

An Article for *Encyclopedia of American Philosophy* on:

Robert Cummings Neville

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Robert Cummings Neville (1939--)

Biography

Robert Cummings Neville was born May 1, 1939 in St. Louis, Missouri. He took a PhD in philosophy at Yale University (1963). He has held teaching and administrative positions at Yale (1963--1965), Fordham University (1965--1971), SUNY Purchase (1971--1977), SUNY Stony Brook (1977--1987), and Boston University (1987--). He served as a Hastings Institute Associate for behavioral sciences specializing in behavior control and psychosurgery (1968--1971). Neville has been President of the Metaphysical Society of America (1989), President of the American Academy of Religion (1992), President of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy (1993), and a member of numerous other professional and service groups. He was ordained as Deacon in the United Methodist Church in 1963, and Elder in 1966.

Development of Neville's Thought

Neville's work has revolved around metaphysics and themes in philosophical theology. In his first book, *God the Creator*, he articulated a theory of divine creation *ex nihilo* that interprets divine transcendence in terms of God being wholly indeterminate apart from creation and immanence as creativity within the determinate harmonies of creation. While this theory is well-suited to solving many classical metaphysical problems, especially the problem of the one and the many and the problem of divine transcendence and immanence, the radical immanence of God in creation presents a challenge to human freedom. Neville's work on the social sciences through the Hastings Center and the philosophical influences of Whitehead and Dewey led him to a theory of freedom in three parts: personal, social, and spiritual freedom. This was published in *Cosmology of Freedom* and applied in *Soldier, Sage, Saint*. Complementing these works was his critique of the metaphysics of process thought in *Creativity and God*.

In 1981, Neville began his Axiology of Thinking series, a three-volume work of systematic philosophy articulating the thesis that all thinking is valuing. The series begins with a critique of modern philosophy's attempts to be value-free and postmodern philosophy's futile attempts to avoid theory construction. Neville offers detailed treatments of four kinds of valuing-thinking---imagination, interpretation, theorizing, and the pursuit of responsibility. The Axiology of Thinking evolves symbiotically with a philosophy of nature that treats the natural world as intrinsically valuable, leading to causal theories of imagination and interpretation. The accounts of theorizing and responsibility integrate Confucian and Western philosophical themes. The Axiology of Thinking series is an unusual and exceptionally rich contribution to modern Western philosophy.

Neville's interest in comparative religion, already evident in the argument of *God the Creator*, has produced a series of writings. These works continue the metaphysics of his first book while exploring the connections between abstract metaphysics and social-political philosophy. They exhibit cross-cultural sensitivity and a special interest in

Chinese philosophy. *The Tao and the Daimon* examines many East-West themes in comparative fashion, including the problem of multiple religious identities. *Behind the Masks of God* continues this project with special emphasis on the treatment of religious thought in the field of religious studies. *The Puritan Smile* is a work at the intersection of comparative metaphysics and practical philosophy. *Boston Confucianism* epitomizes Neville's synthesis of Western and Confucian thought and has drawn the attention of Chinese philosophers.

The Highroad around Modernism contains an important argument that the pragmatic tradition of American philosophy (especially Peirce and Dewey) has no need to escape from the problems of modernist, foundationalist philosophy because it avoided getting entangled in them altogether. *Eternity and Time's Flow* furnishes an account of a major religious theme while continuing the interest in freedom by situating the problem of personal responsibility in the context of the theory of creation. *The Truth of Broken Symbols* uses a naturalistic epistemology to develop an interpretation of religious experience and the practice of religion. It contains an unusually rich theory of symbols that extends a semiotic theory in the style of Peirce to the problem of religious symbolism. *Symbols of Jesus* and *The Scope and Truth of Theology* begin a long-term project, as yet unfinished, aiming to interpret the symbols of major religious traditions in a demythologized way that does full justice to their transformative and imaginative power.

Central Ideas

Neville's system of philosophy is still being extended but is already broad in scope, addressing many of the central Western philosophical problems of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, political theory, and philosophical theology. The chief characteristics of the system are its engagement of East Asian and South Asian philosophical traditions; its concern to do justice to conditions of plausibility drawn from the sciences and religion; its stylistic range from highly abstract metaphysics to concrete applications in religion, education, and bioethics; its thoroughgoing naturalism; and its indebtedness to pragmatic and process philosophical traditions.

Neville's naturalistic system does justice to religion, ethics, and politics in great detail. By contrast, most naturalistic systems (including Quine's, for example) have trouble registering such phenomena with due seriousness. This feature of Neville's system is due to the fact that he centralizes the idea of valuing and indicates his profound indebtedness to the various Platonic traditions of philosophy. At the same time, however, Neville's system of philosophy maintains contact with science and scientific canons of intelligibility, resisting the temptation of value-centered philosophies to degenerate into vague heuristics or mystical flights from the world. Specifically, on the one hand, Neville's metaphysics is neutral to specific scientific outcomes, making it less liable to collapse as scientific knowledge advances (though it loses some of the concrete intelligibility that a theory has when it clearly indicates what scientific discoveries might falsify it). On the other hand, he frames ethical and political problems in explicit dialogue with knowledge derived from the social and natural sciences, and requires of his metaphysics that it account for the world as the social and natural sciences disclose it to be.

Four aspects of Neville's system are particularly original. First, his theory of God as determinate Creator but as wholly indeterminate apart from creation solves many conundrums in the philosophical problem of the one and the many. It answers the question of "Why is there something rather than nothing?" with reference to the divine will (in the fashion of Duns Scotus) and in such a way as to permit fruitful engagement with ontological theories in non-Western religious and philosophical traditions. It is problematic in relation to traditional forms of theism, which picture creation as reflecting the divine nature, but Neville argues that this kind of theism cannot finally solve the problem of the one and the many.

Second, Neville's metaphysics is naturalistic and yet capable of registering a wide range of phenomena. His account of space, time, motion, and causation leads to a theory of intentionality rooted in patterns of causation, thus remaining consistent with naturalist commitments. This yields a theory of truth as causal (and so properly naturalistic) yet non-mechanistic, thereby avoiding a weakness of many naturalistic theories of truth. Neville argues that truth is the carryover of value from an object to an interpreter. This carryover is by means of signs, so a semiotics is presupposed. The respect in which a sign stands for an object determines the way value is carried over. This non-foundationalist theory of truth is not a part of major analytic or continental projects but has a predominantly American heritage running through Edwards, Emerson, Peirce, and Dewey (along with the Scottish common-sense philosophers, such as Dougald Stewart and Thomas Reid), and a far older heritage in Platonic philosophy through the concept of participation.

Third, Neville's cross-cultural study has yielded a theory of comparison. He argues that the comparison of religious and philosophical ideas across cultures requires an array of comparative categories linking the most specific ideas (such as the view of a human person in a particular religious text or practice) by means of categories of intermediate vagueness to extremely general categories (such as "human condition"). Each category of comparison is simultaneously vague in respect of the specific things compared by means of it, and specific in respect of some encompassing category of which it is a specification. Neville's theory provides skillful comparativists the theoretical framework needed to avoid both of the distortions plaguing cross-cultural comparison: insufficient sensitivity to details and the surreptitious predominance of the perspective of the comparativist. This was worked out in practice through Neville's Comparative Religious Ideas Project, which produced three volumes of results in 2001.

Fourth, Neville's interest in religious symbols is deeply coordinated with his semiotic theory and his theory of truth. A symbol is true in an objective sense when it rightly engages its object and true in a subjective sense when it rightly orders the symbol wielder in relation to the symbol's object. This double analysis resists both one-sided philosophical dismissals of religion and the uncritical habits of religious superstition. Neville's lifelong study of the world religions is the inspiration for this aspect of his philosophy. He regards religion as a major test for the adequacy of a philosophical interpretation of reality. Philosophy need not confirm the truth claims of religion but it must account for the details of religion's imaginative potencies and social functions.

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