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Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary (Ch'ien Mu Lecture Series)



Synopsis

Confucian Role Ethics is an exploration of what constitutes and how one becomes an authentic, moral human being as conceived in the Confucian tradition. The book establishes an interpretive context by exploring some of the cosmological foundations of Confucian philosophy through discussion of commentary on the Yijing (The Book of Changes), Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Chinese cosmology. The author proceeds to delineate the morals and ideals of a Confucian life and its foundation in feelings of familial intimacy and its human-centered religiousness. These ideas are contrasted with the principle and virtue based traditions of the Abrahamic religions as well as of the individualistic tradition beginning in ancient Greece. Lastly, Ames attempts to critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of Confucian role ethics as articulated in the early canonical texts, discussing both its return to prominence and feasibility as a system of ethical conduct for the present day.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I think Ames is doing something very interesting in this book. Before going into the discussion of Confucianism, Ames first introduces the "correlative cosmology" from which all classical Chinese thoughts emerges. According to Ames, under this cosmology (or world view), the seemingly discrete elements such as a rock, or a person, are all in fact the emergent property from a field of energy. Ames uses the analogy of "Focus" and "Field" to describe this kind of relationship. Therefore, depending on one's attention, the focus and field varies. For example, if we focus on the tree, then

the sunlight, the birds, and the soil are the field, but if you focus on the bird, then tree become the field. In this way, everything is irreducibly relational, and to understand any focus, we have to first learn about the field. Then, Ames proceeds to argue that Confucianism emerges under this correlative cosmology, which was first articulated by the Book of Change (Yijing 易經). By studying the Book of Change, the sages from Ancient China are able to probe the principle of nature, anticipate the possibilities, and optimize the result by harmonizing human endeavor with the force of nature. Slightly different from the Book of Change, Confucianism concerns more with society. With its ultimate goal of human flourishing, Confucianism articulates a series of moral principles, ritual proprieties, and righteous conducts to ensure that human society could become once again harmonious. Throughout the book, Ames examines different concepts of Confucianism using the aforementioned theoretical framework and have some very interesting discoveries and new interpretations. This might not be the most classical (orthodox) interpretation of Confucianism since it seems that Ames is following a New-Confucian tradition started from the early 20th century when a group of Chinese scholars started to re-interpretive confucianism by borrowing some languages from the most updated scientific and philosophical research in the west, such as Whitehead's process relational philosophy and the quantum field theory in physics. Nevertheless, the book is still a very fascinating read and I have learned immensely.

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