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Commentary on: Minghui Xiong's "Confucian philosophical argumentation skills"

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Years ago, my brother Jerry said I should know more about Chinese philosophy. I replied that Chinese philosophy is not really philosophy; it is really religion—or something. Jerry replied, "Absolute nonsense! It is philosophy and what *you* mean by 'philosophy'." I believe that Xiong is saying essentially what Jerry was saying, and I am not about to disagree with Xiong on this point.

Now, one question raised in Xiong's paper is whether there is logic in the Chinese tradition, in the sense of reflections on logical matters as such. The answer is that there is a bit of logic, but not much. There is more in India and much more in Aristotle. Still, there is some. The so-called Logicians are the most Western-like part of Chinese philosophy, but they are not really logicians; they are paradoxers. But one of their arguments—the white horse argument—is a version of the One and the Many, the argument that led Aristotle to develop syllogistic. And the white horse did cause the Confucianist Hsun Tzu to spend a part of a page making remarks that are recognizably logic, even a touch of syllogistic. But the rest of his book contains no more logic. Also, the second great Taoist Chuang Tzu is influenced by the Logicians in his Equality Chapter. And he makes statements which are recognizable as logical laws, such as non-contradiction or identity. But Chuang Tzu, too, is hardly developing logic as such. In fact, his view is relativism, the anti-Logic view. And Hsun Tzu and Chuang Tzu represent the high points of logic in the Chinese tradition.

This does not mean that Chinese people are not logical. The mystery, rather, is that *any* sane person—such as Aristotle—would *ever* write a treatise on Logic. After all, the main characteristic of logical truths is that they are self evident and known to everybody. In other words, they are excruciatingly boring! Why would anyone write on Logic, when they could do something exciting—like staying at home and reading the phonebook!

But let us turn to the main question in Xiong's paper: Are there *arguments* in Chinese philosophy? The short answer is: Yes, but Becker is not completely wrong—the arguments are often not stated very explicitly. The Logicians argue fairly explicitly, but everyone recognizes that *they* are very Western-like and are excluded from the present type of discussion. Surprisingly, Chuang Tzu, the anti-logic Taoist, argues quite explicitly and well—surprisingly because he is, in part, arguing against arguing! And Xiong rightly reminds us that Mencius's arguments—Mencius is the more kind hearted Confucianist—his arguments are often quite explicit. But usually

the arguments in Chinese philosophy are not explicit as to premises, logical form, etc. A philosopher in India might likely express an argument explicitly in syllogistic form; this is unlikely in China.

Still, the argumentation theorists are interested, in the various ways arguments can be imbedded in discourse. So study of Chinese philosophy might be a gold mine from an argumentation point of view. I think this is one of Xiong's points.

As a first example—adding to Xiong's examples—I start with Chu Hsi, the Great Synthesizer, the Neo-Confucianist of the later period—the Sung dynasty. When Jerry said, "It's really philosophy," he was especially thinking of Chu Hsi. But I found the Sung philosophies incomprehensible, and Jerry had to explain what was going on. Here is my brief version.

The early Confucianists were not very metaphysical, although Mencius and Confucius—not Hsun Tzu—did say things that would later be taken as metaphysics. Taoism was very metaphysical. By Sung times, Taoism had been joined by Buddhism, also very metaphysical, and the two formed a metaphysically strong opposition to a metaphysically weak Confucianism. By arguments that I do not have time for,¹ metaphysics was linked to ethics, so that systems (like Buddhism and Taoism) that deny the full reality of the human essence lead to ethics of detachment from society,² whereas the full reality of human essence would support the Confucianist ethics of social involvement. So Chu Hsi's job was to construct a metaphysics comparable to the Buddhist Taoist metaphysics, but one that restored human nature and thus Confucian ethics. Chu Hsi succeeded brilliantly. His metaphysics strikes a Westerner—me—as Aristotle's metaphysics very Neo-Platonically interpreted.

Question: What is the *argument* for Chu Hsi's view? I think the argument is implicit in the clear presentation of the view itself. The reader of the time says, "Oh, look! It's the very kind of metaphysics we loved in the Buddhists and the Taoists, but it leads to the much more plausible Confucianist ethics." And that observation is the very argument for Chu Hsi's view.

Another interesting argument is Mencius *vs.* Mohism in the classic period. The classic example is in the *Analects* (XVIII, 18) and raises the question: What does a son do when his father commits a crime? In ancient Greece, Euthyphro in the

¹ The argument involves the principle that the moral good for a thing is to fulfill its essence. Jerry calls this the Metaphysical-Moral Deduction. It is quite common in philosophy around the world, not just in China (but Hsun Tzu *would not* have accepted it).

Thus the Italian historian of philosophy Giovanni Reale (*The Systems of the Hellenistic Age*, SUNY Press, 1985, p. 61) says:

Now, from Socrates to Aristotle moral speculation unanimously established that the *moral good* of man is nothing other than the actuation of his essence, the realization of what he is, and that happiness is achieved always and only through this way of the complete realization of his essence.

² Taoism holds that all things are identical (Vedantism in India holds the same), so the individual person has no *distinct* existence. Buddhism holds that there are no physical objects *or selves* (compare Hume!), so our existence as people is illusory.

dialogue is the Mohist, and Socrates is the Confucianist. The general issue is one of abstract fairness vs. personal relationships.

Now Mo Tzu has said that all men are brothers and one should treat a stranger as if he were one's brother. Mencius, the Confucianist, replies that to treat a stranger as your brother is to treat your brother as a stranger. Now as it stands, that reply is a fallacy. To treat a stranger³ and your brother equally is of course to treat your brother and the stranger equally. But Mencius is implying that you are not treating your brother very well. So further analysis of the argument is called for.

Another interesting example involves the Taoist arguing that the best life is the simple, uneducated life, while Confucius argues for education. The interesting point about the debate is that at first glance, it seems to involve no argument at all. Do they even disagree? Does either side actually *argue*? But analysis reveals ambiguities, so the first side commits a fallacy, and the second side (Confucius) points out the fallacy and commits a similar one himself!

Here is the *whole* argument. Taoist: The wise man does not learn. Confucius: The wise man and the fool do not learn.⁴

So there are arguments in Chinese philosophy, and it seems fitting to conclude with one of Chuang Tzu's arguments against arguments.

If we have an argument and I win, does that prove that I'm right? If we have an argument and you win, does that prove that you're right? So what's the point of having an argument?⁵

³ I am paraphrasing Mo Tzu & Mencius from Giles memory and haven't found exact quotes to match. However Giles (in *Confucianism and its Rivals*, AMS Press, NY, 1914) quotes a proponent of Mohism as saying "He who wants to play the lofty part . . . will feel . . . for his friend's parents as for his own" (p. 106) and Mencius as saying "Mo's doctrine . . . does not recognize the special claim of a parent . . . but to recognizing, neither parent nor ruler is to be a beast."

⁴ I don't have the Taoist quote, perhaps I am re-constructing it from Confucius's reply, which is at *Analects* (XVII, 3).

⁵ The argument is on p. 72 in *Sources in Chinese Tradition* ed. W. du Bary, W. T. Chan, B. Watson.