Learning from Bad Teachers: Leibniz as a Propaedeutic for Chinese Philosophy

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Abstract

One of the challenges facing instructors of Chinese philosophy courses at many Western universities is the fact that students can often bring orientalizing assumptions and expectations to their encounters with primary sources. This paper examines the nature of this student bias and surveys four pedagogical approaches to confronting it in the context of undergraduate Chinese philosophy curricula. After showcasing some of the inadequacies of these approaches, I argue in favor of a fifth approach that deploys sources from the “pre-history” of comparative philosophy, viz. documents by some of the first Western interpreters of Chinese thought. Such sources give students an access point to the Chinese primary source material that might be prima facie more culturally familiar, while also prompting them to recognize the limitations of that perspective. Of course, most of these early Western interpretations are naive, ignorant, or even blatantly xenophobic; but as Confucius stresses, even bad role-models can still serve as effective teachers by reminding us of pitfalls to avoid (Analects 7.22). Thus, if we can appreciate the failings of earlier interpretive efforts, we may be more cautious and open-minded in how we ourselves approach primary texts. An analysis is given of the hermeneutic climate of early modern European-Chinese comparativism, and Leibniz’s writings on Confucianism are unpacked as a specific case-study of this teaching strategy.

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Definitions and high quality example sentences with “propaedeutic” in context from reliable sources - Ludwig is the linguistic search engine that helps you to write better in English. These experiences serve then as a propaedeutic for Christian teaching. SEP. 13. Medieval Aristotelians tended to locate rhetoric in the trivium (which also included logic and dialectic), and, thus, as propaedeutic to “higher” sciences such as metaphysics. SEP. 14. In a sense Hegel’s phenomenology is a study of phenomena (although this is not a realm he would contrast with that of noumena) and Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit is likewise to be regarded as a type of propaedeutic to philosophy rather than an exercise in or work of philosophy.