graham nor Schwartz was trained as a philosopher, and both works would benefit from more philosophical sophistication, the interested reader will learn a great deal from either book.

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