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INTRODUCTION: THE *YIJING* AS A CHALLENGE FOR WESTERN METAPHYSICAL REFLECTION

ABSTRACT

As an introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* on the *Yijing* and Western metaphysics, this article examines the variety of uses to which the *Yijing* has been put in the past and offers suggestions as to why the vast majority of Western philosophers, and even many recent Chinese philosophers, have tended to ignore it. Drawing on insights conveyed by the papers included in the special issue, as well as on various other recent research related to this topic, I argue that the *Yijing* has a largely untapped potential to be used by philosophers who seek to construct metaphysical arguments and systems. Everyone interested in gaining wisdom through philosophical reflection—whether their main focus is on Chinese thinkers, on Western thinkers, or on thinkers from other, more marginalized traditions—can benefit by accepting the challenge posed by this classical Chinese book of wisdom.

The great Chinese classic known as the *Yijing* 《易經》—literally, the *Book of Changes*—is reputed to be the oldest book known to humankind. Despite the fact that it has served as the wellspring of wisdom for most of the great schools of thought in Chinese philosophy at least since Confucius, its relevance to serious metaphysical reflection has often gone unrecognized, even by philosophers working in the Chinese tradition over the past century. This, no doubt, is partly due to the well-known fact that the *Yijing* was originally used as, and is to this day often primarily regarded as, a tool for divination: if serious philosophical reflection in general has no proper role for *fortune-telling*, then surely metaphysics (the queen of the philosophical sciences, if not the model for all science whatsoever) is fully justified in shunning any book that smacks of such nonsense. This, at any rate, has been the typical line of thinking assumed by most respectable and respected philosophers, East and West, over the past few

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centuries. Yet the *Yijing* is far more than just a handbook for fortune-telling. Its mathematically precise method of distinguishing between sixty-four hexagrams (or *gua*), each consisting of a set of six broken (*yin*) or solid (*yang*) lines arranged as a pair of trigrams, can be interpreted as a symbolic depiction of the essential building blocks of the ever-changing structure of human existence. This way of reading the *Yijing* poses a direct challenge to philosophers in every age and every tradition, for it suggests that the most profound way of reading the *Yijing* is as a handbook for *metaphysics*.

Fortunately, the past few decades have witnessed a surge of interest in the *Yijing*, on precisely the grounds that it is properly read as far more than just a fancy attempt at quasi-philosophical magic. The work of Chung-ying Cheng has been especially influential in this regard: he has tirelessly organized and/or helped promote a variety of recent *Yijing* conferences in China (e.g., in Anyang, October 2011, and annual conferences in Wuxi since 2015—to mention just a few examples) and has himself defended the relevance of the *Yijing* to Confucian ethics.¹ Thus, in discussing the relationship between Kant's philosophy and Confucianism, he suggests at one point that it is primarily through their creative interpretations of the *Yijing* that Confucian philosophers “may be said to come to know the thing-in-itself in a sense that they come to realize it as an end of human life and that they could see it as an end of human action.”² Numerous other scholars—too many to list in this brief introduction—have followed similar lines of thought, exploring the multi-faceted ways in which the *Yijing* and Western metaphysics have mutually challenging implications for each other.

Halla Kim's initial paper in this special issue observes that, even in the Chinese tradition, it is not always immediately apparent why a fortune-telling manual would have attracted so much attention from ancient Chinese scholars, whose main focus was normally on ethics—i.e., on forging a path of wisdom so that people would know how to live a good life. Kim points out that the ancient Chinese mind-set dominated by Confucianism was so heavily influenced by the *Yijing* precisely *because* the ideas expressed in “the text of *Zhouyi*, with its mantic practices, contain a peculiar notion of normativity that can explain the idea of prescription found in the doctrine of the rectification of names.”³ This key Confucian doctrine combines ethics and metaphysics in a unique way, by directly linking right action to the proper designation of the real relationships that define human life. Because the *Yijing* systematically names sixty-four such basic relationships, and because the potential number of different types of *change* between these sixty-four possible starting-points is so extremely numerous (traditionally referred to with the proverbial expression, “the ten thousand things,” but actually far greater than that⁴), the basic set of

sixty-four *gua* can be taken as a blueprint for an orderly application of Confucius' doctrine *and* for the virtually infinite array of possible states of affairs that metaphysical reality exhibits. Moreover, this emphasis on a metaphysical way of reading the *Yijing* was not limited to Confucius himself; for as Tze-Ki Hon argues in the second contribution to this special issue,⁵ Wang Bi's approach to the *Yijing* offers a similarly rich resource for understanding its ontological implications.

Recent studies in the history of comparative philosophy have demonstrated that, during the first half of the eighteenth century, a surprising shift took place in reception of Chinese philosophy in Europe. As Martin Schönfeld has persuasively argued,⁶ European scholars were, in general, excited and open-minded about the ancient philosophical ideas coming out of China during the time of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), but by the time Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) began his scholarly career, Chinese philosophy was being shunned and often being made into an object of ridicule. While this is not the place to discuss the *reasons* for such a dramatic cultural shift, it undeniably did happen, and the reasons were not all (or even primarily) philosophical in nature. As is well known, Leibniz not only knew about the *Yijing*, but wrote a journal article about it, in which he depicted the *Yijing* as being based on an expression of the very same mathematical logic that he himself had used as the basis for inventing calculus.⁷ The role of the *Yijing* not only in Leibniz' discovery of calculus, but also in his construction of a natural theology and in his overall metaphysical theory, is a theme well-deserving of further research.

Equally well known is that, by the time Kant began formulating the ideas that became the monumental and (in the post-Kantian West) almost universally influential Critical philosophy, Chinese philosophy had gone out of style. As a result, unlike Leibniz, Kant never mentions the *Yijing* and most of what he says about Chinese philosophy is negative—or cautiously neutral, at best.⁸ Nevertheless, my article⁹ in the special issue takes up the challenge of the *Yijing* in this potentially hostile context by presenting the latest installment of a series of essays that I have written in preparation for a forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Changing the Changeless* (see note 9, above). Theology, the most thoroughly metaphysical of the three “higher faculties” in Kant's understanding of the fourfold structure of the university (the other two higher faculties being law and medicine, while philosophy proper is the “lower faculty”), is a topic that many would regard as entirely absent from the *Yijing*, given the general earthly (i.e., practical, moral) focus of Chinese philosophy. But I argue that Kant's own theological reflections mirror the cautious approach toward theology adopted by Chinese philosophy in such a way that the *Yijing* can actually serve as a suitable interpretive

framework for Kant's philosophical system in general, and for his theology in particular.

Ever since the middle of the twentieth century, the viability of metaphysics as a stand-alone discipline has been questioned in many Western philosophical circles, due to the fact that metaphysical reality is (as Kant had pointed out two centuries earlier) inaccessible without some form of *interpretation*. The discipline of hermeneutics has therefore come to take the pride of place that once belonged to ontology—a fact that has led Cheng to coin the term “onto-hermeneutics.” The final article¹⁰ in this special issue therefore explores the roots of Cheng's position in Gadamer's apparent abandonment of traditional metaphysics: Andrew Fuyarchuk argues that this “renewed” view of hermeneutics actually leaves ample room for the kind of “immanentist” perspective that is characteristic of both Confucian metaphysics and the *Yijing*, not to mention much of the Western metaphysical tradition that predates twentieth-century hermeneutic philosophy. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Fuyarchuk's specific and wide-ranging arguments regarding the proper interpretation of the Western metaphysical tradition, one thing is clear: his claim that the role of hermeneutics in Western philosophy must continue to be reassessed is virtually unassailable for anyone who wishes to take seriously the challenge that the new wave of *Yijing* research poses to all traditional forms of Western metaphysical reflection.

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ENDNOTES

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1. See, for example, Chung-ying Cheng, “A Transformative Conception of Confucian Ethics: The *Yijing*, Utility, and Rights,” in *Confucian Philosophy: Innovations and Transformations*, Supplement to *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 4 (2011), 7–28.
2. Chung-ying Cheng, “Theoretical Links between Kant and Confucianism: Preliminary Remarks,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33, no.1 (2006), 11.
3. Halla Kim, “Confucianism before Confucius: The *Yijing* and the Rectification of Names,” quoted from the second paragraph of the article published first in this special issue. Kim's article provides a helpful historical introduction to the origin of the *Yijing* and its relation to other ancient Chinese classics.
4. Each line can change into the equivalent line in any of the 64 *gua* (including itself). At the very least, with only one iteration of change, this means there are 6^4 possible permutations. This works out to 6.334×10^{49} possible distinct types of change, if

just a single change in each line is treated independently from a single change in each of the other five. Of course, there are only four *types* of change: from *yin* to *yin*, from *yin* to *yang*, from *yang* to *yin*, or from *yang* to *yang*. But the meaning of a given *yin* or *yang* line will be different, depending on which of the 64 hexagrams it appears in.

5. Tze-Ki Hon, "The Ontology of Change: Wang Bi's Commentary on the *Yijing*," the second article in this issue.
6. See, e.g., Martin Schönfeld's paper titled "What Did Kant Learn from China, and Why Did He Not Own Up to It?" presented for a panel organized by the North American Kant Society and held at the American Philosophical Association's Pacific Division Meeting (April 2017).
7. See especially Leibniz' first book (1666), titled *Dissertatio De Arte Combinatoria* (*On the Art of Combinations*), and his later article, "Explanation of Binary Arithmetic, which Uses Only the Characters 0 and 1, with Some Remarks on Its Usefulness, and on the Light It Throws on the Ancient Chinese Figure of Fu Xi" (English translation available at: <http://www.leibniz-translations.com/binary.htm>). The original (French) version was published in *Memoires de l'Academie Royale des Sciences* (1703), titled "*Explication de l'arithmetique binaire, qui se sert des seuls caractères 0 et 1, avec des remarques sur son utilité, et sur ce qu'elle donne le sens des anciennes figures Chinoises de Fohy*," and is reprinted as Chapter XXI in *Leibnizens mathematische Schriften*, vol. III, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, and vol. VII of Georg Heinrich Pertz (ed.), *Leibnizens Gesammelte Werke* (Halle: H. W. Schmidt, 1863 [second edition]), 223–227.
8. See, for example, the chapters collected in Part XII ("Kant on Asia and Asia in Kant") of Stephen R. Palmquist, ed., *Cultivating Personhood: Kant and Asian Philosophy* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010): Alain-Marc Rieu, "The Kantian Model: Confucianism and the Modern Divide" (741–752); Klaus-Gerd Giesen, "Asian Hospitality in Kant's Cosmopolitan Law" (753–763); Rein Vos, "Doing Good or Right? Kant's Critique on Confucius" (764–776); Peter K. J. Park, "The Exclusion of Asia and Africa from the History of Philosophy: Is Kant Responsible?" (777–790); Soo Bae Kim, "Menschliche Autonomie als Aufgabe – der Autonomiebegriff in der Geschichtsphilosophie Kants" (791–798); and Simon Shengjian Xie, "Is Kant a Western Philosopher?" (799–807).
9. Stephen R. Palmquist, "Twelve Basic Theological Concepts in Kant and the Compound *Yijing*." The series began with a conference paper presented at the 2009 Kant in Asia conference, which was revised and republished as Stephen R. Palmquist, "The Unity of Architectonic Reasoning in Kant and *I Ching*," in *Ibid.*, 811–821, then revised and reprinted again as "Architectonic Reasoning and Interpretation in Kant and the *Yijing*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 4 (2011), 569–583. Other previously published articles in the series are: Stephen R. Palmquist, "Mapping Kant's Architectonic onto the *Yijing* via the Geometry of Logic," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39, Supplement (2012), 68–86; "Twelve Basic Philosophical Concepts in Kant and the Compound *Yijing*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 42, nos.1–2 (2015), 143–162; and "Twelve Basic Concepts of Law in Kant and the Compound *Yijing*," *Modernos e Contemporâneos* I.1 (Jan./June 2017), 109–126.
10. Andrew Fuyarchuk, "Gadamer and the *Yijing*: Renewing Hermeneutics," the fourth article in this issue.