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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation by Tu Wei-Ming

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Source: *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Jul., 1987), pp. 323-325

Published by: University of Hawai'i Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1398522>

Accessed: 13-05-2019 02:46 UTC

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Book Reviews

Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation. *By Tu Wei-Ming.* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1985. Pp. 203. Glossary, Bibliography, Index. Hardbound \$34.50. Paperback \$12.95.

Confucian Thought comprises a gathering of Tu Wei-ming's writings of the past decade. The papers cohere into a significant pattern, and the book emerges as a major statement in Tu's endeavor to present Confucianism as a creed, not merely of local antiquarian concern, but which offers the rudiments of a viable philosophy for contemporary life (pp. 3–5). While appreciative of scholarly demands, Tu discerns and hopes to tap vital insights in the Confucian canon into the human condition and human potential.

The key to this venture is to liberate Confucian studies from the fetters imposed on the system by most received interpretations. Such accounts commonly reduce Confucianism to a collection of moral truisms, a system of etiquette, a normative scheme of family-social organization, or a philosophy of imitative correct action based on age-old ritual norms. Tu vigorously questions the scope and validity of such reductions and urges that "selfhood as creative transformation" be understood as the animating core of Confucianism round which everything else revolves. Selfhood in this connection, Tu argues, is neither a function of one's "privatized ego," nor of one's family-social position, nor even of one's ritual refinement. Confucian selfhood, Tu avers, is firmly rooted in cosmic patterns of attunement and harmonization. These roots provide every person with the inner resources for his self-realization through cultivating interpersonal virtues. Selfhood thus conceived is buoyed by one's expanding circle of human relations, which occasion the growth, testing, and endless realization of his virtues. Tu effectively conveys the very cosmological depth, self-to-other interflow, and ontological significance of selfhood that are not adequately appreciated in most received interpretations.

This Confucian picture indeed contains many elements congenial to our spiritual needs, though a contemporary idiom may have to be devised for their dissemination and acceptance. The Confucian organismic cosmology, for instance, coheres with and expresses a value system for an ecological understanding of the world. It effectively extends this understanding to human life in a way which

The familiar dichotomies such as self/society, body/mind, sacred/profane, culture/nature, and creator/creature, in light of the "continuity of being," are relegated to the background. A different mode of thinking, which emphasizes part/whole, inner/outer, surface/depth, root/branches, substance/function, and Heaven/man, becomes prominent. The central question does not involve static, mechanistic, analytical distinctions but subtle relationships, internal resonance, dialogical interplay and mutual influence. (Pp. 8–9)

Moreover, the holistic Confucian philosophy of man advocates self-realization as a communal act in the context of other-realization (p. 128). It identifies resources in man for the formation of such interpersonal virtues as once were considered naïvely optimistic, but now are finding a place in contemporary ethical theory.¹ It specifies self-cultivation measures which draw upon an aesthetic perspective that flows from its organismic cosmology and structures one's sense of appropriateness and harmony. This aesthetic perspective, then, forms the backdrop for the determination of ritual action and other Confucian arts and could nurture new forms of creative human life. Furthermore, Confucian ethics presuppose man's inherent embeddedness in interpersonal, particularly familial, relations. These commit him to various obligations and concerns and allow him

to have faith in and expect the same from others. Through its elaboration of man as a relations-bound creature, Confucianism offers lessons to alienated moderns on why they ought to feel at home with others; its doctrine of human relatedness could rekindle man's original sense of interpersonal solidarity.

Finally, Tu goes on to set forth an account of the dynamic Confucian ontology of man as the simultaneous root and goal of self-realization. He describes the ontological core of man as precisely that of the natural order. Hence, full self-realization involves, besides consummate personhood, a profound experience of identity with the cosmic whole in virtue of which one resonates with the cosmic pulse (pp. 73–75, 105–107).

While Tu's account is substantially correct, there are several flaws in his presentation. First, in endeavoring to show that the spiritual roots of Confucianism are quite as deep and profound as those claimed, for example, by Christianity, he frequently describes basic Confucian notions like Heavenly principle and mandate of heaven as being in some sense "transcendental" and as providing "transcendental anchorage" for human nature and self-realization. Although he makes it clear that he is not using the term in the sense of a radical other, it is ultimately inconsistent with the attractive organismic view of nature and man emphasized in Confucianism. "Immanent" is the most fitting term for describing these notions; indeed, their "immanent" cast is what makes them such promising alternatives to their dualistic Western counterparts.² Second, while recognizing the importance of interpersonal moral practice in Confucianism, Tu goes on to suggest that one conducts himself properly toward others as an instrumentality for realizing his transcendental nature:

My relationship to my father is vitally important *for* my own salvation. . . .

The father-son relationship, in this sense, provides a context and an *instrumentality for* self-cultivation. . . . We respect them (our fathers) *for* our own projects of self-realization. . . . After all, *it is for the ultimate purpose of self-realization that we have our fathers* as the source of the meaningful life we have been pursuing. (P. 127; my italics)

What Confucian would countenance such a proposition? We respect our fathers and treat them appropriately just because they are our fathers and for no further reason or purpose. Confucians insist time and again that we ought to do what is appropriate simply because it is appropriate; it would be an anathema to them to suggest that we do so in order to advance "our own projects of self-realization." Third, Tu's related treatment of Shun's saintly filial conduct toward a malicious father is unduly forced and apologetic; the odd case calls for a more probing consideration (pp. 119–120). Finally, Tu's discussion of Confucianism's implicit respect for women and ability to accommodate women's equality glosses over the significant failure of Confucian values to foster any moral realization of the unequal status of women in traditional China. The moral inertia of Confucian values in this regard contrasts sharply with the dynamic unfolding of the normative value of the concept of equal rights in the West. Historically, it took an influx of Christian missionaries and schools to give women a solid sense of their own value and ability to do significant work in Chinese society. The role of Confucian values in social hierarchies has to be reexamined critically and made more progressive to make Tu's constructive vision a viable option for modern man.

The testament of a major Chinese scholar, *Confucian Thought* displays fine cultural sensitivity and is substantially correct. Rich in insight, lively polemic, and masterful prose, it shall challenge and inspire philosophers and sinologists for years to come. At the same

time, it has much the air of a prolegomenon; one hopes that Professor Tu will continue to develop and systematize his pregnant insights and go on to set them forth in a definitive treatise.

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NOTES

1. An excellent example of this trend in contemporary ethics is Peter Singer's *The Expanding Circle: Ethics & Sociobiology* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981).

2. See Roger T. Ames's and David L. Hall's critical discussions on these terms in "Getting It Right: On Saving Confucius from the Confucians," *Philosophy East and West* 34, no. 1 (January 1984): 3–23, and *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), chap. 4.

A History of Early Vedānta Philosophy, Part I. By Hajime Nakamura. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983. Pp. 566 Rs. 150.

I

"The tendency of the contemporary academic world is to concentrate mainly on the period after Śaṅkara... But the opinion of the present writer is that to omit the consideration of pre-Śaṅkara Vedānta thought and focus attention only on subsequent developments is a major defect in the historical approach to philosophical studies" (p. 5). The book under review not only sets out to overcome this defect, but also succeeds to a remarkable degree in doing so. Thus it constitutes a milestone in the study of the history of Vedantic philosophy in particular and Indian philosophy in general.

II

This is, of course, not to say that all the issues connected with the history of pre-Śaṅkara Vedantic thought can be taken as settled. As a matter of fact, it will now be shown that two fundamental assumptions made by the author in part one of the book concerning the chronology of the Upaniṣads may not bear scrutiny. These two fundamental assumptions are: (1) that the Kaṭha Upaniṣad is post-Buddhist and (2) that "since the contacts between the Indians and the Greeks arose after the expeditions of Alexander to India" (p. 33), Pāṇini should be placed at circa 350 B.C. or later because he refers to the Greeks.

The case for the Kaṭha Upaniṣad being post-Buddhist is based on the following arguments: (1) that the use of the word *Dharma* in I.21 and IV.14, 15 is Buddhist; (2) that Naciketas "tried to throw away his life in order to hear the truth" (p. 26) like Prince Sutasoma in Jātaka no. 537; and (3) that Naciketas' third question echoes the Buddhist "unexplained question" regarding the post-mortem existence (or otherwise) of the Tathāgata.

In my opinion all three arguments are questionable. The description of *Dharma* as subtle in Kaṭha I.21 (*aṅur eṣa dharmah*) does not seem to be enough *by itself* to be