Confucianism and critical rationalism: Friends or foes?

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ABSTRACT
According to Karl Popper’s critical rationalism, criticism is the only way we have of systematically detecting and learning from our mistakes so as to get nearer to the truth. Meanwhile, it is arguable that the emphasis of Confucianism on creating a hierarchical and harmonious society can easily lead to submission rather than opposition, producing a conformist rather than critical mind. A question arises here as to whether Confucianism tends to denigrate criticism and thus run counter to critical rationalism. In this paper, I first argue that Confucianism prizes criticism and critical discussion, for which ample justification can be found in Confucian classics. Then I compare Confucianism with critical rationalism and assess the compatibility between them.

Introduction
Basically, Popper (1966b) formulates critical rationalism as an attitude of admitting that ‘I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth’ (p. 225), or an attitude of readiness to listen to critical arguments and to learn from our mistakes. Three key concepts can be identified in this formulation, viz. fallibilism (‘I may be wrong’), criticism (the needed ‘effort’), and verisimilitude (‘we may get nearer to the truth’). Among them, the most important one is criticism, which, according to Popper, is the only way we have of systematically detecting and learning from our mistakes so as to get nearer to the truth. Indeed, in his non-justificationist theory of rationality, Popper (2002b) rejects all attempts at the justification of ideas and replaces justification with criticism:

Previously, most philosophers had thought that any claim to rationality meant rational justification (of one’s beliefs); my thesis was, at least since my Open Society, that rationality meant rational criticism (of one’s own theory and of competing theories). (p. 173)

To put such a non-justificationist theory into practice, Popper has been keen to combat various hidden stratagems that reduce or eschew criticism. One example is the demand for precision in concepts as a precondition for criticism. Asserting the non-existence of ‘precise’ concepts, or concepts with ‘sharp boundary lines’, Popper (1989) stresses that words are significant only as instruments for developing theories and do not need to be more precise than our criticisms demand.

By and large, Confucianism refers to the philosophy that comes from the teachings of Confucius in China. Living at a time of widespread civil disorder, Confucius intends his philosophy to introduce morality into the exercise of governmental power, replacing rule by force with rule by virtue. While Confucius characterizes the hierarchical structure of traditional Chinese society as natural, he believes that a harmonious society can be created if everyone fulfills the moral obligations of their social role through conforming to the fundamental principles of humanity, especially benevolence (ren 仁) and
ritual (禮). Yet, it is arguable that the emphasis of Confucianism on creating a hierarchical and harmonious society can easily lead to submission rather than opposition, producing a conformist rather than critical mind. For example, a review of recent psychological research indicates that the people of China are dominated by authority-minded (Shi & Feng, 2010) and harmony-minded (Ng, 2010) ways of thinking, being willing to take anyone who is the most senior or knowledgeable as the arbiter of truth or morality, and to adopt non-confrontational approaches to conflict resolution, respectively. Here, a question arises as to whether Confucianism tends to denigrate criticism and thus run counter to Popper’s critical rationalism. In the following discussion, I first consider the political and educational implications of critical rationalism. Then I examine the connection between Confucianism and criticism, focusing on whether, and if so how, Confucianism is critical. Finally, I compare Confucianism with critical rationalism and assess the compatibility between them.

Critical rationalism

Popper’s critical rationalism, which promotes the adoption of a critical attitude towards our theories, has profound implications for politics and education. On a political level, it is necessary to build an open society in which individuals live by a humanitarian faith in the importance of maximizing their freedom to live as they want by minimizing avoidable suffering for all (Popper, 1966a). More specifically, an open society implies such social values and practices as rationalism, equalitarianism, and democracy. By ‘rationalism’ Popper (1966b) means a social theory of reason that rationalists have a respect for reason and owe their reason to social interaction, or rather critical discussion, with others. The growth of reason requires not only a careful consideration of the argument rather than the person arguing, but a conscious attitude of openness to criticism and of learning from mistakes. With regard to equalitarianism, Popper asserts that it has a close affinity with rationalism. And a key principle of it is equal treatment of citizens before the law: ‘Equalitarianism proper is the demand that the citizens of the state should be treated impartially. It is the demand that birth, family connection, or wealth must not influence those who administer the law to the citizens’ (Popper, 1966a, p. 95). For Popper, a political practice that is essential for an open society is democracy. For one thing, democracy secures the freedoms of thought and expression that are indispensable for intellectual progress (Popper, 2002a). For another, democracy provides an institutional framework that allows the exercise of reason without violence in political matters, particularly the implementation of reforms and the change of governments (Popper, 1966a). Recognizing that rulers are fallible regardless of how good or wise they are, Popper suggests that democracy should rest on a theory of checks and balances, which endeavors to exercise institutional control over rulers by balancing their powers against that of others.

On an educational level, Popper’s critical rationalism requires teachers to do at least three things. First, the teacher should help students develop good discussion skills in the classroom, enabling them to discover different perspectives and interpretations, as well as to participate as effective discussants in other public places – a core component of democratic living. As Hess (2009) puts it, ‘A healthy democracy requires necessary and ongoing political discussion among citizens. … But not just any talk will do. To cultivate democracy, students need to learn how to engage in high-quality public talk.’ (p. 29) Second, the teacher should initiate students into both what Popper (1989) calls the ‘first-order tradition’ (i.e. the dominant traditional knowledge, values, and practices of the society) and ‘second-order tradition’ (i.e. the tradition of critically discussing the first-order tradition). Although an open society is mainly characterized by the second-order tradition of a critical attitude, which is a tradition of not accepting a certain idea as true simply because it comes from a certain dominant tradition, Popper maintains that it is practically impossible to build this tradition of critical discussion without the first-order tradition, or something to criticize. Third, the teacher should help students detect and correct their mistakes by creating thought-provoking situations where their ideas are challenged and criticized. And a critical teacher should be able to force students into reexamining their ideas through demonstrating that and how their ideas are contradictory, thereby making them conscious that they really do not know what they thought they knew.
Confucianism and criticism

Is Confucianism critical?

It’s true that when evoking the norm of ritual (li 礼), Confucianism emphasizes affirmative thinking in the sense that this thinking complies with established institutions, norms, and values. Yet, it doesn’t imply that Confucianism is simply affirmative and not critical at all. For one thing, it is arguable that Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, the three representatives of Confucianism in ancient China, are exemplars of critical thinking, considering that all of them constantly reflect on the cultures of their times and do not shrink from criticizing what they view as flaws in them. But more importantly, Confucianism prizes criticism and critical discussion, for which sufficient justification can be found in such Confucian classics as the Analects, Mencius, and Xunzi (Paul, 1990).

In the case of the Analects, criticism and critical discussion are considered as instruments for achieving benevolence (ren 仁), which involves cultivating oneself and helping others to cultivate themselves through learning (xue 學). Stressing the role of xue in realizing ren, the Analects (Lau, 1992) asserts that ‘To love benevolence without loving learning is liable to lead to foolishness’ (p. 173), and that ‘Learn widely and be steadfast in your purpose, inquire earnestly and reflect on what is at hand, and there is no need for you to look for benevolence elsewhere’ (p. 191). For Confucius, xue entails participation in critical discussion, demanding the readiness of learners not only to seek opinions from others and take justified criticisms, but also to give opinions to others and express justified criticisms. As an illustration of the former, consider the following two comments made by Confucius on his favorite disciple, Yen Hui: ‘Hui is no help to me at all. He is pleased with everything I say’ (Lau, 1992, p. 97); and ‘I can speak to Hui all day without his disagreeing with me in any way. Thus he would seem to be stupid’ (Lau, 1992, p. 13). They reveal that Confucius welcomes criticism from his disciples as a means for self-improvement, expecting them to challenge his teachings and seeing the absence of disagreement as a prima facie indication of stupidity. After all, it is hard, even for a sage, to improve without disagreement or criticism from other people, intelligent ones in particular. In Book XVII, Chapter 1 of the Analects (Lau, 1992), Confucius sets an example of taking justified criticism by changing his decision not to take office after being criticized for behaving inconsistently. With regard to the latter, Confucius highlights the importance of government officials in expressing justified criticism. For Confucius, they should remonstrate with their ruler when s/he deviates from ren and thus imperils the state. Confucius believes that a government is doomed to ruin the state if it makes bad mistakes and does not listen to criticism or lacks critical officials, as shown in the following passage:

Duke Ting asked, ‘Is there such a thing as a saying that can ruin a state?’

Confucius answered, ‘A saying cannot quite do that. There is a saying amongst men: ‘I do not at all enjoy being a ruler, except for the fact that there is no one to go against what I say.’ If what he says is good and no one goes against him, good. But if what he says is not good and no one goes against him, then is this not almost a case of a saying ruining a state?’ (Lau, 1992, pp. 125, 127)

Here, criticism is seen as part of an impersonal concept of loyalty (zhong 忠): zhong, which literally means ‘doing one’s best’, is conceptualized as loyalty to ren – the realization of which is the ultimate goal of criticism – rather than people. With a view to serving ren, loyal officials should voice justified criticism, even at the risk of losing their lives. As Confucius puts it implicitly, ‘For Gentlemen of purpose and men of benevolence while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished’ (Lau, 1992, p. 151).

As regards the Mencius, criticism and critical discussion are viewed in a similar vein as a way of achieving fundamental human virtues, especially benevolence (ren 仁) and righteousness (yi 義). Indeed, ren and yi are deemed the only virtues a great person should pursue and realize. In Book VII, Part A, Chapter 33 of the Mencius (Lau, 2003), Mencius asserts that a great person should set their mind on high principles, by which he means setting it merely on ren and yi. For Mencius, whatever endangers these two virtues must be fought; therefore, teachings that dispute them must be critically discussed and resolutely opposed. The quotation below serves to illustrate this point.
The teachings current in the Empire are those of the school of Yang or of the school of Mo. Yang advocates everyone for himself [weiwo 為我], which amounts to a denial of one's prince; Mo advocates love without discrimination [jianai 兼愛], which amounts to a denial of one's father. To ignore one's father on the one hand, and one's prince on the other, is to be no different from the beasts. … If the way of Yang and Mo does not subside and the way of Confucius does not shine forth, the people will be deceived by heresies and the path of morality will be blocked [chongse renyi 充塞仁義]. When the path of morality is blocked, then we show animals the way to devour men, and sooner or later it will come to men devouring men [renjiang-xiangshi 人將相食]. … I, too, wish to follow in the footsteps of the three sages in rectifying the hearts of men, laying heresies to rest, opposing extreme action, and banishing excessive views. I am not fond of disputation [bian 辯]. I have no alternative. (Lau, 2003, pp. 141, 143)

Mencius here argues that it is unavoidable to criticize and critically discuss (bian) certain teachings (e.g. weiwo and jianai) if one wants to prevent or stop their dangerous consequences (e.g. chongse renyi and renjiang-xiangshi) so as to establish or maintain ren and yi. And it is through criticism that excessive thoughts and extreme behaviors can be rectified.

Following the lines of argument in the Analects and Mencius, the Xunzi provides justification for criticism and critical discussion in terms of teaching and learning. Based on his belief that humans are evil by nature and good only as products of civilization, Xunzi claims that teaching and learning, which imply criticism and learning discussion, are instrumental in creating a great civilization and a good government:

It is necessary that man’s nature undergo the transforming influence of a teacher and the model [shihozhihu 師法之化] and that he be guided by ritual and moral principles [liyizhdao 禮義之道德]. Only after this has been accomplished do courtesy and deference develop. Unite these qualities with precepts of good form and reason, and the result is an age of orderly government. (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, pp. 741, 743)

A person who is transformed by their teacher and the model, thereby having high educational and moral standards, becomes a gentleman (junzi 君子). In fact, the Confucian doctrine that governments should be ruled by junzi is most comprehensively expounded in the Xunzi. According to Xunzi, it is characteristic of a junzi to be self-critical and open to criticism. The significance of a self-critical attitude lies in its function in learning: ‘In broadening his learning, the gentleman each day examines himself so that his awareness will be discerning and his actions without excess’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999a, p. 3).

As for the openness to criticism, emphasizing that nobody can know or do everything, Xunzi argues that this willingness to ponder criticism is essential and valuable to self-cultivation (xiushen 修身). As he explains in Book 2 of the Xunzi, entitled ‘On Self-cultivation,’ ‘Those who consider me to be in the wrong and are correct in doing so are my teachers. … Thus, the gentleman esteems his teachers. … He accepts reproofs and is able to take guard from their warnings’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999a, p. 25).

In other words, a junzi should be receptive to justified criticism and be respectful of those (teachers) who offer it to him.

**Confucian criticism**

The chief outcome of the preceding discussion is that criticism in Confucianism plays a key role in helping people achieve self-cultivation through perfecting their learning (xue 學). Indeed, for Confucius, xue is essential for the cultivation of intellectual and moral virtues. Without xue, the attempt to attain such virtues as benevolence (ren 仁), cleverness (zhi 知), trustworthiness in word (xin 信), forthrightness (zhi 直), courage (yong 勇), and unbending strength (gang 剛) – called the ‘six qualities’ in the Analects (Lau, 1992, pp. 173, 175) – is liable to lead to the ‘six attendant faults’, viz. foolishness, straying from the right path, harmful behavior, being unrelenting, insubordination, and indifference, respectively (Lau, 1992, pp. 173, 175). But how does criticism optimize learning? What is the connection between them?

In Book VII, Chapter 1 of the Analects (Lau, 1992), Confucius claims that he is a transmitter rather than an innovator, being a devotee of antiquity. This statement provides a clue to the Confucian view of learning: xue involves the accumulation of information and knowledge – through watching, listening, reading, etc. – not only from current ideas and practices but, more importantly, from past ones that are believed to contain antique wisdom and supposed to be transmitted wholeheartedly. The past is often used as a source of role models that exemplify specific virtues, and not as an unquestionable authority that makes criticism impossible (Lai, 2008). For instance, both Confucius and Mencius make a number
of references to the commitment and achievements of sage rulers, like Yao and Shun, as examples of
the Confucian ideal of benevolent government (renzheng 仁政) that strives to bring benefits to the
common people. Speaking of Yao, Confucius says, ‘He was so boundless that the common people were
not able to put a name to his virtues. Lofty was he in his successes and brilliant was he in his civilized
accomplishments!’ (Lau, 1992, pp. 73, 75); and Mencius says, ‘Not to govern the people in the way Yao
governed his is to harm one's people’ (Lau, 2003, pp. 151, 153).

Although Confucianism does not expect a learner, as a transmitter, to actively transform the content
of what is transmitted, it does not imply learning by rote memorization and uncritical imitation, nor
does it deny the need of a learner for actively engaging with – i.e. analyzing, evaluating, and synthe-
sizing – the content. For Confucians, a proper understanding of the transmitted content requires such
active engagement, the essence of which is thinking (si 思). In Confucius’ own words, ‘If one learns
from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. If, on the other hand, one thinks but does not
learn from others, one will be imperilled’ (Lau, 1992, p. 15). More specifically, xue and si are regarded as
two integrated components for the cultivation of intellectual and moral excellence. Genuine learning,
learning for self-cultivation, cannot be achieved in the absence of any of these two components. What
Confucius means by ‘si’ here is reflection that presumes and strengthens such critical thinking skills as
exploring underlying principles, being open-minded in considering alternative views, being fair-minded
in assessing competing evidence, and examining the logical consistency of beliefs. This kind of reflective
thinking, Kim (2003) argues, entails reflection on the information and knowledge accumulated during
xue as well as reflection on oneself. On the one hand, reflection on the accumulated information and
knowledge helps to synthesize and systematize them into a meaningful whole that is a vital element
of wisdom. To do so, Confucius urges his disciples to grasp the underlying principles of his teachings
and to draw the wider implications of those principles. As he puts it, ‘When I have pointed out one
corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to
him a second time’ (Lau, 1992, p. 57). On the other hand, reflection on oneself helps to ensure that the
aforementioned synthesis and systematization proceed in an open-minded, fair-minded, and logical
manner, internalizing the resulting knowledge and wisdom. The reason is that such reflection helps one
to know what one knows and does not know; where one’s strengths, weaknesses, and biases lie; and
whether one’s beliefs are logically consistent. This reflective self-knowledge, Kim (2003) remarks, leads
one to humility that is the foundation for open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, and logicality in judgment.

Apart from improving learning, criticism in Confucianism also has a significant part to play in achiev-
ing harmony. In its broadest sense, the concept of harmony involves at least five layers of meaning in
Confucian tradition: the harmony of humans and nature, peace between nations, harmony in human
relationships, joy in an individual’s spiritual life, and an attitude of tolerance of different cultures (Chen,
2009). They are conducive to environmental protection, peaceful coexistence between nations, the
strengthening of interpersonal relationships, more effective handling of negative emotions, and the
acceptance of different cultural views, respectively. So far as the role of criticism in Confucianism is
concerned, it is to foster harmony between people of diverse backgrounds in the local and international
community. The ultimate goal is harmony in diversity, or a harmonious world where people of various
backgrounds blend together into a harmonious whole without aiming to eliminate their differences, like
a piece of polyphonic music with different melodies. To attain this goal, critical argumentation – whether
in educational, social, or political contexts – should be interpreted as a collaborative undertaking among
participants who show concern and accept responsibility for a matter of common interest that affects
the life of not only themselves but perhaps others (Cua, 1985). Accordingly, instead of obstinately
insisting on their own opinions, the concerned and responsible participants should strive to reach
consensus by examining viable alternatives and accommodating mutual differences. For Confucians,
being able to do so is one of the key expectations a gentleman (junzi 君子) is required to live up to:
Confucius says, ‘The gentleman agrees with others without being an echo (heerbutong 和而不同)’ (Lau,
1992, p. 129); and Xunzi says,
The gentleman, though worthy, is able to tolerate the unfit. Though wise, he is able to suffer the stupid. Though profound, he is able to endure the superficial. Though pure, he can tolerate the adulterated. This may be described as the ‘universal method’ ["兼術 jianshu 兼術"]. (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999a, p. 115)

This partly explains why Confucianism puts a heavy emphasis on ritual ("禮 li"). Li, as a set of accepted norms of proper behavior, serve to ensure appropriate and orderly conduct of participants in argumentation. Since, as Confucius argues, people ‘return to the observance of the rites [li] through overcoming the self [personal desires and interests]’ (Lau, 1992, p. 109), li contribute to the mutual accommodation of differences in beliefs and values among participants in argumentative contexts. Although the traditional character of li is contingent in the sense that there are always alternative traditions, this does not imply that the tradition is unreasonable or cannot be challenged. Traditions may be criticized and revised, hence the compatibility between a critical attitude towards li as a set of traditional norms and an acceptance of their suitability in specific contexts, including the context of critical argumentation. In other words, not only do li not reject criticism, they enable criticism to be expressed effectively in argumentation.

To achieve the goal of harmony in diversity, in addition to the use of li as a social institution to regulate the behavior of participants in argumentation, the participants themselves have to display certain desirable qualities. Xunzi is quite emphatic about these qualities. For instance, in Books 1 and 3 of the Xunzi, he underlines the importance of non-quarrelsomeness, maintaining that a junzi should neither engage in argumentation ‘to the point of causing a quarrel’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999a, p. 51), nor engage in one ‘with a person who is in a quarrelsome mood’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999a, p. 19). Being non-quarrelsome is a way of preventing the argumentation from deteriorating into an aggressive quarrel that betrays a concern for personal rather than common interests. After all, argumentation is not a contest, so the aim of criticism is not to win a contest, which necessarily remains a divisive zero-sum game, but to strengthen communal harmony through a cooperative search for options on which all participants can agree.

Moreover, in Book 22 of the Xunzi, Xunzi describes in detail what a scholar or gentleman should and should not do in argumentation:

He explains with a humane compassion ["以仁心說 yi renxin shuo 以仁心說"], listens with a studious attitude ["以學心聽 yi xuexin ting 以學心聽"], and engages in disputation with an impartial mind ["以公心辨 yi gongxin bian 以公心辨"]. He is unmoved by the praise or blame of the multitude. He is not seductive to the eyes and ears of those who observe him. He does not use gifts to seek the power and influence of those in high position. … such are the disputations and explanations of the scholar and gentleman ["士君子之辨說 shi junzi zhi bianshuo 士君子之辨說"]. (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, p. 725)

In particular, the three positive qualities of humaneness (i.e. renxin), studiousness (i.e. xuexin), and impartiality (i.e. gongxin) are crucial for the success of argumentation. For Xunzi, humaneness, or benevolence, involves loving and respecting others. While the former ‘causes a hatred of whoever does injury to them’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999a, p. 479), the latter means they ‘will get hold of the idea under discussion, yet will not be given offense or be insulted’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999a, p. 115). To build love and respect for one another, Confucius suggests developing empathy for the feelings and needs of others. This empathy is sometimes formulated in the negative in its concern for the welfare of others. In Confucius’ own words, ‘Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire’ (Lau, 1992, p. 155). Considering that showing one’s humaneness in argumentation is a way of demonstrating one’s care for the well-being of not only participants but those affected by its outcome, the quality of humaneness embodies the notion of concerned and responsible participation.

With regard to studiousness, it refers to an attitude of open-mindedness, or a willingness to listen to and learn from others. It entails a willingness to consider and accept new ideas, especially criticisms, and thus to revise or abandon one’s convictions. Although, as pointed out by Xunzi, it is a common flaw of people ‘to be blinded by some small point of the truth and to shut their minds to the Great Ordering Principle’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, p. 671), it is possible to overcome this flaw of only grasping a partial truth by learning from other people. As Confucius puts it, ‘Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy; the bad points of the other I correct in myself’ (Lau, 1992, p. 63). In fact, open-mindedness is an exemplification of impartiality in that people can hardly keep an open mind in argumentation if they are partial towards
their own interests and the interests of those close to them. And it is arguable that partiality towards personal desires and personal friendships are two major enemies of harmony in diversity; hence the reminder of Xunzi that ‘the gentleman’s ability consists in his use of a sense of common good to triumph over merely personal desires [yi gongyi sheng siyu 以公義勝私慾]’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999a, p. 45), and of Confucius that ‘the gentleman … comes together with other gentlemen without forming cliques [qun er bu dang 羣而不黨]’ (Lau, 1992, p. 155). The significance of impartiality lies in its selflessness that facilitates the broadening of mind as well as the tolerance and appreciation of diversity.

Confucianism and critical rationalism

Major differences

Owing to their development in different historical and cultural contexts, some basic differences between Confucianism and critical rationalism appear unavoidable. One example is that critical rationalism strives to establish democracy and the rule of law, while Confucianism upholds neither a democratic society nor the law to protect the freedom of people or to ensure a non-violent change of governments. Indeed, the Confucian conviction about the effectiveness of teaching and learning, as revealed in the traditional saying that everyone can become a Yao or Shun (both are legendary model rulers in ancient China), reflects a non-Popperian optimism about the power of education over human nature: it favors the development of an undemocratic government or at least a society that does not respect the law (Paul, 1990). Another example is that critical rationalism, having faith in the compelling power of impersonal reason, holds it possible and desirable to disagree with specific opinions while continuing to show respect for the person(s) entertaining them. However, upon the assumption that good people generate good ideas and do good things, Confucianism does not clearly distinguish a person from their opinion. Therefore, one would not expect to read in the works of a classical Chinese [Confucian] scholar anything like Aristotle’s statement, ‘I love my teacher, Plato, but I love truth more.’ Such a declaration would have been seen as indulgence in the sort of contentiousness and self-assertiveness which threatens social harmony. Instead, communication as constitutive of ritual community is effected through patterns of linguistic deference. (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 211)

As far as the role of criticism is concerned, there is a crucial difference in it between Confucianism and critical rationalism. For critical rationalism, criticism is the best, if not only, means of establishing truth; but for Confucianism, criticism is at best an effective means of realizing benevolence, which is the ultimate goal of improving learning and achieving harmony. Accordingly, in Confucians’ view, the touchstone of acceptable speech in critical discussion is not truth but moral effectiveness (Paul, 1990).

One moral virtue that serves to illustrate this point is being ‘trustworthy in what he says [yan er you xin 言而有信]’ (Lau, 1992, p. 5) or ‘in their discourse always loyal and trustworthy [yan zhongxin 言忠信]’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, p. 973). Here, one can be trustworthy in what one says but make a mistake, and although one may make a mistake, one may at least try to be loyal and trustworthy in one’s discourse. In other words, this virtue is compatible with erring. According to the following two examples given in the Analects, it is even compatible with lying: in Book XIII, Chapter 18, Confucius advocates that a son should cover up for his father’s criminal behavior rather than giving evidence against him, hinting that lying can be a more sincere expression of human feelings, and thus more favorable to humanity and morality, than truth; and in Book XVII, Chapter 20, in order to make his disciple reflect on his fault, Confucius lies to him about his illness (Lau, 1992). The implication is that the Confucian criteria of acceptable language use in criticism are primarily standards of morally effective speech, and only incidentally rules of truth in so far as they contribute to the realization of benevolence. As Paul (1990) explains it,

Speaking implies promising to ‘live up to one’s word’: This requires endeavoring to say only what one is able to ‘fulfil’, which in turn entails moral as well as cognitive efforts. Hence, speaking is per se a moral task. … The words of a man who has proved trustworthy and reliable are taken seriously, for one can expect that they are realizable and/or, as we would say, ‘will come true’. (p. 79)
Possible reconciliation

Despite these differences, Confucianism and critical rationalism share some significant similarities in the theory of criticism and rationality. With regard to criticism, both Confucianism and critical rationalism consider it as an effective means of learning and improving knowledge. In line with critical rationalism that advocates a respect for all members of society as a potential source of criticism and knowledge (Popper, 1996), Confucianism calls for modesty, courtesy, and respect for the interlocutor in critical discussion: the following two quotes from the Analects and the Xunzi, respectively, are chosen to illustrate this.

To be capable yet to ask the advice of those who are not. To have many talents yet to ask the advice of those who have few. To have yet to appear to be wanting. To be full yet to appear empty. (Lau, 1992, p. 71)

Due measure in polite refusals and courtesy has been attained. … Forbidden subjects and tabooed names are not mentioned. … Such are the disputations and explanations of the scholar and gentleman. (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, pp. 723, 725)

Moreover, to achieve mutual understanding and eventual consensus in critical argumentation, Popper (1966b) advocates that one should follow reason rather than emotions, especially following such generally accepted rules of communication as logic, language, and experience. In a similar vein, on the one hand, Xunzi argues that problems should be solved by rational and impartial inquiry rather than emotions, viewing ‘desires and aversions’ as a source of ‘the flaws of the mind’s operation [xinshuzihuan 心術之患]’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, p. 681); on the other, he argues that sense experience, as an important source of knowledge, should be used as a criterion of correct designation and consistent language use, giving the same designations to what create the same impressions on ‘the sense organs given us by nature [tianguan 天官]’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, p. 713). Condemning the use of sophistry for causing confusion in argumentation, Xunzi tries to refute contemporary sophistries by means of his criteria of proper language use. For example, in Book 22 of the Xunzi, he criticizes the statements ‘Mountain and marshes are level’ and ‘A white horse is not a horse’ for using objects to disorder names (yongshiyiluanming 用實以亂名) and using names to disorder objects (yongmingyiluanshi 用名以亂實), respectively (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, p. 719). To exclude such statements, Xunzi suggests that one should test the former ‘with the senses – which are the basis for distinguishing the similar from the different – and observe which alternative accords with them’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b, p. 719) and test the latter ‘against the agreed use of names and … use “what one accepts” to show that “what one rejects” is fallacious’ (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999b). In other words, while the criticism of the former statement centers on the relation between a designation and its designatum, the criticism of the latter warns against violating the conventionally accepted relations that exist between the designations themselves.

Besides, just as Popper’s critical rationalism emphasizes the importance of the first-order tradition of traditional knowledge to the second-order tradition of critical discussion, Confucian criticism maintains that the knowledge accumulated from the past during learning (xue 學) constitutes the object of, and is thus essential to, critical reflection (si 思). Although Confucians who encourage drawing inspiration from the past are often described as conservative, it is arguably a much more effective way of achieving self-cultivation than trying to generate everything oneself: as Confucius puts it, ‘Once I went without food all day and without sleep all night thinking, but I found that this did me no good at all. It would have been better for me to have spent the time in learning’ (Lau, 1992, p. 157). Indeed, Confucius’ emphasis on the past reflects more a concern with continuity that shapes the future than a conservatism that seeks to retain the past unchanged. For example, in Book III, Chapter 14 of the Analects (Lau, 1992), he espouses the culture of the Zhou dynasty in that it built on the learning from the earlier Xia and Yin dynasties. Such Confucian learning from the past, for Bell (2008), carries both ethical and political implications:

As ethical practice, it means being open to the possibility that the past can offer useful moral lessons for the present. As political practice, it means that change must be based, at least partly, on past practices and traditions. The alternative – to criticize and attack all forms of old thought – was propagated during Chairman Mao’s Cultural Revolution. The result, of course, was disaster. (p. 158)
As for the theory of rationality, according to Paul (1990), there are three basic similarities in it between Confucianism and critical rationalism: both of them regard rationality as the optimum means of promoting humaneness, believe that all humans are essentially equal in terms of their rational and moral capacities, and establish a theory of rational discussion by using relevant terms and concepts. Furthermore, in line with critical rationalism that rejects the demand for precision in concepts in rational discussion (see Section ‘Introduction’), Confucianism depends mostly on exemplary models rather than precise definitions to evoke knowledge and understanding (Hall & Ames, 1995). Finally, resembling the social theory of reason upheld by critical rationalism, Confucianism stresses the importance of sociability in rational inquiry. An etymological analysis of the concept of wisdom (zhi 智) – a key Confucian concept that is associated with thinking and may be considered as the result of inquiry – serves to illustrate this point. More specifically, the analysis of the character 智 indicates not only that the linking of the ‘mouth’ (kou 口) element and the ‘saying’ (yue 言) element with speaking reveals the vital role of communication in the knowing process, but also that the ‘arrow’ (shi 弓) element, which is thought to be originally ‘persons’ (ren 人), suggests that zhi entails communities of inquirers instead of solitary knowers (Ames, 2011).

Conclusion

To sum up: contrary to popular belief, Confucianism is not simply affirmative, but really critical, in thinking. Apart from the fact that three major classical Confucians – viz. Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi – are exemplars of critical thinking, ample justification can be found in the respective Confucian classics for the fact that Confucianism prizes criticism and critical discussion. Indeed, criticism and critical discussion in Confucianism play two crucial roles in realizing benevolence (ren), which is the ultimate goal of optimizing learning and achieving harmony. On the one hand, criticism, in the form of reflection (si) on the knowledge accumulated during learning (xue) and on oneself, serves to optimize learning. While the former reflection helps to synthesize and systematize the knowledge into a meaningful whole that is a vital element of wisdom; the latter helps to ensure that such synthesis and systematization proceed in an open-minded, fair-minded, and logical manner, internalizing the resulting knowledge and wisdom. On the other hand, critical discussion, interpreted as a collaborative undertaking among participants who show concern and accept responsibility for a matter of common interest, aims to achieve harmony in diversity. In order to do so, in addition to the use of ritual (li) as a social institution to regulate the behavior of participants, the participants themselves have to display such desirable qualities as non-quarrelsomeness, humaneness, studiousness, and impartiality. As regards Confucianism and critical rationalism, due to their development in different historical and cultural contexts, some basic differences between them appear unavoidable. Yet, considering that they share some striking and significant similarities in the theory of criticism and rationality, it can be argued that Confucianism is, to a certain extent, reconcilable with critical rationalism.

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