



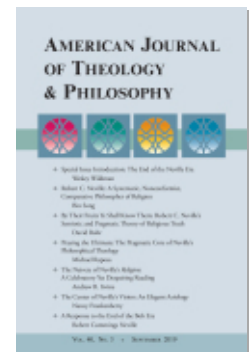
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Robert C. Neville: A Systematic, Nonconformist, Comparative Philosopher of Religion

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Abstract

Neville's comparative study of religion cannot be neatly categorized into current divisions of human knowledge of religion. Its comparative method of vague categories remains hospitable to varying scholarly interests. With the help of this methodology, Neville contributes in a sui generis fashion to the Christian-Ru transcendence debate. An analysis of these three aspects of Neville's work supports reflection upon the nature and future of comparative study of religion.

Introduction

As his student, colleague, and friend, my learning process with Robert Neville has experienced two stages of perplexity, which I think represent to a large extent other scholars' similar experience of engaging Neville's thought. The two stages can be described as follows. First, given their familiarity with existing divisions of human knowledge of religion within modern research universities, scholars reading Neville's work may be confused by questions concerning its disciplinary nature, or what it is all about. Is it theology, philosophy, or religious studies? Second, however, after reading and thinking hard with Neville for a longer time, scholars may begin to question why we need those divisions at all.

These categorical perplexities are further complicated by another compelling aspect of Neville's study of religion: comparison. Since comparative theology, comparative religion, and comparative philosophy of religion delineate their own disciplinary territories following distinctive, albeit somehow crossed, historical trajectories, and since they are currently established in disparate departments of modern universities, scholars will confront the same question of disciplinary identity when pondering Neville's comparative work: what is this all about? Is it comparative theology, comparative philosophy of religion, or comparative religion? Ditto for the question of the necessity of these divisions.

In my view, Neville's systematic approach to the study of religion defies the categories currently compartmentalizing human knowledge of religion. Drawing upon my expertise in comparative philosophy of religion, which draws upon my knowledge in the intellectual history of interaction between Christianity and

Ruism (Confucianism),¹ I will try to make my contribution to this symposium through arguing that the systematic nature of Neville's comparative study of religion speaks to its uniqueness mainly in three aspects. First, it pushes hard the boundaries of varying self-identified disciplines thematizing the comparative study of religion, and therefore, urges scholars to study more broadly and think more deeply. Second, its method of comparison, which centers upon a pragmatist use of "vague category," has made a major breakthrough in comparative study of religion, enabling it to be pursued as a fallible, correctible, and therefore progressive science broadly construed (in a pragmatist sense). Third, Neville's approach to comparison yields distinctive insights into many controversial issues in the field of Christian-Ru comparative studies. I will use Neville's response to the "transcendence debate" as one example to illustrate the last point.

Since it is not easy to dovetail Neville's comparative study of religion with pre-established categories, I would like to portray Neville as a systematic, non-conformist, comparative philosopher of religion; thus the title of this paper.

Comparative What?

Contemporary scholars' discussion over the disciplinary nature of comparative theology vs. comparative religion focuses upon two criteria: whether a comparative study of religions is anchored in one home tradition, and whether the purpose of the study pertains to truth central to one's faith. For instance, Francis X. Clooney understands comparative theology as following the Catholic tradition of "faith seeking understanding," with a demand that insights obtained from other traditions should be utilized to enrich one's home tradition. In contrast, a more detached scholarly approach that maintains neutrality regarding where comparisons lead is defined as comparative religion.² In tune with Clooney's definition, Catherine Cornille differentiates comparative theology from comparative religion by specifying that the former addresses issues of truth central to one's faith, and the latter does not. Furthermore, Cornille sorts comparative theology into its several subcategories. When holding to one's home tradition of faith seeking understanding through comparison, a comparative theology is

1. In this chapter, I replace "Confucianism" with "Ruism" or the "Ru tradition," and "Confucian" or "Confucianist" with "Ru" or "Ruist" in consistency with my other writings. For the history of the nomenclature of "Confucianism" vis-à-vis the "Ru" tradition, please refer to Tony Swain, *Confucianism in China: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3–22; and Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 45–76.

2. Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology, Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7.

“confessional.” Meanwhile, scholars can compare multiple traditions for common issues and, once secured, solutions to those issues are thought of as being significant for all compared traditions. This is “metaconfessional” comparative theology. An “interconfessional” comparative theologian may focus on seeking a common ground among traditions while oscillating between the normativity of the traditions.³ According to Cornille’s classification, Neville’s comparative study of religion is a metaconfessional comparative theology, since, firstly, it addresses the first-order issue of truth, and secondly, it contributes to the construction of a systematic metaphysics, the normativity of which is intended to be of consequence to all compared traditions.

The modern discipline of comparative religion can be seen as deriving from Max Müller, who initiated the project of world religions vis-à-vis the European discovery of non-Christian religions in a colonial era. Müller envisions the study of comparative religion with two objectives: first, to answer what religion is through objectively describing its varying forms; second, to explain the similarities and differences among religions using linguistic, historical, and sociological perspectives, among others. Müller likens these two goals to the distinction between kinematics and dynamics in modern physics, and asserts that his comparative study is a “science of religion.”⁴ However, the early development of comparative religion attends to similarities more than differences. Scholars following Müller’s initiative could not easily avoid Christian biases, and they tended to conduct studies on religions in accordance with a standardized conception of religiosity drawn from the forms of Christianity with which they were most familiar. To Müller’s critics, especially postmodernists around the middle of last century, his comparative religion is little more than a delicate façade of Eurocentrism and social Darwinism.⁵ In response, contemporary scholars of comparative religion defend its scientific nature by highlighting two methodological points. First, unchecked biases are indeed condemnable, but the impartiality of comparison does not derive from any transcendent view detached from scholars’ perspectival starting points. Instead, the objectivity of comparison can be achieved through an open-ended process

3. Catherine Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 21–24.

4. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution, in February and May, 1870* (Boston: Adamant Media Corporation, 2001), 16–24.

5. On postmodern critiques on comparison, please refer to Robert Segal, “In Defense of the Comparative Method,” *Numen* 48, no. 3 (2001): 344–47; and Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1–22 and its related chapters.

of continual hypothesizing and correction. Using Jonathan Z. Smith's terms, this is a process of "description, comparison, re-description and rectification."⁶ Second, scholars enjoy their freedom to interpret or explain comparative data from any perspective, depending upon their interests and what scholarly "situation" they are tackling.⁷ However, scholarly perceptions of such contexts need to be exposed to a broader scholarly community so as to benefit from further critique and correction. If the first point answers the "how" question for doing accurate comparison, the second addresses the "why" and "so what" questions. These two points correspond to the objectives that Müller initially set for the discipline of comparative religion and respond to postmodern criticisms through devising a more refined, properly chastened form of comparative methodology.

How does this reformed and renewed type of comparative religion comport with the common types of comparative theology discussed above? Since comparative religion claims no home tradition and does not predetermine where comparative conclusions lead, it is ill at ease with both the "faith seeking understanding" type of comparative theology per Clooney and the "confessional" comparative theology per Cornille. However, scholars of comparative religion are thought of as being able to interpret and explain comparative data from any perspective depending upon their situations, and this is rather similar to a comparative study that addresses the first-order issue of truth central to one's faith while not predetermining the comparative conclusions. In other words, a theologian not constrained by any pre-established theological convictions will be little different than a religious scholar who cares about the truth value of varying truths claimed by religions. This blurred disciplinary boundary is alive and well within Neville's comparative study of religion.

Regarding the purpose of theological dialogue, Neville believes that "we should not think that the work of theological dialogue is only to look good in a dialogue, or to make for cultural peace and mutual accommodation. Rather, it is for the sake of ascertaining the truth." Therefore, Neville continues, "In theological dialogue, the creed would be a matter of theological truth if and only if it could be communicated as an assertion about divine matters that other traditions recognize."⁸ In this sense, Neville refuses to understand theology as "a (given) faith seeking understanding" which must be constrained within a bounded faith

6. Jonathan Z Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 29.

7. These two points about Smith's methodology of comparative religion can be referred to Smith, *Relating Religion*, 20–32.

8. Robert C. Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay toward Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 168.

community. He also maintains that neither a sociological (i.e., to say something is true because my group believes it) nor a voluntaristic (i.e., to say something is true because of my commitment to its authority) approach to theological study is suitable for providing evidences to argue for religious truth.⁹

Comparative theology of Neville's sort should be understood in a broader enterprise of open theological inquiry, which seeks truth on ultimate realities drawing upon all accessible sources, and the obtained truth-claims are expected to have interreligious relevance and cross-cultural efficacy. For the enterprise, comparative study of religion serves as both a resource and a test-field for Neville to formulate, rectify, and refine hypotheses about first-order issues of religious truth.

Understood as such, Neville's comparative study of religion can be categorized as comparative religion, because Christianity, albeit remaining constitutive of Neville's work, serves his comparison mainly as a perspectival starting point, and theological claims need to be tested by varying critiques by other traditions. In other words, Neville's comparative study of religion does not predetermine its destination, and hence, fulfills the requirement of impartiality in the discipline of comparative religion. However, Neville's comparison is deeply concerned with first-order issues of truth, and because of this, it can be seen as comparative theology per Cornille. But is Neville's work readily thought of as a "metaconfessional" comparative theology? I once asked Neville this question, and he denied it. I think the major reason for the denial is that Neville's comparison significantly drifts away from the confines of any home tradition. Hence, it would be inappropriate to use terms centering on the adjective "confessional" to describe his scholarship, unless Cornille can provide a more nuanced definition of the adjective beyond what is conventional to the Catholic "faith seeking understanding" tradition.

Since comparative religion and comparative theology, as they are reflected by practicing scholars in those established disciplines, cannot adequately capture the nature of Neville's comparative study of religion, perhaps we should think of it mainly as comparative philosophy of religion? Neville once defined philosophy of religion as "philosophy in a comprehensive sense [that] has something important and interesting to say about religion, situating that philosophy in global religious cultures, learning from all the ways to understand religion, defining religion so as to embrace all those ways without reductionism, and making this systematic approach vulnerable to correction."¹⁰ Given such a

9. *Ibid.*, 165.

10. Wesley Wildman, "Robert C. Neville on 'What Is Philosophy of Religion?,'" *Philosophy of Religion* (blog), April 6, 2013, <http://philosophyofreligion.org/?p=691>.

lucid self-understanding of philosophy of religion, and his many contributions to it, Neville's comparative work certainly seems classifiable as comparative philosophy of religion. However, philosophers of religion may not practice religion, and may not be concerned with assessing truth-claims of religions. In this sense, philosophy of religion, according to how this discipline is historically and currently practiced, may be just a philosophical hermeneutics of any or all religious traditions. But for Neville, philosophy of religion "is the examination of how the ultimate realities are best addressed in our day, and how the various religions are different ways of doing that, for better or worse."¹¹ More importantly, Neville holds that, in every religious symbol, not only is there an abstract, philosophical aspect, there also exists a material aspect that speaks to the symbol's intimacy to actual human experience in a particular cultural and communal context.¹² Neville's work richly elaborates how to reinterpret the meaning of religious symbols in given traditions, and have them continue to serve communities vitally in local environments. His study on the symbols of Jesus,¹³ the portability of the tradition of Ruist rituals to America,¹⁴ and his long-time service as a Methodist minister are powerful indications of this apparently not-quite-a-philosopher side of Neville's comparative study of religion. The similarity to his predecessor Paul Tillich is unmistakable: Neville's comparative philosophy of religion holds that philosophers' Absolute of *logos* and religionists' Absolute of *pathos* should be one and the same. This deeply religious and practical commitment makes Neville's comparative philosophy of religion stand out prominently among his peers.

In summary, we might construe Neville's comparison as comparative theology, yet it is objective and impartial. We could understand it as a case of comparative religion, yet the first-order issues of truth are its primary focus. We might interpret it as comparative philosophy of religion, yet it is deeply faithful and practical. So what is it? I hope the systematically nonconformist nature of Neville's comparison has been depicted with a strong stroke.

11. Robert C. Neville, "What Does Philosophy of Religion Offer to the Modern University," *Philosophy of Religion* (blog), posted by Dave Rohr, July 28, 2016, <http://philosophyofreligion.org/?p=524883>.

12. A recent exposition on the value of intimate symbols can be found in the fourth chapter of Robert C. Neville, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. 3 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

13. Robert C. Neville, *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

14. Robert C. Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

How to Compare?

Neville's systematically nonconformist comparative study of religion requires a comparative method fit for the goals of impartiality and truth-oriented inquiry. In this regard, Neville shares some of the same concerns with contemporary scholars of comparative religion. As analyzed above, a major methodological emphasis among these scholars is that impartiality derives from an open-ended process of hypothesizing and verification. According to Jonathan Z. Smith, the selection of appropriate categories remains crucial. Smith once described the nature of comparative categories inspired by Wittgenstein's idea of "family resemblance":

I summarized only the new numerical taxonomic proposals as representing a self-consciously polythetic mode of classification which surrendered the idea of perfect, unique, single differentia—a taxonomy which retained the notion of necessary but abandoned the notion of sufficient criteria for admission to a class. Comparison would be based on a multiplicity of traits, not all of which might be possessed by any individual member of the class.¹⁵

In other words, categories derived by comparativists from one source do not need to remain unchanged when being used to describe traits of other sources. Instead, specificities of new traits may require a redefinition of those categories, and thus, to accurately describe these traits, comparison ought to be amenable to redescription and rectification while being mediated by categories sharing family resemblance.

Smith's methodological reflection on the significance of the choice of appropriate comparative categories is conducive to our understanding of Neville's comparative method. Both point to a pivotal characteristic of the categories: a certain degree of "vagueness." However, since scholars of comparative religion rarely apply their method to major philosophical inquiries oriented to seeking truth, it will be more helpful for us to comprehend the distinctiveness of Neville's method if we put it in comparison with other comparative philosophers of religion who work on the same traditions, i.e., Christianity and Ruism. With that in mind, I will analyze Neville's comparative method by comparing it with Lee Yearley's and Aaron Stalnaker's.

Neville's comparative method centers on the use of vague categories and derives from Charles S. Peirce's pragmatic semiotics:

For Peirce, "a sign that is objectively indeterminate in any respect is objectively vague in so far as it reserves further determination to be made in

15. Smith, *Relating Religion*, 22.

some other conceivable sign, or at least does not appoint the interpreter as its deputy in this office.” That is, a sign is vague if it is capable of further specification in multiple ways, all of which are not necessarily compatible with another; Peirce contrasts this with a “general” sign, which is specified in the same way in every instance.¹⁶

A vague category defined as such facilitates comparison because (1) it enables the discovery of similarity between traditions so as to make a comparison possible; (2) the similarity can be specified as vaguely as possible so that it allows comparativists to attend to the specificities of traditions, which makes it possible to minimize the carryover of bias from one tradition to another; and (3) hypotheses about the similarity and difference between compared traditions can be devised in such a way as to be susceptible of further rectification and reformulation. Comparison is therefore capable of being pursued in an open-ended process regarding the same or multiple comparative points of reference. In Neville’s comparative projects, a vague category is elicited when “a conception from some one tradition is extended, abstracted further, and purified of its particularities to serve as a vague ground for comparison.”¹⁷ Therefore, a comparative process “is concerned primarily with the identification, vetting, and improvement of cross-cultural categories for comparison.”¹⁸

As for the criteria of successful comparison, Neville endorses that “if the category of comparison vaguely considered is indeed a common respect for comparison, if the specifications of the category are made with pains taken to avoid imposing biases, and if the point of comparison is legitimate, then the translations of the specifications into the language of the category can allow of genuine comparisons.”¹⁹ Among the three criteria, the third one of “legitimacy” speaks to scholars’ interests and situations that orient comparisons in a particular explanatory or interpretative direction. The first two indicate the proper use of vague categories to describe comparative data impartially and accurately. The possibility of selecting and applying appropriately vague categories is the reason that comparative philosophy of religion can be pursued as a “science” construed broadly in a pragmatist Peircian sense.

16. Robert D. Smid, *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy: The Pragmatist and Process Traditions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 143. The quoted Peirce’s word is from Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5 (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Continuum, 1997), 447.

17. Neville, *Behind the Masks*, 4.

18. Smid, *Methodologies*, 152.

19. Wesley J. Wildman and Robert C. Neville, “How Our Approach to Comparison Relates to Others,” in *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 213.

Lee Yearley expounds the methodological significance of the “analogical term” in his comparison of Mencius and Aquinas concerning theories of virtue and conceptions of courage. Like Neville, Yearley asserts that the pivotal procedure for comparison is “the choice of which categories to employ when we do comparisons and how best to use them.”²⁰ He named his choice of comparative category an “analogical term”: “the notion that analogical terms have systematically related focal and secondary meaning gives us a productive approach to that problem (about the choice of comparative categories).” From here we find that “analogical term” is also intended by Yearley to possess a certain degree of “vagueness.” Moreover, the way Yearley chooses an “analogical term” is also similar to Neville: “I think good reasons exist for my initially deriving the focal meaning of most key terms from contemporary English usage; that is, from my understanding of the terms, I must adjust those chosen focal terms as the comparison proceeds.”²¹ In other words, an open-ended process of selecting and refining analogical terms is considered by Yearley to be necessary for accurate comparison.

Compared to Neville’s vague category, I think Yearley’s analogical term is less successful in achieving the envisioned goals of accurate and legitimate comparison. Unlike the pragmatic root of Neville’s method, Yearley’s derives from Thomas Aquinas’s concept of “analogical predication.” In order to establish a hierarchy of harmony among all existing virtues that had been addressed by previous moral philosophers, Aquinas adopted two key ideas—“virtue has parts” and “analogical predication”—to orchestrate a massive number of comparisons. For example, Aristotle’s virtue of “magnanimity” is analogous to Paul’s “humility,” so these two virtues can be seen as a predication, as well as two different parts for another, higher virtue. In this way, Aquinas was able to organize his theory of virtues into a hierarchical harmony aiming to include as many instances of virtue as possible. By the same token, Yearley applies Aquinas’s method of analogical predication to his comparison between Mencius and Aquinas such that some virtues are treated as analogical terms that furnish possibilities of comparison. For example, although Mencius never analyzed courage in the way Aquinas did, Mencius’s idea of appropriate self-esteem is thought to be analogical to Aquinas’s idea about magnanimity, vanity, and pusillanimity so that they can be seen as parts of the same higher virtue, courage. However, Aquinas’s method, centering as it

20. Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 190. The following summary of both Thomas Aquinas’s and Yearley’s comparative method derives from varying parts of this book.

21. *Ibid.*, 193.

does on analogical predication, is not primarily for the purpose of comparison. Instead, it is for constructing a hierarchical harmony among enumerated virtues to fit Aquinas's own theology. Because of this, the method of analogical predication, as well as Yearley's use of the "analogical term" modeled on Aquinas, lacks the dynamic and flexible nature of Neville's vague category derived from the pragmatic tradition.

The application of Yearley's method had two unfortunate consequences. First, Yearley's work directly compares an analogical term, such as Aquinas's concept of magnanimity, with a purported counterpart, such as Mencius's concept of proper attitude toward fate. In this way, a possible bias was carried over from the Christian tradition into Ruism. And the higher category of virtue, in this case "courage," is not a mediatory comparative tool similar to Neville's vague category but is instead artificially constructed after a direct comparison between analogical terms. Second, Yearley's comparative method seems not to have been grounded in a clear hermeneutical consciousness of the scholarly situation in which he was located. As a result, it seems likely that the motive of Yearley's comparison is merely a purely intellectual exercise for the sake of comparison, which does not have much relevance to the compared traditions.²² These two consequences jointly suggest that Yearley did not pay due attention to the holistic features of the compared figures, and thus that his attempt to produce textured comparison led to dissection of the compared traditions to the point of risking misunderstanding and distortion.²³

Aaron Stalnaker's comparative method centers on the use of a "bridge concept" and is explicitly intended as an improvement of Yearley's. In order to seek methodological resources for his comparative philosophy of religion, Stalnaker returned to the tradition of pragmatism and discovered James Bohman's thought of "vocabulary vocabulary." According to Bohman, human vocabulary is not meant mainly to represent and map out a given set of features of reality, but to function as an enabling condition for humans to engage with a continuously changing and unfolding reality. In the context of cross-cultural dialogues, the selection and refinement of appropriate vocabulary are important tasks

22. One reviewer of Yearley's book, Anthony C. Yu, has noticed this feature of Yearley's comparison: "The reason for comparing what seems to be wholly disparate objects is finally arbitrary, much as human perception and rationality can be arbitrary." Anthony C. Yu, "Of Apples and Oranges," *Journal of Religion* 73, no.1 (Jan. 1993): 69–74.

23. A similar concern is raised by Aquinian scholars such as John Jenkins: "My claim against Yearley, then, is that because he fails to recognize the fundamentally formative role of Aquinas' distinctive Christian doctrines on his views on virtue and human flourishing, his interpretation of those views is distorted." John Jenkins, "Yearley, Aquinas, and Comparative Method," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no.2 (Fall 1993): 377–83.

because this is the only way for people within a given tradition to engage with the relevant realities.²⁴

Stalnaker's deployment of "bridge concepts" as the pivoting tool for comparison is one particular case of "vocabulary vocabulary." Stalnaker says:

Bridge concepts are general ideas, such as "virtue" and "human nature," which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide comparative inquiry yet are still open to greater specification in particular cases. . . . The process of selection and refinement is thus in an important sense inductive, and any broader applicability any given set might possess is essentially hypothetical and subject to further testing and revision in wider inquiries.²⁵

Stalnaker's basic insight of bridge concept is very similar to Neville's vague category. Compared with Yearley's analogical term, the use of bridge concept allows Stalnaker to attend to the holistic nature of Xunzi's and Augustine's thoughts without haphazardly putting any pair of seemingly similar concepts into direct comparison. Compared with Neville's various applications of vague category into themes including metaphysical comparison, Stalnaker's comparisons are located mainly in the realm of ethics—and Stalnaker explicitly refuses to construct a grand ethical theory that might be construed as a universal deep structure for the compared traditions.²⁶ In this way, Stalnaker's bridge concept is effectively a middle way between the non- or subvagueness of Yearley's analogical term and the super- or metavagueness of Neville's vague category.

Nevertheless, due to this half-way nature of his method, the application of bridge concepts in Stalnaker's comparison is problematic. Stalnaker does not explain why he remains skeptical about the existence of any deeper ethical structure of human behaviors. In my view, as long as a comparative process is open-ended and hypotheses formulated through bridge concepts continue to be refined, a constructive endeavor that deepens into identifying more universal features of ethical traditions and addresses issues shared by all humanity will be more than helpful and certainly should not be ruled out in advance. Because Stalnaker asserts the impossibility of "transcultural universals," and thus preempts the elevation of the abstract level of comparative terms from bridge concept to Neville's sort of vague category, his work lacks the means to evaluate the metaphysical assumptions in thinkers such as Xunzi and Augustine. As a consequence, after comparison he can only attain a somewhat disappointing

24. See Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 1–17.

25. *Ibid.*, 17.

26. *Ibid.*, 17.

conclusion: “It appears that there is no easy way to harmonize these two types of moral psychological pictures.”²⁷ Although I am not so optimistic as to assert there *is* a way to harmonize them, I remain critical of Stalnaker’s insistence on using bridge concepts solely within the realm of ethics and his preempting of the possibility of finding new points of comparative points and hence new opportunities to build mutual insight between the compared traditions.

Neville, Yearley, and Stalnaker appear to have strong commonalities in their understandings about how to conduct impartial and accurate comparison. First, they all underscore the significance of the selection of appropriate comparative categories. Second, the selected categories must admit a certain degree of vagueness so that their application in comparison can be flexible and adaptable. Third, a scholarly community needs to contribute a joint effort to continually critique and refine comparative hypotheses. But they are not identical, and Neville’s method occupies a unique niche. Compared with most of scholars in the field of comparative religion, Neville’s comparative method accommodates studies of religion in more diverse disciplinary perspectives, including philosophy and theology. Compared with Stalnaker’s method, which improves significantly on Yearley’s, Neville’s comparative method of vague categories does not preclude comparative philosophy of religion from delving into metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, etc. It does not conform to any pre-established disciplinary or subdisciplinary boundaries, so it can be responsive to varying scholarly interests. And it enables comparative study of religion to be conducted as a science broadly construed in a pragmatist sense. In other words, any statement made by comparativists about religion is thought of as explorative, hypothetical, fallible, and formulated so as to be readily testable against reality in varying ways: if the statement is about compared traditions, then data gathered from these traditions will be feedback for refining hypothetical statements; if it is about something else, then the statement is vulnerable to critique by scholars in relevant disciplines, no matter how abstract the hypothetical statement appears to be.²⁸

An Example of Neville’s Comparison

Neville’s stance in the Christian-Ru “transcendence debate” will serve as a case study to illustrate the novelty and efficacy of his comparative method.

27. *Ibid.*, 286.

28. An explanation of the scientific nature of comparative study of religion from the perspective of epistemic fallibilism can be found at Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010). Views in this book are helpful for us to understand the nature of Neville’s comparison.

I use the “transcendence debate” to refer to a long-standing intellectual controversy in the history of Christian-Ru interaction about whether the Ruist idea of *Tian* (天, cosmos), or its metaphysically more accurate reference *Taiji* (太極, ultimate polarity), can be seen as transcendent in comparison to the way Christian ideas of the creator God are considered transcendent. The debate was initiated by Matteo Ricci, the pioneering Jesuit missionary theologian to China, who asked whether *Taiji* can be seen as the origin of the world and thereby set into comparison with the Christian God. Protestant missions in China during the nineteenth century define the debate’s second stage, with James Legge as its eminent exemplar. After the middle of twentieth century, an intensified process of globalization and East-West interaction accelerated the debate among three major kinds of disputants: Christian scholars who are normally also ordained in varying Christian orders, Ru scholars who intend to continue the lineage of Ru learning in the modern world, and comparativists who do not proclaim affiliation with a single tradition.

For the following reasons, the debate has provoked significant disagreement among scholars with no sign of resolution. First, disputants are stimulated by varying motives to engage the debate, which could be, for instance, Christian scholars’ missionary purposes, Ru scholars’ self-defensive and apologetic argumentation, and other philosophical intentions. Second, since both Christianity and Ruism are historic traditions, each incubating a great number of internal variations, disputants may draw on different periods of thought or varying thinkers in each tradition to engage the debate. If disputants claim universality across one of these traditions for an idea that depends on partial selection, the debate will not be easily settled. Third, comparativists have tended to operate with varied understandings of the term “transcendence.” The impact of these reasons for the lack of resolution to the transcendence debate has been greatly amplified by a fourth reason: it is uncommon among disputants to employ a carefully devised comparative methodology while a comparison is actually pursued.

In recent work, I investigated major definitions of “transcendence” and analyzed the intellectual characteristics of the debate in its three stages; I will not repeat those details here.²⁹ For the purpose of the paper, it is worthwhile pointing out that, among all disputants on this question, Neville proposes a *sui generis* definition of transcendence, and therefore furnishes a singularly specific answer to the debated metaphysical issue. His unique approach to the transcendence debate puts Neville’s interpretation at odds with many disputants,

29. Bin Song, *A Study of Comparative Philosophy of Religion on “Creatio Ex Nihilo” and “Sheng Sheng”* (Birth Birth, 生生) (PhD diss., Boston University, 2018), chap. 1 in particular.

including some of the most influential ones. In what follows, I will compare Roger T. Ames's and Neville's stances in the transcendence debate in order to illustrate more concretely the nonconformist nature of Neville's comparative study of religion.

In line with the "correlative thinking" tradition comprising prominent sinologists such as A.C. Graham, Ames's comparison is conducted in a framework of philosophy of culture, which employs philosophical comparisons to highlight cultural differences between China and the West. For Ames, a mode of correlative thinking in ancient Chinese cosmology, which underscores all facets of cosmic realities to be mutually conditioned and interconnected, furnishes a genuine alternative to mainstream Western metaphysics. Accordingly, Ames also refuses to use the term "transcendence" to characterize Chinese cosmology in any significant sense:

We shall continue to argue here, as we have in the past, that one of the most striking features of Chinese intellectual culture from the perspective of the Western interpreter is that absence in any important sense of transcendence in the articulation of its spiritual, moral and political sensibilities.³⁰

Here, "transcendence" is defined in the strict sense: "We characterize strict transcendence in the following way: A is transcendent with respect to B if the existence, meaning, or import of B cannot be fully accounted for without recourse to A, but the reverse is not true."³¹

Ames ascribes this conception of "strict transcendence" to the Christian understanding of God,³² which Ames more recently portrays as "Greek and Abrahamic interpretations of origins or beginnings."³³ By contrast, for Ames, the Ruist idea of *Tian* is not "some ontological independent order of Being," but is "defined as the 'day' and the 'skies' under which culture accumulates" and thus maintains a fundamental continuity with the human world. In this sense, "where the Judeo-Christian God, often referred to metonymically as 'Heaven,' creates the world, classical Chinese *Tian* is the world."³⁴

Ames's engagement with the transcendence debate turns out to be one ingredient of his boarder view regarding the contrasting features of Chinese and

30. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 189.

31. *Ibid.*, 190.

32. *Ibid.*, 191.

33. Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 226.

34. Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 241.

Western thought. For example, the Christian understanding of God champions an idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is contextless, ahistorical, and emphasizes agency and originality, rather than situation and novelty. Meanwhile, Chinese thought pivots upon *creatio in situ*, which is context-based, historical, and cherishes situation and novelty.³⁵ While conceiving of creation as *creatio in situ*, Chinese thought does not include the concept of “ontology,” so a typical Chinese cosmology would address a “this-that” question rather than the Western “one-many” question. By extension, this Chinese mode of thought also leads to the absence in Chinese culture of Western ethical and political ideas such as “individual,” “freedom,” and “equality.”³⁶

Neville’s stance on the transcendence debate is in almost polar opposition to Ames’s. Concerning Ames’s strict definition of transcendence and his outright denial of any important sense of “transcendence” in Chinese thought, Neville points out ample possibilities of understanding “transcendence” in different traditions:

Sometimes the transcendent is what you find when you transcend the borders, such as a Christian God beyond the world of determinations. Other times the transcendent is rather a perspective form which one can think of the world as such, as in Buddhist notions of emptiness or Buddha-mind. Transcendent here means place or perspective beyond, not a principle of explanation as in the Hall-Ames formula. Other times transcendence means change or ground beyond limits, as a moral person can transcend the limitations of his or her past, or transcend one moral stage for another.³⁷

Given various understandings of transcendence in world traditions, Neville suggests a vague conception of transcendence capable of bridging the gaps among these understandings and thus yielding great comparative value: “Suppose we say that a general definition of transcendence is that to which reference can be made, in any sense of reference, only by denying that the referent lies within the boundaries of a specifiable domain, whatever else is supposed or said about the referent.”³⁸ Guided by this vague definition of “transcendence,” Neville defines the highest metaphysical principle conceived by various traditions as “ultimacy,” which refers to any “finite-infinite contrast” that marks something as transcendent.

35. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 245. Also refer to Roger T. Ames, “Confucian Harmony (he 和) as Creatio in Situ,” in *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2 (2010): 7517–33.

36. Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 270–81.

37. Neville, *Boston Confucianism*, 150.

38. *Ibid.*, 151.

Despite the fact that, as in Ames's case, Neville's definition of "transcendence" resonates with the Western metaphysical tradition of "creation," pivoting upon the idea of "ontological dependence," there is one crucial difference between the two interpreters. For Neville, ultimacy as such can be indeterminate. Its grounding ontological power can be used to explain the existence of cosmic realities, but what those cosmic realities are is still determined by relationships among those realities. In this sense, the ultimate ontological creative power of ultimacy does not impose extra or imperial order upon cosmic realities and, in the epistemological sense, the *de facto* cosmic realities are instead the only way by which humans could know anything about ultimacy. In contrast, for Ames, as well as for quite a few comparativists sharing a similar view on this point, the highest principle positioning itself on the utmost end of the chain of "ontological dependence" must possess determinate features. As manifested by the Judeo-Christian ideas of God, the principle is for Ames an independent order of being that not only accounts for the origin of the existence of the world but also imposes an extra order on the empirical one indicated by the *de facto* cosmic realities. For Ames, the imperialist commitment to such a principle is one major cause of the crisis of Western culture, and therefore some crucial part of Western thought needs to be critically reevaluated by the alternative Chinese one.

Relying upon this unique idea that what is transcendent is indeterminate, and yet ontologically creates a determinate world, Neville maps out a lineage of ancient Chinese cosmology that richly elaborates this sort of transcendence: "In China it is the dominant tradition, illustrated by the opening lines of the *Daodejing*, by Wang Bi, and by the classic statement of Neo-Confucian cosmogony in Zhou Dunyi, among other sources."³⁹ Because this Chinese tradition does not typically conceive of ultimacy as a determinate deity and resonates with Neville's idea of genuine, indeterminate ultimacy, Neville thinks the Chinese tradition does a better job of representing the idea of "ontological unconditionality" implied by the traditional Christian conception of *creatio ex nihilo*:

My argument has been that both the category of ontological creativity and the categories of the primary cosmology are illustrated by the Chinese philosophic-religious tradition. They are illustrated there perhaps even more clearly than in the Western traditions that gave rise to my terminology.⁴⁰

39. Robert C. Neville, *The Good is One, Its Manifestations Many: Confucian Essays on Metaphysics, Morals, Rituals, Institutions, and Genders* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 54.

40. Neville, *Behind the Masks*, 83.

In summary, if “transcendence” is understood as that which grounds an infinite-finite contrast and that which is indeterminate itself though creating a determinate world, Neville strongly argues that there is a transcendent dimension in Ruist metaphysics, and in a certain sense, it is even more transcendent than the tradition of *creatio ex nihilo*, which mainly conceives of divine creation as deriving from a deity with a determinate nature.

To Compare for What?

With this analysis of the distinctive character of Neville’s comparative study of religion in hand, let us reflect on its values. We can start from his contrast with Ames regarding the transcendence debate.

Neville’s unique contribution to the transcendence debate obviously derives from a creative application of his general comparative methodology of vague categories. He surveyed varied understandings of transcendence in world traditions, formulated hypothetically a vague category, and then investigated sources in the intellectual history of Chinese thought to elaborate and test the hypothesis. Regardless of whether scholars agree with Neville’s cosmology or his interpretations of Chinese sources, it is certain that, if they disagree, a dialogue can be continued thanks to the hypothetical and dynamic nature of Neville’s method. Because boundaries between traditions keep being explored by the flexible application of vague categories, Chinese thought is opened, and its rich resources become an integral part of the global conversation. Therefore, Neville describes his general approach to comparative philosophy in these terms: “I take myself to be a contemporary philosopher, building a philosophy for a global conversation that builds heavily on Confucianism while extending it, and on Platonism while extending it too.”⁴¹

In response to Neville’s self-portrait as a contemporary philosopher on top of being a comparativist, Ames clarifies his own overall motive and method of comparative study as follows:

Our concern from the beginning has been with the excavation of “the uncommon assumptions” that serve as alternative grounds for the continuing cultural discourses within the two traditions themselves. And such contrastive assumptions can only be identified and made available for mutual edification and critique through a process of responsible and responsive comparison.⁴²

41. Robert C. Neville, “On the Importance of Ames-Hall Collaboration,” in *Appreciating the Chinese Difference: Engaging Roger T. Ames on Methods, Issues, and Roles*, ed. Jim Behuniak (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 5.

42. Roger T. Ames, “Responses,” in Behuniak, *Appreciating the Chinese Difference*, 257.

Keeping Ames's enormous contributions to the field clearly in mind, I offer two critiques of his comparative methodology in order to reflect upon Neville's.

First, to do "responsible and responsive" comparison, we need to aim at impartiality and objectivity so as to get our description of the compared data right, as concerned scholars in comparative religion have pointed out. However, we do not find Ames has been dedicated to devising a methodology fitted to meet this demand. What we find from his argument in the transcendence debate is that he did not use any method similar to vague categories or bridge concepts. Instead, he picked up one specific definition of "transcendence" from the Judeo-Christian tradition, without due consideration of alternatives, and compared it directly with the purported Chinese counterpart. In this way, Ames's comparison committed the cardinal sin highlighted by postmodern critics of the early stages of comparative religion. I made a similar critique of Yearley's method above.

"Unbridged comparison" of Ames's sort has one of two predictable outcomes. Either we find too many similarities, as the early stage of comparative religion did, rightly earning the accusation of imperial Eurocentrism, or we find too many differences. Unsurprisingly given the ultimate motive of philosophy of culture in Ames's case, the latter error is what occurs. As a matter of fact, the differences Ames discovers are so many and deep that David L. Hall, Ames's cospeaker in the transcendence debate, even claims that "the Chinese inventory of issues, problems, and ideas is so uncongenial to Western understanding as to suggest real incommensurability."⁴³ But if Chinese thought is essentially incommensurable to Western understanding, there can be no common measure for comparability, so how is any comparison between them possible? Moreover, how can we know they are incommensurable in the first place?

Second, a viable defense of Ames's comparative project, if we set the issue of comparability aside, is to refer to his guiding framework of philosophy of culture. This framework entails that, when scholars intend to provide insights to save the West from its alleged crisis, the goal of comparison should be to uncover genuinely alternative cultural assumptions. Within this framework, it would be both desirable and inevitable for scholars to emphasize dissimilarities in Chinese thought, present them as a mainstream or essence, and then put them into a maximally sharp contrast with Western thought. However, what if scholars of Chinese thought do not concur with the alleged dissimilarities

43. David L. Hall, "The Culture of Metaphysics: On Saving Neville's Project (from Neville)," in *Interpreting Neville*, ed. J. Harley Chapman and Nancy K. Frankenberry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 271.

marking Chinese thought as so different from Western, Christian thought? How do we deal with the many exceptions within Chinese thought that run counter to Ames's cultural generalizations?⁴⁴ Is it possible for Ames's methodology to incorporate those exceptions so as to formulate a more nuanced and inclusive account of Chinese thought? In my view, Ames's comparative methodology falls short when facing these impending challenges. This is mainly because Ames's framework of philosophy of culture makes scholarship delving into exceptions to those ready-made cultural generalizations generally insignificant, since in the eyes of philosophers of culture they will be readily judged as exceptions, and hence not mainstream. Consequently, the ready-made cultural generalizations will turn into infallible principles, and under the guidance of these principles, the philosophers of culture will continue to find examples to confirm these principles without feeling an urgent need to respond carefully to dissenting scholars.⁴⁵ Eventually, the philosophy of culture of Ames's sort will be powered into a continually expanded narrative about the alleged differences between cultures, rather than being maintained in a state of open inquiry into issues of common concern to all humanity.

It is not my purpose here to assess the general value of the philosophy of culture proposed by Ames. But I do assert that this sort of philosophy of culture robs comparison of a scientific dynamic that is essential to any open inquiry. Accordingly, I conclude that, for purposes other than the philosophy of culture, Neville's method of vague categories and his general vision of how to do philosophy comparatively are more hospitable to scholars' varying interests, and therefore also more commendable in light of criteria of scientific and open inquiry. Neville once responded to Hall's comment on incommensurability in this way:

My own practice is to work within the environment funded by all the cultural resources to which I can find access, balancing different metaphoric systems and attempting to weave a garment fit for our time; for me, philosophy of culture is internal to a much larger philosophic enterprise with

44. A noticeable critique of Ames's generalization made on the theme of "creation" in Chinese thought can be found in Paul R. Goldin, "The Myth that China Has No Creation Myth," *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008): 1–22.

45. Robert Smid raised a similar critique to the inability of Ames's work to deal with exceptions: "By employing contrasts that appeal to the defining features of each tradition, Hall and Ames are able to capture many of the distinctive features of each of the traditions they compare and also to make it more likely that those features are preserved in any instance of comparison. However, it also leads them unable to address any features that are not definitive in any of these traditions but that may still be significant with respect to their comparative relation." (Smid, *Methodologies*, 123.)

many checks on consistency and faithfulness before getting to cultural generalizations.⁴⁶

Thus, Neville's broader and systematic philosophic enterprise, thoroughly integrated with his approach to comparison, challenges the philosophy of culture of Ames's sort. Furthermore, it obligates comparativists to be critically aware of their comparative motives lest the motives divest a comparative study of its scientific quality.

The same conclusion carries over to our understanding of the other analyzed features of Neville's comparative study of religion that do not conform to established comparative approaches. Regarding our comparison of methods for comparative philosophy of religion, Neville's is amenable to varying applications in all major subdisciplines of philosophy. Regarding our comparison of the disciplinary natures of comparative study of religion, Neville's is simultaneously concerned with the impartiality of comparison and first-order issues of truth central to his practiced faith, which makes it difficult to locate Neville's work within the current disciplinary distinctions. Based upon the above analysis, it should be clear now that Neville's exceptionally inclusive approach to comparative study of religion serves his larger scholarly endeavor.

In closing, I stress that Neville's comparative study of religion ought to be understood as integral to his broader endeavor to build a systematic philosophy fit for both himself and our time. Given the fallibility of any component in this systematic philosophy, the study in question can also be understood as a science, construed pragmatically. While the science might progress in the long run, pre-established divisions of human knowledge can threaten such progress by interfering with the scientific goal of making comparison a free and open inquiry. In fact, such preconceptions are likely not to invite new perspectives but rather accumulate into hurdles for human creativity.

46. Robert C. Neville, "Responses to My Critics," in Chapman and Frankenberry, *Interpreting Neville*, 327.