

On This Topic

Towards a More Comprehensive Moral Psychology: *Integrating East Asian Perspectives*

Guest edited by Doil Kim*

Contemporary moral psychology seeks to unravel the intricate psychological processes underlying moral judgments, emotions, and virtues. Drawing on recent research in the fields of empirical and evolutionary psychology, as well as cognitive neuroscience, scholars aim to shed light on the complexities of human morality. The study of East Asian philosophy by philosophers trained in the Anglo-American tradition has applied these results to a number of traditional East Asian thinkers.

Of particular interest is the treasure trove of profound wisdom in traditional Confucian thought concerning moral psychology and human nature in general. English-speaking scholars have been diligently scrutinizing a plethora of claims from Confucian philosophy that intersect with contemporary moral psychology, hoping for mutual enlightenment between the two disciplines. The focus has fallen on intriguing topics such as early Confucian responses to the critique of global virtues from a situationist perspective, the cognitive aspects of emotions as understood through Confucian principles, and the foundational role of innate inclinations in morality, which draws upon the concept of moral modularity.

However, there remains a lingering concern for the future of East Asian philosophy—a yearning for a more profound integration of

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the experiences of contemporary East Asians into moral psychology research. One pressing issue that requires further attention is an asymmetry in theory building and testing that results in having the experiences of modern East Asians not adequately reflected in the study of East Asian philosophy itself. This challenge does not simply call for contemporary moral psychology to rely more heavily on the experiences of modern East Asians than it currently does. It also necessitates a deeper appreciation of the experiences of modern East Asians even when studying their own philosophical tradition. After all, this tradition continues to shape the everyday lives of modern East Asians and those who have been influenced by their culture.

Regrettably, the study of East Asian philosophy has not fully embraced the indigenization of these experiences. As a consequence, the standards of experience in the field are largely biased in favor of data and analysis based on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) samples rather than accounting for the unique experiences of modern East Asians. This results in the asymmetry noted above. Western theories often provide the primary concepts, approaches, and goals, which are then applied to East Asian traditional materials, overlooking the rich tapestry of modern East Asian experiences.

To address these concerns, we organized the academic conference “Contemporary Moral Psychology and Cross-cultural Moral Psychology,” held at Georgetown University on September 22–23, 2022. The conference was co-organized by Philip J. Ivanhoe at Georgetown University and myself, and it was co-sponsored by the Center for the Contemporary Study of East Asian Classics and Critical Confucianism (CCECC) at Sungkyunkwan University, Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and the National Research Foundation of Korea. The event featured a total of nine presentations, each delving into various issues that arise at the intersection of East Asian thought with contemporary moral psychology and social or cultural psychology. One of the important foci was exploring how the study of East Asian philosophy can extend beyond merely gleaning insights from traditional Confucian texts to understanding the experiences of contemporary individuals.

From these presentations, we have compiled five papers to form this special issue. Each showcases the diversity in research directions within the realm of moral psychology concerning East Asian philosophy, thereby illuminating the interconnectedness of these disciplines. These contributions collectively shed light on the relevance of East Asian philosophical perspectives for contemporary moral psychology, further enriching our understanding of the complexities of human morality across cultures.

Let me introduce each of the papers briefly, highlighting the different issues they explore:

Jin Li's paper emphasizes the importance of paying attention to emotions that have been developed and shared within the Confucian cultural context when studying the moral psychology of East Asians. These emotions are not purely natural but are shaped and influenced by cultural values and norms. She identifies four aspects of these emotions, which she names as philosophized, moralized, ritualized, and aestheticized. Among such emotions, her focus particularly centers on the emotions of filial piety and humility, topics extensively discussed in two other papers within this special issue.

Monima Chadha and Shaun Nichols's paper takes a typical comparative philosophical approach to the prominent moral emotion of gratitude. Their study revolves around the compatibility issue between the concept of gratitude prevalent in Western analytic philosophy and the concept of no-self prominent in Buddhist philosophy. They raise the question of whether it is possible to express gratitude to someone for the benefits he has given without presupposing a specific self, as viewed from a Buddhist perspective. They delve into the formation of gratitude within the Buddhist cultural sphere in a manner consistent with the concept of no-self. This exploration is closely related to the overarching theme of our special issue, aiming to explain the differences in moral emotions arising from cultural variations.

Hagop Sarkissian's attention is drawn to the distinctive moral emotion and virtue of filial piety among East Asians. He raises challenging questions about the legitimacy of filial piety from a modern moral standpoint, particularly in the context of Confucian culture. Specifically, he questions whether sons and daughters are morally obligated to show

absolute filial piety even towards parents who deserve moral criticism. In an attempt to answer this question, he delves into a textual analysis of the relevant literature, focusing on the notion of remonstrance and its limits. He thus seeks to clarify the conceptual roots of filial piety, which remains highly relevant in the experiences of modern East Asians.

Keunchang Oh focuses on “*hwabyeong* 火病,” a particularly indigenous moral emotion in Korea. Previously classified as a Korean culture-bound syndrome in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (by health care professionals in the United States), *hwabyeong* represents a highly culturally specific form of anger. Through a philosophical inquiry into *hwabyeong*, Oh endeavors to uncover the intricate interplay between emotions and cultural influences. While the paper maintains some skepticism about the cultural specificity of *hwabyeong*, it underscores the importance of exploring the cultural or indigenous nature of certain moral emotions.

Finally, in my own paper, I shift my focus to the virtue of humility within the East Asian Confucian traditions. Acknowledging the profound significance of humility in shaping the mindset of contemporary individuals influenced by Confucian teachings, I draw attention to the limitations of defining the true essence of humility as found in these traditions. According to my argument, this limitation stems, in part, from various biases prevalent among researchers in both the East and the West, as well as among those influenced by the Confucian tradition themselves, when it comes to understanding humility or modesty. These biases, I note, are encapsulated in the concept of “modesty-bias,” which is frequently associated with collectivist cultural traits in modern social and cultural psychology, particularly in East Asian contexts. I aim to distinguish between attitudes or behaviors associated with modesty-bias and traditional Confucian humility, emphasizing that failing to make this distinction hinders our understanding of Confucian humility as a virtue and its contemporary relevance.

The aforementioned papers offer diverse approaches to exploring moral emotions and virtues within East Asian traditions. As mentioned earlier, it is crucial for our future endeavors to reexamine and interpret certain aspects of East Asian philosophy in light of modern scientific achievements, such as recent empirical and evolutionary psychology

research and cognitive neuroscience. However, this special issue highlights the simultaneous necessity of gaining a clearer understanding of the social and cultural specificities that shape these moral phenomena. In this process, some of the papers underscore the importance of integrating the "contemporary" perspective in a compelling manner. This involves grounding our inquiries in the lived experiences of contemporary East Asians and seeking a more nuanced comprehension of their worldview.

Building upon this foundation, we can enrich our understanding of universal human moral experiences. In other words, such endeavors pave the way for a more inclusive and insightful exploration of moral psychology, effectively bridging the gap between East and West and providing us with a more intricate understanding of the variegated tapestry of human morality across diverse cultural contexts.