Expanding Process: Exploring Philosophical and Theological Transformations in China and the West (review)

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Accepting his argument also entails a different take on the science wars. Much of this conflict is fought on spurious grounds that invoke artificial oppositions between science and superstition, science and ideology, science and religion, and so on. It has also degenerated into claims of the superiority of one kind of reason and rationality, even as it places the capacity to be agents of such rationality solely within the European Enlightenment tradition. While doing so, it negates the creative and critical capacities of not only other cultures but also other non-scientific communities within these cultures. Accepting the multicultural origins of modern science will significantly change the contours of these battles. Bala’s argument also has serious implications for science debates in non-Western countries, particularly for the conflict between science and indigenous knowledge. If Bala is correct, then indigenous knowledge was an essential part of the creation of modern science, and so modern science cannot be used to “sharply sunder the intellectual history of the West from the Rest” (p. 3).

Are matters of priority really important? Definitely—at least if we believe in the virtues of modern science. The history of modern science is filled with claims and counterclaims to priority. The institutionalization of science valorizes priority and rewards the first discoverer and inventor. Scientific publication is very much about being the first to publish a result. The intensely strong reaction against plagiarism is related to this obsession with priority. It is ironical, then, that given such meticulous attention to priority in modern science, proper acknowledgment of priority is not given to the birth of the discipline itself!

This book will also be very useful to those who want to construct similar arguments about intellectual ideas in the fields of philosophy, art, literature, and so on. In all these cases it is not a matter of priority alone but also of recognizing that in choosing one dominant paradigm (that of the West), a majority of the world’s population is losing access to very different views about the world, the cosmos, and our own place within it. And it is very possible that it is within these differing traditions and worldviews that the future of humanity is to be secured. Even if the West chooses not to build upon the insights in this book, at least the Rest should be made to read it!


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Expanding Process: Exploring Philosophical and Theological Transformations in China and the West, by John Berthrong, is a model study of processive motifs in Chinese traditions and their contributions to global process-relational philosophy. Process-relational philosophy, which became a full-fledged school of thought in the twentieth century with the works of Alfred North Whitehead and the American Pragmatists, conceives of reality as constant flux. This metaphysical view is opposed to
the substance-ontological view, which understands reality as a composition of time-
less, discrete substances, such as Plato’s Forms.

In working to move process philosophy out of its Whiteheadian and American
roots, Berthrong draws out processive motifs in classical Confucianism, Daoism, and
Neo-Confucianism and integrates them with what he calls North American naturalist
notions of process to create a more robust global understanding of process philoso-
phy. These processive motifs are areas within a particular school of thought that em-
phasize change and flux over substance and permanence. Berthrong’s three studies,
of Xunzi, the Liezi, and the master-disciple pair of Zhu Xi and Chen Chun, demonstra-
the applicability of process thought to moral self-cultivation, conceptions of
authority, and metaphysics, respectively, and thus demonstrate not only the proces-
sive nature of Chinese philosophy, but also the broad applicability of process thought
to a variety of philosophical fields; process thought is not limited to twentieth-century
Western philosophy, nor is it limited to metaphysical issues.

In the introductory chapter, Berthrong describes his project as inspired by the
work of Nicholas Rescher. Rescher combed Western philosophical texts in search of
a history of process thought prior to the works of Whitehead and his contemporaries.
Berthrong has a similar goal, but he aims to find a global history of process. Through
the accumulation of processive motifs drawn from varying fields of philosophy within
three distinct schools of Chinese philosophy, Berthrong aims to construct a more ro-
bust conception of process than those limited to a Western perspective.

In the second chapter, Berthrong examines Xunzi’s philosophy and argues that
the processive motif of transformation is most readily found in Xunzi’s theory of self-
cultivation, particularly in his epistemology and theory of human nature. Berthrong
notes that though the individual’s transformation under the guidance of a sage is an
excellent and ready example of process thought, the truly interesting question is how
the early sages developed morality without someone to model it for them. Berthrong
draws from recent scholarship on Xunzi to argue that it is through borrowing and
developing, or, in Confucius’ terms, learning and reflecting, that the sage begins the
process of self-cultivation: the transformation of his innate, rough, and coarse human
nature into a refined, moral nature. Berthrong ends this chapter with a brief analysis
of cheng (true integrity/sincerity/self-actualization) as the emotional, and ultimately
moral, motivation to begin the process of learning and reflecting.

Berthrong’s task is somewhat different in his third chapter as he switches both the
tradition in focus and the philosophical field. Daoism in general, but particularly the
early Daoism of which the Liezi is a foundational text, is structured entirely around
the concept of ceaseless change and flux, and thus the identification of general pro-
cessive motifs is easy. So Berthrong turns his attention to the study what sort of pro-
cess one finds in the Liezi. He develops the Daoist notion of ziran (spontaneity) and
its related trait, open receptivity. He then explores the relation of spontaneity to anti-
authoritarian radical social theory. His ultimate conclusion is that though there is a
close relationship between the two historically, the philosophy does not necessitate
such a relationship.
In chapter 4, Berthrong examines the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi and Chen Chun. Berthrong’s approach is to examine Chen Chun’s Glossary for processive motifs and then to demonstrate that Chen Chun, Zhu Xi’s student, offers a vision consistent with Zhu Xi’s philosophy. Much of this chapter considers the relationship of li (principle) and qi (vital force). Berthrong concludes that the relationship between the two is not one of “ontological priority” but rather of “ontological parity,” to borrow the terms of Justus Buchler. Rather than one generating the other, the pair always exists in tandem. The relationship of vital force and principle is like that of field and focus, respectively, with principle ordering the constant flux of vital force.

The final chapter moves across the Pacific and examines the North American process traditions that Berthrong covers with the umbrella term “North American naturalism.” In this camp he includes the three traditions of pragmatism, process-relational philosophy proper, and the sort of naturalism exhibited in Justus Buchler’s work. Berthrong emphasizes in this closing chapter that as the naturalist trend in philosophy has gained momentum, it has played a significant part in the de-emphasis of religious experience, previously dominated in the West by a belief in supernatural transcendence. Berthrong turns to the Confucian concept of liyi fénsu, “principle is one, its manifestations many,” as an informative concept to be brought into the American naturalist tradition as “immanent transcendence,” the experience of the sacred within the secular.

In the appendix, Berthrong makes a short foray into the Western occult. He focuses specifically on the three movements of high ritual magic, Wicca, and New Age. He notes both the overwhelming presence of processive motifs as well as the troubling presence of strong Neoplatonist inclinations. Reading through Berthrong’s brief analysis of these movements and their affinities to process philosophy, one hopes that it foreshadows a future project from the author.

In evaluating the merits of this book, two in a field of many come into focus. The first is Berthrong’s contribution to global process philosophy. Berthrong finds the processive motifs throughout Chinese intellectual history in texts as diverse as the Xunzi, the Liezi, and Chen Chun’s Glossary. In developing these processive motifs as they are found in the original traditions, Berthrong enables Chinese process thought to contribute positively to a dialogue with the process movement in North America.

The second merit is that in teasing out the processive motifs in Chinese traditions, Berthrong also demonstrates the range of possible philosophical fields in which a processive account can thrive. Its applications include moral self-cultivation, conceptions of authority in social and political philosophy, and of course metaphysics. There is no doubt that Berthrong’s goal of developing a more robust global understanding of process is successfully met, and, as with any great work, some of the questions it raises for future studies are just as valuable as those it answers.

There is one serious drawback to Expanding Process and that is the copyediting. The editing errors go beyond the occasional typo and unfortunately render parts of Berthrong’s study difficult to unpack. To begin at the end, the fifth chapter contains twenty-five notes, all of which are properly numbered in the endnotes. However, the
number “26” is used within the text to pick out twelve of those twenty-five notes. This makes the very detailed and informative endnotes nearly inaccessible unless one corrects each supertext along the way. In addition to endnote problems, there are issues with romanized Chinese names. There are instances in the plain text when the names are in Pinyin and others when they are in Wade-Giles. A reader unfamiliar with the transliteration of Chinese terms and names may not realize that Cheng Zhongying and Chung-yeng Cheng (to give one example) are in fact the same person. This problem is compounded by the numerous misspellings of Chinese names, such as Dong Zhongshu becoming Dong Zongshu. Unfortunately, these sorts of editing errors are distracting to anyone attempting to access the detailed scholarship Berthrong has produced. Despite such distractions, however, Expanding Process is yet another excellent contribution from Berthrong to the fields of comparative philosophy and theology.