

Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New

Interpretation. By Loubna El Amine. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 218p. \$39.95.
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Loubda El Amine's book provides exactly what its title promises: a new interpretation of the political teachings of the writers and texts that have, over the millennia, been constructed into the "classical Confucian" canon. The debates over the many different arguments that generations of students and scholars have found through those writings attributed to Kongzi (Confucius), Mengzi (Mencius), and Xunxi are wide-ranging and thorough. However, almost without exception, readers throughout the centuries have assumed that the teachings of the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunxi* at least shared a somewhat moralistic, "ethics-first" approach to political questions. It is from this starting point that El Amine's interpretation takes what is, for almost all students of the Confucian political tradition, a new direction. Rejecting the assumption that Confucian arguments require an appreciation of these writers' understandings of the moral signification of peoples' actions in the world, the author argues instead that the political writings of the classical Confucian tradition are focused primarily on the practical questions of how to establish and maintain a stable, and thus not necessarily virtuous, social order.

As El Amine elaborates in her prologue: "I take the political discussions in the Classical Confucian texts as my starting point. . . . [I]nstead of considering the discussions of rulers, ministers, political exemplars, rituals, and regulations as secondary or antiquated, I take them to be central to understanding early Confucian political theory. . . . [W]hat is crucial for my argument is the idea that political order, not moral edification, is the end, and that political order is an end in itself, not a means toward virtue" (pp. 10, 15). This set-up promises something genuinely intriguing in the author's reading of these texts—a repositioning of the role of virtue and morality, broadly conceived, in the whole Confucian philosophical project. But in order to do that, she would have to distinguish and separate from the moral, ethical, and even quasi-religious context, which permeates classical Confucian writings, the particular work that "rulers, ministers, political exemplars, rituals, and regulations" are regularly presented as doing. And that is easier said than done, as El Amine herself perhaps unintentionally acknowledges. While affirming that classical Confucianism imagined rulers as implementing policies that would encourage the common people to achieve "honesty and industriousness," she adds that "whether [that project] should still be described as 'moral' turns on what is exactly meant by 'moral'" (p. 16). In my judgment, she fails to wrestle

successfully with the comprehensiveness of classical Confucianism's moral conception of the world, and consequently misses the moral role played by those elements of these writings that she makes central to her interpretation.

This is not to say there are not important insights in her book. Several chapters thoughtfully address components of classical Confucianism that actually can be separated out from what the great majority of Confucian scholars have long accepted as their moral or ethical context, and examined closely on their own terms. For example, her reading of classical Confucian statements about the hegemon who arose during the chaos of the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history is highly instructive. She argues persuasively that it is a miscategorization to associate the arguments made about those rulers with the pragmatic legalist tradition, and points out instead that classical Confucianism makes room for "a third meaningful class of rulers . . . less good than virtuous kings but better than despots," whose rule is "appreciated for its success in preventing the unraveling of the Chinese states amid turbulent times," without regard to whether or not such success makes possible the moral cultivation of the people (pp. 52–53, 58). In doing this, El Amine presents her readers with an important additional way of thinking about the practical necessities of rulership.

El Amine similarly pushes against the occasional tendency to read classical Confucian political thought as legitimizing a certain moral absolutism and quietism. Instead, she points out the early Confucian rejection of recluses, the presumption that one needs "to be around others to become virtuous" (even if those others are not virtuous themselves), and that "the presence of a basic modicum of propriety in key human relationships" is all that was presented by these sages as necessary for a Confucian gentleman to involve himself in political life (pp. 149, 170–71). In a political environment where debates between the ideal and the achievable are endless, these arguments are greatly worth pondering. All in all, the author's close reading of the relevant texts, combined with a superb grasp of Chinese history during the time of the Eastern Zhou (the so-called Golden Age of Chinese Philosophy) that provides cultural and social context, is suggestive of many possibilities within classical Confucian political thought that have been mostly passed over by previous scholars.

Unfortunately, I do not think that these many insights into the practical political concerns reflected by the texts she examines completely add up to a case for El Amine's overall interpretation. Again and again throughout the book, she suggests a reading of certain observations and claims that simply sets aside the moral perspective that Confucius, Mencius, and Xunxi, in different ways, all constantly reiterated. In this way, her interpretation is limited in its ability to appreciate what, in the classical Confucian tradition, "rulers, ministers, political

exemplars, rituals, and regulations” were actually believed to involve.

The most prominent example of this interpretation comes early in the book, when El Amine confronts the most common moralistic feature of classical Confucianism: “[t]he thought that Confucians view political life as geared toward promoting virtue in the common people.” Her argument against this rests on the fact that only very, very rarely in the Confucian canon are the cardinal virtues of *ren* (goodness) and *yi* (rightness) ever associated with the common people, with the great preponderance of discussions of those topics taking place in the context of Confucius himself or his disciples (pp. 31–32). Instead of an exploration of the possibilities of self-cultivation that this implies, El Amine argues that the classical Confucian writers assumed that since “the common people lack constant means [the material resources and time that the study of rituals and the classics require] . . . they lack constant hearts,” and thus the disposition to seek after virtue (p. 36). But this socioeconomic observation, while a valuable reminder of the world through which classical Confucian thinkers moved, is reductive; it assumes moral cultivation to be an individual project, requiring a particular individual to have access to relatively elite resources, rather than something collectively realized through relationships and social duties that build upon the *zhi* (nature) of individuals.

El Amine later sees the classical Confucian writers as presenting the people as passive, incapable of being moral agents (save in their ability to abandon bad rulers), playing a role only insofar as they are taken to express “an almost organic notion of fittingness between ruler and ruled” (p. 43). But the very idea of fittingness itself reflects a kind of mutual signification, a belief that the ritual and relational actions of all the people play a role in validating the authority of the ruler. It is this deeper sense of signification that I believe El Amine frequently misses, or consciously decides to juxtapose against her chosen texts.

It is perhaps revealing that El Amine confines her discussion of the *dao* (way), one of the central pillars of the classical Confucian conception of the world, almost entirely to an aside about whether or not a Confucian gentleman should consider it a duty to take an official position (p. 164). By choosing not to attempt to read these texts in light of that abiding ethical concept, she is led to making strained—though admittedly often intriguing—observations. For example, in what has long been taken by most scholars to be one of the clearest expressions of the moral confidence Confucius had in the power of ritual, we read in *Analects* 15/5: “If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action (*wu wei*), it was, perhaps, Shun. There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and face due south.” El Amine notes that it would be possible to read that passage

as “symbolizing [Shun’s] rule by virtue through which he effortlessly transforms those around him” via his ritual example. She concludes otherwise, however, writing that since she has shown that classical Confucian writers actually did not believe that good rulers should hope to cultivate virtue through ritual devotion, it almost certainly refers instead to Shun’s having filled his ministerial posts with the right people (pp. 131–32).

Of course, it is impossible to dismiss the possible accuracy of her interpretation, especially when dealing with such an ancient and frequently opaque text. Yet it must be said—as did Edward Slingerland, a translator of the *Analects* upon which El Amine frequently relies—that the reading of this passage to which she is drawn runs against the whole drift of the *Analects*, denying its alignment alongside dozens of other references (and not only in the *Analects*, but throughout the classical Confucian canon) to the social order as something which achieves direction and goodness not through explicit political action but through a kind of effortless moral attention and ritual propriety that emerges in the context of proper social relationships. In this and many other cases, El Amine’s interpretation requires that too much of the texts in question be read in a way that ignores much that most scholars have long accepted as central to their worldview.

Overall, this book is a fine and detailed reconstruction of early Confucian thought, which investigates particular aspects of that tradition that many (myself included) probably have given little thought to before. But it is also a book that presents the classical Confucian tradition in a manner comparable to talking about Martin Luther’s writings on the power of princes versus the power of the church without ever mentioning how that perspective is related to what Luther wrote about sin. Even if the early Confucians were not “ideal theorists” in the way in which that term has come to be used in contemporary theoretical discussions—El Amine is certainly correct about that—it does not mean that their thinking ever left aside what they clearly accepted as an enveloping ethical context to all human interactions. While treating Confucians’ discussions of the mandate of Heaven as a simplistic religious concept is obviously wrong, trying to see them as practical men not thinking anything like “religious” thoughts when it comes to politics, as attractive as that interpretation may be to some, ultimately does not work any better. I would thus prefer an account that took more seriously the broader moral, religious, and metaphysical dimensions of Confucian political thought.

At the same time, I greatly appreciate the ambitious reading offered in *Classical Confucian Political Thought*, and welcome further discussion and debate about the complex connections among religion, morality, and politics in Confucian political theory and in political theory more generally.