

Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions, edited by Bo Mou (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001; pp. xvii, 381).

Two Roads to Wisdom? is a collection of fifteen essays, all but two previously unpublished, organized loosely around the topic of philosophical methodology as it bears on Chinese-Western comparative philosophy. The contributors include distinguished analytic philosophers, senior scholars of Chinese and comparative thought from Chinese- and English-speaking lands, younger specialists, and a few unfamiliar names. The best of the essays are excellent, yielding insights into the nature of philosophy, the purpose and character of comparative philosophy, and substantive aspects of Chinese thought. Others challenge mainstream conceptions of the point of philosophical activity and writing. The book is a fertile source of ideas and information about the Chinese philosophical tradition, offering provocative discussions that will benefit both specialists and Western philosophers curious about Chinese thought. Yet on the whole this is an anthology that adds up to less than the sum of its best parts. The purpose of the volume is vague, its structure unfocused. The separate papers do not really cohere as contributions to a conversation about a unified theme or themes. Consequently, it is hard to see a compelling reason for collecting this particular set of papers together in one book.

The premise of the volume is that, to a large extent, what sets Chinese philosophy and Western analytic philosophy apart is their different methodologies (Bo Mou, "Introduction," xi). Thus the volume's aims are "to investigate the issue of philosophical methodology through a comparative approach," to promote dialogue between different traditions and philosophers from different backgrounds, and to investigate how Chinese philosophy and "Western philosophy in the analytic tradition" can learn from and complement each other, especially with regard to

method (xi).

This emphasis on methodology is puzzling for two reasons. First, interesting differences in philosophical method tend to be so deeply intertwined with differences in substantive belief that it is difficult to say where one leaves off and the other begins. One can hardly give an adequate account of the distinctive methods of different thinkers or discourses without also explaining the problems they address, the kinds of answers they propose, and how their concepts and beliefs lead them to frame these problems and answers in the way they do. Hence it seems odd to pinpoint method, as distinct from substantive theory, as the crux of the difference between two philosophical discourses or traditions.

Second, and more important, in this case the objects of comparison—Chinese philosophy and Western analytic philosophy—are specified so broadly that it is unlikely that either is actually distinguished by a characteristic method. To consider only the Western side of the comparison, one would be skeptical enough of the suggestion that there is a distinctive method shared by recent philosophers working in the tradition initiated by Frege, Russell, and Moore. Yet it turns out that here “analytic philosophy” refers not to the contemporary analytic tradition, but to “Western philosophy in the analytic tradition from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle via Descartes, British empiricism, and Kant to the contemporary analytic movement” (xii). “Analytic methodology” is “the characteristic methodological approach which has historically dominated in the Western analytic tradition” (xii). But surely any method or approach general enough to be shared by this entire list of names and movements will be shared by much Chinese philosophy as well. For any characterization of such an “analytic method” will have to be as thin as the one Donald Davidson gives in a brief foreword to the volume: “a method that starts with a question or doubt and tries . . . to find

reasons for or against theses that suggest themselves as answers to the questions or resolutions of the doubts” (v). If this, or another equally loose notion, is the core of analytic method, then there is nothing distinctively “Western” about it, and a mainstream Chinese thinker such as Xunzi qualifies as a skilled practitioner. It is also hard to imagine how this method could fail to be useful in doing philosophy of any kind, or how there could be any defensible alternative to it. Even special paths to wisdom, such as meditation or intuition, need to be consistent with sound reasoning at some level.

What, then, are the “two roads” of the book’s title? From the editor’s introduction, one would assume they are Chinese and analytic methodology. But the introduction gives no hint as to what Chinese methodology might be, nor any reason to think that analytic method can usefully be characterized as a distinct road not also traveled by Chinese thinkers. Another possibility, implied by the book’s subtitle, is that the two roads are the Chinese and Western philosophical traditions. But neither of these forms a single, monolithic “road.” Both comprise a plurality of approaches and practices, some paralleling those in the other tradition, as Robert Neville emphasizes in his insightful essay (30, 34–35). Ancient Hellenistic schools such as the Stoics and Epicureans, for instance, are in many respects philosophically more similar to Confucianism and Mohism than to modern Western thought.

This imprecision in defining the objects of comparison is mirrored by a lack of focus in the anthology’s content and organization. Despite their individual excellence, several of the essays—such as Adam Morton’s on philosophy as conceptual engineering and Kwong-loi Shun’s on early Confucian virtue ethics—do not contribute directly to the volume’s central themes. Others—such as Lik Kuen Tong’s manifesto for “field-being” philosophy—are simply not representative of either the

Chinese or the Western tradition. There are also conspicuous gaps in the ground covered. Given the volume's purpose and scope, I would have expected to find articles exploring the ideas and methods of each of China's three dominant traditions of thought, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Several essays discuss Confucianism, but Daoism receives relatively little attention and Buddhism almost none.

The volume is divided into four parts. Part One, "Philosophy: Discipline and Methodology," explores general methodological features of philosophy, with the aim of elucidating "analytic methodology and its contemporary orientations" so as to clarify how it relates to Chinese thought (xiii–xiv). On the whole, however, the essays in this part lead one to conclude that "contemporary analytic methodology" amounts mainly just to trying to give good reasons for and improve the coherence of our beliefs. None of the essays identifies a specifically "analytic" approach distinct from what we would expect to find in Chinese philosophical discourse—or, for that matter, any reasonable discourse at all.

Part Two, "Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Analysis (I): Methodological Perspectives," is intended to provide a theoretical discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of applying "analytic methodology" in studies of Chinese thought (xiv). The section title is incongruous, however, since three of the four essays—David Hall's insightful reflections on the contrasting problematics of ancient Greek and Chinese thought, contemporary New Confucian Shu-hsien Liu's intellectual autobiography, and You-zheng Li's wide-ranging discussion of Chinese philosophy and semiotics—do not really explore the application of analytic methods to Chinese sources. The exception is Chung-ying Cheng's paper, which endorses analytic methods as a useful tool for rational reconstruction of Chinese thought, while also

cautioning that the tendency of analytic modes of thinking to focus on the part at the expense of the whole must be offset by “onto-hermeneutical” interpretation, through which we can more fully appreciate the status of Chinese thought as a claim to truth (124–25).

The vagueness of the notion of analytic method at play in the volume is especially conspicuous in Part Three, “Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Analysis (II): Test Cases.” The three papers in this section are of great interest, but it is a stretch to label them “test cases” for the application of “analytic strategies” to issues in Chinese philosophy (xv), since two of them apply no distinctively analytic methods. Yiu-ming Fung’s critique of 20th-century New Confucian thought does attempt at one point to translate an argument for the ineffability of the cosmos into formal logic (256–57). But Chad Hansen’s penetrating comparative study of metaphysical and moral transcendence in Chinese and Western thought and Kwong-loi Shun’s detailed examination of potential weaknesses in the Confucian ethics of self-cultivation apply no specific methods other than careful reading and argumentation.

Part Four, on methodological issues in comparative philosophy (xvi), is more tightly focused. Robert Allinson’s contribution questions the “myth” of comparative philosophy as an independent subdiscipline, pointing out that nearly all philosophy originates in comparison, evaluation, and application of ideas from different sources (270). Ji-yuan Yu and Nicholas Bunnin propose a three-stage approach to comparative philosophy inspired by Aristotle’s method of “saving the phenomena”: establish comparable phenomena, or “common beliefs,” from different thinkers or traditions; articulate the differences between the phenomena; then save what seems true (294). Expressing a view echoed by Neville, Cheng, and Allinson, they urge that

comparative philosophy move beyond mere historical studies to explore how ideas from different sources can be combined to make constructive contributions to contemporary philosophical discourse (311).

Bryan Van Norden's article addresses Alasdair MacIntyre's well-known concern about the possible incommensurability of different ethical traditions. Van Norden presents a case study of Augustine's and Mencius's accounts of evil to show that, in some cases at least, disparate worldviews may indeed have enough in common for rational dialogue (314).

Van Norden's paper stands out as a solid contribution toward the volume's secondary aim of promoting dialogue and interaction between the Chinese and Western traditions. Other essays that make notable steps in this direction include Neville's, Cheng's, Hall's, and Hansen's. Yet because many of the contributors do not engage with each other or even with a common set of issues, one cannot help thinking that opportunities for fruitful dialogue have been missed. It would be interesting to know, for example, what Adam Morton thinks of Chung-ying Cheng's onto-hermeneutics or of New Confucianism, or how Cheng or Shu-hsien Liu would respond to Yiu-ming Fung's critique of the New Confucians, or how Morton, Shun, or Hansen would evaluate Liu's suggestions about the potential contributions of Confucian ethics to contemporary global ethics. Papers such as Neville's and Cheng's identify specific respects in which Chinese thought might provide insights relevant to issues in contemporary Western philosophy. Much more could have been done to explore such potential intersections between the traditions.

As to its primary aim of exploring the relationship between Chinese thought and analytic methodology, the volume never really succeeds in articulating the issues to be discussed, nor even in establishing that there are indeed pressing issues here that

demand attention. In this regard, Neville seems right to suggest that once we set aside unproductively narrow definitions, “analytic methodology” amounts roughly to what he calls “good philosophic discipline” (42)—the habit of attending closely to dialectical differences and conceptual distinctions (30) and arguing carefully for one’s views in a manner credible to one’s contemporary “philosophical public” (41). But a consequence of this suggestion is that there is just not much to say in general about the relation between Chinese philosophy and analytic method. There is no real alternative to employing lucid, careful, rigorous exposition in interpreting, discussing, and developing ideas from the Chinese tradition. One cannot plausibly contend that Chinese philosophy addresses a public with distinct, special standards, because philosophical practices today are uniform enough internationally that much of the Chinese-speaking audience for Chinese philosophy shares the same standards of clarity and rigor as Western analytic philosophers and others. Nor can analytic method in this broad sense meaningfully be contrasted with Chinese thought, since it is not a substantive view, but merely a disciplined style of thinking and writing, as applicable to Chinese philosophy as to any other field. Such a style obviously does not eliminate the need for insight, intelligence, and sensitivity to nuance and context. But like these features it is indispensable to good interpretive and philosophical work.

There is one respect in which the nature and ends of traditional Chinese philosophical activity genuinely differ from those of contemporary philosophy, a difference that could have been emphasized more strongly in the volume. Philosophy today is a professional discipline, a specialized field of inquiry devoted largely to technical questions concerning the nature of mind, objects, meaning, knowledge, right, good, justice, and other concepts. To be sure, training in so-called “analytic” philosophy may contribute to the development of intellectual and other virtues, such

as patience, tolerance, and fairness. But analytic philosophy is not regarded primarily as a source of values or the basis for a particular ethical or spiritual way of life.

In contrast, the primary purpose of much traditional Chinese philosophy was to guide the student in developing an exemplary character and thereby following the dao, the proper way of life. Theory was seen fundamentally as an aid to practice, which was the principal end. Might this contrast be the root of a deep incompatibility between Chinese philosophy and “analytic method”?

It might, if such practical moral training depends on accepting certain doctrines as above criticism and beyond the need for justification. But here it is crucial to notice two points. First, this view of philosophy as part of and training for a good life is not uniquely Chinese. It is shared by many ancient Western thinkers, including Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic schools. The contrast in question is thus not so much between Chinese and Western thought as between ancient and modern thought. And no one would suggest that the contrast renders analytic method out of place in studying Plato and Aristotle.

Second, philosophers throughout the Chinese tradition have themselves frequently criticized and demanded justifications for each other’s views. Mencius criticizes Yang Zhu and Mozi; Daoist texts argue against the Confucians and Mohists; Xunzi rebuts every rival he can. Thinkers in both the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang lineages debated numerous issues at length, both internally and with colleagues in the other line. So the Chinese tradition itself indicates that character cultivation and critical thinking are not necessarily incompatible.

The question of whether and in what way moral philosophers ought to revive philosophy’s ancient role as a guide to cultivating a good character is a vital one, particularly given the surge of interest in virtue ethics over the past two decades. But

even if traditional Chinese thought is right to stress philosophy's role in practical moral training, in the contemporary context this conception of philosophy will need to be articulated and defended through precisely the sort of clear, careful explanation and argumentation that characterize the best "analytic" philosophy. There can hardly be any question that such an approach can be used effectively to put Chinese philosophy into dialogue with Western thought, as several of the contributors to this volume convincingly show. Indeed, to suggest otherwise is to do a disservice to a great tradition by abandoning the attempt to present it to a wider audience in the most lucid, persuasive way possible.¹

Chris Fraser

Chinese University of Hong Kong

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