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Review of Unity of knowledge and action: Toward a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge

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Citation

TAN, Sor-hoon.(2005). Review of Unity of knowledge and action: Toward a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73(4), 1206-1208.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/2534

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Published in Journal of American Academy of Religion
Vol. 73 Issue 4, December 2005,
page 1206-1208

Unity of Knowledge and Action: Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge. By Warren Frisina. State University of New York Press, 2002. 262 pages. \$22.95.

The title of this book is inspired by the Neo-Confucian scholar, Wang Yangming (1472–1529). However, the volume is not devoted solely to Wang Yangming's philosophy about the unity of knowledge and action. Wang is only one of several thinkers brought into this philosophical conversation and does not even receive the most attention (Richard Rorty has that honor). The conversation is interesting and occasionally illuminating, although one is not sure at the end whether it is moving toward one particular nonrepresentation theory of knowledge or whether the conversation partners who share an aversion to representational theories might disagree profoundly about what kind of nonrepresentational theory will suffice.

Frisina's aim in this work is to highlight the connections among Neo-Confucian, pragmatic, and process philosophies' nonrepresentational metaphysics and epistemology, against the background of contemporary challenges to the representational theory of knowledge within analytic philosophy, postanalytic philosophy, continental philosophy, and cognitive science. These contemporary challenges found in the works of Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, and Daniel Dennett are inadequate in their metaphysical assumptions. In this respect, Frisina believes that the metaphysics of Wang Yangming, John Dewey, and Alfred North Whitehead will clear the path toward a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge, wherein "knowledge and action are really one thing" (2).

The case for the unity of knowledge and action is made "largely by exposition, juxtaposition, and reconstruction" (8) rather than analytic arguments. The exposition of the works of thinkers included is clear and engaging. The author's discussion of works of Davidson, Rorty, Taylor, and Dennett not only lays out the central problems of representational theories within epistemology itself but also elucidates the significant implications of such epistemology for our understanding of the self, of the human mind, of the way we experience one another and the world.

One implication of treating knowledge as representation of an external world separate from the self, rather than as a form of action through which the self engages the rest of the world, is the reduction of qualities and values to mere epiphenomena without objective reality. Taylor resists this conclusion by showing the phenomenological necessity of the evaluative process in constituting the self. Frisina criticizes Taylor for not giving values ontological status. Frisina favors what he calls Dewey's and Whitehead's nonreductionistic naturalism, which posits a continuity between human experience and that of other organisms, as capable of supplying the requisite ontological ballast.

Frisina defends the viability and relevance of metaphysics from a pragmatic point of view: it need not involve deductive and a priori foundations but could be a hypothetical and speculative account of the general traits of experience that enables us to better appreciate how knowledge is a form of action. The book

probably would not convince those pragmatists who are most resistant to metaphysical speculations; they would insist that we are more in need of a concrete nonrepresentational theory of knowledge that works, and metaphysical discussions would only divert energy into inconsequential disagreements.

The central chapters of the book present the metaphysical and epistemological positions of Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead. Wang proposed the doctrine of “unity of knowledge and action” in response to the epistemological dualism among Ming dynasty Neo-Confucians who separated learning from acting. Wang’s doctrine builds on five metaphysical presuppositions. Being is dynamic within the universe viewed as a creative matrix of processes, which “underscores the ontological continuity between human existence and nature” (80). There is ontological interdependence in the “interactions of vibratory wave patterns of *yin* contraction and *yang* extension” (80–81) constituting the processes of the universe. *Li* (principle) creates all the patterns of interactions, while individual *li*, each specific pattern created, defines a specific entity. By extending *li* in ways previously not realized, one could “form one body with all things” (84). The potential of ontological interdependence has to be made manifest through human creative participation in the harmonic structures of *Li*. In maximizing the possibilities within the creative process, one fulfils *ch’eng* (sincerity), which integrates human creativity with the cosmic creativity of *Li*.

Wang’s metaphysics precludes separation of physical from mental, of subject from object, of knowledge from action. Within that metaphysics, knowledge is a movement within the larger movements of the Tao itself. Subject and object are unified in the identification of *hsin* (heart-mind) with *Li* from the beginning. Knowledge and action are one thing because *Li* is not to be sought outside the *hsin*, which is not merely a cognitive center but where “we create who we are by determining what our relation with others will be” (92). Knowledge is the action of relating creatively and harmoniously with others (including objects). The move toward a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge is aided by de-emphasizing cognitive processes in favor of continuity of all experiences implying pre-cognitive sources of knowledge. Wang’s concept of *liang-chih* (innate knowledge) is one such source: a prereflective moment that “preceded and provided the foundation for all more complicated cognitive activity” (94).

Dewey and Whitehead also expand experience beyond cognition in their attempt to combat the pernicious dichotomies that afflict substance ontology and its epistemological consequences. While mindful of their differences, Frisina sees similarities in Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead with regard to an ontology wherein “final real things” (141) are not fixed substances with secondary characteristics but “nodes of causal relatedness” (141). For them, cognition is not “an ontologically distinct purely mental re-presentation of what is happening in the causal realm” (141). It is a specific kind of relational activity, continuous rather than separate from perception because instead of ontological divides separating minds and bodies, experience and nature, there is only one organic continuum.

Frisina acknowledges that the panpsychism and organicism in such metaphysics are viewed with suspicion and devotes one chapter to outlining and responding to Rorty’s critique of panpsychism in Dewey’s concept of experience,

which describes an organism's coping with its environment. "Experience is not an essential characteristic of an independently existing subject. It is, rather, a *trait* exhibited within organic situations and in that sense is not owned by any individual" (156). In Frisina's view panpsychism offers a nonreductive physicalism. It dissolves the problem of connecting mental to physical and relating cognition to perception without reducing one to the other. Apart from avoiding problematic dualisms, panpsychism is also becoming fashionable in certain philosophical circles "newly fascinated by the way bodies, minds, experience, and nature are all interwoven into a complex organic network" (161).

Frisina considers Rorty's worry, that any use of "experience" raises the specter of representationalism, a consequence of his early commitment to the linguistic turn which creates an unbridgeable gulf between perception and cognition. Deweyans such as Frisina have no problem with Rorty's accounts of language as a coping tool rather than a mapping device, and of the contingent creation of selves and worlds through language games, but they balk at Rorty's claim that there can be *no* criterion governing the shift from one language game to another. There is no absolute atemporal criterion, but Dewey would insist that such shifts occur because the new game offers greater satisfaction. While the definition of "satisfaction" is left open, this is not a rejection of all criteria. Rorty's linguistic turn leads him to suppose, contrary to Dewey, that higher order cognitive activity is independent of other levels of experience.

Frisina gives Rorty credit for "exposing the radical side of the early Pragmatic thinkers" (178) in a manner similar to the way Taoist insights facilitate the expression of tendencies toward openness and spontaneity in Neo-Confucian thought. Neo-Confucians remain Confucian even as they learned from the Taoist by reaffirming their commitment to human responsibility for creating new orders as partners with heaven and earth. Similarly, Deweyans remain pragmatic even as they assimilate Rorty's postmodernism by reaffirming the continuity between linguistic behavior and all other levels of experience, between experience and nature.

In conclusion, Frisina brings to readers' attention the works of two contemporary philosophers who assert the organic bases of human cognition. Mark Johnson's work from within the field of analytic philosophy, cognitive science, and linguistics provides resources for building on the metaphysical insights of Neo-Confucianism, pragmatism, and process philosophy, to build a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge. Robert Neville has attempted a comprehensive "axiology of thinking" (215) that takes account of the role of values in cognition.

In providing a starting point for connecting the projects of a disparate group, Frisina succeeds in making it "easier for followers of each thinker to see how their work connects fruitfully with followers of the others" (235–236).