

***Transcendence and Non-Naturalism in Early Chinese Thought.* By Joshua R. Brown & Alexis McLeod. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 245 pp. ISBN: 9781350082533. \$115.00, hardback.**

While approaching “the other,” we humans are prone to commit several intertwined thinking fallacies: firstly, over-generalization, which essentializes the other based upon limited evidences; secondly, stereotyping, which sticks to pre-established perception of the other regardless of dissonant new evidences; and finally, pigeonholing, which cognizes the other into a false dilemma of either “being the same as” or “being different from” us so as to disregard the unique nature of the other’s genuine otherness.<sup>1</sup> Normally, when we commit these fallacies towards the other, we also do that to ourselves, since the perception of the other in these fallacies is formed against a standard that we pre-establish about the perception of ourselves.

When such a standardized perception of the other vs us is formed by these thinking fallacies, we would either try to swallow the other into the ingroup of us (since she is perceived as the same as us), or to fight against the other as a threatening foreigner (since she is perceived as different from us). As Confucius once asserted, “an exemplary person promotes harmony without uniformity, while a petty person promotes uniformity without harmony.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the execution of such thinking fallacies would keep us away from the ideal of authentic human relationship by which human fellows change, grow and co-thrive with one another while retaining each of their own unique, irreducible personhoods.

What the collaboration of a comparative theologian, Joshua Brown, and a comparative philosopher, Alexis McLeod, in this fine study of transcendence and non-naturalism in early Chinese thought tries to achieve is to dispel all these thinking fallacies, which quite a few scholars seem to have committed when they bring an unexamined assumption into their studies of comparative theology and philosophy on Chinese and Western thought. The assumption is that in comparison to the prevalent influence of Christianity on Western thought, there is no robust idea of transcendence in early Chinese thought, and hence, naturalism is an inevitable perspective of interpreting early Chinese texts. Brown and McLeod detect two reasons for scholars to embrace the assumption: firstly, some of these scholars want to find out of early China what is different from the West, viz., mainly from Christianity. Secondly, some of them want to find out of early China what is the same as the West, viz., the same as the scientific and analytic mindset of the Western academia since early Modern Europe, which remains suspicious of all religious discourses rich on transcendence and non-naturalism. (3–7) Regardless of their apparent difference, both of these two approaches succumb to the same fallacies analyzed above: they select a rigid and over-generalized standard of what is the West and measure their reading of early Chinese thought against the standard.

A major strategy for Brown and McLeod to accomplish their goal is, firstly, to present rich nuances and diversities of the concept of transcendence argued by Western philosophers and

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the terms of the three fallacies is inspired by Elliot Cohen, *The Rational Therapy: Thinking Your Way to Serenity, Success and Profound Happiness* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007): 205-226.

<sup>2</sup> Confucius, *Analects* 13.23. Translation is my own. The notation of the verse refers to Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2017), 316.

theologians such as Plotinus, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Pseudo-Dionysius. Secondly, they demonstrate fruitful interpretations of early Chinese texts (such as *Chunqiu*, *Xunzi*, *Dao De Jing*, and *Zhuangzi*) that one can garner via the newly presented concepts of transcendence and non-naturalism. Eventually, to enrich further dialogues in the field of Chinese and comparative theology and philosophy, Brown and McLeod urge scholars not to ask misguided “whether or not” questions concerning transcendence any longer, and instead, to ask more interesting questions such as “what these concepts were like in early China, what roles they played in both particular systems and broader swaths of the intellectual tradition, and in what ways early Chinese understandings of these concepts compare with those of other traditions.” (193)

From the perspective of interreligious studies, two major inspirations we can draw from Brown and McLeod’s fine study are these. Firstly, sinologist philosophers who hold contrastive views of West-China tend to essentialize early Chinese thought while emphasizing the distinction of traditional Chinese language from Western ones. However, Brown and McLeod make a strong case that a language may constrain, but by no means determine how a people think. This is because firstly, every single Chinese character, just as words of other languages, has multiple meanings, and it depends upon contexts for readers to decipher which meaning is being designated. Secondly, people can create new uses of given characters if they feel the need of combining new meanings to them. An instance is that while the origin of the Chinese character 有 (you) may mean “having,” it can develop the meaning of “existing” in further contexts. Therefore, it is not legitimate to infer from the purportedly original meaning of *you* that early Chinese thought does not have a concern with ontology, viz., with the unchanging traits of changing realities. (pp. 82) Instead, Brown and McLeod very convincingly argue in Chapter 8 and 9 that the Dao envisioned by the Daoist texts of *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuang Zi* does have its traits of “being” vis-à-vis cosmic changes as “becoming,” and thus, has its recognizable transcendent traits. I think this powerful critique of the deterministic view of language versus thought can also inspire interreligious scholars to come into a term with George Lindbeck’s theology of religions normally termed as “particularism”: Lindbeck may be right to emphasize the unique nature of each religion as a holistic linguistic-cultural complex; however, it is inappropriate to envision the linguistic-cultural influence upon a religion as so deterministic that terms within each religion cannot even be fruitfully translated and communicated.

However, not only particularism, but all the other major types of theology of religions, which are traditionally formulated per a Christian model, would also succumb to questioning because of the comparative perspective brought by Brown and McLeod. Exclusivism excludes “the other” which is perceived as different from “us.” Inclusivism includes elements of the other which are thought of as the same as us. Pluralism affirms every religion appears to be different in surface while all leading to the same salvific goal in essence. If assessed by Brown and McLeod’s nuanced comparative interpretations of early Chinese thought, all these models fail to consider the genuine uniqueness of a religious “other,” the spiritual nature of which may imply more than what a simple “the same or not” question is able to canvas. Inspired by this more nuanced comparative perspective, I would submit that to compare such long-standing traditions as classical Chinese traditions and Christianity, each of which has its considerable inner variations and long histories of inter-traditional interaction, a better model would be predicated upon the Confucian wisdom of “harmonization without uniformity.” In other words, we shall essentialize no tradition, treat religious traditions as intrinsically dynamic and diverse, and hence, aim for promoting a certain

degree of co-thriving based upon a ceaseless process of mutual dialogue and learning, which does not necessarily lead to a final synthesis.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding that the book furnishes these much appreciated inspirations on interreligious studies, I do not think the means utilized by Brown and McLeod are equally successful as the goal they have accomplished. In other words, not all concrete interpretations of selected early Chinese texts are convincing. I think one major reason for the authors not to perform better in this regard is that, in order to prove stereotyped interpretations of early Chinese thought regarding transcendence are wrong, Brown and McLeod seem to have taken a hermeneutical method of what I may call “whatever-ism.” That is, they would choose whatever text in whatever period of early China using whatever available comparative concepts. As indicated by the above analysis, this whateverist approach is very successful at presenting the diversities and nuances within each of the compared cases, viz., Christianity and early Chinese thought. However, what this approach may fall short of is that it does not pay sufficient attention to the conceptual continuity or discontinuity between selected texts, and hence, it also fails to consider how these texts are read by the later received traditions [such as Ruism (Confucianism) and Daoism] after the target period of early China, which technically ends in Han Dynasty (202B.C.E.–220 C.E.) by the book.

Several instances in this regard can be raised as follows: overall, the book does not indicate an attempt to explain why certain texts are selected for the purpose of comparative analysis rather than others. Since all these selected texts are termed as belonging to “early Chinese thought” just because of the purported time of their authorship, a certain degree of randomness of the selection speaks to the reactionary nature of the book which takes it as a priority to provide contrary interpretations to established scholarship on concerned texts. In tandem with this reactionary nature, at least in two places, the book expresses a serious doubt towards reading early Chinese thought per traditionally categorized schools of thought such as Ruism, Daoism, Legalism, and so on. (See pp. 70 and pp. 131.) I think this is mainly because, in order to compose a protestive sort of scholarship on transcendence, Brown and McLeod have to characterize a variety of texts as implying transcendence, and hence, to significantly mitigate the differences among them as read by the later traditions. Nevertheless, the differences among the texts discerned by the later received traditions are, albeit worth questioning, not entirely meritless. As a consequence, Brown and McLeod in other places of the book have to refer to these differences in order to explain why the Daoist text of *Dao De Jing* argues the ontological status of Dao is superior to *Tian*, which is a classical instance of the polemical nature of Daoist texts vis-à-vis Ruist texts in the period of Warring States acknowledged by each of the later received traditions. (166)

If my criticism towards these mentioned instances is correct, from the methodological perspective of hermeneutics, I cannot help but think that Brown and McLeod’s whateverist approach would lead to considerable inconsistencies in their interpretations of early Chinese thought. A defense by Brown and McLeod regarding their refusal of considering more traditional reading of selected early Chinese texts may be that they intend to let these texts “speak on their own terms” (pp.6), and thus, to avoid scholars’ sometimes unexamined hermeneutical assumption of reading early texts using later traditional interpretations. However, I believe the commitment to letting early Chinese texts “speak on their own terms” is more rhetorical than operational, since even contrastive sinologists critiqued by Brown and McLeod proclaim to be committed to it. If Brown and McLeod cannot explain why their interpretation of a selected early Chinese text is

better than the ones provided by the later received traditions, a sheer refusal of considering the latter would not make readers more convinced.

In a nutshell, I think the greatest value of Brown and McLeod's study consists in that they have made an extremely convincing case for comparative theologians, philosophers and interreligious scholars on Chinese thought to abandon the binary "the same or not" mindset identified at the beginning of this review. With a further respect towards the historical and traditional nature of classical Chinese thought, I believe their work can lead to even more fruitful conversations on how to harmonize classical Chinese thought and Western thought without making them uniform.

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