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Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World by Robert Cummings Neville

Review by: Bryan W. Van Norden

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World.* By Robert Cummings Neville. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Pp. xxxv + 258.

Reviewed by **Bryan W. Van Norden** Vassar College

At an international conference in 1991, people began to refer to Robert Neville and his colleagues as “Boston Confucians.” At first the phrase was used as affectionate teasing and tongue-in-cheek self-description. However, Neville reports that, by the end of the conference, the phrase “Boston Confucianism” had come to be used as a semi-serious label for a particular view: the position that “Confucianism is not limited to East Asian ethnic application” and that it “has something genuinely interesting and helpful to bring to contemporary philosophical discussions” (p. 1). Neville’s book, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World*, is a defense of these claims.

In the process of defending his theses, Neville makes a number of points that I think are utterly incontrovertible. I shall note five of his insights. The first three I shall just mention, but then I shall proceed to two that are particularly worthy of more extensive discussion. First, one need not be ethnically East Asian to be a Confucian. To deny this claim is as absurd as suggesting that one must be Greek in order to be a Platonist or an Aristotelian (p. xxii). Second, in order to be a viable, contemporary “world philosophy,” Confucianism must have (and has yet to develop) ways to accommodate cultural diversity and pluralism in practice. Third, Confucianism must show that it is not inconsistent with the insights of modern science. (This is particularly an issue if, like Neville, one is attracted to the more metaphysically baroque forms of Confucianism that developed in the Song and later dynasties.)

Neville’s fourth insight is that the Confucian notion of “ritual” is a category that could significantly deepen and broaden Western philosophical discussions. Neville suggests that the semiotic work of the American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce provides a useful framework for understanding and enriching the Confucian emphasis on ritual. Neville’s comments on Peirce are suggestive, but I wonder what Neville would say about the “functionalist” approach to ritual pioneered by Emile Durkheim. Durkheim argued, in works such as *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, that participation in ritual activities functions to express and (more importantly) maintain the individual’s commitment to society.<sup>1</sup> Several commentators, including A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (who independently developed an approach to ritual similar to that of Durkheim) and more recently Robert F. Company, have noted that this sort of functionalist interpretation of ritual is quite similar to that advanced by Xunzi more than 2,500 years ago.<sup>2</sup> Functionalism helps us to understand (in naturalistic terms) why ritual is so important, why it is perfectly acceptable for it to take different forms in different societies, and why the decay of ritual leads to excessive individualism and, in Durkheim’s phrase, “anomie.” As far as I can see, all of this is at least con-

sistent with what Neville says about ritual, but I would be interested to know whether he thinks functionalism adds anything to a Peircean construal of Confucian ritual.

Finally, Neville presents an insightful critique of the positions developed by David Hall and Roger Ames in their trilogy of books.<sup>3</sup> It is worth spending some time on Neville's critique, since Roger Ames and the late David Hall are so well known and have been such influential figures in contemporary comparative thought. Neville objects that "their method of contrasting cultures by generalizing to basic principles and trivializing exceptions follows the Western ... strategy of developing a grid of categories ... and locating thinkers and cultures within them. ... This is surely an imposition of categories from without to the neglect of the concrete, a matter they ironically would consign to the West" (p. 49). Another way of putting this point is that Hall and Ames strongly oppose what they see as the dualistic tendencies in the Western tradition, and applaud the nondualistic tendencies in the Chinese tradition. However, they do so using a sort of "methodological dualism," which sharply distinguishes "China" and "the West," as if each were itself largely monolithic. Hall and Ames certainly do acknowledge that there are exceptions to their generalizations. But, as Neville suggests, there is much more complexity and subtlety in both "China" and "the West" than methodological dualism allows.

Neville makes a related objection to Hall and Ames' application of the notion of "transcendence" to distinguish Chinese and Western thought (pp. 148–150). Hall and Ames write: "a principle, A, is transcendent with respect to that, B, which it serves as principle if the meaning or import of B cannot be fully analyzed and explained without recourse to A, but the reverse is not true."<sup>4</sup> However, as Neville notes, "heaven, earth, and dao are all transcendent in the strict sense" (p. 149), even following Hall and Ames' definition of that term. Consider, as an illustration, the discussion of the *dao* in *Daodejing* chapter 25:

There is a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before Heaven and earth.  
Still and indistinct, it stands alone and unchanging.  
It goes everywhere yet is never at a loss.  
One can regard it as the mother of Heaven and earth.

.....  
People model themselves on the earth.  
The earth models itself on Heaven.  
Heaven models itself on the Way.  
The Way models itself on what is natural.<sup>5</sup>

The *dao* certainly seems to be described as transcendent in this passage.

Neville also observes that Hall and Ames' own definition of transcendence actually does not apply to many of the Western concepts that they use to illustrate it. I agree with this point, but I am unsure about Neville's way of arguing for it. He says of Hall and Ames that "in all their examples—God, a Platonic form, the unmoved mover, a classical atom, a decisive will—the transcendent principle cannot be explained in itself, only in its explanatory function" (p. 150). Neville's argument seems to be that A cannot transcend B if A cannot be explained *to us humans* with-

out reference to B. I am not sure that this follows from Hall and Ames' definition. But part of the problem here is that it is not clear what Hall and Ames mean by "the meaning or import" of something. Do atoms (as conceived by, say, Lucretius) transcend ordinary physical objects? Hall and Ames state explicitly that they do,<sup>6</sup> but it is hard to know how to apply their characterization of transcendence to this case, because "meaning" and "import" are not central concepts in classical atomist philosophical views or methodology. Leaving tricky cases like this aside, though, I agree with Neville that there are many major Western philosophical movements that it would be misleading to describe as "transcendent." Aristotle, for example, suggests in *Metaphysics Z* that the "primary substances" are ordinary, everyday physical objects, whose matter, form, function, and "efficient cause" all interrelate to make them what they are.

So I find myself pleasantly in agreement with Neville on a number of important points. In fact, I have only two disagreements worth mentioning. One is that, precisely because I agreed with so many of this book's major theses, I wondered whether it actually advances the argument in the field in an important way. Are we being told anything we didn't already know? (When I was in graduate school, we used the phrase "New Wave Confucianism" to describe the same basic position that Neville identifies with "Boston Confucianism." So Neville's label is original, but the concept is not.) However, perhaps the points this book makes are controversial to more of the major figures in the field than I realize.

This relates to my second difference of opinion with Neville, which has to do with how the two of us conceptualize the field of Chinese and comparative philosophy as a whole. I was surprised, for example, by how much space and energy this book devotes to the views of Tu Wei-ming. My own view is that Tu occupies a position in contemporary Confucianism roughly equivalent to that of a serious, sincere Christian evangelist, one who is charming in personal presence and delightful and effective as a public speaker, but not a Biblical exegete, theologian, or historian of religion, and not regarded as such by those who are. Neville is aware of the concern that certain versions of Confucianism may seem "bland" (p. 84). He strives valiantly to make something sophisticated and "piquant" out of Tu's comparison of Confucianism and Kierkegaardian existentialism (pp. 86 ff.). However, I ended up thinking that the similarities are not illuminating of either Kierkegaard or Confucianism. Tu's main point seems to be that, according to both Kierkegaard and Confucianism, living well requires an intense personal commitment to the source of value (God or the *dao*, respectively). But this is a very thin similarity. For example, Aristotle is neither an existentialist nor a Confucian, but he, too, stresses that one must "choose" virtue for its own sake.

Perhaps my objection will be more clear if I say a little about what I consider to be a more helpful comparison of Confucianism and existentialism. In his "Moral Decision in Wang Yang-ming: The Problem of Chinese 'Existentialism,'" David S. Nivison points out that there are superficial similarities between the two positions: "there is much curiously existentialist-like talk about 'freedom' and 'nothingness' between Wang Yang-ming and his students."<sup>7</sup> However, "'Nothing' for Wang's

disciples seems to mean an absence of preconception or selfish interest that could attach or bind us to things. For Western existentialists, consciousness is ‘*nothing*’ because it must be other than its object, which ‘is’: while the object so to speak just sits there, a thing ‘in itself,’ we are things ‘for ourselves,’ as it were, tipped into the world, concerned with open possibilities of dealing with it. One could argue that this is the direct opposite of ‘nothing’ as ‘nonattachment.’”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, for Wang and his disciples, “freedom is spontaneity and is something they take for granted that we want to have; indeed *the* task of self-cultivation is to adjust our understanding of ourselves so that ‘obstructions’ to spontaneity, all anxiety or hesitation, fall away. For both Kierkegaard and Sartre our freedom is a terrifying burden, its exercise painful, something we can never really escape, though we will hide it from ourselves if we can.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most important difference is that “Wang seems to be in the last analysis an ‘intellectualist,’ not a ‘voluntarist’ in ethics.” In other words, Wang thought that there was some objective truth to discover within ourselves, and that this can and should be our ethical guide.<sup>10</sup> For existentialists of either the theistic or atheistic variety, the claim to follow such an inner guide would be a paradigmatic instance of “bad faith.”

Nivison has certainly not given us the last word on this topic.<sup>11</sup> But what I find preferable in a discussion like Nivison’s is that it clearly sets out various positions, shows intimate familiarity with both the relevant Western and Chinese philosophical texts, takes into account historical context and the development of intellectual traditions over time, and then tries to identify specific similarities and differences. The failure to do this kind of careful work is, I believe, one of the reasons that Tu Weiming’s work has had little influence in the broader philosophical community. Perhaps, though, like Zhuangzi’s well-frog, I have insufficient appreciation of what lies outside my own narrow perspective.

Allow me to end on an irenic note. Let us heartily agree with Neville that Confucianism is in no way parochial to East Asia. And let us also agree that the various alternative formulations of Confucianism are in a league with the various formulations of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Kantianism, Vedānta, Buddhism, and others as participants in a world-philosophical dialogue.

#### Notes

- 1 – Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995). See especially the sections “Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion” and “Conclusion.”
- 2 – See A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, “Religion and Society,” in Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1952), pp. 153–177; Robert F. Campany, “Xunzi and Durkheim as Theorists of Ritual Practice,” in Frank Reynolds and David Tracy, *Discourse and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 197–231; and Xunzi, “Discourse on Heaven,” “Discourse on Ritual,” and “Discourse on Music,” trans. Eric Hutton, in Philip J. Ivan-

hoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001), pp. 260–272.

- 3 – The books to which Neville refers are David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); idem, *Anticipating China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); and idem, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). For an alternative critique of their approach, see Stephen A. Wilson, “Conformity, Individuality, and the Nature of Virtue,” in Bryan W. Van Norden, ed., *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 94–115.
- 4 – Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, p. 13. This statement immediately raises one minor issue that Neville does not address. Formally speaking, what Hall and Ames have given is a *sufficient condition* for something being transcendent. Sufficient conditions are of the logical form “P, if Q.” One suspects that Hall and Ames meant to give *necessary and sufficient conditions*, which would be of the form “P if and only if Q.”
- 5 – Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, p. 171.
- 6 – Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, p. 13.
- 7 – David S. Nivison, “Moral Decision in Wang Yang-ming: The Problem of Chinese ‘Existentialism,’” in David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1996), p. 235 (originally published in *Philosophy East and West* 23 [1–2] [January–April 1973]: 121–137. All references in this review are to the reprinted version. Note that Nivison’s essay was published several years prior to Tu Wei-ming’s work on this topic).
- 8 – Nivison, “Moral Decision in Wang Yang-ming,” p. 236.
- 9 – Ibid.
- 10 – On this point, see David S. Nivison, “The Philosophy of Wang Yang-ming,” in Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*, pp. 217–231.
- 11 – One of Nivison’s students has addressed this issue in even more detail: Philip J. Ivanhoe, “‘Existentialism’ in the School of Wang Yangming,” in Ivanhoe, *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1996), pp. 250–264.

## Response to Bryan W. Van Norden’s Review of *Boston Confucianism*

**Robert Cummings Neville** Boston University

Professor Van Norden’s gracious claim that much of my point in *Boston Confucianism* was already known and accepted in his graduate school somehow makes me feel the way the Chinese emperor must have felt when he stood in the doorway looking south and the empire just fell into order. Whew!

If Boston Confucianism is nothing but New Wave Confucianism to the minds of some American scholars, it was new news to the Chinese when I lectured about it in Xian, Urumqi, and Beijing last year. One of the things that intrigued them was that, whereas they were accustomed to hearing Confucianism discussed and advocated by scholars of history, I spoke as a philosopher. *Boston Confucianism* is a book of contemporary philosophy, arguing about how to take Confucian resources for a viable philosophic approach to issues today. I am not a sinologist or a history scholar, and I am not "a Biblical exegete, theologian, or historian of religion," as Van Norden accuses Tu Wei-ming of also not being (actually, I am a philosophical theologian, but not the kind of historical theologian he most likely means). A principal thesis of *Boston Confucianism* is that enough scholarly work has been done for the non-scholarly but genuinely philosophical public to put Confucianism into play within constructive philosophy, and it lays out some directions for that construction. Although Van Norden agrees with me that you don't have to be East Asian to be a Confucian, I wonder whether he also agrees that you don't have to be a historian or sinologist to be a Confucian philosopher? Certainly you don't have to read Plato in Greek to develop Platonic ideas in your philosophy, for instance as Whitehead did; he got his knowledge of Plato from his neighbor, A. E. Taylor.

As to Van Norden's claim that Tu Wei-ming is the Confucian equivalent of "a serious, sincere Christian evangelist, one who is charming in personal presence and delightful and effective as a public speaker," I must say that as the dean of a Christian theological seminary I take that to be a high compliment. But because Tu and his colleagues might take that as a put-down, permit me to give an alternative characterization of his work.

Tu Wei-ming is probably the leading Confucian intellectual to work in practical arts such as law and politics in the milieu of contemporary social scientists, philosophers, theologians, and thinkers who otherwise have little knowledge of or interest in Confucianism. Tu is not a mean sinologist—his book on the *Chung Yung* has gone through two editions, and his classes both in Chinese and in English draw students from many academic institutions in the Boston area. Nevertheless, the focus of his work is not writing for those who are Confucian scholars such as Bryan Van Norden, and he has not attempted to be an East Coast version of David Nivison, who is a scholar's scholar. Rather, he has engaged the great issues of our day in politics, philosophy, and religion, just as many of the great Confucians did in the past, and for a public consisting of people engaging these same issues from other traditions. Whereas Confucian *scholars* have often been preoccupied with Confucian history and identity—and Tu is not entirely free of this—Tu's main energies have been devoted to engaging the issues of our time through focusing on the Enlightenment project, creating a conversation about that here and abroad, and developing a form of contemporary Confucian discourse. The future of Confucianism will be determined as much if not more by those who use it in contemporary engagement with the broad intellectual world than by those who study it for itself. Tu is likely to be the foremost innovator in Confucian philosophy of our generation; he will almost certainly be that if he agrees with my gentle criticisms, such as that he value Xunzi

more highly, come to terms with the obdurateness of alienation that Christians know as sin, and rescue filial piety from a social situation in which so many families are dysfunctional.

I thank Professor Van Norden for bringing up the functionalist interpretation of ritual from Durkheim to supplement my pragmatic semiotic interpretation. Surely there is much to the functionalist approach, and it is how John Dewey took ritual. I worry some about reductive functionalism—ritual is “nothing but” the fulfilling of certain functions in social life. The semiotic approach can embrace the functional approach but be open to many more plays of meaning. In particular, the semiotic approach emphasizes a kind of recursive building of ritual—lower level rituals stimulate the development of higher ones, and by this means “high civilization” gets higher and higher. The functionalist approach emphasizes the functions necessary for social stability, whereas the semiotic approach focuses on the attractiveness of aesthetic meaning, a point well emphasized by Hall and Ames and that I think can be found in Xunzi (and should be developed today).<sup>1</sup>

Roger Ames and the late David Hall have done groundbreaking work to elevate the understanding of the Chinese sense of the aesthetic from a kind of poeticism found, say, in the work of Chang Chung-yuan to a large-scale philosophy of culture. I am pleased that Van Norden agrees with my criticisms of dichotomous philosophies of culture and the Hall-Ames attempt to minimize “transcendence” in Chinese culture. But this should not detract from their monumental achievement of providing an interpretation of differences between Chinese and Western cultures that allows these cultures to be thematized creatively in contemporary philosophy. Many sinologists and most non-sinologists interested in the Chinese contribution to contemporary culture take the Hall-Ames position as the place to start, even after my dreadfully devastating criticisms of a few points.

Concerning Tu Wei-ming’s “existentialism,” I would not want Tu to be criticized for a point of my own making. His idea that I discussed was in a few brief paragraphs in an early work, and he only suggested a similarity between Kierkegaard’s claim that “truth is subjectivity” and Wang Yangming’s claim that a would-be sage doesn’t just “try harder” but by will takes on a new subjective identity. Neither Tu nor I suggested any careful point-by-point comparison between Wang and existentialists. Van Norden is quite right to point out great differences that we did not mention. The purpose of my discussion was to sharpen the challenge to Confucian self-help meliorism made by the Christian idea of contradiction in the soul (Paul’s “the good I would I do not, and the evil I would not, that I do”). Tu was making the best case I know for a non-meliorist Confucianism in the Mencian tradition, and I think that on this point if not more generally he is right that Wang has a stubborn streak of voluntarism. Remember that Wang reversed Zhu Xi’s editing of the *Da xue* to put fixing the will before fixing knowledge. Xunzi would have given Tu more with which to work, a theme of my several discussions of Tu.

The main theme of this discussion with Van Norden is whether authentic Confucianism in our time is owned by scholars of history or can also be owned, used, and advanced by philosophers whose agenda is to engage contemporary issues

rather than to interpret the tradition. This distinction is by no means sharp—most writers on Confucianism do both. Yet it marks a difference as to what constitutes good and useful Confucian thinking. Surely those of us who are philosophers are dependent on the scholars for our resources, and accountable to them in the long run for our interpretations of the tradition. I am extremely grateful for Professor Van Norden's generally positive evaluation of my reading of Confucianism. The question is whether the scholars of history see value in the philosophers' approaches to contemporary engagement.

#### Notes

- 1 – I make this point about ritual and semiotics at much greater systematic length in *Normative Cultures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), chap. 7, than in *Boston Confucianism*.

#### Reply to Robert Neville

##### Bryan W. Van Norden

I am pleased, once again, to see how much Professor Neville and I agree about. He opposes a functionalist approach to ritual that is "reductive." I do, too. He speaks of the "attractiveness of aesthetic meaning" of ritual, whereas Durkheim talks about the "collective effervescence" it produces through its symbolic functions.<sup>1</sup> The genius of Durkheim and Xunzi was to see that ritual has a social function, but that it cannot perform this social function unless it is imbued by its participants with some other meaning. And as a Neo-Kantian, Durkheim realized that something can get its meaning from humans and their practices without being an ignorant superstition. I am still not sure that Peirce gives us anything beyond this.

Neville wonders whether I would agree "that you don't have to be a historian or sinologist to be a Confucian philosopher." Absolutely! In fact, I would like to see more people writing for the intellectual public who apply Confucian thought to issues of public life. However, there are minimal intellectual standards that one must meet to do this job well.<sup>2</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 – Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), passim, but see especially pp. 383–387. See also Robert F. Campany, "Xunzi and Durkheim as Theorists of Ritual Practice" (cited in my original review).
- 2 – Professor Neville refers approvingly to Tu Wei-ming's *Centrality and Commonality*. I encourage readers to compare Tu's book to Daniel K. Gardner, *Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh: Neo-Confucian Reflection on the Confucian Canon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), a book on a similar topic.