Confucian Role Ethics and a Narrative Understanding of Person

Professor Roger T. Ames

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Room 730, Run Run Shaw Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU
Moderator: Professor Shu-mei Shih (HKU)

Abstract: In the introduction of Chinese philosophy and culture into the Western academy, we have tended to theorize and conceptualize this antique tradition by appeal to familiar Western categories. Confucian role ethics is an attempt to articulate a sui generis moral philosophy that allows this tradition to have its own voice. This holistic philosophy is grounded in the primacy of relationality and a narrative understanding of person, and is a challenge to a foundational liberal individualism that has defined persons as discrete, autonomous, rational, free, and often self-interested agents. Confucian role ethics begins from a relationally constituted conception of person, takes family roles and relations as the entry point for developing moral competence, invokes moral imagination and the growth in relations that it can inspire as the substance of human morality, and entails a human-centered, a-theistic religiousness that stands in sharp contrast to the Abrahamic religions.

Professor Roger T. Ames
Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hawai‘i and editor of Philosophy East & West and China Review International. He has authored several interpretative studies of Chinese philosophy and culture: Thinking Through Confucius (1987), Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture (1995), and Thinking From the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture (1998) (all with D.L. Hall), and most recently Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary (2011). Recently he has undertaken several projects that entail the intersection of contemporary issues and cultural understanding. His Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China (with D.L. Hall) (1999), and Confucian Role Ethics: Doing Justice to Justice (forthcoming) are a product of this effort. He has most recently been engaged in compiling the new Blackwell Sourcebook of Classical Chinese Philosophy, and in writing articles promoting a conversation between American pragmatism and Confucianism.

All are welcome