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What Is in the Cloud? A Critical Engagement with Thomas Metzger on "The Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theories"

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1

A menacing cloud hangs across the Pacific, over relations between China and the United States, according to the title of Thomas Metzger's groundbreaking new book. The book's subtitle, however, refers to a clash between China and *the West*. In the book itself, Metzger shifts flexibly, often imperceptibly, between these two distinct loci of tension, motivated by two closely related concerns. On the one hand, he is interested in actual political conflicts, especially those that cast "a deep shadow over the prospects for world peace in the next century" (2). There is little doubt that such conflicts exist more between China and the United States than between China and Europe (or loosely speaking, between China and the West as a whole); in any case, two distinct if related sets of conflicts are identifiable here. On the other hand, Metzger takes actual political conflicts to result in large part

from philosophical differences over how to think about politics, about knowledge, and especially about the relationship between the two. In addressing such philosophical differences, the subject matter of his book, Metzger speaks of China and the West, and in this context there is something to be said for this pairing.

Metzger's highly sustained attempt to probe beneath conflicts of national interests in search of underlying epistemic differences—in his own words, "to uncover the epistemological basis of a major pattern of international tension today" (147)—makes *A Cloud Across the Pacific* a work of uncommon interest and importance that deserves wide critical attention. According to the author, what separates China and the West is an epistemic divide, above all, a divide created by a modern Western paradigm shift in the conception of knowledge that has yet to take place in China. Metzger calls this paradigm shift the Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution (GMWER), claiming that the paradigmatic epistemic differences that result from embracing or rejecting this revolution are the root cause of more tangible conflicts of interests between China and the West, especially between China and the United States. It is on account of these fundamental epistemic differences that each side views the other not as a competitor in a shared game but, at worst, as a force that is immoral and irrational (2–3). This unnecessary elevation of the stakes, in Metzger's view, is what makes for the depth and intensity of the clash between China and the United States.

It follows that the key to improved political relations is to clarify and resolve the fundamental epistemic differences that underlie the surface conflict of national interests, making it resistant to pragmatic calculation and compromise. In other words, the best way to approach the actual political conflicts between China and the United States is to look at the clash between Chinese and Western political *theories* as repositories of ways of conceiving knowledge, politics, and the relation between them. What, then, is the clash between Chinese and Western political theories referred to in the subtitle of the book?

2

Metzger wisely approaches this clash in terms of differences between discourses rather than differences between entire cultures. "A large population regarded as 'a society' or 'a culture' typically consists of a number of such we-groups [a we-group being a set of people who share the same

basic premises and can speak in terms of 'we']. The discourse of each partly overlaps, partly conflicts with the discourses of other we-groups, and the degree of overall integration varies greatly from society to society. Unless one can demonstrate a high degree of such integration or show that a population possesses only one discourse, one cannot precisely describe 'a culture.' That is, one can precisely describe only particular discourses" (76). The discourses that are the main objects of Metzger's analysis are mainstream modern Chinese political thought (dubbed discourse #1) and mainstream modern Western political thought (dubbed discourse #2), discourses in which, according to Metzger, can be found the epistemic clashes that inform the political conflicts between China and the United States.

For Metzger, "the discourse of any we-group is based on ideas regarded as indisputable by that we-group, and . . . we-groups loosely use generic labels like 'reasonable,' 'truth,' and 'knowledge' to lump together all the kinds of thinking based on these indisputables and to reject all the kinds that are not" (78). Well, it does not seem indisputable to me that the premises upon which a group of people think and act have to be indisputable to them. What is often the case is that such premises do not appear disputable to the people whose premises they are, and this is not because the premises have been subjected to scrutiny and found to be indisputable but because they have not been, and thus the question of their disputability or indisputability simply does not arise. In the event that the question has arisen and received a positive answer, all that seems to be necessary for such premises to serve as a basis of thinking and acting is for them to be considered plausible or not too implausible. In either case, the concept of indisputability misses what is going on, and *nondisputability* seems more appropriate: something is nondisputable either in the sense that it is simply not called into dispute or in the sense that it is considered sufficiently plausible not to make (further) dispute imperative or necessary.

This way of looking at the matter should help rather than undermine Metzger's comparative project. For one of the things that sets discourse #1 and discourse #2 radically apart is precisely whether and to what extent such nondisputables (I use this term to match Metzger's "indisputables") are subjected to scrutiny and critique. Discourse #2 may be said to represent the limit case, in which the standard used in such scrutiny and critique is nothing less than indisputability. Metzger's notion of indisputables is quite apt with regard to this particular attitude toward nondisputables but, by the same token, inappropriate for describing the much less unyielding attitude that is characteristic of discourse #1. There is a sense in which the readiness

and severity with which nondisputables are subjected to critical dispute are a measure of how seriously they are taken. The more seriously they are taken, the stronger the incentive to prove that they are indeed *in*disputable, and so the greater the readiness to place them under scrutiny and to perfect the intellectual apparatus with which to do so. Paradoxically, all this increases the probability that ideas that have been nondisputable hitherto will turn out *not* to be indisputable and that what are treated as indisputable today will prove to be less than indisputable tomorrow. This profound paradox lies at the heart of what Metzger calls epistemological pessimism, for him the preeminent feature of discourse #2, just as the absence of this paradox marks the epistemological optimism of discourse #1.

3

The distinction between epistemological optimism and epistemological pessimism was first drawn by Karl Popper to describe two opposite mistakes of thinking. Metzger uses these terms not to refer, as Popper does, to the extreme readiness to believe or not to believe, but rather to designate two ways of balancing credulity and skepticism (22). Still, in Metzger's scheme of things, discourse #1 (mainstream modern Chinese political thought) is essentially optimistic, and discourse #2 (mainstream modern Western political thought) is essentially pessimistic, and this, according to Metzger, is a fundamental epistemic difference with important political implications.

Discourse #1 is epistemologically optimistic, or so it appears, about a wide range of things, as Metzger's discussion shows, a range that includes the power of human understanding, the goodness of human nature, the efficacy of education, the feasibility of implementing moral ideals, the incorruptibility of good leaders, and so on. Within this mix, three categories can, I think, be usefully identified. The first is a purely or largely *epistemic optimism*, which places huge confidence in human epistemic powers. This optimism is reflected in such features of Chinese thought as the obliviousness of the historicity of knowledge, the treatment of all aspects of the world as forming a unity accessible to human comprehension, and the concomitant absence of the fact/value distinction (53, 66, 127–28). Distinct from, though obviously related to, this epistemic optimism is a *moral-political optimism*, an optimism about human moral powers (not least about the ability to overcome selfishness) and about the kind of political institutions that such moral powers make practicable. It does not follow either from epistemic optimism

or from moral-political optimism, or indeed from their combination, however, that government should take the form of "top-down control," that is, "a corrigible political center" presided over by "moral-intellectual virtuosi" (24). The preference for this kind of government must rest on a further premise, namely, the superiority of a select few in epistemic and moral powers to ordinary people who have enough ability only to follow. *Epistemic-moral elitism*, then, is a third element that needs to be identified.

Thus, when Metzger asks, "Is the kind of knowledge needed fully and perfectly to organize society available? Or, to put the matter more modestly, *to what extent* should people such as children, students, and ordinary citizens believe that there are people who have more knowledge than they about how they should think and live, and whose authority over them should therefore be respected?" (21), he is conflating questions of epistemic power, moral power, and epistemic-moral inequality. Once we keep these questions separate and bear in mind the three distinct elements that make up Chinese epistemological optimism, we see more clearly the tensions and possibilities that exist in this complex position. Metzger is quite right, for example, to distinguish between "(a) the belief in blind, unconditional compliance with the commands of persons occupying socially established positions of authority, such as parents, teachers, and government officials, and (b) the belief that one should autonomously search in one's own conscience for the universally true principles of life (the *tao*) and then completely obey anyone who knows what these principles are" (20). However, if such a distinction goes together well enough with epistemic and moral optimism in theory, it nevertheless tends in practice to be more or less neutralized by epistemic-moral elitism, especially by the political and educational institutions that rest on such elitism. Thus, it is a considerable exaggeration to say, as Metzger does, that the Chinese brand of authoritarianism "legitimizes defiance of conventionally established political leaders *as easily* as it does respect for them" (20, my emphasis), although one should obviously not be surprised if this potential for defiance is realized once in a while.

4

The rareness with which the radical potential of epistemological optimism—not least its potential for benevolent government and equal citizenship—is realized should alert us to the possibility that epistemological optimism is not utopian but ideological. I am drawing, of course, on Karl Mannheim's well-known distinction. According to Mannheim, "Only those

orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time." And he continues:

> In limiting the meaning of the term "utopia" to that type of orientation which transcends reality and which at the same time breaks the bonds of the existing order, a distinction is set up between the utopian and the ideological states of mind. One can orient himself to objects that are alien to reality and which transcend actual existence—and nevertheless still be effective in the realization and the maintenance of the existing order of things. In the course of history, man has occupied himself more frequently with objects transcending his scope of existence than with those immanent in his existence and, despite this, actual and concrete forms of social life have been built upon the basis of such "ideological" states of mind which were congruent with reality.[1]

In the light of Mannheim's still highly illuminating distinction, I have serious reservations about Metzger's description of Chinese epistemological optimism as a species of utopianism. According to Metzger, "Chinese utopianism . . . differs from the Platonic idea of a perfect state imagined by someone realizing it is impracticable. This concept is missing in the history of Chinese political thought. What is basic to this history is a concept of political perfection put forward by Chinese believing it is practicable" (20). The crux of the matter is practicability. In the very long time span of the Chinese tradition, belief in the practicability of some perfectionist vision may have been held at one point or another, in which case the discourse of optimism would indeed have bespoken a utopian mentality. But it is surely implausible to ascribe a utopian mentality to purveyors of a utopian-sounding discourse who saw its "practicability" fail to materialize generation after generation, who had little evidence that the political and educational institutions erected on the basis of belief in this practicability had really worked, and yet who, apparently immune to disillusionment, continued to propagate their vision of an ideal society and ideal rulers and speak of both in seemingly practicable terms. The only plausible explanation for this otherwise puzzling phenomenon, it seems to me, is that the utopian-sounding discourse actually was, or had turned into, an ideological one. There is no better proof than in the fact that "the situationally transcen-

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1. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1936), 192.

dent ideas . . . never succeed *de facto* in the realization of their projected contents"[2]—the more so the longer the time span involved. This applies not only to the better part of the immensely long (loosely called) Confucian tradition (Metzger calls it discourse #6) but also to the somewhat toned down continuation of socialist-communist rhetoric after the demise of Mao and Maoism if not before.[3]

Metzger gives the impression that what he calls Chinese utopianism is an enduring feature of the Chinese tradition, a moral and political ideal that has informed the actions and tempers of generation after generation of Chinese.

> One can (1) be determined to act decisively to end completely all this moral-intellectual dissonance [i.e., selfishness, corruption, irrationality, etc.]; (2) give up this radical, transformative hope but still denounce the dissonance as inexcusable and intolerable; (3) regard this dissonance as the normal medium of accommodative, peaceful, piecemeal, gradualistic, progressive political efforts; (4) deplore but opportunistically accommodate this dissonance; or (5) fatalistically accept it.
>
> Certainly all five attitudes can be found in China today or perhaps even in any major society. In China, however, the four premises above [see p. 695] made up a coherent, widespread intellectual standpoint morally legitimizing options #1 and #2 and utterly incompatible with the moral legitimization of option #3. It is this extremely prominent and optimistic concept of political practicability for which the term "Chinese utopianism" is suitable. (700)

If this picture of Chinese utopianism is true, the Chinese must be utterly irrational, the "moderate realism" noted by Metzger notwithstanding. The worst enemy of minimally rational belief in the practicability of a perfectionist vision is time, and more than enough time has passed and setbacks occurred to make continuing belief in the political practicability of realizing either Confucian or communist ideals close to farcical. To show something

2. Mannheim, *Ideology*, 194.
3. For Metzger, utopianism is a thread that runs through the entire Chinese tradition right up to the present. "I would especially emphasize," he writes, "the continuity of a Chinese epistemological scene free of epistemological pessimism, the utopian belief in the political practicability of greatly reducing the role of selfishness in political-economic life, and the belief that societal transformation can be accomplished by intellectual virtuosi as super-citizens working with a corrigible political center. All these ideas were central equally to the modern Chinese discourse #1 and the Confucian discourse #6" (88).

to be farcical is not to prove it untrue, to be sure, but this does make advisable the search for an alternative explanation compatible with the Chinese being minimally rational.

It is in the search for such an explanation that the possibility of an ideological use of utopian-sounding discourse presents itself. To call an optimistic or utopian-sounding discourse ideological is to suggest that its function is not that of informing radical change but that of legitimating the status quo and the rule of those who preside over it. There is little doubt that epistemic-moral elitism—whether in the shape of the Confucian doctrine of kingly rule (*wangdao*) or in the guise of the Leninist idea of a Vanguard—suits this function. Nor is it difficult to see how epistemic and moral optimism can be so construed as to fit in the same discourse of legitimation: given that human beings have the epistemic and moral potential for a particular kind of authoritarian rule, those who are fit to rule are those who have best realized this potential, either on the strength of innate endowment or by dint of effort and education. Such a discourse of legitimation has been a fixture in Chinese political culture.[4]

5

While an ideological discourse has epistemic content, this content is not meant to be taken at face value. Competent members of Chinese society all know intuitively how to react to ideological discourses: they do so by not taking the ostensible epistemic content of such discourses as an invitation for an epistemic response. One way in which a utopian discourse is different from an ideological one is that the former has a certain level of epistemic content that is meant to be taken with complete seriousness, since it is the real basis for or substance of the radical change envisioned. More often than not, however, and for reasons that we need not go into here, this content is not so conceived and presented as to invite epistemic scrutiny. Different from both ideological discourse and utopian discourse is a discourse of public reason, which is aimed at securing consensus in the public sphere through an informed exchange of reasons. Though

4. This also helps explain the dearth of systematic reflections on "moral darkness" (781) in the Chinese tradition. Rather than put lack of *discussion* of "moral darkness" down to lack of insight into it, it seems more plausible to suggest that such discussion would sit ill not only with the odd utopian discourse, for obvious reasons, but also with the mainstream ideological discourses of legitimation that have always rested on a highly positive account of the moral capacity of leaders *regardless of the actual record*.

capable like utopian discourse of being put to ideological uses, a discourse of public reason nevertheless contains a potentially nonideological or anti-ideological moment in its constitutive invitation for scrutiny and challenge.

In terms of this tripartite distinction, I would hazard the following generalizations. First, the epistemological optimism of the (loosely called) Confucian tradition belongs largely to an ideological discourse that serves the function of legitimation. Second, the epistemological optimism of Chinese communism is either part of an ideological discourse of legitimation or part of a utopian discourse that nevertheless (for reasons that we need not go into here) is inhospitable to epistemic scrutiny of its irreducibly epistemic (utopian) content. Third, with the partial exception of Taiwan and Hong Kong in recent times, Chinese political culture for the most part has not been able to develop anything like a discourse of public reason.

On the basis of these generalizations I will venture a yet more general observation, and that is that political discourses in the Chinese tradition, including what Metzger calls discourse #1 (mainstream modern Chinese political thought) and discourse #6 (Confucian political thought), are predominantly nonepistemic. This is the case even when, sometimes especially when, these discourses invoke some notion of truth; here, strikingly, the very employment of the discourse of truth is nonepistemic. To be a competent participant in Chinese political culture is to have learned how to relate to official discourses of truth. When one encounters an official appeal to objective truth (*keguan zhenli*), universally valid truth (*pubian zhenli*), laws of historical development (*lishi guilü*), science (*kexue*) in the broad sense of the true and the correct, and so on, one knows, pretheoretically, that this is not an invitation for discussion of the epistemic merits of the case in question but a conversation stopper, with varying degrees of risk involved if one reacts publicly as if it were such an invitation. To respond to such an appeal with an epistemic challenge or even query is to misconstrue the official speech act and commit a category mistake. To do so knowingly rather than naïvely is to commit a political mistake.

This way of relating to the official discourse of truth has over time evolved into an intellectual habit whose application goes well beyond reactions to official discourse. Even outside official discourse, appeals are routinely made to truth and science and reason where the epistemic substance is only skin-deep. Academic discourse, one might surmise, should be an exception, if only because it is by nature theoretical rather than pretheoretical. It is somewhat more of an exception than is true of other types of discourse, to be sure, but a politically nonnaïve academic knows how to

toe the line on those topics over which official discourse has a time-honored prerogative or else to stay away from such topics altogether. Su Hao's book on relations in the Asia-Pacific region, not least U.S.-Chinese relations, is a case in point. In his extensive discussion of Su's book in chapter 14, Metzger strikes me as having largely missed the point and spirit of the author's overall speech act, as when he takes Su's seeming confidence in the role of rationality in delivering a correct blueprint for international justice and in the moral good will of nations to implement such a blueprint to be "expressing what [Su and people like him] regard as a universal truth about political life" (780).

Does this mean that scholars like Su are lying or at least saying something they don't quite believe? Not exactly. The important thing is that the discourse of truth is employed in a certain way in Chinese political culture, especially though not exclusively on a certain range of largely officially monopolized topics, and Su is doing no more and no less than following this customary way of speaking. He is neither lying nor telling the truth as he sees it; he is just comporting himself—automatically and effortlessly—to an official or officially influenced discourse that uses the notion of truth in a predominantly ideological fashion. It is a crucial feature of such employment of the discourse of truth that appeal is made to epistemic notions in a way that is essentially not epistemic. To take this kind of appeal at its epistemic face value is to misunderstand the nature of the game on the model of a discourse of truth in which the epistemic dimension is meant to be taken with utter seriousness.

This misunderstanding is quite understandable, however, in the case of scholarly employment of the discourse of truth, as by Su Hao. It is one thing for government officials to use the discourse of truth in a largely nonepistemic way, given the nature of their assignment, or for people in their everyday activities to use the discourse of truth in a similar manner, given the pretheoretical character of such activities. It is something altogether different for scholars and intellectuals, in their capacity as such, to make seemingly theoretical use of epistemic notions in a largely nonepistemic way. One may be tempted to explain such behavior in terms of the pressure on scholars to toe the official line, and even today this line of explanation has not ceased to be true. But there is little doubt that this kind of pressure is much less in evidence than it used to be, and yet the truth-content of scholarly political discourse has not shot up proportionally. The sad thing is that comportment toward heavy political pressure over many years has caused an intellectual sclerosis that makes it difficult for many scholars to

use epistemic notions in a largely epistemic way, even when they are under little (or less) pressure to do otherwise.

This intellectual sclerosis is by no means confined to the relatively short span of the People's Republic of China. The pressure to parrot official political discourse was a long-standing feature of the Chinese tradition, a tradition that seldom rewarded stubbornly epistemic approaches to epistemic issues, least of all to the epistemic portions of political issues. Common to this tradition and Chinese communism is the importance of rote learning, an essentially nonepistemic way of approaching ostensibly epistemic matters, which is as characteristic of instruction in political subjects in communist China as it was of the imperial examination system for selecting officials (*kejü*). Small wonder that the semiautomatic way of employing the discourse of truth is found in Taiwan and Hong Kong (treated by Metzger in chapters 3, 6, and 7, among others) as well. It attests to the power of this tradition that a philosopher as strong willed and intellectually well equipped as Tang Junyi (T'ang Chün-i), of whom Metzger gives detailed and often illuminating accounts in chapters 2 and 13, devoted a lifetime to the study and revival of Confucianism without ever subjecting it to the rigorous epistemic scrutiny that a tradition in crisis calls for.

6

It is in this light, I believe, that what Metzger calls the agenda of discourse #1 (mainstream modern Chinese political thought) needs to be approached. According to Metzger, this agenda consists of three questions: first, "the question of the extent to which a 'total system of thought answering all key questions about human life' has already been formed, and so that of the extent to which intellectual-moral dissonance should be tolerated" (90); second, the "question . . . of which doctrine or combination of doctrines or philosophies should be selected out of the variety of new and old, Chinese and foreign ideas to answer epistemological, ontological, cosmological, and historical questions" (101); and third, the "question . . . of which persons constitute the 'enlightened' group qualified to serve as the agents of Chinese progress" (102). Metzger then proceeds to make sense of modern Chinese political thought in terms of "different combinations of answers to the questions on [this agenda]."

> For instance, a widespread kind of Chinese Marxism arose holding
> that a largely definitive system of thought was already available; that

> it had been produced by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao; that
> the knowledge China today needed stemmed from the West and
> some current Chinese thought, not the Confucian tradition; that this
> correct theory was being implemented by the Chinese Communist
> Party; that it called for socialism rather than the liberal mix of democ-
> racy and capitalism; and that some violence would be needed to
> accomplish the transformation for which it aimed. Within the Chi-
> nese intellectual world, each of these propositions was prominently
> challenged on the Mainland by the 1980s, but the liberal, humanistic,
> and Sunist voices rejecting it had been alive all along. (102)

This analysis is not inaccurate as an account of the surface currents of
modern Chinese political thought. The problem is that Metzger attaches far
too much importance to the so-called agenda of discourse #1 in terms of
epistemic substance and epistemic commitment. The frequent lack of unin-
hibited discussion about the questions on this agenda, the inhospitality to if
not invariable proscription of epistemic challenges as indicators of *political*
ill intent, the sheer epistemic sloppiness of seemingly intellectually seri-
ous statements within the agenda, and not least, the readiness with which
the state ideological apparatus has been able to characterize the market
reforms in recent decades as socialism with Chinese characteristics—all
this tells us that discourse #1 is a game whose epistemic dimension is
of exceptionally low importance and whose character must be grasped
accordingly.

7

The attenuated epistemic commitment in Chinese political culture,
common to discourse #1 (mainstream modern Chinese political thought)
and discourse #6 (Confucian political thought), is of a piece with an impor-
tant feature of the Chinese intellectual tradition at large. I mean a certain
practice and spirit of working with nondisputables instead of subjecting
nondisputables to the test of indisputability before they are allowed to count
as knowledge. In view of this, I doubt that epistemological *optimism* is the
right description of the Chinese outlook. If in a certain way of thinking the
standard of knowledge is undemanding and therefore relatively easily met,
it is hardly accurate to characterize this way of thinking in terms of episte-
mological optimism. Rather, for an epistemology to be really optimistic, it
must contain a belief in the possibility of knowledge *by a highly demanding*

standard. This kind of optimism is a central constituent of what has come to be known as the Western philosophical tradition, beginning with Socrates' introduction of certainty as the standard that distinguishes knowledge from mere opinion. Not surprisingly, epistemological optimism thus understood can lead over time to pessimistic conclusions about the scope and even the possibility of knowledge. But without epistemological optimism to begin with, how could there be epistemological pessimism as the disappointment of initial hopes?[5]

In the Chinese case, the lack of epistemological pessimism implies precisely the lack of a prior epistemological optimism. It is paradoxically this lack of epistemological optimism that has allowed the Chinese epistemological tradition to maintain a surface optimism. I call it surface optimism in the sense that it is not informed by an underlying quest for certainty as the hallmark of knowledge. As the trajectory of the Socratic tradition has repeatedly shown, the quest for certainty goes hand in hand with skepticism and has a uniquely powerful potential to lead to pessimistic conclusions about knowledge or at the very least to deflate overly confident claims regarding its possibility or scope.[6] In the absence of this quest, it is not surprising that the main tenets of the Chinese intellectual tradition have enjoyed remarkable stability. Nor is it hard to explain the longevity of the surface optimism, for what is ultimately corrosive of epistemological optimism is precisely the quest for certainty.

In this light, epistemological optimism/pessimism is not a fundamental dividing line but only a derivative of the deeper distinction between the presence and absence of the quest for certainty. Given that Metzger is well aware of the importance of the quest for certainty (41, 44–46), it is somewhat surprising that he should operate most of the time at the level of surface outcomes rather than underlying causes. What he calls Western epistemological pessimism is the outcome of the quest for certainty turning

5. I owe this line of thought to Friedrich Nietzsche, who has the insight both to see in Socrates "the prototype of the theoretical optimist who, with his faith that the nature of things can be fathomed, ascribes to knowledge and insight the power of a panacea, while understanding error as the evil *par excellence*" and to uncover the logic whereby "science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism . . . suffers shipwreck." See *The Birth of Tragedy (and The Case of Wagner)*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), sec. 15.
6. For an account of the inner dynamic of the quest for certainty, see Martin Heidegger, "Metaphysics as History of Being," in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

the tables on its own products, whereas there are no comparable tables to be turned in the case of so-called Chinese epistemological optimism, and this is what gives these two paradigms their radically different trajectories.

The absence of the standard of certainty does not, of course, prevent appeals from being made to nondisputables in discourse #1 and discourse #6, nor does this absence prevent nondisputables from being loosely referred to in objectivist-sounding terms. It is nevertheless quite obvious that we are dealing with a distinct paradigm here. In this paradigm, regular appeals are made to truth and knowledge as a basis for normative principles and normative authority, and yet, as we saw earlier, there is relatively little *politically* permitted room for informed epistemic challenge. What has just emerged from our discussion of the quest for certainty is that within the paradigm comprising discourses #1 and #6 there is also relatively little *epistemic* potential for Chinese society to negate its own ideas and convictions through the sheer operation of its members' will to truth (given appropriate social conditions)—the sort of potential that is the ultimate hallmark of epistemic seriousness.[7]

8

This picture has not been changed by the introduction of Western science to China. As it happened, modern science came to China largely ready-made, and so the broader quest for certainty that had originally helped give rise to science in the West did not have to come with it. While science as a mode of knowledge has since flourished in China, little of the quest for certainty—the spirit of science, as it were—has come to inform fields of intellectual inquiry other than science. Since the quest for certainty started life in China in a reified form, more as technique than as spirit, it is not surprising that it has been confined to the domain of science itself. If scientists, qua scientists, have learned to speak the narrowly precise language of science, the absence of the animating *general* quest for cer-

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7. One example of such epistemic seriousness is atheism arrived at in a certain way. "Unconditional honest atheism (and *its* is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!)," writes Nietzsche, "is . . . *not* the antithesis of that ideal [the ascetic ideal], as it appears to be; it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution, one of its terminal forms and inner consequences—it is the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God.*" *On the Genealogy of Morals (and Ecce Homo)*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), third essay, sec. 27.

tainty means that other intellectual discourses, including those of scientists in their more general capacity as intellectuals, are largely untouched by the intellectual cleanliness that informs their Western counterparts at their best.

Meanwhile, a notion of science at once vague and narrow has been valorized as a standard applicable to all intellectual inquiry and to all activities with an intellectual component. Thus, despite an apparently unbridgeable divide between scientific and not strictly scientific modes of inquiry, what unites the two is a political-intellectual orthodoxy that attaches the approving epithet *scientific* to anything that meets with the approval of the establishment. That science (or scientism) reigns in this way is a measure of the absence of the general spirit of the quest for certainty.

This does not invalidate what Metzger says about the Chinese response to the GMWER. Metzger's observation that "the vast majority of the Chinese, including many intellectuals, remained simply unaware of or unresponsive to the GMWER" (51) needs to be explained, however, in the face of the readiness and considerable success with which modern science, an important relative of the GMWER, has been embraced in China. A plausible explanation lies, I think, in that remarkable feature of a modernizing China which I have been commenting on, namely, that modern China has embraced science without quite taking on board the general spirit of the quest for certainty that has culminated in the GMWER. Thus, instead of saying, with Metzger, that modern Chinese intellectuals have rejected the GMWER, it would be more accurate to suggest that their selective import of one element of the GMWER, in the shape of science, has helped produce the epistemological confidence with which to reject the discomforting remainder.

9

The same was largely true, until quite recently, of the introduction of liberalism in post-Mao China—liberalism construed broadly here to include also libertarianism, in line with Chinese usage. At the beginning, much of the liberalism that was in vogue consisted of ideological dogmas of liberalism, not least of its libertarian variant. Much as in the case of science, liberalism was being imported largely ready-made, in response to perceived Chinese realities, to be sure, but often without the benefit of some of the animating impulses that had kept Western liberalism reflecting on and, time

and again, reacting against its own earlier doctrines and emphases. But this situation has been changing—helped, perhaps, by the mutually chastening if often fractious encounter between the Liberals (*ziyoupai*) and the New Left (*xinzuopai*). An increasing internal differentiation among Chinese liberals has brought with it an obvious gain in epistemic sophistication. Also discernable, the more so if we include also liberals based in Taiwan and Hong Kong who are increasingly part of the same debate, is the gradual emergence of the kind of internal dynamic that has caused much of Western liberal political philosophy to move from an emphasis on negative freedoms to advocacy of a broad range of social and economic rights in keeping with a more cogent and expansive interpretation of the underlying rationale for negative freedoms. If this trend continues, and if at the same time the New Left recovers the insistence, formerly quite explicit on the part of some of its members, on the importance of negative freedoms as necessary though far from sufficient conditions of a just society, the day may soon be over when the Liberals and the New Left are separated by a seemingly unbridgeable political divide. I for one believe such a development will be good for both sides and good for China. What, then, to make of Metzger's striking claim that schools of Chinese liberalism are epistemically far removed from their Western counterparts (28–29, 144) and may, in fact, have less in common with the latter than with the other, anti- or nonliberal ideologies that have figured prominently in modern China (20–21)? The short answer is that this claim has less force now than when Metzger was prompted to make it but remains thought provoking.

10

As the example of the initial introduction of liberalism in post-Mao China shows, what appear to be Chinese and Western versions of the same thing can in fact belong to two discourses that are separated by nothing less than the Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution. For Metzger, mainstream modern Western political thought, or discourse #2, is a product of the GMWER (89) and, as such, is marked by epistemological pessimism. I have called into question the appropriateness of describing the differences between discourse #1 (mainstream modern Chinese political thought) and discourse #2 in terms of epistemological optimism and pessimism. I have alluded to one sense, however, in which it remains accurate for Metzger to speak of pessimism in the case of discourse #2, that is,

pessimistic *conclusions* arrived at through the pursuit of an outlook and a standard that are not themselves pessimistic.

Metzger is quite right to link epistemological pessimism to the quest for certainty and the resultant distinction between knowledge and opinion (41, 44). It is this quest that has led to paradigm shifts from, very roughly put, the premodern conception of knowledge to the modern and then the postmodern. With the term *Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution* Metzger designates essentially the second of these shifts, which has been recounted many times before.[8] As Metzger tells the story, "the GMWER revealed a so-far unresolved problem—does the subjective side of thought outweigh the objective, or vice versa?—and in an arbitrary, intuitive, vague, but highly suggestive way alleged that the subjective side should generally be given the benefit of the doubt. In other words, sympathizing with this allegation, many Western intellectuals 'turned the corner,' so to speak, putting the burden of proof on those claiming to state objective truths" (47; see also 258–59). The GMWER's application of the standard of certainty can lead to "maximum epistemological pessimism" (41–42)—the radical conclusion that nothing is sufficiently objectively certain to count as knowledge. Some distance from this is a more moderate version of epistemological pessimism, which increases the difficulty of access to truth and narrows the scope of what is good enough to count as knowledge, but less radically. By epistemological pessimism Metzger means sometimes the former and sometimes the latter.

The important thing is that in either case epistemological pessimism is sufficient to lead to the positing of the fact/value distinction and the rejection of normative objectivism—in other words, to "the epistemological demotion of normative ideas from the status of true propositions or knowledge to that of ideas to which the standard of truth is not applicable" (128). Once the fact/value distinction is drawn, the important question for political philosophy concerns not so much the status of knowledge as that of values. As far as the latter is concerned, it would increase the perspicacity of his account, I think, if Metzger were to identify three distinct objects of

8. For example, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), chap. 1.

skepticism and hence of potential pessimism, namely: (a) the objectivity of values, (b) human epistemic powers to grasp values (whatever the status of values), and (c) human moral powers to act on values (whatever the status of values). It makes a big difference to ways of thinking about politics whether it is believed that there are objective values. Given a belief in the objectivity of values, it makes a big difference whether it is further believed that human beings have nearly perfect epistemic powers to comprehend such supposedly objective values, and given an affirmative answer to this question, whether it is yet further believed that they have nearly perfect moral powers to act on such supposedly objective values. Otherwise, in the absence of belief in the objectivity of values, the question still arises as to human moral powers in relation to whatever values happen to be considered worthy of implementation. At each point, there is room for a more or less optimistic answer and for a more or less pessimistic answer, and it does not necessarily take pessimism about the objectivity of values, still less a wholesale pessimism, to justify prudence in the design of political institutions. It is sufficient that human epistemic or moral powers, or both, are believed to be limited or fallible.

John Stuart Mill, for example, whom Metzger cites as an example of epistemological pessimism (30), believed in the objectivity and priority of the good and yet argued for liberty and tolerance on the grounds of human epistemic and moral fallibility in relation to what is objectively good. What differentiates Mill as an exemplar of discourse #2 from a proponent of discourse #1 is not whether values are regarded as objective but whether (at least some) human agents are presumed to have infallible or nearly infallible epistemic and moral powers in relation to values, and what institutions are necessary in the light of the assessment of human epistemic and moral powers.[9] Likewise, John Rawls, another exemplar of epistemological pessimism in Metzger's account, is able to justify what he calls "reasonable pluralism" through recourse to the idea of "burdens of judgment," that is, the sources of disagreement among reasonable persons, without taking any position on the objectivity or otherwise of values.[10] To take yet another example, also mentioned by Metzger (704), Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, an idea the likes of which

9. As John Skorupski rightly points out, "objectivism, fallibilism, and pluralism can go together, and this is essential in a proper appreciation of Mill." *Ethical Explorations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 204n17.
10. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 55.

have significantly informed Western political institutions, consists of deep doubts about human moral powers quite irrespective of the ontological status of values and even of human epistemic powers in relation to values.

What these examples suggest is that in making sense of the pessimistic conclusions characteristic of discourse #2, it is necessary to distinguish carefully between recognition of human fallibility on the one hand and skepticism about objectivism on the other, and, in the case of the former, further between epistemic and moral fallibility. Although elements of all three are found in discourse #2, they do not necessarily go together and often do not actually go together. Where human moral fallibility is used as the main argument for prudence in the design of political institutions, the pessimism in question is not exactly epistemological. The other two cases do involve epistemology, but skepticism about objectivism is much more radical than belief in human epistemic fallibility. One could argue that of the three pessimistic conclusions that make up discourse #2, only skepticism about objectivism is quintessentially part of the GMWER. But then it is far from clear that modern Western political theorists generally subscribe to this conclusion. If anything, Ronald Dworkin's well-known article "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It"[11] expresses a view that still enjoys greater currency among mainstream political philosophers. While recognizably different from discourse #1, most current Anglo-American political theories, not least liberal political theories, are decidedly not postmodernist.

11

Metzger is ambivalent in his attitude toward discourse #2 and the GMWER. He has an entirely positive appraisal of the epistemic cautiousness and moral realism found in epistemological pessimism and yet shows a deep uneasiness with their deflationary effects on collective political psychology. He sees discourse #1, on the other hand, as displaying a healthy dose of hopefulness and resoluteness necessary for motivating efforts to improve political life and yet lacking the sobriety and prudence to make such efforts successful. Metzger thus credits each of these two combinations for exhibiting something valuable that the other lacks while taking issue with each for missing something just as valuable that the other has in abundance. In other words, discourse #1 and discourse #2 are both "partly irrational" (121), in opposite ways. This state of affairs Metzger dubs "the

11. In *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no. 2 (April 1996): 87–139.

seesaw effect" (115–21), exemplified, in his view, by John Rawls, John Dunn, and Richard Rorty on the Western side, and by Tang Junyi and Ambrose King, among others, on the Chinese. It follows that whether the seesaw effect can be avoided is "the key issue in the search today for a rational political theory" (558). This is a bold and thought-provoking claim.

I find it puzzling, however, that Metzger should conceive the problem of political rationality in terms of the distinction between the rationality of ends and instrumental rationality, and characterize the seesaw effect in terms of discourse #1 scoring high with respect to the former and discourse #2 with respect to the latter. This way of viewing the matter does not quite do justice to the complexities of either discourse. What Metzger seems to be hoping for, at bottom, is some combination of epistemological pessimism (from discourse #2) and political optimism (from discourse #1). But this cannot be the whole story, if only because the sheer combination of epistemological *pessimism* and political *optimism* seems intellectually incoherent and psychologically impracticable, while scaling both down until they meet in the middle seems scarcely more advisable.

Nor is it clear why Metzger considers it *irrational* to place no more "emphasis on hopeful, resolute political action" than, say, Rawls or Dunn do (Metzger criticizes both in this regard). If by hopefulness about politics Metzger means the a priori kind of hope that treats belief in a minimal degree of human goodness and reasonableness as a necessary condition for human life, including human political life, to be at all worthwhile, then Rawls for one has it in abundance.[12] Otherwise, rational hopefulness about politics depends on a proper assessment of experience. Here one can go some distance along with Metzger when he writes, "The heart of the problem . . . is how to combine an emphasis on hopeful, resolute political action with one on accuracy in depicting facts and caution in defining the scope of knowledge" (119). But if one takes "accuracy in depicting facts and caution in defining the scope of knowledge" seriously, one must leave it open whether the exercise of such epistemological virtues in the context of experience will lead to pessimistic political conclusions. It will not do to rule out such conclusions by simply suggesting, without non-question-begging argument, as Metzger does in his criticisms of Dunn (516–18, 537), that the standard of precision employed in reaching such conclusions is too high and inappropriate for the messy business of politics.

12. See, for example, Rawls's "Concluding Reflection," in *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 127–28.

A further problem I have is with Metzger's argument for a "transcultural critical perspective" (121), which is needed to overcome the seesaw effect. Crucial to Metzger's argument is the idea, repeatedly stated throughout the book, that "a discourse is a paradoxical combination of culturally inherited premises with a reflexivity oriented to objective reality and universal issues" (77). Granted that human beings possess such reflexivity, the exercise of this capacity is still framed by premises whose historical givenness such reflexivity seems unable entirely to remove or transcend. If this is true of each and every discourse, the capacity for reflexivity in itself is not enough to support the belief that a transcultural critical perspective is possible. Metzger makes an important concession when he says that "there is no way to escape the fact that, ultimately, political rationality is dependent on a historically limited perspective" (126; see also 508). It seems to me that one must either weaken (or fine-tune) if not abandon this kind of concession or settle for something considerably less ambitious than the discovery of a transcultural critical perspective. In either case, critical reflexivity in political thinking needs some normative point of reference (say, nondomination or parity of participation), and what is lacking in Metzger's otherwise very comprehensive conception is some explicit and fully developed account of such a point of reference and, by implication, of what is politically bad (say, in terms of domination or lack of parity).[13] Without some such account and a better thought-through notion of critical reflexivity, "a thoroughgoing empiricism" (762) is unlikely to take the search for a transcultural critical perspective very far.

12

To be fair, it is possible to detect something like an overarching normative point of reference in the book, although Metzger does not provide much explicit argument for it. This is clear from the central importance he attaches to freedom, especially negative freedom, as an issue for political theory, and from the way in which he sees the chief implications of epistemological optimism and epistemological pessimism as bearing on the issue

13. On nondomination as a political ideal and domination as the chief political evil, see Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 138–44. On parity of participation, see Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation," in *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, by Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (London: Verso, 2003), 36–37.

of freedom. According to Metzger, "discourse #1 and discourse #2 clash especially in that the former correlates epistemological optimism with thick parameters of individual freedom, while discourse #2 correlates epistemological pessimism with thin parameters of individual freedom" (25). Metzger's explanation for these correlations is very straightforward:

> According to discourse #1, . . . the knowledge with which spiritually to transform the citizenry is available; the corrigible state can be expected eventually to respect the moral-intellectual virtuosi with this knowledge; and propagation of this knowledge through education can produce the thick moral parameters that will prevent the freedom of the three marketplaces [economic, intellectual, and political] from turning into license. According to discourse #2, however, maximizing this freedom even at the risk of its turning into license is the only hopeful way to try to improve society, because the knowledge needed to transform human nature and create thick parameters is unavailable, not to mention the Jacobinic dangers in trying to solder any such knowledge into an incorrigible political center. (26; see also 30, 40, 67)

The underlying idea is that freedom is largely the opposite of conformity, while the underlying political value is that, as such, freedom should be maximized and conformity minimized, though by no means eliminated. Metzger's detailed descriptions and analyses add up to a picture that is more complex than this, of course. Still, missing from that picture is any realization that freedom—that is, the interpretation of certain human practices in terms of the notion of freedom—may be a recipe precisely for conformity (among other things).[14] Is it not a thought-provoking fact that those Western societies in which freedom figures as a central moral and political value tend also to be the most stable? In these societies, freedom goes together not only with a certain orderliness but often also with a high degree of conformity and even uniformity, in such things as political opinion, lifestyle, and so on, notwithstanding certain conventional and rather neat divisions along lines of class, race, and gender. This coexistence of freedom and orderliness and conformity suggests the need to unpack the notion of freedom, including Metzger's specific notion of parameters of freedom, and, above

14. This idea is made familiar by Michel Foucault, among others. For a good Foucauldian account, see Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

all, the need for a different explanatory framework within which to place these notions.

This is not the place to propose such a framework. What I would submit, however, is that the central question in thinking about this framework should be conceived not in terms of more freedom or less freedom but in terms of how it is brought about that members of society are subjected to a social order in a manner that meets the individual's need for agency sufficiently for the social order to be acceptable and stable. Given this way of posing the question, what Metzger calls thin and thick parameters of freedom can be interpreted as representing two different social strategies for satisfying the twin needs for individual agency and for social order. It is an oversimplification and, if carried too far, an illusion, that thin parameters of freedom favor individual agency, while thick parameters of freedom are conducive to social order. Both are ways of *simultaneously* meeting the need for individual agency and the need for social order. In catering to the latter need, both involve the production of conformity, just as in serving the former need, both must allow room for individual initiative and subjectivity. Thus, we need to counterbalance our customary way of thinking about such issues by asking, with regard to those societies marked by so-called thin parameters of freedom, in what ways such notions as freedom and autonomy are conducive (also) to conformity-producing social practices, and, with regard to societies marked by so-called thick parameters of freedom, how agents are constituted if not through such notions as freedom and autonomy.

Whatever one's answer turns out to be, it must not only address the question of how moral and political values correlate with social practices but also, and just as important, treat whatever correlations happen to exist as answering to the dual need for individual agency and social order. Therefore, if modern Chinese and Western political philosophies differ profoundly (like Metzger, I believe they do), it is as comprehensive strategies for meeting the dual need for individual agency and social order that they differ, not simply as doctrines regarding parameters of freedom.

13

That in reality differences between Chinese and Western political values are so often represented as conflicting positions on freedom, even by as thoughtful a scholar as Metzger, is highly revealing. To me, this fact suggests that the two sides are involved in an ideological clash with a rather

low epistemic content. The cold war may be dead, but the old rhetoric is not, and the presence of a big country like China, which still calls itself socialist, helps keep that rhetoric alive, with its rich store of memories and affects. Though largely a misrepresentation of China and the United States and of the relation between them, the continuing ideological discourse in terms of freedom is itself an *ideological reality*, as it were, and, as such, a contributing or complicating factor in conflicts between the two sides.

This ideological confrontation, one that takes place at the level of official as well as popular discourses, is not exactly between discourse #1 and discourse #2, however. It is one thing to identify a discourse #1 and a discourse #2, both of them theoretical or academic discourses, and something else to claim that these discourses represent, respectively, mainstream Chinese and Western thinking in general and political thinking in particular. Metzger himself is cautious enough to say that "the more empirical way to proceed is to refer only to these texts themselves, regarding them as constituting one cultural strand and leaving open the question of relations between this strand and the rest of society" (3). My impression—it is no more than an impression, for I have not carried out the kind of empirical study that a firmer conclusion would require—is that discourse #1 is fairly representative of modern Chinese thinking in general and political thinking in particular. Discourse #2, on the other hand, presents a far less straightforward case. While it represents a main strand of Western academic political thinking, there is little evidence to suggest that discourse #2, especially in its rejection of hard-core objectivism and its penchant for self-questioning, is representative of the political thinking of either the government or the citizenry as a whole. The confidence in their own correctness and righteousness often evinced by both of the latter seems rather close to that expressed by discourse #3.[15] And to the extent that the everyday discourse employed by both is ideological and short on epistemic seriousness, it bears a strong resemblance to discourse #1, substantive differences notwithstanding. The extent in question is quite large, in my view, and so I see the ideological conflict as taking place between two sides that are equally complacent and immune to serious epistemic questioning. Unlike Metzger, I believe the quest for certainty represented by discourse #2 *at its best*, with its will to truth and its potential for self-critique and even self-negation, can never be too rigorous, although it needs of course to be informed by more

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15. Discourse #3 is the objectivist variety of Western political theory that is largely unaffected by the GMWER (88, 572).

than purely epistemic concerns. On both sides of the Pacific, and this is especially true of official and popular discourses (and of discourse #1 as a whole, as explained earlier), there is much too little of this quest in political thinking.

This is not to imply that a sharp rise in epistemic integrity and seriousness on both sides, with regard to issues of international politics in particular, would automatically reduce the "deep shadow over the prospects for world peace in the next century" (2) or begin to "affect concrete political reality" (764). For the ideological conflict is far from being the only cause of this shadow. To begin with, China and the United States are both huge capitalist societies, informed alike by an ideology of never-ending growth and depending alike if to different degrees on such growth for much of the legitimacy of their respective governments. That this is the case is as important as the fact that capitalism takes significantly different cultural and political forms in the two countries. As superplayers in the shared global capitalist game, China and the United States are involved in an ever-intensifying competition for markets and resources, although the economies of the two countries are already so connected as to make wholesale noncooperation, let alone confrontation, an extremely risky option for both sides. Moreover, unlike other countries, capitalist or otherwise, China (in prospect) and the United States (in actuality) are perhaps alone in having both the temptation and the wherewithal to achieve or (in the case of the United States) maintain a certain preeminence in the post–cold war world, fueled by an often intense and complacent nationalism in both countries. These two competitions—for markets and resources on the one hand and for overall preeminence on the other—are bound up in such a way that the compounded stakes can become very high and the potential for confrontation correspondingly dangerous. Added to these stakes, sometimes to the point of inextricability, is the ideological clash discussed earlier, a clash that has the potential to turn an already intense competition for economic and political power into a perceived struggle between (free, capitalist) good and (authoritarian, communist) evil. Such a perception is quite misleading, and yet it is made seemingly plausible by China's own insistence on characterizing its market reforms in terms of socialism with Chinese characteristics, just as it is kept alive on the American side by the subtle shift to the less overtly political yet equally discriminating (and mostly other-directed) discourse of human rights.

In the face of this threefold conflict between China and the United States, parts of which exist or can exist between China and the West in

general, mere clarification and reduction of epistemic differences will not be enough. What is just as badly needed is a fresh reexamination of those forces and ideologies that, since China embarked on its current path, have come increasingly to shape the domestic and international agendas of both China and the United States despite ideologically engendered appearances to the contrary.