

P R E F A C E

In the ensuing pages fifteen senior scholars from a variety of perspectives critically examine the thought of Robert Cummings Neville. Until now, aside from journal articles and a symposium or two, there has been no sustained, book-length treatment of the work of one of the most significant philosophers and theologians of our time. Long convinced of the value of Neville's profound and wide-ranging vision, we as editors invited the sympathetic but critical appraisals of experts in the several fields within which Neville works. Each of the essays that appear here has been specially solicited for this volume. Neville himself has responded to each author in a lengthily concluding essay that, to our delight, furthers the dialectic and suggests additional research projects.

A prolific writer, Neville to date has authored fourteen books beginning with his dialectically brilliant *God the Creator: On the Transcendence and Presence of God* (1968) and continuing with a series of studies testing his central metaphysical hypotheses through their applications in cosmology, ethics, social and political thought, cultural criticism, comparative religions, theology, and philosophy of religion in a global culture. Even when gravitating toward metaphysical generality, Neville does not blink at the real issues of the time, addressing the fact-value split in modern culture, postmodernism, non-Western philosophies and religions, as well as issues in biomedical ethics, capitalist-socialist debates, religion in contemporary Western culture, God, freedom, time and eternity. His work calls out for serious examination, to which this volume makes an original contribution.

We believe that the essays that follow, including Neville's, together provide a good introduction to the range and depth of Neville's thought as well as a critical commentary on significant issues, themes, and arguments. Readers with limited previous exposure to his work—an *oeuvre* that can be as daunting as it is ambitious—deserve a brief introduction here to the dimensions of Neville's overall intellectual enterprise. To grasp *how* he works is helpful for understanding *what* he says. We wish to highlight four aspects or interrelated identities: the dialectician, the hypothetical metaphysician, the comparativist, and the critic.

First of all, by temperament and as evidenced in his first book thirty years ago, Neville is a dialectician. He once quipped that there were probably only six people in the world who think the way he does. This rather

unique designation is due not to his capacity for abstract thought—many intellectuals possess such a gift—but to his penchant for, and demonstrated skill at, sustained dialectical thought. Neville has a high regard for and commitment to rational faith, in the sense of seeking and offering reasoned explanations for things about which humans have genuine concern, deep puzzlement, or profound questions, even if it should mean that there is no certifying authority or simple and satisfying means of verification. The alternative to rational faith is a horrifyingly irrational display of brute force; Neville sides with Socrates over Thrasymachus. This commitment does not, however, produce an airy rationalist, who subsumes experience under a few principles but never justifies the structure of rationality. Rather, as a dialectician, Neville starts with the fundamental questions, including ultimately those of existence, and searches for what would finally and satisfyingly account for everything, including the so-called “first principles.” In contradistinction to Aristotle and Kant, who interpreted dialectic as a specious form of argument, but like Plato, Aquinas, and Hegel, who saw dialectic as the highest form of reasoning, Neville believes that for a thesis to be established there must be the consideration and critique of alternative claims proffered as answers to a genuine question, which claims are, in turn, critiqued in light of the norms they presuppose. Dialectic in this and related senses—whether the consideration of alternatives in the process of self-criticism or in the social process of examination of alternative theories—is methodological. Through intellectual give-and-take, problems and their possible solutions are clarified and refined; categories initially considered are transformed into those more nearly instantiating the ideal of system. Neville pursues methodological dialectic with rigor, systematically pushing thought—his own and that of others—toward greater consistency, coherence, application, and adequacy to experience. Dialectic begins in experience generously and profoundly pondered, elucidated, organized and interpreted categorially, ramified, applied and tested. Neville’s first book, *God the Creator* (1968), makes masterful use of methodological dialectic; in a later volume, *Creativity and God* (1980), he engages dialectically the writings of Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and scholars in the process-theological tradition.

Yet it is the second major type of dialectic—constitutive dialectic—that more centrally gets at Neville’s unique contribution: reality itself is dialectically constituted. Hegel and Marx would have agreed, but they lack the profound ontology that Neville puts forth. In this form of dialectic, there is the search for an explanation for the determinations of existence—every thing has an identity comprising both essential and conditional features—which would account for why things are together and, further, why they are at all. This search yields the explanation of the

indeterminate creator (or act of creating) that accounts for all the determinations of being, including the determination of indeterminate being to the degree that it is the creating source of the world of determinations. Reality is seen as paradoxically indeterminate and determinate, infinite and finite, eternal and temporal, radically transcendent and totally present. It is the job of constitutive dialectic to trace the contours and signal the shifts in context and meaning as philosophical reflection seeks to align itself with its paradoxical subject matter. According to Neville, dialectic has not completed its work, nor rationality fully asserted its rights, unless and until it has moved from the world of contingent reality to what both grounds and transcends that world. *God the Creator* is the most sustained employment of constitutive dialectic known to us; it is a veritable tour de force. Its central arguments are repeated throughout Neville's work and can be seen especially in *Soldier, Sage, Saint* (1978), *The Tao and the Daimon* (1982), *Behind the Masks of God* (1991), *A Theology Primer* (1991), and *Eternity and Time's Flow* (1991).

In the second place, as a "speculative pragmatist," Neville operates hypothetically, that is, metaphysics is seen as hypothesis. For him, there is no absolute foundation in experience: all experiencing and all thinking involves selection, and selection entails a judgment about what is important. Other theories, of course, select different data, stimulated by different questions, categorize the selected data differently, and seek to test the hypothesis by its application to experience considered important. The ultimate test of a good metaphysical hypothesis is its ability to provide guidance in the practical affairs of life, the "issues of men (and women)," as John Dewey would have it. Inescapably, it is hypothesis all the way up and all the way down. Embracing metaphysics as hypothesis commits Neville to a radical vulnerability and fallibility. A good metaphysician, he insists, consciously puts forth a theory in such a way as to invite critique. A system, ramified and even profound, can never be certain. It is always, as William James frequently said, "ever not quite." Neville's three-volume *Axiology of Thinking* (*Reconstruction of Thinking* in 1981, *Recovery of the Measure* in 1989, and *Normative Cultures* in 1995) as well as his earlier *Cosmology of Freedom* (1974) present the argument that all thinking rests on a basis of value and that all acts of thinking are perforce evaluative.

In the third place, Neville is a comparativist. He has made it increasingly central to his thought to take in, compare, and reflect upon world philosophies and theologies. He has made a special attempt to open his thinking to the East Asian influence, especially Confucian and Buddhist philosophies. To think globally is a formidable task since philosophies incorporate widely varying cultural assumptions—aesthetic, religious, and practical. Without some categories of comparison, however, one

culture cannot get close enough to assess, and be assessed by, another; yet the categories themselves may be seriously flawed and in need of radical critique. The vulnerability that Neville makes crucial to metaphysics is felt most keenly in cross-cultural comparison. Within an emerging global culture, the axiology of thinking must run the risk of making itself even more vulnerable. Neville's comparativism is most clearly seen in *The Tao and the Daimon* (1982), *Behind the Masks of God* (1991), and *Normative Cultures* (1995).

Finally, Neville is a critic. He believes that thinking should make a difference in the time and place in which one lives. This pulls him into serious and critical engagement with the issues of the culture. This approach is seen in his dialectical assessment of philosophies and theologies, in his treatment of economic theories and political ideologies, and most recently in his sustained critique of the totalizing attitudes and moves of modernism and postmodernism alike. Neville attacks the foundationalism and the rebellion against bourgeois culture of modernism and the revolt against systematic philosophy and its replacement with a move toward edifying conversation, albeit of serious moral concern, in some important versions of postmodernism. His critical work is best seen in *The Puritan Smile* (1987) and particularly in *The Highroad around Modernism* (1992).

Further ramifying and testing his metaphysical hypotheses in the fields of hermeneutics and semiotics, Neville has continued the dialectic most recently in *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (1996) and is even now, indefatigably, projecting it into future volumes. Let this collection of critical essays, then, be the first such attempt to come to terms, at century's end, with the thought of Robert Cummings Neville. Knowing that serious responses to philosophical originality are usually slow in forming, we bequeath to the twenty-first century the next set of essays that will still be needed for the full comprehension of this one scholar's rich contribution.

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