CHAPTER TWO

“PHILOSOPHY” AND THE BUILDING BLOCKS
OF MOU’S UNIVERSE

Now we may turn to the substance of Mou’s philosophy. Before we take up his specific understanding of Buddhist philosophy in Chapter Three, I would like to forewarn the reader that Mou conceives of “philosophy” differently than we ordinarily do in the English-speaking academy and presumes different ground rules for his philosophizing. I would also like to to familiarize the reader with the “moving parts” of Mou’s metaphysics and introduce bedrock ideas and terms which we will use in later chapters to make sense of Mou’s more difficult-seeming claims.

*Mou’s Notion of “Philosophy”*

Much like his teacher Xiong Shili, Mou thinks of philosophy as a guide to living. He thinks of it as “existential learning” (*shengming de xuewen* 生命的學問), a theoretical study that we use in order to get better at a certain kind of practical activity (*shijian* 實踐), namely living what we could call a spiritually excellent life.¹ As with other practical activities, we can do a better job of learning how to live and teaching it to others if we have a theory which accurately describes how this process works.

Confucian and Buddhist philosophers both offer theories of the cultivation of spiritual excellence, and they have significant differences.

Mou believes that Confucians teach a style of practice which can produce top-level performers of a higher rank than Buddhists can, but that Buddhists traditionally devoted much more energy to theorizing the activity and made a number of major theoretical breakthroughs that made much better sense of it than the Confucians had done. Confucians then learned about these more sophisticated theories and used what they learned to solve problems in their own theory, and on top of that also managed to account successfully for a hugely significant factor which the Buddhists had systematically left out of their own theory. The result was a Confucian theory which became the best yet at explaining the activity of living a spiritually excellent life, but which is so deeply indebted to earlier Buddhist advances that, in order to master it, one needs to master the Buddhist models that inspired its most complicated points.

To begin with, Mou thinks that Buddhist philosophers historically had much more sophisticated theories of psychology and spiritual anthropology (i.e. of the spiritual types of humanity). They analyzed the mind better and developed minutely detailed theories about the sagely and non-sagely varieties of mentation. From there they developed a highly articulated spiritual anthropology, which classified subjects into over fifty grades of spiritual excellence and described precise differences among them.

Moreover, Mou thinks, Buddhists gave the most advanced doxography or meta-theory yet reconciling different metaphysical models of the universe. The best Buddhist philosophers taught that because the universe presents the theorist with more salient aspects than are convenient for one to speak of at one time, in order to describe the universe optimally we need at least two distinct models, which appear superficially contradictory but in fact cohere with each other.

So why, according to Mou, did Buddhists lag behind Confucians in their spiritual attainments? The answer is that, in Mou’s opinion, the most effective way to practice for spiritual excellence is to notice the moral law in and around us (see Chapter Four) and then conform our will to it, so that, in an ideal case, we will identify ourselves with the moral law entirely. The problem for Buddhists is that, under their distinctive “emptiness” doctrines, they disavow the existence of a moral law (at least theoretically) and try to contrive a useful theory of spiritual practice that makes no reference to it. Though they manage very impressively by developing a sophisticated pathology of ‘ignorance’ (or the absence of intellectual intuition from non-sages), Mou thinks, they