

## Communications to the Editor

### TO THE EDITOR:

As the editor of David S. Nivison's *The Ways of Confucianism*, I would like to respond to James D. Sellmann's review of this book (*Journal of Asian Studies* 57:2, May 1998).

Sellmann objects to what he refers to as the "universalism" of Nivison's approach. Sellmann never defines "universalism," and it is not a well established technical term in philosophy, so I can only speculate about what he means. Nivison *does* think that there are some issues that are discussed by some philosophers in both China and the West: Nivison documents the fact that Confucius, Mozi, Mengzi, Xunzi, Wang Yangming, and Dai Zhen addressed the issue of whether a sincere commitment to the Way was sufficient to guarantee right action, and that this is related to the problem of "weakness of will" familiar to Western philosophers (*Ways of Confucianism*, p. 79 ff.). But he also stresses repeatedly that the views of Chinese and Western philosophers on this topic are quite different. For example, Mengzi differs from Western "internalists," who think that to judge an action right is to be motivated to perform it (*Ways*, p. 89). Indeed, much of Nivison's book is devoted to detailing differences between Western and Chinese philosophers on a variety of topics: Mengzi differs importantly from Kant in attributing ethical value to acting out of emotions like benevolence (*Ways*, p. 118); despite superficial similarities, Wang Yangming is radically different from Western "existentialists" (*Ways*, p. 233 ff.). The examples could be multiplied.

Sellmann's review is also misleading at points. He asserts that Nivison "assumes a coherent unity to 'Chinese society' across three millennia" (p. 25). In fact, one of the significant features of Nivison's book (and one of his most important contributions to the field) has been to emphasize the disagreements and differences within the Confucian tradition. For example, in "Two Roots or One?" Nivison argues that Wang Yangming and Dai Zhen held interpretations of the "one root" doctrine in *Mengzi* 3A5 that were very different both from one another and from that of Mengzi himself.

Sellmann's page reference above is to a comment by Nivison that is not a blanket assertion about Chinese culture, but rather a specific comment about the importance of gift-giving in Chinese society, and the fact that it is seen as creating obligations and psychological pressures to reciprocate. (Nivison intriguingly argues that the concept of the suasive power of *de* in Chinese thought grows out of these social and psychological facts.) And there *is* evidence that these are persistent features of Chinese culture going back to the Shang Dynasty.

Sellmann contradicts himself when he first suggests that "without argument," Nivison "turns the king's *de* into a" property "of any good person," and then a few sentences later criticizes the argument which Nivison does give. Sellmann's counterargument (to the argument which he claims does not exist) is that Nivison is anachronistically reading back into earlier sources an ethical aspect to *de*. This counterargument is flawed in two ways: it ignores the epigraphical evidence from Western Zhou bronzes that Nivison cites (*Ways*, p. 27), and it assumes (without argument) that nothing in the *Zuo zhuan* or the *Shu jing* could reflect ideas that antedate Confucius.

So far, I have tried to focus on specific problems with Sellmann's review. However, I would like to briefly touch on the broader issues which I think underlie his objections. Sellmann's review is characteristic of a school of thought which frequently employs the rhetorical trope of dividing the field of Chinese philosophy into those who impose "Western concepts on Chinese philosophy" (the bad guys), and those who interpret the text on the text's own terms (the good guys). But this is too simplistic. Any interpretation must be done in terms of *some* set of concepts. The only real issue is *which* of the many available conceptual frameworks one should use. For example, some contemporary interpreters read Confucius in the light of postmodern concepts, which are as "Western" as Nivison's conceptual vocabulary. (And, once again, Nivison uses his vocabulary to explore the *differences* between particular Chinese and Western philosophers.) An objection to either approach should be based on specific arguments about how specific concepts fail to do justice to specific texts, rather than on vague accusations such as "universalism" (or, to use another trendy term, "transcendence").

I certainly disagree with Nivison about many points of emphasis and detail. (For example, I have argued, contrary to Nivison, that to use the term "will" in connection with early Confucian thinkers conceals more than it reveals.) However, I think it is unfortunate that Sellmann has failed to recognize Nivison's four most important contributions to the field. (1) Nivison has emphasized close textual reading, involving careful examination of alternative interpretations, and providing detailed textual evidence. This is a methodology that is practiced by few scholars of Chinese philosophy today, although it has antecedents in both *kaozhengxue* and in contemporary methods of studying the history of Western philosophy. (2) Nivison has stressed the diversity within the Confucian philosophical tradition, in particular the ways in which Neo-Confucians unconsciously reinterpret their own tradition in terms of Buddhist concepts. (3) Nivison has given one of the few plausible accounts of the evolution of the notion of *de* from the Shang oracle bones through Confucius. (4) Nivison has illustrated how Chinese thinkers can be brought into a dialogue with Western philosophers on such issues as human nature, the ethical role of emotions, and ethical cultivation.

For these reasons, Nivison deserves the same sort of careful reading that he has given to Chinese philosophical texts.

BRYAN W. VAN NORDEN  
Vassar College

#### TO THE EDITOR:

Thank you for the opportunity to carry on a discussion of David Nivison's important work, *The Ways of Confucianism*, and to give my reply to Bryan W. Van Norden.

The search for truth depends on a diversity of claims and their debate. That is one of the reasons why writers do not review their own work. Van Norden's rejoinder ignores my praises of Nivison's scholarship, and his own efforts to compile those essays. My review was written for the general readers of *JAS*, i.e. historians, anthropologists, and so on, not merely philosophers. I make no apologies for seeing things and thinking unlike Van Norden.

Although the term "universalism" may not be well defined, most academicians

in Asian Studies understand its usage. I employed the term as a simple handle that almost anyone could grasp to highlight what I considered to be a popular approach forty to thirty years ago. I was trying to be critical of but generous to Nivison. Van Norden's criticism "that to use the term 'will' in connection with early Confucian thinkers conceals more than it reveals" cuts much deeper to the heart of one problem with Nivison's approach.

The readers of Nivison's work will have to decide whether or not my review is misleading. Van Norden skillfully labeled the disparate essays as chapters of the book, giving them the appearance of internal coherence. Both Van Norden and Nivison write of the "Confucian tradition" as if there is a coherent system, despite their respective emphasis on the disagreements within that so-called "tradition." It is instructive to note that there is no single expression in Chinese that captures what academicians refer to as the Confucian tradition. (See, Lionel M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997], for an interesting discussion on the fabrication of "Confucianism.")

"Contradiction," unlike "universalism," is a well established technical term in philosophy. Because I did *not* say: "Nivison has an argument and he does not have an argument," I did not contradict myself. The most Van Norden can claim is that I was inconsistent. However, I was not inconsistent either because what I criticized was Nivison's "move" or leap (not an argument) from the Shang oracle bones concept of kingly power (*de*) to Kongzi's (Confucius') concept of a cultivated person's virtue (*de*). It is my understanding that Shang and Zhou cultures are different, despite certain similarities in material culture and written language. I did not ignore the "evidence from the Western Zhou bronzes. . . ." Although I did not explicitly mention that evidence in my short review, nevertheless that was part of my claim that his thinking is anachronistic. A book review is not the place to belabor one's own methodology or theory of ancient Chinese philosophy. Certainly I do believe that ideas in, and even some parts of, the *Shujing* and *Zuozhuan* antedate Kongzi. My criticism of Nivison's leap is based on the understanding that *de* as the virtue of any cultivated person is an Eastern Zhou idea that was promoted by Kongzi. The real question at stake which cannot be answered here is whether or not the passages Nivison cites from the *Shujing* and *Zuozhuan* do in fact antedate Kongzi. Personally, I believe that they do not for the reason given above.

The concern that a text be read in its own terms is not simplistic. (Please, note that this concern was popularized by modern [western] academia.) Van Norden's caricature of this as a rhetorical trope is simplistic. I can only quote the once popular love song: "There are no good guys; there are no bad guys; there's only you and me, and we just disagree." I do, however, agree with Van Norden; the real issue is which conceptual framework *should* one use. Should one employ a framework that imposes extraneous and concealing ideas, or should one use a framework that enlightens by explicating native ideas? In my world, there is room for generalizations and even some vague accusations, especially in a short book review.

It is not unfortunate that I think and see things differently than Van Norden. Concerning what he considers to be Nivison's four important contributions to the field, in fact I did mention in some detail the first, and I criticized the third and fourth. I encourage the subscribers to examine Nivison's book for themselves.

JAMES SELLMANN  
*University of Guam*

## TO THE EDITOR:

Professor Anthony Yu's displeasure with my review of Professor David Rolston's book seems to come from the feeling that some of my criticisms of the book lack "specific documentation" and "meticulous substantiation" in the review itself. This is surprising to me since I indicated the most problematic sections of the book by giving specific citations and page numbers within the very limited space allowed to the reviewer. I surely would like to engage in a point-by-point, paragraph-by-paragraph debate with issues in Rolston's book, but to do so would go beyond the 800-word limit of the book review format of the *JAS* and require a full-blown essay.

I would like to take this opportunity, however, to provide one example to illustrate the kind of problem I was talking about. Let the reader compare the following two passages, respectively taken from my 1994 book and Rolston's 1997 book.

## Passage #1

By this stage, the Chinese poetics of narrative has moved from being centered on *shih* (historicity) to being centered on *ch'ing* and *li*; that is, it has moved away from a historiography based on authentic historical events to an aesthetics that focuses on the depiction of realistic human emotions and truthful principles. . . . [Narrative's] existence is justified because it conjures up a world that is lifelike, credible, and, "verisimilar". . . .

At this point, in terms of the study of cross-cultural poetics, one may note a parallel between the flourishing of a poetics of fiction in Ming and a similar trend in the West during the Renaissance. The rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* led to a new justification for writing fiction and poetry and the appearance of "defenses" of and "apologies" for fictive writings that cleared the poets of the charges of fabrication and lying. The standards of verisimilitude, *vraisemblance*, the "probable," and the "credible" replaced strict fidelity to history.

## Passage #2

## Forgetting Fictionality

In Western criticism, the change from Plato's conception of art as imitation of what is perceivable to Aristotle's more liberal conception was momentous in its implications for narrative. Aristotle said,  
[A long quotation from Aristotle's *Poetics*]

We can also see in the development of fiction and fiction criticism in China a shift from historicity (did this event happen or not?) to plausibility (is this likely?).

One way that Chinese critics rated the plausibility of descriptions was to measure how much they were in accord with the general logic of things (*qingli*). *Qingli* is short for *renqing shili* or, alternatively, *renqing wuli* (Graham, p. 16), but the same idea could be indicated by the word *li* (principle or pattern) common to them all. If the material presented was plausible, it need not be historically true.

The first passage is from my book *From Historicity to Fictionality: The Chinese Poetics of Narrative* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), page 11. The second passage is from Rolston's book *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing Between the Lines* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), page 174. Professor Rolston has read my book. It is listed in the bibliography of his book. He is also the reviewer of my book in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (vol. 18, 1996, pp. 219–21).

SHELDON H. LU  
*University of Pittsburgh*