***Confucian Political Ethics*. Edited by Daniel A. Bell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. xiv + 273 pp. $60.00 cloth, $19.95 paper**

doi:10.1017/S1755048309000297

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I should begin with a truth-in-advertising disclaimer. I am neither a specialist in Confucian thought nor, except for a semester teaching in Taiwan in fall 2007, have I lived extensively in a Confucian-influenced country. I will not try, then, to adjudicate between diverging voices in this volume regarding whether classical Confucianism (551–472 B.C.E, including Confucius and Mencius) is superior to Neo-Confucianism (960–1279 C.E.); or how either of these two relates to the "new Confucianism" that attempts to update Confucian ideas in response to twenty-first century challenges (the larger question here, for any tradition in ethics, is what constitutes the authoritative canon of texts). Nor will I weigh in on whether Confucianism (which classically linked self, family and society, nature and heaven in an integrated vision) is best seen as a religiously neutral path, as Richard Madsen and Daniel Bell argue, or as a species of religion, as Henry Rosemont and Peter Nosco contend in their chapters. As editor of a parallel book in the Ethikon Series in Comparative Ethics, which published Bell's volume, my main take on the book will be its possible useful contribution to comparative ethics.

Even for the non-specialist, *Confucian Political Ethics* is a lively and easily ingested read. I bring the following four questions to my reading of this book: (1) Can Confucianism be retrieved in the twenty-first century and to what purposes? (2) What contributions does a Confucian ethic make to the study of comparative ethics? (3) As a perfectionist ethic, how adaptable is a Confucian ethic to pluralist settings? And (4) What elements in a Confucian ethic need elaboration for its more credible adaptation to the twenty-first century?

Can a Confucian Ethic be Retrieved in the Twenty-First Century and to What Purposes?

A number of present day Asian societies (Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, Japan and, perhaps, even if a matter of dispute, China) have, in fact,

sustained a national ethos around central Confucian concepts of virtue, relationality, benevolence. Two essays in *Confucian Political Ethics* ask whether the Confucian relations of husband-wife (men and women more generally) can be shorn of their earlier hierarchical subordinationist grounding. A contribution by Lee Yearley helpfully distinguishes between elaboration (applying core concepts to new realities such as the environment, feminism, human rights) and emendation, which may effectively gut the core tradition in attempts to apply it to modern issues. Yearley asks how inextricably any ethics is bound to certain core and stable orienting concepts. In looking for a development of Confucian ethics, which is both credible to the tradition and appropriate to modern situations, he notes that this attempt "in some cases — such as ethical pluralism — may not be possible" (140).

In his introduction, Daniel Bell contends that Confucianism seems to have enabled the economic miracles in the Asian tiger economies ("The Confucian Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism"!). Clearly, Confucianism remains salient for an Asian context. What is less clear is the extent to which it can become relevant to a broader non-Asian audience. Some may argue that it is not really a universal ethics. Others (myself, included) doubt that there is, anywhere, a non-tradition bound universal ethics. The best we can achieve, in this view, is what John Rawls called an "overlapping consensus" and a dialogue across traditions about ethics (cf. William Sullivan, "Ethical Universalism and Particularism: A Comparison of Outlooks" in *The Globalization of Ethics*, ed. William Sullivan and Will Kymlicka, pp. 191–211). If Confucianism still undergirds and drives certain contemporary societies, it will, willy nilly, provide an indispensable lens by which those societies confront globalization, the environment, issues of war and an international order.

Contributions of Confucianism to a Comparative Ethics Project

One of the chief merits of the Confucian vision is that it is root and branch social (as opposed to a putative radical individualism in much of western thought). As Herbert Fingarette once put it: "For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there are no human beings." Minimally, Confucianism forces a comparative ethics to probe anew what Charles Taylor called "the sources of the self." Bell thinks that classic Confucianism has the virtue of lacking any heavy metaphysical baggage

(which allows, then, both exportability and capability of adaptation), that its ethics are not rooted in deontological principles. It brings back the issue of virtue to the comparative ethics project. Richard Madsen, in his essay in the volume, puts it this way: "In the Confucian vision . . . human flourishing can occur only if social relations have a proper moral basis. . . A community based on force and fear cannot be a good community. But neither can a community based on an amoral clash of competing interest groups, even when this leads to a stable, peaceful balance of power and many opportunities for individuals to choose between rival versions of the good life. The Confucian project requires moral cultivation at all levels of society" (9).

Confucianism balances any talk of rights (although authors in the book differ on whether Confucianism can generate a theory of genuine individual autonomy) with equal talk about duties. As Michael Nylan puts it: "The apparent owners of bodies and of states — the individual person and the titled rulers — held these assets only temporarily in trust for all members of the community" (91). Confucianism, with its insistence on discretion, adaptability to persons, places and times, moreover, usefully returns something akin to casuistry (i.e., ethical rules for applying general maxims to different cases) to the discussion of comparative ethics. Confucianism also — because of its theory about the appropriate relationality between ruler and ministers of government, between fathers and sons and husbands and wives — raises the debate in comparative ethics between universal impartiality versus legitimate graded benevolence.

Perfectionist Ethics in Pluralist Settings

As a virtue-based ethic, with a central emphasis on the good, Confucianism represents a perfectionist ethic. Virtue can not be coerced. It depends on persuasion. Confucianism envisions a long, careful moral cultivation of virtues. The shadow side of almost any perfectionist ethic (i.e., an ethic which stresses a particular vision of the good over right procedures) for modern pluralist societies is its difficulty in accommodating pluralism. Confucianism views its way as inherently superior to that of the barbarians. As Joseph Chan notes, "For Confucians, when a debate comes down to ethical fundamentals, there is little room for reasonable disagreements" (122). Those who disagree with its position are either unenlightened or perverse.

Or, as Richard Madsen puts it, in an essay on Confucian ethics in the aforementioned Sullivan and Kymlicka volume: "They would want to be

able to propagate their values as freely and effectively as possible because they regard their basic values as superior to all others. But they would, out of principle, be wary of un-restricted exposure to non-Confucian values. Their openness is always contingent, never grounded in an absolute principle" (129). Confucianism has a bent toward protecting the less educated from heterodox ideas and, thus, fosters a restricted notion of freedom of speech and conscience.

Which Elements in a Confucian Ethic need to be more elaborated to make it credibly appropriate to the twenty-first century?

Madsen wonders if classic Confucianism may be too tied to local communities to make it highly adaptable to large urban settings. Other authors note that the distinction between public-private moralities gets collapsed, since the family becomes the prime analogue for all relations, even those to the state. Several authors seem to find it a strain to retrieve any robust notion of a civil society. In his essay, Peter Nosco notes that Confucianism has little to say about conflict. "Because of the benevolent paternalism Confucianism expects from a state," notes Nosco, "a Confucian perspective will inevitably favor the state in any adversarial proceeding with voluntary associations" (39). For his part, Joseph Chan argues that Confucianism, in fact, "has not yet developed a theory of distributive justice within the context of a modern political community, let alone a theory of justice between states or a theory of entitlements of the citizens of a political community versus outsiders. Confucianism still has a long way to go before it can come to terms with these issues" (81).

A final, splendid chapter, authored by Bell, treats of just-war and Confucianism. Drawing largely on Mencius, he presents a cogent Confucian case for self-defense and some variants of humanitarian interventions. Generally, Confucianism is wary of coercion as a false way to win hearts and minds and counsels wide benevolence, persuasion and exemplary living as the way to deal with conflicts. Indeed, historically, even in China, exponents of a *realpolitiek* rejected Confucianism as too idealistic. But Bell thinks that reliance on Confucian ideas of dealing with conflict might constrain China. Yet, here, too, he argues, work needs to be done on a Confucian account of *jus in bello* (moral constraints on how to wage even justified wars).

Bell's volume convinced me that Confucianism is every bit as interesting a conversation partner for comparative ethics as, for example, Kantianism or utilitarianism. On several counts, I would even prefer arguing for elements of the Confucian vision over some regnant philosophical accounts from the west.

Christian Political Ethics. Edited by John A. Coleman, S.J. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. xvii + 289 pp. $60.00 cloth, $21.95 paper

doi:10.1017/S1755048309000303

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Secular liberals tend to be wary of conservative political activism motivated by Christian values. But that's only part of the story of Christian political ethics. In 1985, I joined the Social Justice Committee of Montreal because I admired the work they did for the poor in Central America. The committee members rarely talked about God, though I knew many were motivated by Christian ideals. A Jesuit priest, Father Ernest Shibli, encouraged me to go to Guatemala to help "twin" churches with churches in Montreal so that the Guatamalan churches would have some measure of international protection against human rights abuses. Some of the people I met in Guatemala — including progressive nuns who devote their lives to helping the poor — were among the most admirable people I ever met. Yet they were indifferent, if not hostile, to the Pope's warnings against Christian "Marxist" activism in Central America. Obviously Christianity is a rich and diverse tradition, and this book helps to shed light on the moral and political ideals that animate Christian activists on the political left. I would strongly recommend it for anybody who wants to learn more on the topic.

The book is divided in five sections: "State and Civil Society," "Boundaries and Justice," "Pluralism," "International Society," and "War and Peace." Each section has essays that offer different perspectives on social and political controversies, but most contributors are committed to defending the ideals of the political left: a critical perspective regarding authority, tolerance for different views, solidarity among human groups, and this-wordly concern for the poor and the downtrodden. But