Cline, Erin M., *Confucius, Rawls and the Sense of Justice*

Eirik Lang Harris¹

This welcome volume should benefit not only those interested in learning about what Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius) and John Rawls have to contribute to our understanding of a sense of justice and its practical relevance, but also those interested more generally in comparative philosophy, textual interpretation, and moral psychology. Furthermore, it provides an example of how to move from political theory to more concrete social policy. The particular richness of Cline’s work arises because she does not limit herself to explicating, comparing, and contrasting the views of Kongzi and Rawls. Rather, she uses this comparison as a springboard for two other, often neglected, projects—arguing for why and how comparative philosophy is worthwhile and demonstrating the contemporary relevance and applicability of the results of such a comparative study.

The task of the comparativist is not an easy one, for there are multiple masters to be served and satisfied. Specialists in the Confucian tradition require careful attention to textual and interpretive issues while Western philosophers are often skeptical that Chinese material is even philosophy, let alone that it can speak to contemporary concerns. It is a credit to Cline that she directly addresses these and other worries in her introduction, and moreover, her analysis throughout demonstrates the relevance of her work to a wide range of scholars. As always, it is possible to disagree with her interpretations and analyses, but it is not, I think, possible to deny her substantial contribution to a variety of different areas within philosophy, political theory, and public policy.

Chapter 1 “Methods of Comparative Work” is a clear overview of a range of methodological issues raised by comparative work, focusing on the fields of philosophy and religious studies (the latter, as she notes, for its long tradition of accepting the importance of comparative work). She focuses on three distinctive challenges that comparative philosophers must deal with: “[T]hematic issues (concerning what one compares, including one’s choice of topic and texts or thinkers to compare), interpretive

---

¹ Department of Public Policy, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong
issues (concerning one’s interpretations of the texts or thinkers under study), and procedural issues (concerning how one conducts one’s study, including particular methods or approaches)” (48, italics in original). Each of these challenges must be attended to by anyone doing comparative philosophy, but Cline argues that how they should be dealt with will vary depending on the goals of the study. Indeed, her examination of these issues leads Cline to endorse what she calls an “anti-method” approach to comparative philosophy, arguing that “comparativists are usually better off attending carefully to the different kinds of challenges and questions that arise in comparative work than embracing a particular method for doing comparative work” (72).

There are a couple of ways of interpreting this claim. She could be arguing that one should avoid any methodology in comparative work, or she could be claiming that one should not approach comparative philosophy with any preset methodology, rather allowing the particular thematic, interpretive, and procedural issues that arise in each particular study and in light of one’s chosen goals to guide one’s choice of methodology. Given that she herself is approaching the texts under study from the perspective of a philosopher interested in determining how a deeper understanding of a sense of justice, as illuminated by Kongzi and Rawls, may contribute to our own lives, one suspects that she is making the second claim.

Chapter 2 “The Sense of Justice in Rawls” focuses primarily on Rawls’s claim that, in Cline’s words, “humans have a fundamental capacity for cooperation and a ‘sense of justice’ that leads them to make sacrifices for the least advantaged members of society” (75, italics in original). Cline is not merely interested in this basic claim; rather, she wishes to examine Rawls’s understanding of the sense of justice, how and where it is developed and cultivated, and how the fully developed form of this sense provides for the stability of a just society over time (75). Cline examines this issue not only by looking at Rawls’s more famous A Theory of Justice and Political Liberalism but also by examining his 1963 essay “The Sense of Justice” in which, as Cline notes, he argues that those who lack a sense of justice “would lack certain essential elements of humanity” and that this sense of justice is the result of a “certain natural development” (89–90).

What is particularly useful about this chapter is how Cline demonstrates that Rawls has a much more developed account than has usually been recognized, not only of how a sense of justice is cultivated in citizens but also how it manifests itself in the social and political realms. By focusing on these two issues, Cline provides readers with a perspective on Rawls’s work that will allow them to see why a comparison with Kongzi may well be worthwhile and fruitful.

Chapter 3 “The Sense of Justice in the Analects” turns its attention to the second major figure of Cline’s study, Kongzi, as illuminated in the text whose ideas are attributed to him. This chapter requires much more work on Cline’s part for, unlike Rawls, Kongzi never discusses a “sense of justice.” (The worry that Kongzi lacks a term for justice and must therefore lack a concept of justice is thoroughly examined and convincingly addressed.) As such, Cline first devotes herself to arguing that the Analects should be read as a text advocating the cultivation of the virtues, subsequently moving on to argue that a range of concerns arise in Kongzi’s discussion of moral cultivation that “evince an appreciation for a sense of justice” (119).