

What Multiculturalism Should Not Be

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What Multiculturalism Should Not Be

D A N I E L B O N E V A C

Studying other cultural traditions is important for many reasons. It teaches us about other cultures. It teaches us that familiar ways of doing and thinking about things are not the only ways. It helps us to understand what divides us and what unites us. It gives us a new perspective on our own culture. It gives us new insights into issues that concern us. And it teaches us about ourselves.

This sounds like a brief for multiculturalism. Indeed, though I am not a specialist in non-Western thought, I admire much non-Western philosophy. I have co-edited two anthologies of non-Western philosophical writings and have created and taught a course on World Philosophy. Ideas I have gleaned from non-Western philosophers increasingly influence the direction of my own philosophical work. Nevertheless, I have helped to defeat a multiculturalism requirement on my own campus, and have criticized multiculturalism in print (Bonevac). Why?

Part of the reason is my suspicion of requirements *per se*. That studying other cultures is good for you does not imply that it ought to be required. I think low-fat diets are good for people, for example, but I do not want to require them. More fundamentally, however, I believe that critics of multiculturalism are too often right: Many multicultural courses and writings are politicized and distorted. Politicization, while sometimes significant, is usually easy to recognize. Not so the distortion arising from Western writers reading their own concerns into non-Western traditions and thinkers. The out-

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come of multiculturalism is too often a cartoon version of foreign thought, contrasted with a cartoon version of the West.

In this paper I examine a recent article on Chinese philosophy that illustrates these dangers of multicultural inquiry. In my view, it constitutes an insult to Chinese philosophy. My point is not merely to show that some bad things go on under the name of multiculturalism—bad things go on under the name of just about anything—but to show that multiculturalism presents a powerful but destructive temptation even to prominent writers. “Understanding Order: The Chinese Perspective” is the lead essay in a recently published multicultural philosophy volume (Solomon and Higgins). Its authors, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, are noted scholars of Chinese philosophy. Ames edits the most prestigious journal of non-Western philosophy, *Philosophy East and West*, and both have written well-regarded books on Chinese philosophy and other topics. Yet their essay makes a series of mistakes that are typical of the multicultural genre. My goal is not only to defend Chinese thought from their caricature, but to alert others to a pattern of misreading found in many pieces with multicultural objectives. Evidently, the temptation to such misreading is strong enough to seduce scholars of the stature of Hall and Ames. Hall and Ames’s earlier writings on Chinese philosophy show that they know—or, at least, once knew—better.

PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

Three problems strike the reader of “Understanding Order” quickly. First, the authors do not hesitate to speak of Chinese thought in the singular. Their subtitle, “The Chinese Perspective,” signals their willingness to treat Chinese writers and sages as developing a unified set of views. Hall and Ames also treat the West monolithically. They glibly talk about “the West,” “Western individualism,” and what “we” believe. But lumping together thinkers as diverse as Plato and Nietzsche, Aquinas and Russell, and Mill and Marx into a single perspective does not encourage fine-grained analysis. What do all of these thinkers have in common? Something, surely. All wrote in Indo-European languages, for example, and the later thinkers thought of themselves as part of a tradition including the earlier ones. But it is not clear that they share any substantive theses of real philosophical significance. A similar point applies to China. Classical Chinese philosophy enjoyed its most fruitful development during the “Hundred Schools” period; Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions have sparred throughout the centuries with one another and with competing paradigms offered by thinkers such as Mo Tzu, Han Fei Tzu, Wang Ch’ung, and Wang Fu-chih. All these thinkers wrote in Chinese, and the later ones saw themselves as part of a tradition including the earlier ones. But it is doubtful that they all share important philosophical theses. Seeking “the Chinese philosophical perspective” is probably a mistake.

Second, the authors seek not only “the Chinese philosophical perspective” but “the Chinese perspective” *tout court*. They slide effortlessly between philosophy, arts, literature, opinions of contemporary Chinese, and political movements, assuming the unity not only of Chinese philosophy but of Chinese culture as a whole. The assumption of the unity of culture is even more pronounced in some of the other essays in the same volume. “Ways of Japanese Thinking,” for example, spends more time discussing Japanese food, tea cere-

monies, film, and theater than philosophy, mentioning Nishida and Nishitani, Japan's two greatest twentieth-century philosophers, only in a single footnote (Parkes). It is as if an article on American philosophy spent most of its time talking about baseball, McDonald's, and Steven Spielberg! Another essay gives prominent place to Aztec human sacrifice (Valadez).

To talk about the Chinese philosophical perspective is to assume that there are important and substantive philosophical theses that all, or almost all, Chinese philosophers have shared. That is implausible enough. To talk about the Chinese perspective *tout court* is to assume that there are important and substantive theses that all, or almost all, Chinese people have shared. That is far more implausible. Cultures are unified by things such as language, history, customs, and religion, but only the last has much connection to beliefs. And, since China is home to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, religion is a poor prospect for playing a unifying role in its culture.

The volume's introduction makes the assumption of the unity of culture explicit: ". . . in reading other philosophical traditions we are not only trying to understand other authors, other languages, other ideas. We are also trying to imbed ourselves in another culture, engage in another life. . . . [U]nderstanding a philosophy is necessarily understanding the strains and structures of the culture it expresses and through which it is expressed" (Solomon and Higgins xii). Understanding a philosophical text, in other words, requires understanding an entire culture. Presumably the same holds of understanding a literary work, an artistic production, or a social movement.

This is an exaggeration. Undoubtedly, philosophy, literature, and art interact with other elements of the culture they occupy. But it is easy to overstate the connections. Between 1959 and 1972, Saul Kripke revolutionized American philosophy. How does his work connect to the space race, the urban riots of the 1960s, the advent of the Beatles, and the eventual adoption of the designated hitter rule? It does not. Aspects of culture do not move in tandem. They are independent to various degrees. Some trends in contemporary poetry, for example, are responses to other trends within poetry, having no particular connection to developments in painting, philosophy, or direct mail marketing. One can understand some aspects of culture without understanding every aspect. One can understand a great deal about the modern novel without accompanying expertise in sculpture, hockey, and political action committees. Cultures comprise many strands, and connections between them must be argued for rather than assumed.

Third, the assumption of the unity of culture has an obvious but, for the multiculturalist, troubling consequence: understanding a foreign philosophy or literature requires "engag[ing] in another life," "put[ting] oneself 'in another's skin,' to see 'from the inside' a life that is as routine and unexceptional to others as our lives are to us" (Solomon and Higgins xii-xiii). It seems an understatement to say, as the editors do, "This raises deep questions about our ability to read such philosophy" (xiii). It makes understanding a foreign philosophy or literature impossible. In fact, it may make understanding *any* philosophy or literature impossible. I cannot put myself in the skin of Saul Kripke; I cannot see David Bartholome's life from the inside. It might seem that I can at least understand my own writing, since I do inhabit my own skin and live my life from the inside. But, on the assumption of the unity of culture, I cannot

understand even what I myself write without understanding my entire culture. There is a chicken-and-egg problem here: understanding a work requires understanding the entire culture from which it arises, but surely understanding a culture requires understanding the works it comprises.

If foreign and, indeed, all art, literature, and philosophy are unintelligible, what is the point of multiculturalism or, for that matter, any humanistic study? This discomfort shows up in Hall and Ames's stress on "the difficulty of adjusting to a cultural sensibility so utterly distinct from our own" (4). They emphasize again and again how remote Chinese conceptions are from those common in Western philosophy. (Yet, paradoxically, they think that the Chinese perspective turns out to have much in common with "such thinkers as Foucault, Derrida, and the American pragmatist Richard Rorty" [22n]!) But if Chinese ideas are remote and virtually unintelligible to us, why study them? Serious engagement with those ideas would seem to be impossible or, at least, so difficult that it is possible only for the specialist.

If we reject the assumption of the unity of culture for a more pluralistic, common-sense view, we can see our way out of these conundrums. A particular work—a painting, a poem, a novel, or a philosophical treatise—depends in various ways on certain aspects of the culture in which it is produced. It may depend heavily on some aspects and be completely independent of others. Some works may depend on many aspects of culture, others on few. Furthermore, understanding is not an all-or-nothing affair; it is a matter of degree. Understanding some works requires considerable knowledge of many features of the culture, while understanding others requires only a little knowledge of a few features. Some works, consequently, are difficult to understand, while others are easy. A work from another culture is of course harder to understand than one from our own culture, all other things being equal, because our knowledge of our own culture is generally more extensive than our knowledge of other cultures. But other things are rarely equal. *Finnegans Wake* is probably much harder to understand than the *Analects*, even for us.

If this is right, then trying to understand a literary or philosophical text is not a matter of trying to "engage in another life," "put oneself 'in another's skin,'" or see someone else's life "from the inside." Because different aspects of culture are largely independent, a reader can understand quite well what I say in this essay without knowing my tastes in food or music, without knowing anything about my religious beliefs or philosophical views, without knowing anything about my family or friends—without, in short, knowing much of anything about what it is like to be me. Avicenna drank heavily and stayed up most of the night partying with his students; Al-Ghazali lived ascetically. That strikes me as interesting, but not at all important to understanding their contrasting views on the eternity of the world. Much less does such an understanding require seeing their lives from the inside, whatever that might mean.

Pedagogically, the point makes a difference, for someone who believes that another literary or philosophical tradition is very difficult or even impossible to understand is likely to see the questions raised and answers posed in that tradition as remote from our own, contemporary concerns. If understanding texts from another tradition to an acceptable degree requires only acquaintance with some highly relevant aspects of another culture, however, questions and answers in that tradition are likely to seem relevant to our own questions.

The natural outcome of the unity of culture assumption, therefore, is not just pessimism about our ability to understand other traditions, but a lack of motivation to try. At best, other literary and philosophical traditions become intellectual curios with little prospect of enlightening us about our own interests.

But other traditions can give us new insights about ourselves. Confucius and Lao Tzu can teach us about virtue. Mencius and Hsün Tzu can help us understand the links between ethics and human nature. Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-Ming can illuminate the contrast between realism and idealism. The problems these philosophers address are not remote from us, even if their solutions differ in some ways from those in our own philosophical tradition. Copies of the *Tao-te-ching* appear in almost any bookstore because the work addresses basic human concerns, not because the nation is filled with amateur Sinologists.

What I have said has some implications for literary theory to which I can only gesture here. There is no reason to expect a single theory to apply to all works of art. Literary theorists tend to assume that all works should fall under the same theory. New historicists, old historicists, new critics, critical theorists, reader response theorists, and others all contend that they have the key to unlocking the meaning of any literary work. This is an ungrounded pretension. Any literary method will illumine some works and fail to illumine others. Some works may depend in interesting ways on race, class, and gender, to take an example, but some do not. There is no formula for determining on which aspects of culture a work depends, nor is there any limit to the possibilities for such dependence.

SELF AND SOCIETY

So far I have criticized Hall and Ames for taking Chinese philosophy and, indeed, all of Chinese culture as a monolith. The monolith, they contend, is postmodern in design. But their interpretations of texts are distorted and their selections are biased. Much of what they say is misleading or false.

Postmodernism is difficult to define or even describe. Writers who identify themselves as postmodernists nevertheless tend to advance a related family of views, including the following:

1. The self is a social construct; there is no underlying Cartesian subject.
2. There is no distinction between the public and the private; everything is political.
3. No statements are disinterested; all are ultimately practical and rooted in particular social contexts.
4. Objectivity is a pretense; things have no essences or natures, and there are no standards independent of our interpretive community.
5. Logic and argumentation are similarly pretense; the only legitimate terms of evaluation, if there are any, are _____.
6. Moral discourse that is not based on _____ must be abandoned.

Variants of postmodernism fill in the blanks of theses five and six differently. Some would write "based on power" or "based on difference." Hall and Ames consider an aesthetic postmodernism that would write "aesthetic."

Hall and Ames argue that "the Chinese perspective" includes all six theses. In what follows I consider each thesis and show that writers central to the Chinese philosophical tradition, as the tradition is usually understood, reject

it. In fact, the only thesis that finds much support from Chinese philosophers is the third. Some Buddhists accept part of thesis one; some Buddhists and Taoists accept parts of thesis five. No central figure accepts anything like theses two, four, or six.

I begin with thesis one: *The self is a social construct; there is no underlying Cartesian subject.* Hall and Ames write as if there is a generally accepted Chinese theory of the self:

The Chinese “self” is a complex of roles and functions associated with the obligations to the various groupings to which one belongs. One is son, father, brother, husband, citizen, teacher. Subtract each of these roles from him and nothing constituting a coherent personality remains: no soul, no mind, no ego, not even an “I know not what.” (11)

But there is no generally accepted theory of the self in Chinese philosophy. What Hall and Ames say has some basis: Buddhists advance the doctrine of *anatman*, “no soul,” maintaining that there is no ego or self. Hsüan-Tsang, a seventh-century Buddhist, for example, maintains that “neither the real self nor the real dharma is possible” (Chan 375). He considers the view that “the substance of the self is eternal, universal” (375), but rejects it because it makes mind-body interaction inexplicable. He also rejects materialist views of the self as incompatible with its unity. The conclusion: there is no unified self.

But neither Hsüan-Tsang nor other members of the “Consciousness-Only” school believe that the self is a complex of social roles and functions. For Hsüan-Tsang, what we call the self comprises eight different consciousnesses (one for each sense, a sense-center consciousness that coordinates the senses, a thought-center consciousness that deliberates, and storehouse consciousness, which makes memory and imagination possible). This is typical of thinkers of the Consciousness-Only school and the Yogacara school from which it developed.¹ None of the distinctions or kinds of consciousness they invoke involve in any way “the various groupings to which one belongs.”

The Consciousness-Only school, moreover, is almost unique in Chinese philosophy in contending that the self is unreal. Confucius holds that one person’s moral obligations to another depend on their relation, as parent and child, brother and sister, friend, stranger, enemy, or, in the limiting case, self. But he does not hold that such social relations exhaust the self. In fact, a central idea of both the *Analects* and the *Great Learning* is that the self lies at the center of the moral sphere. “Things have their roots and their branches,” the *Great Learning* teaches (86); the root of all things moral is ultimately the self. According to the *Great Learning*, order in the state requires good families, which requires cultivated personal lives. That in turn requires rectifying the mind, which requires sincerity. Sincerity requires knowledge, which comes from the investigation of things. “From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation” (87). This is the opposite of what Hall and Ames assert. The self is not a social construct; society is a construct of selves. The moral character of society depends wholly on the moral character of its members.

This idea lies at the heart of the *Analects*. The first eight verses establish a distinction between the self, family and friends, and others that, Confucius believes, marks crucial ethical divisions. The *Analects* begins, “Confucius said,

'Is it not a pleasure to learn and to repeat or practice from time to time what one has learned? Is it not delightful to have friends coming from afar? Is one not a superior man if he does not feel hurt even though he is not recognized?'" (1:1; 18). The first and most basic question concerns the self and knowledge. The second concerns friendship. The third concerns strangers. The same triad recurs, in reverse order, at 1:4: "Tseng-Tzu said, 'Every day I examine myself on three points: whether in counseling others I have not been loyal; whether in intercourse with my friends I have not been faithful; and whether I have not repeated again and again and practiced the instructions of my teacher'" (20). It appears again at 1:8: "Confucius said, 'If the superior man is not grave, he will not inspire awe, and his learning will not be on a firm foundation. Hold loyalty and faithfulness to be fundamental. Have no friends who are not as good as yourself. When you have made mistakes, don't be afraid to correct them'" (20). Knowledge, sincerity, and self-correction are the self's moral ideals, which underlie the ideals of faithfulness to friends and loyalty and respect toward others. Thus, "the superior man seeks [room for improvement or occasion to blame] in himself; the inferior man seeks it in others" (15:20; 43). Any account of the self as a social construct would contradict this picture completely. The center of Confucian ethics would become hollow.

Other Chinese philosophers follow Confucius in placing the self at the center of ethics. *The Doctrine of the Mean* and Mencius, for example, speak of benevolence (*jen*), the most important Confucian virtue, in very similar terms: "The man who would be benevolent is like the archer. The archer adjusts himself and then shoots. If he misses, he does not murmur against those who surpass himself. He simply turns round and seeks the cause of his failure in himself."² Neo-Confucian writers make the point even more explicitly. Chu Hsi writes: "The Mind is the agent by which man rules his body. It is one and not divided. It is subject and not object. It controls the external world and is not its slave. Therefore, with the Mind we contemplate external objects and so discover the principles of the universe . . ." (Chu Hsi, reprinted in Bonevac and Phillips, *Understanding* 310). Wang Yang-Ming likewise contends that "The mind is one," and compares it to a mirror reflecting the world (Wang Yang-Ming, reprinted in Bonevac and Phillips, 313-14). Nowhere is there any hint of the mind as a social construct or mere complex of social roles.

Hall and Ames know this. In their earlier book, *Thinking Through Confucius*, Hall and Ames presented a subtler analysis of the Confucian conception of the self. The Confucian self, they observed, should be viewed not as a substance with qualities but as arising from a basic ontology of events, with the result that "The agent is as much a consequence of his act as its cause" (15).³ Moral thinking, accordingly, consists not in applying universal principles to particular situations but in generalizing principles and virtues from those situations. This is far from their later portrait of a self defined solely by social relationships.

Consider next thesis two: *There is no distinction between the public and the private; everything is political*. Hall and Ames claim that "the Chinese never stressed a distinction between public and private realms. Because the family was the model of all types of relationship, including the nonfamilial relations among subjects and between ruler and subjects, there was no effective

public sphere" (11). Chinese thinkers, they maintain, understand the nation as a family, with the ruler as father (20).

This obviously contradicts Confucius's stress on the distinction between self, family and friends, and strangers. The family underlies the state in the sense that a well-ordered state requires good "family values." But the *Analects*, the *Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean* do not use the family as a model of the state. Indeed, the emphasis is always on self-correction as a prerequisite of proper government.

Once again, Hall and Ames know better. *Thinking Through Confucius* nowhere treats the family as a model for the state, and Ames's *The Art of Rulership* does not even list "family" in the index.

OBJECT AND ESSENCE

Hall and Ames assert that the Chinese philosophical perspective includes thesis three: *No statements are disinterested; all are ultimately practical and rooted in particular social contexts*. They observe that "the overriding concern of the Chinese has always been the establishment of harmonious relationships with their social ambience. Their 'philosophic' thinking is always concrete, this-worldly, and, above all, practical" (4). Certainly, Confucius tends to be concrete and practical throughout. But is Chinese philosophy always this way, as Hall and Ames contend? And would Confucius himself agree that all statements reflect practical interests?

The answer to both questions is no. Chinese philosophers have displayed a strong interest in abstract metaphysical issues, as these quotations attest:

Being and non-being produce each other. (Lao Tzu 140)

The Supreme Vacuity which neither comes into [nor goes out of] existence is probably the subtle principle in the reflection of the mysterious mirror of *prajna* (wisdom) and the source of all existence. (Seng-Chao 350)

Heaven is born of activity and Earth is born of tranquillity. (Shao Yung 484)

Nature is principle only. However, without the material force and concrete stuff of the universe, principle would have nothing in which to inhere. (Chu Hsi 623)

Wang Fu-chih is unusual for holding that "The world consists only of concrete things" (694), and his work is itself highly metaphysical, not practical. Moreover, it is doubtful whether Confucius or any other Chinese philosopher would agree that no statements are disinterested. Confucius says rather little about language in general, though what he does say suggests that he regards it as important and as a source of objective knowledge: "In language all that matters is conveying meaning"; "Without knowing the force of words, it's impossible to know men" (*Analects* 15:40, 20:3, in Bonevac and Phillips 247-48). He places great importance on the "rectification of names," which he describes as the first measure he would try to carry out as an administrator. "If names are not rectified, language will not be in accord with truth. If language is not in accord with truth, then things cannot be accomplished" (13:3; 40). This means that proper action requires that names correspond properly with actualities. Clearly, for Confucius, truth and accuracy underlie the practical utility of language, not vice versa.

This brings us to Hall and Ames's central contention, that the Chinese philosophical perspective rejects the Western notion of objectivity: *Objectivity is a pretense; things have no essences or natures, and there are no standards independent of our interpretive community.* Hall and Ames contend that, in Western philosophy, "there is the presumption of an objective standard," while, in Chinese thought, "there is no source of order other than the agency of the elements comprising the order" (8). They call Western notions of objectivity and universality naive (18). Treating objectivity and universality as *Western* ideas is bizarre; they pervade Indian and Islamic thought as well as Chinese philosophy. As I have just argued, the doctrine of the rectification of names, common to Confucius, Hsün Tzu, and others, presupposes an objective standard.

Nevertheless, Hall and Ames see Chinese thought as *ars contextualis*—an "art of contextualization, which does not presume that there are essential features, or antecedent determining principles, serving as transcendent sources of order" (7). Western metaphysics, they insist, relies on concepts of being, nature, essence, and principle foreign to Chinese philosophy.

This is astounding. Being, nature, essence, and principle all play important roles in Chinese philosophy:

1. Being (*yu*) and Non-being (*wu*) are basic notions of Taoism. They are central, not only in Lao Tzu, but in later Taoists such as Huai-Nan Tzu and Wang Pi.

2. The concept of a person or thing's nature recurs again and again in Chinese philosophical traditions. Confucius says, "By nature men are alike. Through practice they have become far apart" (17:2; 45). Mencius argues that "human nature is good" (54); Wang Yang-Ming, agreeing, finds in everyone an innate, intuitive knowledge of the good. Hsün Tzu contends that "the nature of man is evil" (128), while Wang Ch'ung insists that "some people are born good and some born evil" (295). All speak freely of human nature, however much they disagree about its character.

3. The concept of essence is less important, but nevertheless assumed. The passage, "Then is the whiteness of the white feather the same as the whiteness of snow? Or, again, is the whiteness of snow the same as the whiteness of white jade?" (52) could come from Plato as well as Mencius (6A:3).

4. Principle is a key concept of neo-Confucianism—sometimes for that reason called the School of Nature and Principle (*Hsing-li hsüeh*)—and of Taoism: "Everything has its principle and every affair has its proper condition" (Kuo Hsiang 330). Confucius articulates ethical principles, and Hsün Tzu emphasizes the importance of rules of propriety. Admittedly, context matters more to Confucius than to Kant. But it does not stop Confucius from advancing principles: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (15:23, 44); ". . . repay hatred with uprightness and repay virtue with virtue" (14:36, 42). Confucius is willing to call the first, the principle of *shu*—translated as altruism (Chan), reciprocity (Legge), or likening-to-oneself (Graham)—"the guiding principle for conduct throughout life" (44).

Denying the obvious role of being, nature, essence, and principle leads Hall and Ames into some difficult quandaries. First, they insist that *yu* and *wu* mean something like "being there" and "not being around." They conclude, in a *non sequitur*, that "the Chinese sense of 'being' overlaps with 'having'" (6). They even defend Marxist commentators who have rendered the Taoist "not

being is better than being” as “not owning private property is better than owning private property.”

Second, they translate *Analecets* 15:28 (misidentified in their notes as 15:29) tendentiously as “It is the person who extends order in the world (*tao*), not order that extends the person” (9). They read the passage, in other words, as implying that standards are human constructions: that man is the measure of all things, in Protagoras’s phrase. Most translators and commentators interpret 15:28 quite differently. Chan has “It is man that makes the Way great, not the Way that can make man great.” He remarks:

Humanism in the extreme! Commentators from Huang K’an to Chu Hsi said that the Way, because it is tranquil and quiet and lets things take their own course, does not make man great. A better explanation is found in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, where it is said, “Unless there is perfect virtue, the perfect Way cannot be materialized.” (44)

Chan interprets the passage, in other words, as asserting the priority of virtue in human relations over abstract rules: Confucius emphasizes “a good society based on good government and harmonious human relations” (15). Traditional Chinese commentators, in contrast, tend to read the passage as distinguishing moral excellence from what people commonly recognize as greatness. Neither reading suggests Hall and Ames’s relativism.

Third, Confucius occasionally speaks of the Will or Mandate of Heaven (*T’ien-ming*). Hall and Ames take this as referring to “the specific enviroing conditions that set up the viable possibilities in a particular social setting or historical epoch” (12). This is the opposite of standard readings, according to which the Will of Heaven is the decree of God, the moral order, or, in Chu Hsi’s words, “the operation of Nature which is endowed in things and makes things be as they are” (23). The standard readings differ in some respects, but they agree that *T’ien-ming* is a transcendent standard or source of standards.⁴

LOGIC AND AESTHETICS

If objectivity is mere pretense, then traditional notions of rationality are too. Hall and Ames recognize this, and maintain that Chinese thought embraces an aesthetic version of thesis five: *Logic and argumentation are similarly pretense; the only legitimate terms of evaluation, if there are any, are aesthetic.* According to Hall and Ames, “the Chinese create order aesthetically rather than by recourse to logical or rational operations” (8). The moral order “is a shifting set of aesthetic harmonies construed from the perspective of the human world” (12). Chinese philosophers show little interest in “dialectical arguments that depend on appeal to ‘canons’ of reason or logic” (17). One might expect that Chinese philosophy is devoid of argument, and that the arts serve as a model for philosophy. Neither is true. Chinese philosophers engage in argument extensively, and neither art nor music serves as a primary paradigm for moral or other philosophical reflection.

Confucius himself does not construct arguments. His followers and opponents, however, certainly do. Mo Tzu, for example, gives a series of arguments for his conclusion that all immoral action stems from a lack of universal love (213-17). His attack on fatalism consists in tight argumentation and even

develops a three-pronged analysis of how doctrines ought to be examined (221-26). Mencius argues that human nature is originally good, and refutes K'ao's views on human nature with a number of arguments (51-52). Hsün Tzu argues, against Mencius, that human nature is evil (128-35). Neo-Confucian writers such as Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-Ming often consider proposals made by students or other philosophers and construct arguments for or against their positions. Buddhist philosophers vary considerably in approach, but many construct careful arguments for their positions. Only in Taoism is argumentation rare; yet even Chuang Tzu offers arguments for his skepticism.

Does any Chinese thinker invoke aesthetics as a replacement for logic? Confucius discusses music as an important trainer of the emotions: it puts the finishing touches on a person of humanity (*jen*) (8:8). "Benevolence (*jen*) is akin to music," says the *Book of Rites* (1:8). Similarly, the superior person studies literature (1:6, 6:25, 7:6). Education in music, art, and literature helps to develop moral character. This means that moral reflection embraces analogues of aesthetic modes of evaluation. But it does not follow that it contains nothing else. The significance of music in the Confucian tradition seems to lie in its requiring both rational and nonrational forms of excellence, balanced to form a harmonious whole (Higgins). Musical excellence is thus analogous to *jen*. Indeed, Mencius compares Confucius to a concert. Does the Confucian then substitute an aesthetic for a moral standard, as Hall and Ames contend? Surely that does not follow. Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts invoke an analogy between moral excellence and aesthetic excellence. They imply that both involve balancing disparate elements in a way that requires a great deal of knowing *how* as well as knowing *that*. But they do not restrict the moral to the aesthetic or replace the former with the latter.

More crucially, even the Confucian thinkers who emphasize the importance of music, literature, and the arts do not suggest that artistic excellence is analogous to philosophical knowledge. Yet this is what they would have to believe to argue that aesthetic evaluation should replace logic and argumentation. Various Chinese writers suggest that art can affect the world, as well as reflect it. Some suggest that arts are models of the world (the five musical tones, for example, modeling the five elements of the universe). But they do not infer that the order of the world is solely aesthetic.

MORAL CONCEPTS

This brings us to the final aesthetic postmodernist thesis: *Moral discourse that is not based on aesthetics must be abandoned*. Hall and Ames argue that Chinese philosophy rejects Western modes of moral evaluation, which rely on concepts of objectivity and the self as a moral agent. In place of those modes of evaluation are aesthetic criteria. I have already argued that this does not follow from the analogy that some writers draw between moral and aesthetic excellence. In any case, as I have argued earlier, Chinese philosophers do not in general reject concepts of objectivity and the self. To the contrary, Chinese discussions of moral philosophy tend to assume both that we can attain objective moral knowledge and that the self is a moral agent. To be sure, some Taoist and Buddhist philosophers reject these assumptions. It is not clear, however, that even they seek to replace moral with aesthetic evaluation.

Hall and Ames seek to discredit application of Western concepts of rights, freedom, and autonomy to contemporary China. Here is an evident political motivation for their distortion of Chinese thought: an *apologia* for the suppression of the democracy movement at Tiananmen Square, an episode with which their article begins and ends. If Western moral concepts have no application in China, then the common view of Tiananmen and subsequent events as the oppression of people seeking freedom and human rights must itself be a distortion. Hall and Ames ask,

how are we to interpret the incident at Tiananmen as a democratic revolt if in our democracy there is a prevailing conception of personhood that entails natural rights, free choice, independence, autonomy, and so on, while in China such values, far from being self-evident and normative, have traditionally been regarded by even the sagest Chinese as sociopathic? (2)

They mock the “blithe, clichéd interpretation assumed by much of the American news coverage of Tiananmen: An unpopular and tyrannical government crushes young George Washingtons” (2). Dissent in China, they assert, is properly interpreted as “contentiousness and self-assertiveness that threatens social harmony” (18). They take as typical of the political thinking in the democracy movement a student’s response to a question about his understanding of democracy: “I don’t know what democracy is, but we need more of it” (21). (How many American students would respond similarly?) The portrait Hall and Ames try to paint, then, justifies Tiananmen Square as a legitimate reaction to a movement that poses a serious threat but has no intelligible goal.

Hall and Ames contend that we associate democracy with “a prevailing conception of personhood that entails natural rights, free choice, independence, autonomy” (2). This may be true, but associations are not presuppositions. A Northerner who associates houses with basements, storm windows, and garages can nonetheless recognize Southern buildings without them as houses. Similarly, we may associate democracy with a conception of personhood while being able to recognize democracy without it. Legal positivists and others deny that there are natural rights; determinists deny free choice. Notions of independence and autonomy are distinctively Kantian and rejected by many who hold other philosophical perspectives. But legal positivists, determinists, and non-Kantians can have perfectly robust conceptions of democracy. We credit the Greeks with inventing democracy, yet they shared almost none of the features of our “prevailing conception of personhood.” The concept of democracy does not presuppose natural rights, nor does its justification. Suffering for decades under a repressive government provides concept and justification enough, with or without a notion of rights.⁵

Chinese democratic movements, furthermore, did not begin with Tiananmen Square. Arthur Waldron calls the quest for democracy “the most important theme of modern Chinese history” (A14). Far from being imposed from outside, the democratic ideal has been articulated by a variety of Chinese political movements stretching back nearly a century, including Mao’s broken promise of a “New Democracy.”

Other confusions abound in Hall and Ames’s discussion of political philosophy. “Asking the Chinese to recognize that they have inalienable rights,” they say, “is to ask them to become, *per impossibile*, beings with essences or

natures” (21). First, and most fundamentally, the Chinese, like all other human beings, either have essences or natures or do not have them; their recognition of rights or wholesale swap of philosophical perspectives cannot affect the issue. Second, as I have already stressed, most Chinese philosophers do believe that people have essences or natures in a very familiar sense. Third, the concept of rights does not require that people have such essences or natures. A philosopher of the Consciousness-Only school or a Zen Buddhist can have a robust concept of rights. In general, a person has a right to do something if and only if nobody else should prevent him/her from doing it. A person has a right to life, for example, if and only if no one else should kill him/her. This does require us to speak of a person, and what other people should not do, but virtually all moral discourse does that. Nothing special to the language of rights commits us to essentialism or to a universal human nature.

Fourth, Hall and Ames appear to confuse inalienable rights with natural rights. Rights are inalienable when they cannot be surrendered, sold, or transferred; rights are natural when they are independent of government. Hall and Ames display their confusion in saying, remarkably, “The Chinese have no inalienable rights. Citizens have been deemed to possess only those rights that are granted by China’s various constitutions” (20). The contrast here is plainly between rights granted by government and rights independent of government, that is, natural, not inalienable, rights. The confusion may explain Hall and Ames’s view that rights require essentialism, for one could argue that the concept of natural rights (unlike that of inalienable rights) presupposes that human beings have essences. People have natural rights independently of government or law. It is tempting, though by no means necessary, to rephrase this by saying that natural rights are not legal entitlements but, instead, intrinsic to being human.

This is important, for Hall and Ames insist that the ideas of rights, democracy, and economic progress contradict the Chinese philosophical perspective. The assumption of the unity of culture allows them to move from philosophy to culture and then to society as a whole, concluding that respect for human rights, democracy, and economic progress would destroy Chinese civilization:

Wishing for increased autonomy and freedom for the Chinese people, along with access to the technologies and economic institutions that make for the Western standard of living, is to condemn the Chinese order to dissolution. And, after the deluge, there is little hope that any alternative order could be put in its place. (21)

This is absurd. Southeastern China now has the fastest economic growth rate in the world. Hong Kong has enjoyed rapid economic growth and considerable freedom for decades without losing its distinctive Chinese character. The current Chinese government may well face dissolution in the face of these developments, but, for a look at a viable alternative order, one need look no further than Hong Kong and Guangdong. Moreover, India, the world’s largest democracy, has done better at preserving its classical tradition than China.

Are Hall and Ames nevertheless justified in thinking that freedom and affluence contradict elements of the Chinese philosophical tradition? Not at all. To be sure, Confucius urges us not to focus exclusively on money: “The superior man thinks of virtue; the inferior man thinks of possessions” (4:11;

27). "If one's acts are motivated by profit, he will have many enemies" (4:12; 27). "The superior man understands righteousness (*i*); the inferior man understands profit" (4:16; 28). But these passages do not condemn affluence. They simply point out that a desire for profit may conflict with ethical demands. It must therefore be secondary to moral considerations. A good government, Confucius maintains, will lead the people to affluence as well as virtue. What should a leader do for the people? "Enrich them," Confucius answers. Once they have been enriched? "Teach them."⁶

Confucius thinks of the ideal ruler as leading people by setting a proper example, not by controlling them (2:3, 12:17, 12:19, 15:4). Thus, "If a ruler sets himself right, he will be followed without his command. If he does not set himself right, even his commands will not be obeyed" (13:6; 41). This implies that a good government can allow the people freedom, for they will follow the ruler's example. Lao Tzu shares this *laissez-faire* conception of government: "The less a leader does and says the happier his people"; "A leader is best when people barely know that he exists" (Lao Tzu 58, 17, in Bonevac and Phillips, *Beyond* 299, 297). To be sure, not all Chinese philosophers advocate the minimal state. Hsün Tzu and Han Fei Tzu, for example, argue for conceptions of government close to those of Hobbes and Machiavelli. But a *laissez-faire* government setting a moral example, allowing freedom, and promoting affluence, far from contradicting "the Chinese perspective," is precisely the Confucian and Taoist ideal.

* * *

Hall and Ames distort the Chinese philosophical tradition so extensively that they have surely given new import to the traditional saying they quote: "The sage fears nothing in this world, save for one thing only: the foreign devil attempting to speak Chinese" (3). One cannot help but ask: How did this happen? What motivates scholars to manipulate material they clearly know and love to serve their own ends? I will not speculate on Hall and Ames's particular motivations. But a more general answer surely lies in the politics and psychology of the contemporary university, which leads scholars as well as novices to romanticize non-Western cultures and depict them, not as they are, but as they would like them to be.⁷

NOTES

¹See, for example, "Questions to King Milinda," in Warren, reprinted in Bonevac and Phillips, *Understanding* 135-36; Vasubandhu; Chan 370-74. Hsüan-Tsang's theory of eight consciousnesses is economical by the standards of Buddhist idealism. See, for example, Buddhaghosa, excerpted in Bonevac and Phillips 133-34, which lists thirty-six consciousnesses. Many Zen thinkers accept the basic views of the Consciousness-Only school. See, for example, I-hsüan: "The Three Worlds are but the mind, and all dharmas are consciousness-only. Therefore [they are all] dreams, illusions, and flowers in the air" (Chan 447).

²Mencius 2A7, reprinted in Bonevac and Phillips 250. Compare *The Doctrine of the Mean*, reprinted in Bonevac and Phillips 266: "In archery we have something like the way of the superior man. When the archer misses the center of the target, he turns round and seeks for the cause of the failure within himself."

³In *Thinking Through Confucius* Hall and Ames sometimes lapse into the view that “in Confucian social theory a person is irreducibly communal” (160), by which they mean, apparently, “personal order would not be possible except for the context provided by social and political life” (159-60). This confuses what a person is with what a person ought to be and do. It may be impossible to spell out the *tao* without mentioning social relationships (though this is not obvious, for sincerity and knowledge do not involve such relationships directly), but this does not imply that there is no self apart from them.

⁴*Thinking Through Confucius* argues against the standard, transcendent readings in favor of an immanent alternative (204-16). I am not convinced, but I do not have space to argue the point in detail here. Hall and Ames do convince A. C. Graham (Graham 30).

⁵For first-hand accounts of the treatment of political prisoners in China, see Bao and Chelminski; Wu, *Laogai* and *Bitter Winds*.

⁶*Analects* 13:9, in Bonevac and Phillips, *Understanding* 246. The *Analects* also contains an early statement of supply-side economics: “Duke Ai asked Yu Zo, ‘Suppose the year is one of scarcity and the government faces a deficit. What is to be done?’ Yu Zo replied, ‘Why not demand from the people a tenth of their income?’ ‘With two tenths there isn’t enough,’ said the Duke. ‘How could I get by with one tenth?’ Yu Zo answered, ‘If the people have plenty, their ruler won’t be needy alone. If the people are needy, their ruler can’t enjoy plenty alone.’” (12:9, 246).

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