

News Report:

安乐哲《儒家角色伦理学》研讨会

“Author Meets Critics: A Workshop on Roger Ames’s Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary”

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A workshop on the latest book by the prominent philosopher Roger T. Ames (安乐哲) from the University of Hawai’i at Manoa has been held in an ‘Author Meets Critics’ format on 19 July 2011 at the People’s University of China (RUC). Professor Ames’s new book is entitled *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* and has been simultaneously published by the Chinese University Press and the University of Hawai’i Press earlier this year. It makes available to a wider public the revised and largely expanded Ch’ien Mu (Qian Mu) Lectures that Roger T. Ames was invited to deliver in 2008 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The workshop was co-organized by the Philosophy Department of the People’s University of China and the University Research Priority Program ‘Asia and Europe’ at the University of Zurich in Switzerland. It continued a co-operation between these two academic centres which had started in 2010 with a similar workshop about the work and with the participation of Tu Weiming, the famous New Confucian scholar now at Peking University.

An illustrious group of scholars and students assembled in the conference room of the Department of Philosophy to listen to Roger T. Ames’s presentation of the main argument of his new book on Confucian role ethics. Professor Ames claims that the Confucian tradition taken on its own terms reveals an ethic based on concrete roles such as being a mother or being a friend and a sensibility of correlativity, which he traces back to the Chinese classics as well as to the oracle bones and bronze inscriptions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. He juxtaposes this family-centred communal ethics to the currently dominant individualist ethics of classical Greece and modern Western ethics. Moreover, he finds in the classical Confucian texts a religious dimension, which constitutes, he argues, a significant and world-affirming alternative to the Abrahamic, God-centred religions. The aim of the book is to draw out a vocabulary for this Confucian role ethics, which in a next step will allow a sustained conversation between Confucian philosophy and contemporary Western ethical theories.

Professor Ames’s presentation was followed by four invited prepared statements, which appreciated and critically commented on the new book from various perspectives. Zhang Xianglong (Peking University) found it not easy to disagree with the book, but was not yet quite satisfied with how the expedient is said to be the moral in the book as well as with the moral defence given in the book for the passage in the *Analects* (13:18), in which Confucius does not approve of a son who turns in to the authorities his father for having stolen a sheep. Professor Zhang also set out to give a wonderful demonstration of how a phenomenological perspective might contribute to the project of a Confucian role ethics. Daniel A. Bell (Tsinghua University) and Ralph Weber (University of Zurich) both questioned the

practicability of Confucian role ethics and asked for the political implications, which both found little elaborated in the book. Professor Bell specifically wanted to know more about how the author understands the term 'community' and how Confucian role ethics deals with contingencies in the supposedly constitutive roles as well as with situations of conflicting roles, especially if faced with hard cases. Ralph Weber tried to criticize the author on his own pragmatist terms and pointed out that Confucian role ethics, as it is presented in the book, seems to dither between conservatism and anarchism in terms of its political vision. Wen Haiming (People's University of China) elaborated the point that roles quite obviously change and one would assume that cosmologies also change and he asked how Confucian role ethics would deal with legal and other social issues.

The opportunity to ask further questions was welcomed by many in the subsequent open discussion, in which several more aspects of the book were tackled. May Sim (College of the Holy Cross) raised doubts about the account of potential that the author gives in his book and clarified Aristotle's conception of it. Richard Shusterman (Florida Atlantic University) wanted to know how it is that we acquire new roles and whether while inventing new roles we do not violate old roles. William Keli Akina (University of Hawai'i) challenged our imagination and explored an analogy to Jesus in terms of role ethics. Many others contributed with further questions, which might be a good indicator that Confucian role ethics will prove to be a topic that will spark further controversial discussion and will have repercussions well beyond the workshop held on this summer day at the People's University of China here in Beijing.