

MEMORIAL ENGAGEMENT

HENRY ROSEMONT, JR: LOGICIAN AND LOTUS-EATER

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“I was determined to be both logician and lotus-eater, but the task proved more difficult than I anticipated” (Rosemont 1993)

On July 2, 2017, the circle of scholars in comparative philosophy lost a true giant with the passing of Henry Rosemont, Jr.¹ This section of *Comparative Philosophy* is dedicated to his memory and contribution to the field of comparative philosophy and features my present introduction, followed by two essays by eminently qualified scholars in the field who also studied with and worked closely alongside Rosemont for decades: Mary Bockover, Professor of Philosophy, Humboldt State University and Secretary, The Society of Asian and Comparative Philosophy; and Peimin Ni, Professor of Philosophy, Grand Valley State University and former President of both The Society of Asian and Comparative Philosophy and the Association of Chinese Philosophers in America.

There are two quite informative overviews of Henry Rosemont’s biography and its connection to his philosophical work dating from 2008 and written for the collection Marthe Chandler and I co-edited entitled, *Polishing the Chinese Mirror: Essays in Honor of Henry Rosemont, Jr.* (2008). One of these is Chandler’s “Introduction” for the *festschrift* and the other is Roger Ames’s “Rosemont’s China: ‘All Things Swim and Glimmer’” which stands as the first essay in that collection.

To these two very well informed philosophical biographies, we should add as well Rosemont’s own reflections in “The Education of a Philosopher of Sorts,” in the delightful book, *Falling in Love with Wisdom: American Philosophers Talk about Their Calling* (1993). In telling his own story, Rosemont remembers that although his parents had little formal schooling (i.e., not beyond the 9th grade), “They were nevertheless widely read and multi-talented, which, when combined with their strong identification with the working class, made them-and hence me-oddballs in the middle-class neighborhoods of Chicago where we lived” (Rosemont 1993, 129). Rosemont’s formal education began with a curriculum that included reading, writing,

¹ Henry Rosemont, Jr. was born 20 December, 1934; Chicago, Illinois and passed on July 2, 2017 in Newport, Rhode Island, USA.

spelling, and grammar, plus U.S. and English history, learned from his father. His mother taught arithmetic and music, the latter including not only Beethoven *et al.*, but Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, Slam Stewart, and other blues and jazz artists, which opened the door of Black American culture to him. So, when he went to public school at age seven he was not prepared for what he called, “the world turned upside down” (Rosemont 1993, 129).

Most of my heroes-Big Bill Haywood, Joe Hill, Kropotkin, Malatesta-were seen as villains, and my villains-Rockefeller, Morgan, Gould, Carnegie, etc. were to be revered; Negroes had rhythm, but little else; Wobblies and other left-wing groups would destroy us all were it not for the vigilance and dedication of the F.B.I. Worst of all, reading was reduced to Dick and Jane, writing to penmanship, and math to rote memorization, all the while insisting on good personal habits, such as punctuality and respect for authority. (Rosemont, 1993, 129)

In his teens, Rosemont left home and like some others of that generation took to U.S. Route 66 West with his thumb in the air as transportation and odd jobs as his livelihood. Then, in late 1952, he volunteered for the U.S. Marine Corps, an institution which he was later to say inculcated in him three powerful persuasions...

(1) that the effectiveness of the Corps was due to its inculcating communal values in its members-like a union brotherhood-rather than the capitalist values of rugged individualism it was designed to protect; (2) war is insane; (3) East Asian cultures were ancient, mysterious, and beautiful in their own right, and fascinating because they obliged others to confront their own culture(s) in a very different way. (Rosemont 1993, 130)

For many, it may be surprising to learn that up until his discharge from the Corps, Rosemont had not yet completed high school and did not even have a G.E.D. He writes, “Through the good offices of a close friend and fellow ex-Marine, however, I learned that veterans over twenty-one could sit for special entrance examinations at the Navy Pier branch of the University of Illinois. I took them, was admitted probationally, and returned, after almost a ten-year absence, to school” (Rosemont, 1993, 130). Upon his entry into university study, he became fascinated both with the Daoist sage, and, for very different reasons, his Confucian counterpart. As philosopher-kings, he preferred both to that of Plato, because they, “hadn’t lost touch with the world of flowers, food, drink, conversation, dancing, and love-making” (Rosemont 1993, 129).

Rosemont often expressed that he felt it was quite unfortunate that studying philosophy in U.S. universities in the early 1960s meant studying analytic philosophy almost exclusively. Chinese thought was scorned. As a consequence, he took only the minimum requirements to major in Philosophy while devoting much of his time to the study of Chinese language, history, and politics. He wrote, “I was determined to be both logician and lotus-eater, but the task proved more difficult than I anticipated; it was only by the skin of my teeth that I completed the Ph.D.

requirements at the University of Washington and embarked on a professional career” (Rosemont 1993, 130)

Chandler tells us that “After earning a PhD in 1967 at the University of Washington, Rosemont spent two years working with Noam Chomsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At MIT, he did linguistic theory from nine to five, and politics from six until midnight” (Chandler and Littlejohn 2008, 2). In her “Introduction” to Rosemont’s *festschrift*, Chandler rightly pointed out that we left almost entirely untouched Rosemont’s political activism and views. This became increasingly significant because in the years after Rosemont’s retirement he devoted considerable energy to engaging the public with both his criticisms of Western liberal, individualistic, democracy and an advocacy of his own appropriation of Chinese role self-identity and its ethical implications.

Rosemont’s work since 2007 may be understood as an attempt on his part to respond to two challenges he set for himself. First, he committed to the task of establishing a cluster of concepts drawn from the early Confucian canon that would give expression to what he called a “Confucian role ethic”.² Second, he worked toward the articulation of a new concept-cluster to express a genuinely novel philosophical view for the current era (See Ames 2011, xvi). Indeed, Rosemont set out his overall philosophical project in the following way.

I do not wish to imply that the early Confucian writings are the be-all and end-all for finding answers to the multiplicity of questions I have posed....Some Western philosophical concepts will, and should remain with us; some others will have to be stretched, bent, and/or extended significantly in order to represent more accurately non-Western concepts and concept-clusters; and still other Western philosophical concepts may have to be abandoned altogether in favor of others not yet extant, but which will issue from future research as new (and old) concept clusters are advanced and examined. (Rosemont 1991, 92, 94)

It is not far off the mark, if at all, to speak of Rosemont’s most recent works, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing* (2009) done with Roger Ames and *A Reader’s Companion to the Confucian Analects* (2012) as expressions of his response to the first of the challenges he set for himself.

One may wonder, why the *Xiao-Jing* 孝經? Actually, the answer is pretty much ready at hand, although it comes from another of Rosemont’s later works. In the “Prologue” to *Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion* (2015) he wrote,

Because families will continue to be necessary institutions for societies both East and West far into the future, “family values” must be re-ordered so that they no longer remain the sole property of religious fundamentalists and political and social arch-conservatives

² Roger Ames’s work *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* which is the published version of his 2008 Qian Mu 錢穆 (Ch’ien Mu) lectures at The Chinese University of Hong Kong should be understood as an expression of a similar effort by Rosemont’s long-time collaborator.

from anywhere in the world. I will be maintaining, in other words, that a role ethics grounded in a general idea of the family is a prime candidate for a cross-cultural approach to ethics. (Rosemont 2015, loc. 115)

Once we grasp this conviction, then it is clear why Rosemont felt the need to include specifically the *Xiao-Jing* in his (and Ames's) translation portfolio. In that work, the section on "Philosophical and Religious Background" to the text includes expositions of the place of *xiao* 孝 in classical Confucianism, its sociopolitical dimensions, ethical ramifications, its role in "human-centered religiousness", and its centrality to a more comprehensive Chinese philosophical lexicon of classical Confucianism.

Rosemont's *Against Individualism* is certainly best thought of as an attempt to respond to the second of the challenges he posed for himself. This work is by far his most extended effort to establish a Confucian role ethic. Indeed, in the "Prolegomena" to this work he writes,

But even if we are both (i.e., Ames and Rosemont) interpretively mistaken in attributing an ethics of roles to the early Confucians, it would not alter my basic position about the importance of challenging individualism and advancing an ethics of roles, for I could simply re-title this work "Role Ethics: A Different Approach to Moral Philosophy Based on a Creative Misreading of Early Confucian Writings." (Rosemont 2015, loc. 325 my parenthesis)

It is perhaps somewhat startling to read a philosopher admit that his work, based especially as it is on translation of classical texts from another tradition, is a "creative misreading." But Rosemont was quite happy to admit that he did not feel slavishly bound to a rigid or wooden translation, but that he was happy to translate and interpret along the range of possible uses of Chinese terms, or even imagined uses of them which he felt made coherent sense with other terms in what he called "the concept clusters of classical Confucianism".

The subtitle of *Against Individualism* makes it obvious that the work is much more than an exposition on the theory of the self alone, or one devoted exclusively to concerns of public policy or political philosophy. *Against Individualism* is actually a kind of synopsis of Rosemont's philosophy....what turned out to be a last statement of what he thought and why. Accordingly, he states directly,

Overall, then, this is a philosophical book but with numerous political, social and religious undertones, in that I will be taking up issues of contemporary politics and society, cultural movements, the law, patterns of foreign policy, the media, and religion in addition to philosophy qua philosophy—both Western and Chinese. (Rosemont 2015, loc. 95)

Rosemont seemed almost to be quite well aware of the timeliness of *Against Individualism*. He reveals an intense desire to offer this work to a general public and not merely to scholars. In the "Prologue" he writes,

...I have endeavored to keep the body of the work relatively free of detailed philosophical references, allusions, and technical vocabulary to the maximum extent possible consistent with scholarly standards of documentation and narrative. (Rosemont 2015, loc. 95)

In *Against Individualism*, Rosemont sets out first his understanding of Analytic philosophy and then that of Confucian and Comparative Philosophy. For our purposes, I wish to give attention only to what he says about the latter.

Nuances aside, there are two basic approaches one may take to the study of non-Western philosophical and religious writings with respect to their content (as opposed to their origin, philology/etymology, history, etc.). The first, and by far the most common, has been to seek fundamental similarities between the text(s) under examination against the conceptual history and present background of the Western philosophical and religious heritages. Thus the meta-question most commonly used to interrogate Non-Western texts has been “To what extent do these texts suggest answers to philosophical questions that vex us?”

Some other philosophers, however, more absorbed in the breaks and diversity in the history of Western philosophy than the continuities, and finding non-Western writings not fitting neatly into many Western categories and concerns, tend to ask something more like “To what extent do these texts suggest we could be asking different philosophical questions?” Or to put it another way, we should work hard to understand non-Western texts in their own terms, not ours. And in my particular case, I have found the different kinds of questions as helpful both as aids to my translation efforts, and for helping me to see my own intellectual heritage in a different light, less all-encompassing and more culture-bound than I had earlier believed. (Rosemont 2015, loc. 238)

One place where Rosemont is most bothered by those who follow the first approach is the manner in which the earliest Western interpreters of Chinese thought, many of whom were missionaries, looked so very hard for the similarity of a belief in God between the West and China. Rosemont was fond of saying that they “found” the sort of beliefs in the transcendent that they were looking for, even if few non-Christian sinologists and interpreters have found it since.

For Rosemont, putting aside the question of religious transcendence for the moment, and not misinterpreting him as trying to attack Western Abrahamic religions, he reveals his motivations clearly. He observes,

...whatever insights my remarks might provide for readers on this score will come from elaborating what a cosmology, ethics and spirituality might be like that did not involve an all-powerful creator god, immortal souls, a transcendental realm, or require beliefs that contradicted some basic laws of physics or biology, common subjects....

But Rosemont also thought that searching to find similarities between Western and Chinese thought extended beyond religious beliefs and linguistic operators.

My readings of early Confucian texts has [*sic*] not turned up lexical equivalents for the terms in the contemporary concept cluster surrounding “truth,” including the term “truth” itself, and consequently I would argue that the concept of truth as Western philosophers are interested in it today cannot be found in those texts, and consequently in turn, no theory of truth can be attributed to Kongzi (Confucius) or his early followers. (Rosemont 2015, loc. 277)

We can perhaps remonstrate with Rosemont on his conclusions about both religion and truth, but it is perhaps important to notice his landmark contribution to setting the stage for such disputes and to his clarifications of the terrain for doing so, whether linguistically or philosophically. In fact it is just such stage setting that has given birth to many fine studies devoted to the transferability of central concepts in the last decade alone. There are too many of these to mention, and many I am sure about which I do not know. But certainly we should include May Sim’s *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (2007) and Erin Cline’s *Confucius, Rawls and the Sense of Justice* (2012).

Rosemont’s understanding of classical Chinese language had implications far beyond debates in philosophical linguistics. In his essay “Kierkegaard and Confucius: On Finding the Way” (1986) Rosemont describes the impossibility of translating classical Chinese vocabulary into that of Western philosophy. Chandler writes,

Rejecting the strategy of accepting the closest analogue for “moral” in Chinese and going on from there, Rosemont notes that not only is there no lexical item (character) corresponding to “moral,” in classical Chinese, there are none for “freedom,” “choice,” “objective,” “duty,” “rights,” “dilemma,” “individualism,” “autonomy,” or “ought” (1986, 206). Another philosopher might argue that this demonstrates the truth of moral relativism, or conclude that classical Chinese thinkers have nothing to say about ethical evaluations, but Rosemont consistently rejects relativism (1988) and has the deepest respect for Confucian ethical thought. In “Kierkegaard and Confucius” he outlined the differences between the Western moral vocabulary and the classical Chinese the concept-cluster containing terms like *shi* 士 (scholar or knight), *junzi* 君子 (gentlemen or ruler), *shengren* 聖人 (sage or saint), *li* 禮 (rituals, propriety) and *dao* 道 (Way) – a list that can be supplemented with *ren* 仁 (human-kindness, benevolence, goodness), *yi* 義 (reverence, justice, rightness), *shu* 恕 (reciprocity), *xiao* 孝 (filial piety), *xin* 心 (heart-mind), *zhi* 知 (realize, knowledge, know), *de* 德 (power, virtue, inner strength) and *xin* 信 (trustworthy, sincerity, faithful, authenticity). (Chandler and Littlejohn 2008, 3)

Likewise, based on his study of Chinese language about morality, Rosemont did not accept the tendency in much recent comparative philosophy to associate Confucianism with a type of virtue ethics of one kind or another and he argued against all such readings in “Were the Early Confucians Virtuous?” (Ames and Rosemont 2011, 17-41).

Of course, easily the most important way in which Rosemont argued that Western and Confucian discourses offered alternative approaches to human nature combined both his political and linguistic interests. He often surfaced the way in which Western

political discourse has thought rights language to be the primary way of thinking about human interactions in community and he objected to the way rights were divided into first generation civil and political rights; second generation economic and social rights to things like education, health care and employment; and third generation community rights, such as the rights of indigenous people living in nation-states (Rosemont 1998, 1).

Rosemont consistently traced the definition and defense of first generation rights to the assumption that human beings are autonomous, free, and essentially isolated atomistic individuals. He often described such rights as negative rights; that is, as the right to be left alone, he was fond of saying. Anyone who was around Rosemont's presentation of a discussion of human rights will recall that he almost always would say, "I can usually respect your first generation rights by simply ignoring you." He repeatedly confessed that he could find no real philosophical reason for the tendency for Western philosophers faced with any conflict between first and second generation rights to assume that first generation rights are more fundamental than second generation rights.

Rosemont's interest in religious experience as reflected in *Rationality and Religious Experience* (2001) and in his work with Huston Smith, *Is there a Universal Grammar of Religion?* (2008) represents his attempt to find a meaningful conception of the sacrality of the human life itself. He considered most of the ontological and metaphysical claims of the world's religions too fantastic for a rational person to believe (Rosemont 2001, 10-11). He refused to agree that there are religious beliefs having transcendent reference in the classical Confucian texts but he insisted that the emphasis on ethical obligations and the five relationships of humans in these texts held out a spiritual path that could imbue life with a kind of human-centered sacredness. He continued to maintain this position in *Against Individualism* where he wrote the following.

My own work with sacred texts, especially the Confucian, suggests more generally a sense of belonging, belonging in the midst of those who have preceded us, are with us now, and those who will follow us. In the Abrahamic faiths we speak of "atonement," but that sense is much better understood in the context of Confucianism when syllabicated differently: at-one-ment. (Rosemont 2015, loc. 3154)

For Rosemont, the world's faiths ultimately represent paths to the sort of belongingness that creates the at-one-ment with others that is the full meaning of the sacred.

It is perhaps fitting to conclude this introduction to *Comparative Philosophy's* memorial section for Rosemont by referring to the quote from Thomas Hardy with which he prefaces the chapter entitled, "The Religious Dimensions of Role-Bearing Family Lives" (Rosemont 2015, Ch. 9):

I am the family face;
Flesh perishes,
I live on

Projecting trait and trace
 Through time to times anon
 And leaping from place to place
 Over oblivion. (Rosemont 2015, loc. 3316).

For Rosemont, making life and relationships better for people here and how expresses something closer to a religious truth, rather than a political or scientific one. He held that Chinese sages and Confucian texts can show us “how to more fully dwell in the secular to make it sacred” (Rosemont 2001, 58).

And thus, we may say, dear Henry, you were indeed both logician and lotus-eater, and if the task proved more difficult than you anticipated, you nevertheless realized it with grace and left behind you the fragrance of the sacred.

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