Whose Tradition? Which Dao? Confucius and Wittgenstein on Moral Learning and Reflection. By James F. Peterman. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015. Pp. xx + 319. $95.00.

James F. Peterman describes this volume as "the first full-length comparative study of the ethics of ancient Chinese ethicist Confucius and the moral aspects of the later therapeutic approach to philosophy of twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein" (p. ix). For Peterman, the *Analects* does not offer theoretical justifications for its teachings but instead focuses on practice and reflection. Chapter 1 provides an outline of how Wittgenstein's later and more systematic account of the relation between practice and reflection can be used to develop and highlight Confucius's account of moral enquiry, central to which is the practice of ritual. The author argues that Confucius and Wittgenstein shared a set of basic insights about our relationship to norms or *dao* (which Peterman glosses as "the norms of living well"). These include the view that our primary relationship to norms comes from learning "bedrock" practices under the guidance of a master, and that no final, systematic formulation of these norms is possible. Accordingly, attempts to find foundational theories that provide epistemological and metaphysical justification for concepts and ideals of Confucius and Wittgenstein are inevitably wrongheaded. Only through practice can there be true understanding.

Chapter 2 sets out to show that Confucius's vision of moral enquiry has the resources to address the problem of moral disagreement. Peterman maintains that the guidance provided by the master-disciple relationship—in which tradition-based norms are transmitted by the authoritative master to the submissive disciple—provides a means for moral disagreements to be resolved. He provides an (unnecessarily) extended introduction to Cora Diamond's account of Wittgenstein's notion of "realistic spirit," which is to be understood as the spirit that frees us from the laying down of metaphysical requirements so we can examine what we actually do and say. Peterman regards the Confucius of the *Analects* to be a "kindred spirit" to Wittgenstein's realistic spirit (p. 52). He finds evidence for this in Confucius's refusal to speculate about human nature, as attested by *Analects* 5.13. This, however, is to cherry-pick, as 17.2 and 17.3 provide contrary evidence, which the author chooses to ignore. As for the related 9.1, 子罕言利，與命，與仁, Peterman acknowledges that it flies in the face of the fact that *ren* 仁 is frequently cited in the *Analects*. Undaunted, he insists (self-servingly) that 9.1 actually means that Confucius did not discuss *ren* in the abstract. He presents Confucius as applying the hermeneutic strategy of accommodation, whereby the Master tailored his discussions of the concept according the specific needs of various individuals.

Chapter 3 attempts to address the problem of meaning in a text such as the *Analects*. Peterman takes square aim at Daniel Gardner and John Makeham as

representatives of what he terms semantic nihilism and semantic scepticism, respectively. His extended criticisms span both chapters 3 and 4, and spill over into other chapters as well. Semantic nihilism is said to be the view that: "there is no meaning to the sentences of the *Analects*, just various attributions of meaning made by commentators over time" (p. 69). We are informed that: "Gardner argues that the *Analects* has never had a single normative meaning but that it has been read differently by different commentators at different times" (p. 76). These unsupported claims are both mistaken and beside the point. What Gardner actually writes is as follows:

> The commentarial corpus in its vastness is itself proof that for the Confucian tradition there was no such thing as a timeless, normative reading of a classic, *no matter what any individual commentator might have thought or claimed* [italics added]. The array of commentaries on each and every text in the canon makes manifestly clear that any classic could mean—and did mean—quite different things to different people. . . . Commentary acts as a response to the text of the classic. Commentary, in its response, aims to bring out the meaning of the classic. In bringing out its meaning, commentary fixes the range of meanings that the classic can have. . . . Each and every commentator, by virtue of the choices he makes, fixes the boundaries of the canonical text in distinctive ways and thus shapes its meaning differently."[1]

Gardner's comments are made with specific reference to the *reception* of the text by the commentarial tradition. His point is that the sheer variety of interpretations developed by the tradition evidences that there was no timeless, normative reading that dominated the tradition, even if individual commentators within that tradition clearly believed otherwise. The key point is that Gardner himself simply does not buy into the question of authorial intention or some putative original meaning, much less the question of whether the *Analects* actually does have a single normative meaning.

Makeham's equally bankrupt notion of semantic scepticism, according to Peterman, amounts to the view that "we *cannot know* the meanings of the sentences of the *Analects*. . . . Given the limitation of knowledge of the language and history of the time in which the *Analects* was written, Makeham despairs of capturing the historical meaning of the *Analects*." Makeham apparently finds himself in quite a quandary, for he is also said to worry that because the sentences of the *Analects* can be variously interpreted, this "will lead to an unlimited number of meanings, personal

[1] Daniel K. Gardner, "Confucian Commentary and Chinese Intellectual History," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 2 (May 1998), pp. 398, 400, 405.

to each reader's view of the Truth" (pp. 69, 70). This is a mischaracterization of my stated purpose in distinguishing between historical meaning and scriptural meaning:[2]

> By "historical meaning" I refer to the meaning of a text as composed by its original author(s) and/or its original audience. By "scriptural meaning" I point to the meaning realized in the subsequent historical trajectory of that text. . . . I argue that the distinction between these two types of meaning affords us a useful tactic for containing willful interpretation and unlimited semiosis. . . . Unless one is keen to open the floodgates to potentially unlimited semiosis by seeing the reader as the sole determinant of textual meaning, historical context must be addressed. There are responsible and irresponsible readings/interpretations of the *Analects*; by acknowledging the legitimate boundaries of historical context, we are better able to adjudicate between competing interpretative claims. Other things being equal, an interpretation premised on the assumption of a historical context that can be independently verified is preferable to an interpretation premised on the assumption of a historical context that cannot be independently verified. (Makeham, pp. 9–10, 16)

Peterman asserts that my argument for granting a role to historical meaning is akin to tossing a coin to limit meaning. Naturally, I demur. I see nothing incoherent about establishing historical criteria to adjudicate between conflicting interpretations. (Later in the book Peterman himself seems to have experienced a [fleeting] Damascene conversion: "By limiting our interpretations to those backed by historical evidence, we avoid the danger of reaffirming our own prejudices by projecting onto the text interpretations that offer no substantial challenge to our own settled cultural and personal perspectives" [p. 116].) He insists that in the last passage cited above, my argument "lapses into incoherence": "the fundamental problem with his [Makeham's] view is his holding that finding the meaning of a text is the exclusively historical problem of determining meaning" (p. 93). Despite these strident charges, I have never held nor expressed such a view. Rather, the position I develop in some detail in *Transmitters and Creators* appeals to a dialectical engagement of historical meaning and scriptural meaning. I argue that neither approach, by itself, is satisfactory, and what is needed is a strategy that is neither overpowered by the Scylla of retrospection nor engulfed by the Charybdis of prospection. "Retrospection is concerned with a hermeneutics of recovery: an archaeology of the historical context in which the text was created. Prospection is concerned with the ongoing

[2] *Transmitters and Creators: Chinese Commentators and Commentaries on the Analects* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003).

reception of a text by its readers: the unfolding and elaboration of its scriptural meaning" (Makeham, p. 16).

Equally perplexing is the repeated charge that Makeham has "found no knowable meanings whatsoever in the *Analects*" (p. 70); that Makeham declares "that we are not able to know the meaning[s] of the sentences of the *Analects*" (p. 76). This bewildering proposition blithely ignores my clear statement: "Although a pragmatic degree of confidence in the interpretation of the linguistic meaning of a written sentence or passage may often reasonably be assumed, the same does not hold for authorial intention" (Makeham, p. 11).

On the topic of authorial intention I am charged with maintaining, "a text's meaning is separate from the intentions of its author because the meaning of the text is changed over time by readers and commentators" (p. 79). The position I advocate is, in fact, somewhat more nuanced:

> Even if the historical meaning of a text were "recovered," there would be no Archimedean point, no independent criteria by which it could be distinguished from scriptural meaning because (1) writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author; (2) our reception of a text like the *Analects* is mediated through the transmission of tradition; and (3) our ability to reconstruct historical contexts is limited. (Makeham, p. 17)

In challenging my historical meaning thesis, Peterman proposes, "the meanings of the sentences of the *Analects*, like the meanings of sentences of a novel, depend only indirectly on known historical record" (p. 71). He makes a virtue of necessity by insisting that the very lack of historical context for sayings recorded in the *Analects* renders the meaning of those passages all the more accessible by transforming the *Analects* into a kind of philosophical novel. "It invokes an imaginative world with decipherable meanings within the limits of our understanding of that world, even if our historical knowledge of the circumstances of Confucius's discussions with his interlocutors or the circumstances of the authorship of the *Analects* are [*sic*] incomplete. . . . We can think of the *Analects* as a philosophical novel with Confucius as the main character" (p. 87). These views are reiterated at the end of chapter 4, where Peterman further explains, "the paucity of historical evidence [with respect to the contents of the *Analects*] is enabling" because it opens up a door to the principle of charity: "We do not need to labor under the restrictive burden of seeing the *Analects*' Confucius as a real person, . . . We can see him as a character who represents a way of thinking and learning about the *proper* ways to realize our humanity" (pp. 118, 119). The chapter is rounded out with a gratuitous rehearsal of the shortcomings of E. Bruce and A. Taeko Brooks's account of the dating of different strata of the *Analects* and Herrlee G. Creel's depiction of "Confucius the man."

On the constructive side, chapter 4 draws on Wittgenstein's account of meaning—how words are used in a language game—as well as Wittgenstein's application of the principle of charity in understanding language games, which Peterman finds implicit in that account. Accordingly, he proposes that rather than "maximizing agreement between our beliefs and the beliefs we attribute to the unfamiliar Other, we need to maximize intelligibility by attributing to the Other beliefs, sometimes false, which we ourselves would most likely have in the situations we find the Other in" (p. 96). He provides the following example to illustrate this. Instead of understanding statements about *ren* 仁 in the *Analects* to be references that involve theories about ethics or human nature, they are better understood to be part of the "language-game" of pedagogy or of child rearing (p. 106). The subtext here is that Confucius did not theorize but only addressed issues of practice. This, however, seems difficult to square with Peterman's earlier call for "accomplished" contemporary readers of the *Analects* to appeal to shared principles and practices of reading drawn from the commentarial tradition "to defend whatever explications of text [*sic*] that they offer" (p. 100). From the earliest extant commentaries onward we find no shortage of theory attributed to Confucius of the *Analects*, as Peterman is all too well aware.

Makeham's "problematic account" (p. 95) of historical meaning continues to animate the critical thrust of this chapter. I am now alleged to hold the following view of historical meaning: "A meaning is directly present to an interpreter (a hearer or reader) only when the interpreter is aware of the speaker's total historical/sociocultural/linguistic context" (p. 97). A novel thesis to be sure, but alas, once again, perverts my stated position:

> The point is not that we can never completely recover and project ourselves into the horizon of cultural others, but that there is little to support the claim that we can do so, even minimally, for a text such as the *Analects*. We must accept that our hypotheses about historical context and historical meaning are just that: hypotheses. *Furthermore, to the extent that such hypotheses are constructed in the absence of adequate historical data, we need to be honest about the limits this must impose on our interpretative claims*. (Makeham, p. 13; italics added)

The real issue is that Peterman misconstrues my account of historical meaning to represent the account of meaning I actually subscribe to. The account of meaning I subscribe to is indebted to Gadamer, and like Wittgenstein I also see a role for game playing:

> I see no reason to assume that the text presents us with anything more than a body of signifiers. As readers, we construct relations between these signifiers to form patterns of coherence. Coherence, in turn, is negotiated on the basis

> of codes (semiological, semantic, syntactic, grammatical, lexical, metaphoric, inter-textual, cultural, historical, psychological, and so forth) that we bring to our interrogation of the text. . . . Once we engage the text, rotate the hermeneutic circle by animating an initial cluster of these signifiers with meaning—by formulating a question to which they might provide an answer—interpretation ceases to be a one-way process in which we impose a particular interpretative grid on a passive text. Perhaps the best evidence for this is the common experience of the way texts resist, and hence lead us to modify, the interpretations we bring to them and thus enable us to play the role of reader. The operation of the hermeneutic circle reveals the process of give and take, the play, in this game. The tripartite relationship of the creator of a game, the player, and the game provides a heuristically useful model for understanding the relationship between author, reader/interpreter, and text. (Makeham, pp. 14–15)

Peterman's language-game inspired theory of meaning proposes attributing meaning to an authorial voice on the basis of the sense that the reader/interpreter finds in the sentences of the language-game of the text as well as "my [the reader's] understanding of the appropriate responses open to me. . . . For this account of meaning and explanation to make sense, we have to suppose the existence of a community of speakers whose language behavior (i.e., spoken and written communication) exhibits the norms of meaning for that community. . . . For a sentence to have meaning is for it to have a role in a language-game" (pp. 98, 99). This description of a community of speakers captures important aspects of the role played by historical commentators and is a reason Gardner and I both attach central importance to the role of commentators and commentarial traditions. Where I part company with Peterman is I further claim that understanding how prominent representatives of a tradition—and there are many—interpreted the text is to reflect on the preconditions (and preconceptions) of our own understanding. This understanding better enables us to realize the extent to which we uncritically draw on those commentaries and to develop critical strategies to avoid blindly following custom.

Chapter 5 describes Confucian (i.e. that of Confucius) moral enquiry as pragmatic due to the putative centrality of practice and reflection on the meanings of learned practices. Peterman argues that this pragmatic focus does not have to come at the price of truth. Taking the example of the many passages that refer to *ren* 仁, he insists that the only way to understand these passages is to regard Confucius to be "interested in the question of whether it is true that certain types of conduct are sufficient for 仁 (*ren*). And that makes him concerned with . . . truth" (p. 122). Peterman criticizes Donald Munro and Chad Hansen respectively, for their "pragmatic" accounts of early Chinese philosophy, in which early Chinese thinkers

are said to operate without a concept or interest in truth. (I thought that this issue had been put to bed by Christoph Harbsmeier several decades ago.) For good measure, his criticisms further extend to David Hall and Roger Ames who, alongside Hansen, are accused of "mistakenly appeal[ing] to Wittgenstein as a recent Western example of the anti-truth view they attribute to early Chinese philosophy" (p. 128). As an example of "Confucius's relation to the truth," Peterman finds in passages such as 11.16 and 11.22 evidence of Confucius's invoking a normative principle: to be neither excessive nor deficient in one's conduct. He presents this normative principal as a "constituent of the *dao*" and describes it as a "true claim" that *dao* requires acceptance of this principle (p. 164). "These norms about how to live well . . . make true-false claims possible. As such, they are constitutive of the form of life that Confucius inhabits and teaches" (p. 166). One wonders how Peterman believes he can reconcile these claims with his later assertion that "because we know that the *Analects* is authored by various writers and that the direct connection between utterances attributed to Confucius is impossible to establish, it makes sense not to expect a single point of view on any topic" (pp. 236–37).

In chapter 6 Peterman rails against the metaphysical turn he finds endemic in the post-Wei 魏 Confucian commentarial tradition, singling out Zhu Xi 朱熹 in particular. Once again, Gardner and Makeham serve as the targets of righteous indignation. Although it is correct that the commentaries of Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and "He Yan 何晏"[3] are "philosophically spare and not at all inclined to provide a metaphysical framework to justify or explain the *Analects*' teachings," inexplicably Gardner and I are charged with presenting Zhu Xi's more metaphysical commentary as philosophically superior (p. 168). This straw man argument is yet another instance of the author's cavalier disregard for our published views. Neither of us attempted to promote the superiority of Zhu Xi's commentary over that of Zheng Xuan or "He Yan" in the first place, even though we both readily acknowledge its obvious philosophical character.[4]

Turning his critical gaze on Jiwei Ci 慈繼偉 and Alasdair MacIntyre, in chapter 7, Peterman argues that there is no need for Confucianism (here construed as a tradition) to commit itself to a theory of human nature or a related moral ontology because it is able to make sense of its own truth claims by appealing to its own internal norms or language games. In chapter 8, Herbert Fingarette's "flawed theory

[3] In *Transmitters and Creators* I have argued at length that there is no convincing evidence that He Yan played the leading role in the editing of *Lunyu jijie* 論語集解.

[4] For Gardner's views see "Confucian Commentary and Chinese Intellectual History," pp. 403–4. For my views, see chapters 1 and 2 of *Transmitters and Creators*, and also "The Earliest Extant Commentary on *Lunyu*: *Lunyu Zheng shi zhu*," *T'oung Pao* 83 (1997), pp. 260–99.

of ritual and a related interpretation of the *Analects*" (p. xiii) is singled out for critical redressing, focusing on his account of ritual as handshaking. "His account of an essential connection in the *Analects* between ritual and mutual respect is not borne out by the text" (p. 221). In particular, Fingarette is criticized for ascribing to Confucius "a theory about our *nature* as human beings" (p. 233), when in fact, according to Peterman, Confucius "makes no substantive claims about human nature" (p. 234)—despite evidence to the contrary in 17.2/3 (see also 16.9). Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, chapter 9 aims to throw light on how contemporary Western forms of ritual can help clarify the role of ritual in our everyday lives.

This volume is often intellectually engaging and original in approach but the sustained and extensive misrepresentation of the published views of Daniel Gardner and myself throws a pall over the scholarly integrity of the work as a whole. The author's proclivity for denunciation also sits uncomfortably with his professed advocacy of Wittgenstein's principle of charity.

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The Metamorphosis of Tianxian pei: Local Opera under the Revolution (1949–1956). By Wilt L. Idema. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2015. Pp. x + 344. $52.00.

Wilt Idema presents this book as a sequel to his earlier one on stories about Dong Yong 董永,[1] a filial son who sells himself in order to be able to bury his father and who is helped out by and marries Seventh Sister, daughter of the Jade Emperor ("Preface," pp. vii–viii); and as a return to an early focus of interest in his long sinological career ("Acknowledgments," p. x). The most famous version of the story is the 1956 "blockbuster" Huangmei 黃梅 opera film, *Tianxian pei* 天仙配 (Married to an Immortal), which was based on the newly-revised stage versions of 1953–1955 of the same name. In this book, Idema presents translations from pre-revised Huangmei opera play scripts of the story (Chapter 3; the translation of a version produced by collating two different woodblock printings is supplemented by additional scenes found in a play script produced by dictation by an old actor that do not seem to have

[1] *Filial Piety and Its Divine Rewards: The Legend of Dong Yong and Weaving Maiden with Related Texts* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2009).