

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The acknowledgments section is the customary place in books such as this where the reader, perhaps out of some benevolent combination of default ritual indulgence and behind-the-music curiosity, is prepared to let the author rattle off an invocation of all his or her debts to those persons, places, and things that made the book possible. This is an author's opportunity to reflect a little on how humbly enormous a portion of what has come about in his or her work has depended on unpredictable external factors, the seemingly almost infinite chain of encounters and supports necessary to bring any finished thing into the world. Though wary of the cringe-making awkwardness that seems likely if not inevitable in such public displays of the private, I will gladly comply with this custom. In addition to those specific persons and institutions I thanked at the beginning of the previous volume, *Ironies of Oneness and Difference*—and whom I thank anew, with renewed fervor, here and now, adding to the list also Jonathan Sim and Hiromi Okaue for their help preparing the manuscript—I feel these days an ever more insistent impulse to honor this noble tradition of acknowledgment in a more expansive or even global way; for there are so many more acknowledgeable facts and circumstances and things and fortuities left out of such specificities, and though these abstract inanimates and accidents don't care, I still want to acknowledge them, to thank them, to extend some kind of gratitude, or whatever is the equivalent of gratitude when applied to unintentional and inanimate abstract quasi-entities, to the whole mysterious and random concatenation of forces that has made it on the one hand *possible* and on the other hand *permissible* for me to write books such as this at all.

Gratitude, however misplaced, is also a fact to be acknowledged. I can only gape in wonder at this seeming stroke of dumb luck, the fact that, having somehow against all odds stumbled upon something I feel both inclined and able to do, I've so far also been permitted to continue to do it, even to get paid for it, rather than being arrested or lynched or tarred and feathered for it. How many lifeforms ever get so fortunate, to find themselves seemingly unchangeably and unjustifiably constituted in a certain way, and yet also to live in a time and place in which that way of being is viewed as an acceptable way to be, rather than as an atrocity that warrants community wrath, destruction, quarantine, or ridicule? Imagine a person

who, for reasons as yet unanalyzed but quite possibly mildly pathological, seems to have always had some kind of ironclad mental block in every situation against doing “the assigned reading,” as it were—who was too autistic or distracted or arrogant or cowardly or shy or contrarian to listen to anything any living person was trying to teach him, especially persons such as teachers in classrooms. Some kind of nonnegotiable resistance to the very idea of receiving instruction—rooted in an obscure but unshakeable doubt that human minds are alike enough for any single mind’s desires and truths to be likely to be applicable to those of another—drives him to the written word, where the sample size is larger and the distance is greater.

But the ban falls quickly also even on books written in the past hundred years or so, in any language he has heard spoken in the flesh; the familiarity of the methods and assumptions of the authors make them too easily imaginable as living presences, and therefore repellent. Here is this person who can only listen to and learn from people who have long been safely dead for a long time, who don’t remind him of anyone he knows (i.e., of anyone who, as he sees it in his paranoia, assumes it’s perfectly fine to try to impose their ideas of what is true and what is good, their facts and values, on him), a person who can only dialogue with people who are far enough away from him in every sense. In the self-imposed intellectual isolation that comes with this condition, after many dismal experiments, it turns out there is only one thing that brings intellectual enlargement and some mental companionship: walking around in solitude, preferably in a city or country where no one knows who he is, reading classical Chinese texts, looking up characters in dictionaries, trying out various possible hypotheses to resolve the seemingly endless thrilling ambiguities, pondering them, trying to make sense of them, then making alternate sense of them, then growing the eyes to look at the world through the blossoming of each of these sets of new ideas that erupt as a result of these phantom encounters.

That was me. At some point in those years I got lucky enough to have the opportunity to read closely through some of the texts I loved most with some great old-school footnote-free classical-type scholars; it was the deep rootedness in the careful procession through these texts, which were already a part of my private universe, and the new vistas the greater expertise of these mentors opened up in this already beloved territory, that made this a newly viable way to learn to think new thoughts. The slow and methodical burrowing into the texts was an end in itself, with a very large noncoercive space for working through implications and connections that spontaneously emerged from this kind of extended simmering. I internalized the example of those teachers: one went about one’s work, one’s encounter with the text, looking neither right nor left, neither criticizing nor praising anyone else’s encounter with the text, which would be noticed, reluctantly, only when

one's own already internalized resources, the backlog of associations already crystallized from reading hundreds of other such texts, came to a snag, which happened only rarely. For the first and only time, I got knowledge and pleasure from being a student of another human being, and could imagine exchanging ideas with another person in a way that didn't drive me to despair over the abyss of incommensurability concealed in aggressive assumptions about some form or other of "common sense" or "good will" or "shared goals" or "universal truths."

What I thought I was doing, and what I loved to do, didn't feel as if it had anything to do with finding out the truth, becoming more rigorous, joining the ongoing conversation of an existing field of research or inquiry, getting anything right, clarifying history, improving the quality of anything, coming to a consensus, or, god forbid, learning any facts or values from anyone else or making them learn them from me. I liked having new ideas, being able to think new thoughts; tarrying long and intensely with these old Chinese texts seemed to be what facilitated that effect better than anything else I could find. Slowly, as part of this same walk-around-foreign-city-reading policy, a handful of old and long-backburnered European philosophical works also entered my orbit, and, since no one was telling me to read them and it was not my responsibility to do so, and the authors were all good and dead by then, they started to have analogous effects on me, became objects of obsessive study, and I fell in love with them in exactly the same way. My motivation was still very naive and simpleminded: to forge new lenses for looking, to find ways to think about everything I encountered in the world, alternatives to the ways I had previously been thinking about them. This did not at all mean I wanted to replace that first set of ways-of-thinking and lenses-for-looking, as one would replace an error with a truth. It was not an endeavor to fix my vision with a new prescription for my mental spectacles, or a kind of laser surgery to fix my organ of intellectual vision for good, but a greed to acquire as many cool new pairs of elaborate bifocals, trifocals, quadrifocals as I could find. . . .

Then someone told me I could do something like this all the time and not have to get a real job if I went to graduate school. So I did that. My goal was then as now simply to have available more, not fewer, ways of thinking. Why? Because otherwise I would die of boredom. All these years later, it's still the same, and I still love doing this. And I am insanely grateful that I am allowed to do this for a living, and that it has somehow or other turned out that some other people also like to get jostled around in this kind of process. It is true that the institution of formal education, with its notion of rewards and punishments meted out for one way of thinking over another, still seems to me intrinsically obscene, and the idea of one mind standing in judgment over another mind still instinctively revolts me, as much in a

classroom as in the idea of a theistic cosmos. But to my surprise, I find that being in this environment—schools—which I detested so much as a student is now sometimes a place to meet really smart, interesting people, both students and colleagues, with strange and intricate minds that in certain places intersect and resonate and ricochet with mine, and that to watch and interact with these people sometimes, if I keep the right distance and the right closeness, can have something of that old new-thought-evoking effect. There's a tension and a contradiction there, and in the formal setting I've still felt it necessary to avoid too much involvement in precisely those fields of inquiry in which I personally have the most mental investment, but nonetheless, I cannot but be grateful for this mysterious circumstance. So that's gratitude number one.

On the other hand, this puts me in a funny situation sometimes, and I suspect, or at least hope, that I am not the only one in this funny situation. I still don't want the truth about things to turn out to be only a single way, or for any philosophical position to be so right that it puts all other positions out of business. I fear any monopolizing convergence of truth that would eliminate errors and mistakes and alternatives. I still think of thinking as Spinoza did, as a kind of activity, a skill, a power to do more and more stuff, correlative to a way of moving one's body in more ways, rather than as a means of arriving somewhere or getting something ("truth"? "the right answer"? "the best theory"?). I still don't like this assumption that thinking is a means by which some ideas are found to be truths and entirely other ideas are found to be errors, the former to be honored and preserved and the latter to be reviled and dispelled, such that the possibilities of moving around, mentally and physically, are reduced rather than expanded. I still have no sympathy with the academic goal of consilience of knowledge, or what strikes me as the totalitarian yearning for everyone to share the same view of what is so and of what is good, of what is true and of what they should be doing, to construct arguments and marshal evidence with the purpose of compelling everyone to agree about as much as possible. And I still can't read or learn anything someone else tells me to read or learn. Though it's now my job, a lot of the time the professionalization of philosophy (or of sinology, or of Buddhology) leaves me feeling the way I imagine a nymphomaniac who has chosen to make her living as a prostitute must feel—someone who had foolishly thought, Hey, what better way to beat the system, my job will be the exact thing I love doing anyway! It turns out, duh, that making a rent-paying job of something you had originally loved, so that now it must be done on demand, under coercion, in a style dictated by the desires of strangers with their own alien libidinal agendas, can, um, kind of ruin it. One of my main concerns in reading, in writing, in teaching is to find a way to steer clear of this fate.

Which brings us to this book. At the beginning of the previous volume, I made some general methodological clarifications that were not unrelated to these concerns—addressing matters of polyessentialism, presentism, truth-as-interest, hermeneutics as a kind of shelf-handly rhyming dictionary, maximal neglect of fallacy as excavation of ever-present but never-complete coherence, and so on—and these same considerations apply to this volume, which continues the work begun there. But I would here like to reinstate some further remarks that I deleted from that discussion, at the time due to a perhaps misguided desire to avoid causing embarrassment to various people, including but by no means limited to myself. These remarks have to do with the always touchy topic of a writer's relation to other writers. Quite often, people who find themselves engaged in this kind of work—professional scholars, I mean, who labor long and intensely with certain texts and ideas—have a vague but understandable hope to see their own works universally accepted, or, failing that, at least acknowledged with approval. Or failing that, at least cited. It is thus very human, and very forgivable, for an academic, when faced with a work that purports to discuss a text or topic he or she has spent years researching and writing about, to turn immediately to the index or bibliography in search of his or her own name. I do it too. It is frustrating not to find that name there, after laboring so long, and it would be churlish to censure anyone too harshly for venting a bit of this frustration, either as global hostility or as an ad hoc self-advertisement offered in refutation, when evaluating those works that seem to snub them.

And no one would deny that the “literature survey,” where a student is supposed to demonstrate mastery of what is quaintly referred to as “the field” by reading all available secondary literature on a given topic, summarizing and perhaps evaluating all the positions previous scholars have put forth on a given text, is a valuable exercise in postgraduate training. It is perhaps for these reasons that it remains an academic custom, richly punished in the breach, to go through the motions of citing all one's contemporary colleagues when taking up any much-researched topic, respectfully acknowledging the positions put forth there, but then giving a reason why one rejects them in favor of the one currently being advanced. I've made some ritual deference to this custom in this book and the prequel, but have tried to keep it to a minimum. For there is good reason to think this practice is—in addition to being enormously onerous, insincere, and self-serving—a wasteful allocation of time and energy. The pretense is that, being a member of one and the same “field,” one has objectively considered the alternate arguments about all the topics that comprise it, and decided on some mutually agreed-upon grounds that a certain argument—one's own, naturally—is better than the others. This may, indeed, be possible for some cases in some fields. But it is not likely to be possible for all cases in all fields.

More to the point, and putting aside all my personal reasons for disliking this sort of practice as rehearsed above, I am not at all convinced that adopting these procedures of compulsive citation and review of all prior interpretative expositions would serve, in disciplines other than the hard sciences, as a mechanism to ensure the cumulative advance of knowledge, even if that were something we all agreed we wanted. When it does, as in the narrowing of range of possibilities through the exclusion of failed and discarded approaches, or through the handy clarification of philological and historical confusions, it is mainly as a device for the saving of unnecessary labor, whose value is therefore mainly economical in the broadest sense of helping to allocate wisely our limited resources of energy and attention, rather than a positive building block in the constructing of a system of knowledge that either can or should progress in a single direction and toward an ideal completeness and unanimity. So I have tried to cite and discuss only those works that I have found genuinely pertinent to the task of clarifying, rather than justifying, my readings of the texts at hand; I have tried to avoid citing for citing's sake, or even pointing out the obvious radical divergences of my interpretative framework from some others that have been advanced.

I find it necessary to declare in all sincerity that this is not meant as a sign of disrespect or criticism of the interpretations developed by my esteemed peers. Rather, it is my hope that it will be apparent to readers just how pointless it would be, in the context of the present project, to express an opinion about every one of these interpretations. These works may well be very useful, successful, intelligent, persuasive, and in all ways good for the human race. They may connect in interesting ways with the approach I am taking here, or conversely, raise points that conflict irreconcilably with the conclusions I draw here. But in either case, it is very likely too soon for such conclusions to be drawn, and it is doubtful that any of the participants in a debate of this type have the necessary critical distance to give a useful overview of the issues involved. These are things to be decided by readers of both this work and those works not now, but maybe fifty years from now, by a future generation of scholars who are competent in reading the original texts for themselves with the benefit of all the conflicting hypotheses in their arsenal of interpretative tools—if they are still interested, which of course no one can force them to be. I hope I will be forgiven for expressing the heretical suspicion that, in reality, contemporaneous scholars don't really write for each other: we write for the future, for the fresh readers who will take up these problems with their own enthusiasms and their own fresh encounters with the original texts.

What proves useful to future readers survives; what does not, does not. It is for these future students to read and study and consider the possible interactions between parallel interpretations of a given era, if they so desire.

We, and our own first-generation students, are probably too close to the matter to say anything meaningful about it. It requires a “big picture” perspective. A point-by-point comparison of two alternate present-day interpretations, for example, of a particular line in the *Analects* would be not altogether meaningless, but likely an expenditure of time and energy more fruitfully applied elsewhere; both interpretations belong to a total orientation, with its own set of assumptions, goals, methods, which alone conveys its coherence, its persuasiveness, its value—and which is at present still a work in progress, the final contours of which are not yet discernible.

I propose what to my mind is a more “Confucian” alternative, with all due respect, to my colleagues: let us no longer feel honor-bound to read each others’ work merely out of a concern for base covering, professional obligation, or obsessive scorekeeping. It is not an insult, it is not a disgrace, it need no longer be a shameful secret for us to need to close our ears to each other at times. The type of work we are involved in here is different in kind from the sorts for which it is important to pool knowledge and adjudicate between error and accuracy. If we were training engineers to do mathematics, there would be both a clear standard and a strong motive for stern policing: it would *be determinable* and would *matter* whether we did it right or wrong, whether our conclusions were accurate or not, because someone might build a bridge or a helicopter on the basis of our calculations. Lives would be at stake.

No such condition applies to work in the humanities—or at least, if in some loosely analogous sense there are reasons why it might matter which interpretation prevails, it would involve an exponentially slower and subtler set of parameters. Indeed, it could be argued that the thriving of a multiplicity of interpretations is actually a healthier outcome, from an analogously pragmatic point of view. I propose that we drop this whole charade of having a duty to be each others’ watchdogs, and regard ourselves instead as an eccentric guild of obsessives who happen to be smitten with the same compulsion. We can agree to disagree, or even to simply neglect each other while observing all the signs of mutual ritual respect—and do so in all sincerity, as fellow enthusiasts, fellow lovers, and adventurers of the same seas—and leave the hashing out of the better or worse to coming generations.

It goes without saying that there is a danger of abuse in granting this exemption to oneself and one’s peers, an opening for laziness, shoddy workmanship and self-righteous ignorance on the one hand or fruitlessly frenetic wheel-reinvention on the other. But these dangers are perhaps outweighed by the worry that our premature compromises and mutual translations into one another’s idioms will snuff out the buddings of innovations that will prove to have unsuspected ramifications when allowed

to grow unhindered into their full bloom, and indeed that a wheel reinvented from its first foundations may end up rolling somewhat differently from its unnoticed prototype. To assume otherwise, I think, presupposes precisely the kind of uniform “sameness” among wheels that I would like to bring into question in this very work. In any case, I have tried to steer a middle course between obsessive engagement and hubristic disregard, and I hope the results will be found neither irrelevant nor obstructive to the works of my fellow-enjoyers, both now and in the future. To them, for that hope, for letting me do this kind of thing, for their distant company, for their very cacophony of incompatible views and their strident resistance to each other, for their will to victory and the effulgence of multiplicities that are its unintended side effects, I offer my gratitude. The spaces between us, but also that between which the spaces are, have made this book possible.