

Nahum

Brown

TRANSCENDENCE,  
IMMANENCE, AND  
INTERCULTURAL  
PHILOSOPHY

William

Franke



# Transcendence, Immanence, and Intercultural Philosophy

Nahum Brown • William Franke  
Editors

# Transcendence, Immanence, and Intercultural Philosophy

palgrave  
macmillan

*Editors*

Nahum Brown  
The Hong Kong University of Science  
and Technology  
Hong Kong, China

William Franke  
Vanderbilt University  
Vanderbilt Place  
Nashville, Tennessee, USA

ISBN 978-3-319-43091-1  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-43092-8

ISBN 978-3-319-43092-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016948852

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2016

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made.

Cover illustration: © Béatrice Machet

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature  
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland



# Acknowledgments

We acknowledge permission to adapt and reuse previously published or forthcoming material as follows:

Michael Eckert, “Future as Transcendence: On a Central Problem in Ernst Bloch’s Philosophy of Religion,” translated by [person] from “Zukunft als Transzendenz,” in Ernst *Blochs Vermittlungen zur Theologie*, Ed. Deuser Hermann von und Peter Steinacker. München: Kaiser-Grünewald, 1983. 128–143.

William Franke, “Classical Chinese Thought and the Sense of Transcendence,” adapted from sections of chapter 3 of *Apophatic Paths from Europe to China: Regions Without Borders*. Albany: SUNY, forthcoming.

Yonghua Ge, “Transcendence, Immanence, and Creation: A Comparative Study of Christian and Daoist Thoughts with Special Reference to Robert Neville,” *Philosophy East and West*, forthcoming.

Heiner Roetz, “Chinese Studies and Chinese Dissidents: Who Is Engaged in the ‘Complicity with Power?’,” Translated by Mario Wenning from ‘Die Chinawissenschaften und die chinesischen Dissidenten. Wer betreibt die ‚Komplizenschaft mit der Macht‘?’ in *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* 35 (2011): 47–79. München: Iudicium Verlag, 2013.

# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	xi
<b>Part I The Debate: Methodological Position Statements</b>	
<b>1 Getting Past Transcendence: Determinacy, Indeterminacy, and Emergence in Chinese Natural Cosmology</b>	3
<i>Roger T. Ames</i>	
<b>2 Classical Chinese Thought and the Sense of Transcendence</b>	35
<i>William Franke</i>	
<b>3 Equivocations of “Transcendence”: Responses to Roger Ames</b>	67
<i>William Franke</i>	
<b>4 Transcendence, Immanence, and Creation: A Comparative Study of Christian and Daoist Thoughts with Special Reference to Robert Neville</b>	79
<i>Yonghua Ge</i>	

<b>5</b>	<b>“Immanent Transcendence” in the Chinese Tradition: Remarks on a Chinese (and Sinological) Controversy</b>	103
	<i>Karl-Heinz Pohl</i>	
<b>6</b>	<b>Emptiness of Transcendence: The Inconceivable and Invisible in Chinese Buddhist Thought</b>	125
	<i>Hans Rudolf Kantor</i>	
<b>Part II Critical Reflections on Traditions of Transcendence</b>		
<b>7</b>	<b>Idiot Wisdom and the Intimate Universal: On Immanence and Transcendence in an Intercultural Perspective</b>	153
	<i>William Desmond</i>	
<b>8</b>	<b>Transcendent and Immanent Conceptions of Perfection in Leibniz and Hegel</b>	183
	<i>Nahum Brown</i>	
<b>9</b>	<b>An Exemplary Operation: Shikantaza and Articulating Practice via Deleuze</b>	207
	<i>Dr Antonia Pont</i>	
<b>10</b>	<b>Future as Transcendence: On a Central Problem in Ernst Bloch’s Philosophy of Religion</b>	237
	<i>Michael Eckert</i>	
<b>11</b>	<b>The Fate of Transcendence in Post-secular Societies</b>	259
	<i>Mario Wenning</i>	
<b>12</b>	<b>Who Is Engaged in the “Complicity with Power”? On the Difficulties Sinology Has with Dissent and Transcendence</b>	283
	<i>Heiner Roetz</i>	
	<b>Index</b>	319

## Preface

“Transcendence” is one of those words like “God,” or perhaps even “love” or “freedom,” that divide us into believers and nonbelievers. For some, it alludes to what underwrites the significance of all our discourses and lends certain of them an especially high degree of meaningfulness. For others, it infects discourse generically and undermines its validity and ability even to make sense, at least in cases where belief in transcendence takes priority and is given prominence. It is remarkable how the most decisive but intractable debates in virtually all fields of study typically can be understood as versions of this divide, which tends to fissure fundamental approaches to knowing in almost any domain.

The despisers of or objectors to transcendence are often partisans, instead, of “immanence.” A philosopher like Gilles Deleuze can be aligned with the tradition of immanence deriving from Spinoza and Stoicism and battling (like Nietzsche) against the Platonic and Christian tradition of transcendence. Even though such alliances tend to polarize us into proponents and detractors with regard to one term or the other, in fact there is hardly any sense in speaking of “immanence” except in contrast to “transcendence.” The terms form a correlative pair. The issue they raise, however, is that of how the nonsense lying beyond all such binary algorithms of sense-making may condition and impinge on the making of sense. All explanation is articulated in terms of

distinctions, but in the end the wholeness of sense perhaps comes from and depends on some kind of an inarticulable “unity,” or at least non-duality, beyond such distinctions.

What is still divisive in this question of transcendence and immanence is something like what makes the question of belief, especially religious belief or faith, so fractious. Our ability to reason critically and to attempt to persuade one another by logical argument has limits. Some of our conclusions and convictions seem to be not less firm and certain simply because of their being more difficult to explain and justify rationally to others. There are some things that we appear to know without knowing exactly how and why we know them. Even a strict Aristotelian logic of knowing allows for first principles that are self-evident and not subject to further grounding discourses. A decision to favor either transcendence or immanence is likely to presuppose some kind of unmediated assumption or presumed truth that implicitly excludes mediation by its opposite.

In an experiment to see whether forging such a mediation might not be possible after all, Nahum Brown and William Franke convened an international conference at the University of Macau under the auspices of the Programme of Philosophy and Religious Studies in March 2015 in order to explore this key issue in the area specifically of intercultural philosophy. We present the results of our investigation and exchange in the form of this collective volume of selected essays by participants in the conference combined with several supplementary invited contributions.

We wish to express our thanks to all who participated in this project orally and by their presence or collaboration, as well as to those present through their writing. We are grateful to Palgrave Publishers for their enthusiastic reception and timely production of the book.

William Franke

# Introduction

The Western tradition has witnessed a wealth of philosophical arguments about the nature of transcendence. This conceptual terrain finds its origins in the Greek *eidos* (ideals) of Plato and in the complex tensions between *energia* (actuality) and *dunamis* (potentiality) of Aristotle and extends outward into the Judeo-Christian tradition, where representations of God standing beyond the world, as the essence of the world, have become common-place images that frame the meaning of our everyday experience. Even the decline of transcendence in the West—which has gained prominence from the nineteenth century to the present in the form, among others, of Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God as well as from phenomenological arguments rejecting the primacy of essence over existence—nevertheless situates its objections from within that most basic and foundational insight of transcendence: that something otherworldly stands over and against us and that the very core of our being depends upon the nature of an exteriority that cannot be grounded in our perceptual field alone.

Roger T. Ames defines this tradition of transcendence in the West with sharp precision when he writes: “Strict philosophical or theological

transcendence is to assert that an independent and superordinate principle A originates, determines, and sustains B, where the reverse is not the case.”<sup>1</sup> Whether in the form of essences and ideal types, or in the form of theological visions of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God, or in the form of alternative possible worlds that dictate the possibilities of the actual one, Ames characterizes what transcends as both *independent* and *superior* to that which it transcends. These two attributes portray this world, in turn, as dependent upon, as inferior to, and generally as in a relationship of desire with that which does not immediately or necessarily appear for this actual world. Ames claims that while the Western tradition is thoroughly preoccupied with these asymmetrical characteristics of dependence–independence and inferiority–superiority, the basic division of this-worldly verses other-worldly *does not* appear explicitly in the Eastern tradition. Ames rejects, as one of the most trenchant claims of his influential career (especially in his coauthored work with David L. Hall), the notion that Western scholars can import conceptions of transcendence into Eastern thought without grossly misappropriating what is otherwise an immanent vision of cosmology in Confucius, Daoist, and Buddhist texts.

This edited volume begins from debates that have recently surfaced for and against the primacy of immanence in Chinese philosophy. Some of these debates critically analyze our common-sense conceptions of transcendence, exposing new and varied forms of transcendence beyond the “strict transcendence” that Ames defines, and thereby reestablish significant registers of transcendence from within the Chinese tradition. Should Chinese philosophy be interpreted primarily in terms of immanence and is transcendence largely inappropriate to the Chinese tradition? Or are there nuanced forms of transcendence that help to interpret the Chinese tradition in productive ways? Part I of this volume is devoted to detailed discussions from some of the leading sinologists and intercultural philosophers in the world today, who, in numerous ways, attempt to answer these questions, arguing for and against the claim that

---

<sup>1</sup> A similar definition of “strict transcendence” also appears in Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 190.

transcendence does not belong in the Eastern tradition. Part II of this volume is devoted to broader contemporary debates generated from critical analysis of the relationship between transcendence and immanence, including discussions of apophasis, critical theory, post-secular conceptions of society, phenomenological approaches to transcendence, possible-world models, as well as questions of practice and application. Because it opens the way for new investigations of transcendence and immanence, Part I enables Part II to carry out far-reaching critiques of “representational” transcendence. Taken together, the two parts of this book aim to explore alternative conceptions of transcendence that either call the tradition in the West into question or discover from within the basic tenets of Western metaphysics a thoroughly dialectical way of thinking about immanence and transcendence.

“Does apophaticism have an analog in Chinese cosmology?” This question appears in Ames’s chapter “Getting Past Transcendence: Determinacy, Indeterminacy, and Emergence in Chinese Natural Cosmology” along with his extensive analysis of William Franke’s apophatic thinking about the nature of transcendence. Ames and Franke initiate a vibrant discussion about whether the kind of transcendence that Ames rejects in terms of Chinese thought is primarily a representational kind of transcendence, and whether apophatic transcendence can offer a different kind of transcendence, more appropriate for Chinese thought. Apophasis comes from the Greek term for negation. It finds its roots in Plato’s theory of the One in *Parmenides* and in Neo-Platonic arguments about whether the One is beyond being or remains a predicate of being. These Greek formulations were then recast as theological arguments in Judeo-Christian terms, from the sentiment that there is no adequate name for God and that God can only be expressed in negative descriptions, even only as the negation of its own negation. These negative theological arguments take many forms, including, among others, Dionysius the Areopagite’s paradox that God is simultaneously being and beyond being, Eriugena’s conclusion that there is no opposite for God, Maimonides’s claim that only a series of negative predications can bring us closer to God, and Aquinas’s theory that we can only gain partial knowledge of God analogously through the creatures of God. They have also arguably



led in the contemporary continental tradition to the “absolute Other” of Levinas and to “deconstruction” and “différance” in Derrida.<sup>2</sup>

In his chapter “Classical Chinese Thought and the Sense of Transcendence,” Franke explains that although Western metaphysics has been preoccupied primarily with representational forms of transcendence, there also exists an alternative, apophatic history of transcendence in the West and that this alternative history does indeed have analogs in Chinese cosmology. Representational thinking posits otherworldly essences and God-like positions beyond this world as if these realms were graspable, understandable, and determinate. Apophatic transcendence, in contrast, traces the sheer, vanishing expression of our world turned upside down with negation, without, however, laying claim to a domain of determinate images or fixable, understandable phenomena. Apophatic thinking opens the way, instead, for a relationship of non-opposition between the concepts transcendence and immanence. Franke argues that because of this non-oppositional, non-binary relationship, apophatic transcendence does not present us with the kind of definition that Ames proposes, where “A originates, determines, and sustains B, [but] where the reverse is not the case.” Gesturing to the nameless Dao, Franke reveals an especially Eastern way of thinking about transcendence, one whose creation has no beginning or end but rather generates itself from itself in an endless circle of apophatic relationality and negation.

Ames’s central question—“Does apophaticism have an analog in Chinese cosmology?”—can be restated as the question of whether apophatic thinking alters the concept of transcendence enough to make the claim that it belongs to Chinese thought, too, or whether Franke’s application of apophatic thinking to Chinese thought merely continues what Ames cites as the long-standing Jesuit tradition of applying Western conceptions of metaphysics inappropriately to Eastern traditions. Ames proposes that the East is so radically different from its Western

---

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the history of apophatic thinking in the West from Plato to Derrida, see Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Vol. 1: Classic Formulations* and *on What Cannot Be Said: Vol. 2: Modern and Contemporary Transformations*.

counterpart that even the notion of a “concept” is foreign to it, let alone the “concept” of transcendence. He offers a number of persuasive reasons for why even the apophatic register of transcendence does not belong to the Chinese tradition and should not be appropriated from the West. Generally, Ames is suspicious that embedded in Franke’s discourse lies a God, however unnamable, even a Christian God, who, although muted of all kataphatic determinations, nevertheless promotes certain ideas about the nature of God, especially that God is all powerful, all knowing, beyond the world, infinite, and inconceivable. Ames goes on to list seven reasons why apophatic transcendence differs from Chinese cosmology (independent agency, originality, creation-dependency, radical monism, dualism, particularity, and original beginnings), and from this claims that it is misguided to assert that Confucianism and Daoism can be interpreted in terms of apophatic transcendence. Ames points out that even linguistically the Chinese language resists ontological questions such as “Why is there being rather than nothing?” Being and nonbeing are often translated as “*you*” 有 and “*wu*” 無 in Chinese, but “*you*” is closer to “having” and “*wu*” is closer to “not having” than “to be” and “not to be” are in the English. Because “*you*” and “*wu*” are relational, the Chinese language does not lend itself, on Ames’s account, to the same kind of speculations about metaphysical and ontological questions, not in the way that the verb “to be” makes visions of transcendence and questions of other-world semantics possible in the West.

While Ames rejects even the apophatic register of transcendence for Chinese thought, a number of the chapters in this volume do attempt to reinterpret Daoism and Confucianism in terms of a different apophatic version of Chinese negation.

In the context of Robert Neville’s work on Daoism, Yonghua Ge claims in his chapter “Transcendence, Immanence, and Creation” that certain directions of Chinese thinking are thoroughly saturated with visions of transcendence, especially in that the Dao presents a theory of spontaneous creation similar to Western metaphysical insights about *creatio ex nihilo*. This realization leads Ge to conclude that while interpreters of Chinese philosophy should still resist inappropriate Western insertions, there is a way in which Chinese thought is about metaphysics, and therefore, about transcendence. Ge offers a unique position in the debate. Contrary to Ames, he claims that what we have is not an absolutely immanent vision

of the cosmos, but rather a significantly different type of transcendence from that of a Christian God who brings being into the world from a standpoint beyond the world. Ge traces this Chinese type of transcendence, which he finds especially in the unnamable Dao, back to Neoplatonic theories of the One. Ge proposes that to recognize transcendence in the Dao opens up possibilities for new interpretations of Chinese philosophy as well as for conceptions of transcendence generally.

Karl-Heinz Pohl's chapter, "Immanent Transcendence in the Chinese Tradition: Remarks on a Chinese (and Sinological) Controversy," frames the transcendence-immanence debate in terms of whether Confucianism contains a significantly religious dimension or whether its commitment to immanence is also a commitment to secularism. Pohl situates questions surrounding the theological aspects of this debate from within the East–West historical context of the Axial Age as well as from within twentieth-century New Confucian interpretations of Chinese cosmology that attempt to embrace transcendence in the East. Pohl traces Ames's claims about the inappropriateness of transcendence for Chinese thought back to Hegel. While emphasizing many of the virtues of Ames's argument, he also makes a case for what he calls "immanent transcendence" in the East.

Hans-Rudolf Kantor takes another approach to the question of whether conceptions of transcendence are inappropriate for Chinese thought. He claims in his chapter "Emptiness of Transcendence" that for Chinese Buddhism the thesis that things exist inherently and the concept of transcendence that comes from this establish a falsehood which is nevertheless productive for Chinese visions of immanence and "conditional co-arising." Kantor argues that, rather than dismissing the role of transcendence altogether, the Chinese reception of transcendence exposes a blind spot of emptiness that is constitutive for the universal knowing of Buddhism. Far from omitting, neglecting, or otherwise avoiding transcendence, Buddhist thought finds itself preoccupied with transcendence by way of negative contrast, as the blind spot from which immanence operates. Kantor discovers an implicit dialectics at the heart of Chinese Buddhism, where the falsehood of inherent existence turns out to be productive for the highest form of knowledge, that is, for the knowledge that you cannot recognize the existence of things as inherently separate and outside of their conditional co-arising. Kantor thereby complicates Ames's thesis that transcendence

does not belong to the Chinese models. Transcendence belongs, but only through the terms of criticism.

These nuanced arguments from Part I initiate as the basis of Part II a series of critiques of representational thinking in general and of representational transcendence in particular, that thereby attempt either to “immanitize” transcendence or to expose non-representational thinking as a source and origin of being. Chapters from William Desmond, Nahum Brown, Antonia Pont, Michael Eckert, Mario Wenning, and Heiner Roetz each investigate, in their own way, the nature and import of non-representational transcendence.

William Desmond’s chapter, “Idiot Wisdom and the Intimate Universal,” offers an ontological account of how transcendence is constantly present from within the immanence of being and of how this presence exposes us to a “metaxological philosophy” of the between. Desmond claims that the porosity between immanence and transcendence is especially pronounced in terms of *intercultural* philosophy.

In “Transcendent and Immanent Conceptions of Perfection in Leibniz and Hegel,” Nahum Brown proposes that within the depths of Hegel’s *Logic* is a robust account of dialectical modality, an important revision of Leibniz’s claims about perfection, as well as the exciting conclusion that infinite sets of infinite series of possibilities exist immanently within our world. Brown’s chapter is part of a reassessment of Hegel as a philosopher who is concerned not only with rationality and identity thinking but also with alterity, contingency, and apophatic thinking.

Antonia Pont’s chapter, “An Exemplary Operation: Shikantaza and Articulating Practice via Deleuze,” takes up the project from Deleuze of displacing representational thinking. Her work on Deleuze in relation to practice enables a rigorous articulation (within a deconstructed Western lineage of metaphysics) of what she deems the exemplary practice of Shikantaza that has been central across Japanese, Chinese, and Indian traditions, and which allows us to frame in itself how practice operates.

Michael Eckert’s chapter, “Future as Transcendence,” puts forward an interpretation of Ernst Bloch’s thesis of “transcendence without transcendence.” While introducing a conception of “the future as transcendence”

to supplement Bloch's critique of traditional Western assumptions about "Two-World" transcendence, Eckert outlines a model for how to think of the horizons of transcendence as they appear immanently in this actual world.

Mario Wenning and Heiner Roetz explore transcendence and immanence from a perspective of Enlightenment reasoning and dissent. In "The Fate of Transcendence in Post-Secular Societies" Wenning argues that new complex conceptions of transcendence and immanence emerge in post-secular societies. Because post-secularism establishes a constructive engagement concerning the normative potentials as well as the limitations of transcendence and immanence, it breaks with the tendency of privileging one over the other dimension. A dynamic interplay of immanence and transcendence is thereby enabled. The Chinese tradition, from the Axial Age forward, can be seen to have already anticipated this development. Roetz's chapter, "Who Is Engaged in the 'Complicity with Power?'," meticulously reconstructs and criticizes the philosophical underpinnings of prevalent assumptions of a lack of transcendence in China. He takes issue with the prominent notion that dissent would not be possible due to an emphasis on purely immanent processes of transformation and uncritical adaptation to these processes. If it were true that Chinese philosophy lacks a coherent conception of transcendence, Roetz maintains, it would lack the resources necessary for self-critique. Roetz objects to this simplistic interpretative paradigm developed from Max Weber to Francois Jullien and Roger Ames by demonstrating that the classical Chinese tradition, especially in its Confucian form, provides resources for a postconventional morality that allows for resistance and critique.

Underlying all of these discussions about transcendence, immanence, and intercultural philosophy is another debate about the radical possibilities of multiculturalism. Does the cosmology of the Eastern tradition cause a way of thinking and a way of perceiving the world that is so radically different that it requires categorically disparate sets of ideas from its counterpart in the West? Are the possibilities of thinking *as such* so rich and so powerful in variety and scope that human nature can generate the most dynamically diverse multiplicities of rationality, even to the extreme point of enacting cultural divides of sheer incomprehensibility. The nature of modal ontology and the question of radical

possibility lurk directly under the surface of these debates about whether Western interpretations of Chinese philosophy could ever find appropriate conceptual analogs. And yet isn't this radical possibility of an exchange between incomprehensible cultures exactly what is at stake for the commitments of apophatic transcendence as well, which purport to objectify, beyond the determinate meaning of any culture whatsoever, a profound universalism, a transcendent essence that neither reduces the differences between the most alien cultural diversities, nor completely resolves the complex problems of interpretation and conceptual appropriation that come from incompatible worldviews?

Nahum Brown

## Bibliography

- [1] Ames, Roger T., and David L. Hall. 1998. *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- [2] Franke, William. ed. 2007. *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. Vol. 1: Classical Formulations. Vol. 2: Modern and Contemporary Transformations.

# Part I

## The Debate: Methodological Position Statements

# 1

## Getting Past Transcendence: Determinacy, Indeterminacy, and Emergence in Chinese Natural Cosmology

Roger T. Ames

### What Is Strict Transcendence?

Strict philosophical or theological transcendence is to assert that an independent and superordinate principle A originates, determines, and sustains B, where the reverse is not the case. Such transcendence renders B absolutely dependent upon A, and thus, nothing in itself. The formalist notion of *eidos* that is foundational in Plato as antecedent “ideals” that together constitute the single Good or the notion of an independent, absolute, eternal, self-sufficient, and hence unchanging creator God that emerges in mainstream Christian theology would be two philosophical and theological examples of such strict transcendence.

Much familiar cosmological baggage has followed in the wake of a philosophical or theological commitment to this kind of strict

---

R.T. Ames (✉)

Department of Philosophy, Peking University, Haidian,  
Beijing 100871, China  
e-mail: rtames@hawaii.edu

© The Author(s) 2016

N. Brown, W. Franke (eds.), *Transcendence, Immanence,  
and Intercultural Philosophy*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-43092-8\_1



transcendence, beginning from *kosmos* or “uni-verse” as a single-ordered world and including metaphysics as a science of first principles, cosmogony that appeals to a single, metaphysical, originative source, teleological design and final causes, substance ontology and its essentialism, the dualism entailed by ontological disparity between essence and attribute, foundationalism, linear causality, objectivity, formalism, and a correspondence understanding of truth. And one important signature of strict transcendence that, as we will see, has immediate relevance to a discussion of “apophatism”—that is, the religious belief that God as completely “Other” cannot be known and thus must be described in negative terms—is a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Over the years and in different places, my collaborators and I have argued consistently against the relevance of this kind of transcendence and its philosophical entailments for Chinese natural cosmology.<sup>1</sup> But this is not a position we have just staked out for ourselves; early on, we participated in a nuanced and sustained argument being advanced by a community of scholars, both Chinese and Western, who we have come to regard as the best interpreters of Chinese cosmology. For example, Marcel Granet has said explicitly, “Chinese wisdom has no need of the idea of God.”<sup>2</sup> Tang Junyi 唐君毅 again has stated rather starkly:

The Chinese as a people have not embraced a concept of “Heaven” (*tian*天) that has transcendent meaning. The pervasive idea that Chinese have with respect to *tian* is that it is inseparable from the world.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Needham has in many different places made the argument that “Chinese ideals involved neither God nor Law .... Thus the mechanical and the quantitative, the forced and the externally imposed, were all absent. The notion of Order excluded the notion of Law.”<sup>4</sup> And Angus

---

<sup>1</sup> I have rehearsed these arguments in detail in Chapter 5 of my *Confucian Role Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup> Granet, *La pensée chinoise*, 478 [10].

<sup>3</sup> Tang, *Complete Works*, Vol. 11, 241: 中國民族無含超絕意義的天的觀念。中國人對天有個普遍的觀念，就是天與地是分不開的。[16].

<sup>4</sup> Needham. *Science and Civilisation*, Vol. II, 290 [15].

Graham, worrying about the eliding of classical Greek metaphysics and Chinese cosmology in our interpretation of Chinese concepts, observes:

In the Chinese cosmos all things are interdependent, without transcendent principles by which to explain them or a transcendent origin from which they derive.... A novelty in this position which greatly impresses me is that it exposes a preconception of Western interpreters that such concepts as *Tian* “Heaven” and *Dao* “Way” must have the transcendence of our own ultimate principles; it is hard for us to grasp that even the Way is interdependent with man.<sup>5</sup>

## William Franke’s Transcendent Apophatism

William Franke has written much that would contest the claim that strict transcendence has no relevance for Chinese cosmology by associating the “nothingness” that is pervasive in Confucian and Daoist philosophies with apophatism. How does he understand apophatism, and does it have an analog in Chinese cosmology?

In *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, Franke sees an important role for apophatic thinking in our own philosophical and theological narrative, locating it between the sometimes shrill dialectic of what he describes as a kind of secularized immanentism on the one hand and the Anglo-Saxon and Continental resurgence of a radical orthodoxy on the other. Secularized immanentism in embracing Nietzsche’s death-of-God rhetoric is the kind of empiricism that rejects the utterly transcendent and the “theo-ontological thinking” that grounds it. As Franke observes, “starting from the world in its actuality—*this* world as it reveals itself in human life and society without externally imposed metaphysical and a fortiori theological constructions—is the bottom line for secular theology.”<sup>6</sup> Radical

---

<sup>5</sup> Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 287 [9].

<sup>6</sup> Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 273 [4].

orthodoxy, on the other hand, starts at the opposite end by insisting that “it is necessary to start from theological revelation as expressed in the Christian vision and its narrative in order to understand the world—and not the other way round.”<sup>7</sup> Franke argues that while both positions tend to reject apophatic thinking, apophatism is, in fact, the common root or “radicality” that these two positions share. And I think he has a warrant for this argument.

Apophatic thinking in the form of a deconstructive nihilism is necessary for secularized immanentism to challenge and ultimately negate historical pretenses of theological and philosophical tyranny—that is, to kill God—as a precondition for its own transvaluation of values. Secular immanentism begins dialectically from a rejection of the transcendent followed by a secular overcoming of the consequent nihilism that such a rejection has produced, seeking to replace the putatively transcendent given with the audacious human genius who can do the *ex nihilo* job for us. For such existentialists, there is human “being” and there is nothingness.

And again, radical orthodoxy needs apophatism as its ultimate source of theological revelation—the erstwhile Christian vision and its narrative. The attempts to “produce” meaning in the case of secularized immanentism and apprehend the “revealed” meaning for radical orthodoxy are deeply rooted in a transcendent “*ex nihilo*” apophatism—the former with human beings seeking to make great things out of our “nothingness” and the latter opening a space for an otherwise unknown Divinity to intercede in the human experience and in so doing, to invest our lives with meaning. As such, both appeal to transcendent apophatisms.

But Franke wants apophatic thinking to do more for philosophy and theology, much more. Where radical orthodoxy with enormous confidence is quite willing to speak on behalf of the revealed God, for Franke, this radically Other transcendent source is so lofty and distant that it is only in the negation of our familiar categories that we can even hope to gesture in Its direction. And while radical orthodoxy would appeal to revelation as the source of and justification for its own authority, Franke would marshal

---

<sup>7</sup> Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 273 [4].

apophatic thinking against precisely this kind of doctrinal hegemony to serve as “a rigorous and sometimes an aggressive critique of every concept, especially of every theological concept.”<sup>8</sup> For him, negative theology must be “taken as a critical resource and finally as a means of infinite self-criticism of every possible philosophical formulation.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Franke’s own critical apophatism would seem to join ranks with secular immanentalism as an unrelenting challenge to the kinds of religious and philosophical dogmatism that come to constitute an orthodoxy, still, as an avid defender of theology himself, Franke not only accepts but is also inspired by the assumption that it is ultimately a transcendent God that is the source of all meaning, and as such, is deserving of our abject deference. The theological and philosophical *logos* that provides the connections among the things of our world for Franke is certainly derived from God, and it is only through these things “and their immanent being that this glory of the transcendent being (*esse*) or God can express itself, be it ever so little and inadequately.”<sup>10</sup> That is, “it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves.”<sup>11</sup>

This idea of Nothing as universal emanating source is developed penetratingly by the negative theology of the ancient Neoplatonic philosophers from Plotinus to Damascius.<sup>12</sup>

Franke’s transcendent apophatism is clear. This “Nothing” is the single, independent source, and the human role is to surrender to and accord with this radical Other. In his own words:

Whenever Western tradition is seen in the light of apophasis as its deepest thinking, true mastery is always found only in the surrender to Nothing at the core of an all-encompassing Nature that cannot be adequately named in this way or in any other.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Franke, “The Philosopher or the Sage,” ms., 1 [6].

<sup>9</sup> Franke, “The Philosopher or the Sage,” ms., 2 [6].

<sup>10</sup> Franke, “The Philosopher or the Sage,” ms., 7 [6].

<sup>11</sup> *Psalms* 100:3.

<sup>12</sup> Franke, “All or Nothing?,” 10–11 [5].

<sup>13</sup> Franke, “All or Nothing?,” 11 [5].

## Is There an “Apothatism” with Chinese Characteristics?

But how then can Chinese cosmology join this conversation? The question that I will now turn to is whether or not Franke’s transcendent apophatism is helpful in our reading of Chinese cosmology as the interpretive context needed for understanding Confucian and Daoist philosophies. Indeed, I will argue below that given the irrelevance of strict transcendence and its ontological baggage for an emergent, processual Chinese cosmology, the “nothingness” that is central to both Confucian and Daoist philosophies must be clearly distinguished from the kind of transcendent apophatism offered by Franke as its best explanation. That is, the kind of “nothingness” we find in the Chinese canons, far from being prompted by positing the existence of antecedent, independent, and originative principles (including Nothing as an emanating source), is necessary precisely because of the absence of such determinants. The world is not created by something Other; it is an autogenerative, “self-so-ing” (*ziran* 自然), gerundive process, where “self” in this familiar mantra is inclusive of the world and all its bounty, and the only kind of creativity is a reflexive co-creativity. “It is we in the world who are making each other, and not God Himself.”

There certainly is an appeal to an indeterminate “nothingness” pervasive in Chinese cosmology that might evoke an association with apophatism. This cosmology begins from the assumed primacy of vital, constitutive relationality, and the persistent need we have as human “becomings” to defer to context in achieving optimum productivity in this continuing process. In the Confucian role ethics of the *Analects*, for example, we will find that the project of personal cultivation requires us to take others on their own terms—that is, we must strive with moral imagination to put ourselves in the place of others in determining the best way to live our roles and grow our relations in the family and the community. The indeterminate in this Confucian tradition then takes the form of a reverential deference to others (*shu* 恕). In the *Daodejing*, we will find that Daoist indeterminacy is a condition of the *wu* 無—forms that require us to defer to the field of

contextualizing others (*dao* 道) in achieving our own optimally virtuosic disposition (*de* 德).

The *Zhongyong*—reputed to be the highest and most elegant statement of the Confucian project—is perhaps best read as a Confucian response to the challenge set by the *Daodejing* to extend our radius of relevant bonds beyond the human world and to give relationality its cosmic scope. For the *Zhongyong*, we will again find it is the capacity and the responsibility of human beings to reach into and access the bottomless resource of what is imminent and inchoate within the existing and always emergent cosmic order that enables us to become co-creators with the heavens and the earth.

## Indeterminacy as Confucian Deference for Growth in Relations

In thinking about the centrality of indeterminacy in Chinese cosmology, then, we might begin from the *Analects* of Confucius in which we find the Master's insistently negative version of the Golden Rule.

Zhonggong inquired about consummate conduct (*ren* 仁). The Master replied, “In your public life, behave as though you are receiving honored guests; employ the common people as though you are overseeing a great sacrifice. Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not want, and you will not incur personal or political ill-will.”<sup>14</sup>

In the *Analects*, Confucius invariably defers to specific qualities of his protégées, and hence to weigh the import of his response, it is critical to know to whom the Master's remarks are being addressed at any given time. Zhonggong, like Yan Hui, was three decades younger than his teacher. Although Zhonggong, again like Yan Hui, was of very humble origins, Confucius thought so highly of him and his personal refinement that he, in effect, described Zhonggong as a pauper who could be king.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Analects* 12.2: 仲弓問仁。子曰：「出門如見大賓，使民如承大祭。己所不欲，勿施於人。在邦無怨，在家無怨。」仲弓曰：「雍雖不敏，請事斯語矣。」

<sup>15</sup> See *Analects* 6.2 and 6.6.

Still, the profile of Zhonggong in this text is of a person who has that to which he aspires, but is rarely able to reach it (again stated in the negative): “Just as I do not want others to impose on me, I want to refrain from imposing on others.”<sup>16</sup>

In responding here to Zhonggong’s question about the meaning of consummate conduct (*ren* 仁), Confucius is quite explicit: Achieving consummate virtuosity in one’s conduct is a matter of deferring to others in the roles and relations that constitute one’s person—that is, it requires not only receiving your peers as honored guests, but also revering the most ordinary people with unrelenting attention to their needs and feelings. It is significant that Confucius would defer conduct until what is still unknown in the relationship can be fully taken into account and then pattern his response accordingly:

Zigong asked, “Is there one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one’s days?” The Master replied, “There is deference (*shu* 恕): do not impose on others what you yourself do not want.”<sup>17</sup>

It is the function of *shu* as such deference to serve first as a safeguard against inadvertently imposing one’s own values on others, and then positively and with imagination to determine and implement the course of action that promises optimal growth in what is always a unique relationship.

The indeterminacy we find at work in the *Analects* is certainly a reverential quality of deference in relations that seeks to register a full appreciation of what is yet unknown in the uniqueness of both the relationship and the specific circumstances. At the same time, it is also a deference that is informed by the promptings of one’s own cultivated moral imagination in response to what is already available from past experience about those particular persons who constitute our communal environment and their circumstances. Ideally, fully resourcing

---

<sup>16</sup> *Analects* 5.12: 子貢曰：「我不欲人之加諸我也，吾亦欲無加諸人。」

<sup>17</sup> *Analects* 15.24: 子貢問曰：「有一言而可以終身行之者乎？」子曰：「其恕乎！己所不欲，勿施於人。」

the indeterminate for growth in relations is inseparable from making the most of what is determinate and already known. And further, the site of growth is a shared role and relationship that includes particular agents or interlocutors who are themselves only abstractions from the continuing narrative. To capture this process of taking into account what is already known while deferring action until the as-yet-unknown creative possibilities are brought into proper focus, Confucius introduces and develops his neologism, “consummate person/conduct” (*ren*) as one of the defining philosophical terms of the *Analects*—that is, correlating what is known and as-yet-unknown in one’s interactions with others to give full expression to a consummate virtuosity in one’s roles and relations.

## Indeterminacy in Daoist *Ars Contextualis* (The Art of Contextualizing)

Whereas the *Analects* is almost wholly preoccupied with the creative possibilities available for growth in the specifically human relations of family and community, the *Daodejing* elevates this collaboration between the determinate and indeterminate aspects of any situation to cosmic status. One of the more familiar, theistically inspired readings of the *Daodejing* that turns such multilateral collaboration into unilateral imposition is to understand its opening lines as transcendent apophatism that would elide *dao* with some transcendent principle:

The way that can be spoken of  
Is not the constant way;  
The name that can be named  
Is not the constant name.  
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;  
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Daodejing* 1: 道可道,非常道。名可名,非常名。無名天地之始;有名萬物之母。



Commenting on this *Daodejing* passage, Franke equates *dao* with a notion of an independent Creator and His imperfect immanent manifestations cited above. In Franke's own language:

Accordingly, the *Dao* has at least two faces, one manifest and one hidden, like the moon, although more deeply or inwardly, it remains still one and the same. . . . Such manifestations belong to it (as does everything whatsoever), but they do not define it; nor do they exclude what is unchanging and withdraws from manifestation. There is no assertion here that there is anything other than nature, but nature itself (in this dimension) is deeply and mysteriously other to all that we perceive and know. The nature of the *Dao* is to be without nature and beyond nature in any shape or form that we can grasp or name.<sup>19</sup>

Although Franke cites the D.C. Lau translation here, his interpretation of it comes closer to that of the Christian missionary James Legge, who chooses to call this opening chapter "Embodying the Dao." Legge's own translation is as follows:

The Dao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Dao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (Conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.<sup>20</sup>

Franke is able to find additional support for the aseity of the transcendent Other in his reading of *Daodejing* 25 that is, again, often elided with Western metaphysical cosmogonies:

The idea that the "principle" of it all, "God," should already be perfect apart from any of his self-manifestations in the world is affirmed likewise of the *Dao*: the *Dao* was formless and perfect or complete in itself before the universe began.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Franke, "All or Nothing?," 8–9 [5].

<sup>20</sup> Legge, *The Texts of Taoism*, Vol. 1, 47 [14].

<sup>21</sup> Franke, "All or Nothing?," 20 [5].

Alluding to this same chapter, Franke observes:

Prior to heaven and earth and other binary poles producing change, there is here, just as in Creation myths, something antecedent and without change, in some sense a Nothing from which everything comes.<sup>22</sup>

But the *Daodejing*, in fact, states that *dao*, far from being “wholly other,” is what is *chang* 常: “constant, regular, continuing, persistent.” *Dao*, indeed, is what is most familiar, and if we need a term to translate it that resists familiar dualisms such as self and other, subject and object, agent and action, action and modality, we could perhaps use “living,” or “experiencing”—or “making our way in the world.” But the reason that terms such as “living” and “experiencing” do not do justice to this most familiar notion of *dao* is because language cannot “say” the indeterminate, mysterious aspect that always honeycombs the determinate in our experience. “Naming” by “defining” and thus setting limits on its referent can only provide a retrospective account of lives lived, while the poignant, delicious aspect of the human experience is what is still existentially inchoate and available to us for creative advance. It is this indeterminate aspect that provides space for the autogenerative nature of life and for the spontaneous emergence of novelty within that lived experience. This “nothingness” is also the resource that, properly used, allows for the human intervention in and creative contribution to the unfolding of the cosmic order.

Frank Lloyd Wright makes much of this ubiquitous collaboration between the determinate and indeterminate aspects of experience. In his “London Lectures” collected in *The Future of Architecture*, Wright tells the story of how one day in the mails he received a copy of Okakura Kakuzo’s *The Book of Tea* from the Japanese ambassador to America. In his reading of this little book, Wright discovers to his consternation that Laozi as the putative author of the *Daodejing* had millennia earlier perceived a fundamental insight into architecture that Wright, prior to this, had taken to be the product to his own prophetic

---

<sup>22</sup> Franke, “All or Nothing?” 9 [5].