

"Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism: A Dialogue"

The Tang Chun-I Visiting Professor
Chinese University of Hong Kong 2019

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PHIL5180

Class Schedule:

Time: 2:30pm-5:15pm
Venue: LSD214

10 Jan (Fri): - Lecture One
17 Jan (Fri): - Lecture Two
31 Jan (Fri): - Lecture Three
7 Feb (Fri): Lecture Four

Required Reading

1. Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011.
2. Roger T. Ames, "Human Becomings: Theorizing 'Persons' for Confucian Role Ethics" ms.
3. Henry Rosemont, Jr. and Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vision for the 21st Century?* Taipei: National Taiwan University Press and V&R Unipress, 2016.
4. Roger T. Ames, *Reading Confucius, Reading Dewey*, ms.

Course Description

In anticipating the fruits of this dialogue between Confucianism and Deweyan pragmatism, we might be encouraged by the fact that Alfred North Whitehead, a self-confessed "American" philosopher, said in reference to his half-brother John Dewey, "If you want to understand Confucius, read John Dewey. And if you want to understand John Dewey, read Confucius." In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead further allows that his own "philosophy of organism seems to approximate more to some strains of . . . Chinese thought." At our present juncture, we now have the distance and the resources to reassess classical American pragmatism in a way that allows for an appreciation of its truly revolutionary character. Fair evidence of this disjunction is the fact that, within contemporary academic circles, the many resonances the language of Dewey's pragmatism has with Confucianism have been noticed, and the process of establishing a dialogue between these two traditions is already well under way.

Lecture One: Friday 10 January 2020.

“Theorizing ‘Person’ for Confucian and Deweyan Ethics: A Challenge to the Ideology of Individualism”

Almost a century ago, John Dewey in *Individualism Old and New* worried over the growth of an aberrant form of individualism that had broken with Emerson’s promise to conjure forth for us a nonconformist and self-reliant American soul. Dewey rued the fact that real “individuality,” the end of the Emersonian project in which each one of us aspires after the highest quality of our own personal uniqueness—what he calls “the most characteristic activity of a self”—had degenerated into the then prevailing ideology of a self-interested and contentious “individualism.” Using this distinction between his neologism “individuality” and what had become a decadent “individualism,” Dewey goes on to exhort philosophers in their search for the Great Community to step up to the challenge of formulating a new conception of person that embodies the very “idea” of democracy as a personal, social, political, and ultimately religious ideal.

In Confucian role ethics, Dewey’s contention that association is a fact is restated in a different vocabulary by appealing to specific roles rather than unique habitudes for stipulating the specific forms that association takes within lives lived in family and community—that is, the various roles we live as sons and teachers, grandmothers and neighbors. For Confucianism, not only are these roles descriptive of our associations, they are also prescriptive in the sense that roles in family and community are themselves normative, guiding us in the direction of appropriate conduct. Whereas for both Confucianism and Dewey, mere association is a given, flourishing families and communities are what we are able to make of our facticity as the highest human achievement.

Required Readings:

1. John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*.
2. Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, Chapter 1-2, “Introduction: ‘Appreciating’ Confucianism,” “An Interpretive Context for Understanding Confucianism”

Lecture Two: Friday 17 January 2020.

“How do the Confucian Canons say “Role Ethics?”

While certainly having important theoretical implications, what is compelling about the Confucian project and the process cosmology that grounds it is that it proceeds from a relatively straightforward account of the actual human experience. We have found that, rather than appealing to ontological assumptions about fixed, essential natures or supernatural speculations about immortal souls and salvific ends, all of which would take us outside of the world of our empirical experience, the Confucian project focuses instead on the possibilities for enhancing personal worth available to us here and now through enchanting the ordinary affairs of the day. Trying to take this tradition on its own terms, what then is the vocabulary that the Confucian canons use to say “role ethics”?

Required Readings:

1. John Dewey, "Time and Individuality"
2. Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, Chapter 3: "The Confucian Project: Achieving Relational Virtuosity"

Lecture Three: Friday 31 January 2020. "Holography and the Focus-Field Conception of Persons"

Tang Junyi introduces a cosmological postulate he calls *yiduobufenguan* 一多不分觀 that we might summarize as "one is many, many one." This persistent characteristic of Confucian cosmology provides us with yet another way of conceiving of this dynamic process of personal identity formation. Tang would insist that this protean expression is a distinctive, generic feature of the Chinese processual cosmology locating our persons as vital and specific foci that have implicated within each of us a boundless field of relations. Importantly, *yiduobufen* is another way of describing the doctrine of intrinsic, constitutive relationality we have contrasted above with external relations. It is, simply put, the assumption that in the compositing of any "one," there is implicated within it the contextualizing "many."

Required Readings:

1. John Dewey, "Search for the Great Community"
2. Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, Chapter 4: "Confucian Role Ethics"

Lecture Four: Friday 7 February 2020. Confucianism and Deweyan "Human-centered" Religiousness

John Dewey, in rehearsing pre-Darwinian philosophy, appeals to the metonym *eidos* in classical Greek philosophy to represent this persistent notion of "strict transcendence" and its two-world philosophical accoutrements. This "idea" has had significant play in the history of Western philosophy, and as a claim about some permanent and unchanging element within the human experience, has taken on many different forms. In what follows, I will argue that this notion of strict transcendence, now under assault on all sides within the internal critique of the post nineteenth-century Western philosophical narrative as fallacious thinking of the first order, has historically had little relevance for Chinese process cosmology. Indeed, such strict transcendence as a Western ethnocentrism will provide us with a contrastive analogy that will be useful in disambiguating an "eventful" Chinese process cosmology that happily embraces both change and persistence (*biantong* 變通), and the familiar "objectivism" of substance ontology that, in our quest for certainty, has promised us but not yet delivered either Reality or Truth.

Required Readings

1. John Dewey, "Religious vs. Religion"

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address"
3. Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics* Chapter 5: "Confucian Human-centered Religiousness"