

Nahum

Brown

TRANSCENDENCE,
IMMANENCE, AND
INTERCULTURAL
PHILOSOPHY

William

Franke



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Nahum Brown • William Franke
Editors

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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.”¹ 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

¹ 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.²

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

² 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

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