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Review Article: *Moral Agency in Eastern and Western Thought*

Moral Agency in Eastern and Western Thought, by Jonathan Jacobs and Heinz-Deiter Meyer. London: Routledge, 2025, 316 pages. £45.99. Paperback. ISBN: 9781032623795.

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Moral Agency in Eastern and Western Thought (Jacobs and Meyer 2025)[1] is a worthy addition to a growing list of anthologies and works dealing broadly with ethics, moral education, and self-cultivation in traditions of Eastern and Western philosophy. It contributes to a body of work in intercultural philosophy found in such volumes as *Philosophy East/ West: Exploring Intersections Between Educational and Contemplative Practice* (Ergas and Todd 2016)[2]; *Moral Education and the Ethics of Self-Cultivation Chinese and Western Perspectives* (Peters et. al 2021)[3]; and *Ethics and Self-Cultivation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Dennis and Werkhoven 2018).

Moral Agency reflects an orientation toward virtue ethics, as is evident in the editors' choice of self-cultivation and selfcrafting as the governing concept for analyzing moral agency: "In many of the traditions discussed here, character is conceived as the result of a persistent, enduring, self-directed process; a special kind of 'effort on oneself' or on one's moral practices, conduct, and action" (Jacobs and Meyer 2025, 1). This focus is well-reflected in the essays selected for the volume, not merely because many of them adopt and explore this analogy, but because several also identify its limits in interesting ways. Although most of the chapters deal with the expected cast of philosophers relevant to such a focus—Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Mencius,

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1 Henceforth abbreviated as *Moral Agency*.

2 Henceforth abbreviated as *Philosophy East/West*.

3 Henceforth abbreviated as *Moral Education*.

Xunzi, Dōgen, even Augustine—a few draw comparisons between unexpected thinkers, such Maimonides and Confucius (Jacobs 2025a) and Vasubandhu and Parfit (Hanner 2025).

The focus on self-cultivation as a theme common to Eastern and Western virtue ethics is not unique to the *Moral Agency*, however; the usefulness of virtue ethics as a framework for comparing ethical philosophies from Eastern and Western traditions appears to be well-established, as Peters et. al (2021, 5) also observe that

> The analysis of all three classical traditions—Aristotelian, Confucian and Buddhist—reveals a remarkably similar conception and emphasis on moral self-cultivation as a practical answer of how humans become virtuous, even if each tradition provides its own distinct figure of the virtuous person.

Moral Agency distinguishes itself by specifying a few motivating questions about the activity of self-cultivation: does it involve the acquisition of skills or of dispositions? How do the individual's efforts at self-cultivation relate to the community? Should perfect virtue be understood primarily as an achievement of understanding, or of sentiment (Jacobs and Meyer 2025, 2)? In defining its focus in this way, *Moral Agency* also distinguishes its overarching project from *Moral Education*, which Peters et. al (2021, 7) envisioned as a response to recent challenges denying one of the core premises of virtue ethics: that significant—even radical—change of character is possible through self-cultivation. Although Richard Kim's (2025) contribution to *Moral Agency* responds to the challenges of Situationism, Jacobs and Meyer do not present their volume as a robust response to critics of virtue ethics. By and large, the contributors assume self-cultivation to be at least an intelligible endeavor that both Eastern and Western traditions of moral philosophy can elucidate, even if some are more optimistic than others about the psychological plausibility and effectiveness of the self-crafting of character.

Moral Agency also sets its ambitions higher than mere comparative philosophy, in light of what Jacobs and Meyers call the "shrinking distance" between Eastern and Western philosophy; namely, to provide

a body of scholarship that treats the insights of each tradition as a "global group of intellectual resources illuminating the main issues" (2025, 2). It is worth examining their vision of this, since in volumes of a similar nature, one finds a certain anxiety about justifying the intellectual endeavor in terms of more worthy—or simply more practical—aims than the satisfaction of one's curiosity by doing comparative philosophy. Ergas and Todd (2016, 1), for instance, construe the value of *Philosophy East/West* quite practically: the increasing use of mindfulness practices from Eastern traditions in institutions of learning necessitates an investigation of the sources of such practices, as well as their possible impacts on pedagogy. Jacobs and Meyer propose that the value of intellectual resources about self-cultivation pertains, on the one hand, to the backdrop of interconnected worlds of scholarship—Eastern and Western—about virtue ethics: different traditions can learn how each deals with common challenges, even discovering new insights about themselves through the comparison. But on the other hand—and more interestingly—the value of such intercultural scholarship may aid us in making more *self-conscious* choices about new directions for our collective ethical life in the twenty-first century, by showing us ". . .what is possible and what are the consequences of certain institutional arrangements or policies" (Jacobs and Meyer 2025, 2).

Moral Agency contains several examples of the value that the editors intend. Meyer (2025a, 126) argues that humanities education might be revitalized by such resources, offering his work on the "heart-mind" as the proper object that undergoes transformation through education. The "non-dual" nature of the heart-mind—that it is *both* affect and reason—can serve as an antidote to the intellectualist prejudice of contemporary education, which "[relies] on disembodied pedagogies like standardized, quantitative tests and metrics that train students in gamesmanship more than in learning." Oren Hanner (2025, 221–28), comparing Vasubandhu and Parfit, identifies an interesting divergence in the conclusions that the two thinkers draw from similar premises about the reduction of personal identity to more psychologically basic parts: Vasubandhu aims to *preserve* folk-psychological conventions about selfhood and intuitions about diachronic moral commitments

stemming from such conventions (e.g., promise keeping), whereas Parfit appears to prefer *revising* moral practices (e.g., punishment, promise-keeping) that stem from a misguided folk-psychology of personal identity. Clearly, whether we should revise our sense of the moral obligations involved in promise-keeping is an appreciably practical question. It is these surprising insights—which identify the range of possibilities for our collective moral life—that confirm the editors' intended value for such scholarship.

The exploration of ritual as a form of moral pedagogy may be a point of interest for readers who have been acculturated in Western societies. One highlight of the volume in this regard is Christopher M. Gowen's (2025) exploration of the use of tea ceremonies as ritual forms of Buddhist self-cultivation. *Moral Agency* does more than explore the use of ritual however; it also identifies seemingly fundamental differences of orientation in Eastern and Western philosophy that may affect their respective appraisals of ritual. In his reflection on the volume as a whole, Johnathan Jacobs (2025b, 291) identifies some of the causes of ritual's diminished status in Western societies (though he argues that Westerners likely engage in more ritual than they realize), citing the general decline of the influence of religion over public life and the Kantian conception of a moral democracy, in which the individual's reason is authoritative. Although ritual's diminished status in the West may appear to be simply one of the many consequences of the enlightenment, several essays identify an apparent gap in much of the moral philosophy of the West, *viz.*, the neglect of ritual as a tool for moral training. This leads one to wonder whether this signifies a deeper failure of Western moral philosophy to leverage ritual for moral education. In her chapter comparing Confucius and Epictetus, May Sim (2025, 54) points out that the Stoics appear to lack ritual as a resource for self-cultivation, although they have a variety of contemplative exercises for cultivating the mind. This lack, she argues—using Epictetus as a primary representative—appears to be built into the distinction between that which is "up to us" and that which is "not up to us." For Epictetus (1983, 1), what is up to us falls within a quite narrow locus of control: our opinions, desires, impulses, and aversions. Virtue consists largely in bringing this locus of control into harmony with nature and

the divine *logos*—a task that involves the Stoic's abiding by obligations that belong to natural (e.g., fatherhood) and social-political (e.g., citizen, judge) relations. Yet the mechanism that brings the Stoic's judgments, desires, etc., in alignment with nature and the divine *logos* appears to be radically autonomous—no amount of ritual can "coax" one into this state of mind. One can recall the aphorisms in the *The Handbook* or engage in contemplative exercises, but these remain isolated to the intellectual domain: understanding is all. Likewise, Heinz-Dieter Meyer (2025b) and Thomas Angier (2025) both point out the gap in Aristotle's account of the transition from habituation (*ethismos*) to fully-developed virtue in the person who has acquired practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). Aristotle offers few resources—at least explicitly—for understanding how this growth occurs. Whether it is entirely up to the individual's experiment, natural endowment, the assistance of cultural rituals, or sheer luck to acquire *phronēsis* remains unclear; for Aristotle denies that *phronēsis* is a *technē* or a "trained ability" (*NE* 1140b20–30), yet simultaneously claims that those without experience cannot possess it (*NE* 1142a12–15), thereby making it unclear whether *phronēsis* can be taught. Thus, if it cannot be taught, it is difficult to see how ritual could play a role in cultivating it.

It should be noted that the conclusion that Western moral philosophy neglects ritual could be an artifact of the contributors' selection of texts, for both Plato's *Laws* and *Republic* expend great efforts investigating rituals of public life that might cultivate virtue. *Moral Agency*, however, contains only one essay by Amber D. Carpenter (2025) that deals with Plato's ethics in the *Symposium* as it pertains to the investigation of recent scholarship on the epistemic value of moral exemplars. Additionally, Jacobs and Meyer (2025, 3) acknowledge that the volume lacks representatives of Christian and Islamic ethics, which would likely have much more to say about the role of ritual in moral-spiritual cultivation. Nonetheless, the point is well received with respect to the chosen texts, and establishes an interesting contrast with the moral philosophies from the Eastern traditions, which almost universally place great importance on ritual as a tool for cultivating virtue. Philip J. Ivanhoe's (2025, 18–19), contribution helpfully summarizes the views of the Confucian philosophers Xunzi

and Mengzi concerning ritual, pointing out that they differ in (a) their understanding of ritual's mechanism of transformation in their moral psychology and (b) their view of the ultimate source of ritual, i.e., whether they have some natural source or are entirely artificial. Yet both subscribe to the view that the performance of rituals has an essential social function, viz., to express adherence to norms. Such public expression of these norms seems crucial in light of another commitment he identifies in Confucian philosophers: that virtue must benefit both the individual and the collective (Ivanhoe 2025, 18). Western philosophers, in contrast, tend to understand rituals as *etiquette*: behaviors that make life more pleasant, but that have little moral value in themselves—or worse, reflect a blind conformity to cultural norms (Ivanhoe 2025, 18). Meyer (2025, 122–24) accentuates this contrast between Eastern and Western views of ritual by pointing out that much of Western moral philosophy appears to be affected by an intellectualist prejudice: one must know before one can act; understanding precedes virtuous action. In contrast, Buddhist and Confucian philosophies maintain that one must engage in moral *askesis*—even *without* fully understanding the insight it is supposed to engender—in order to reach the "inflection point" at which moral life provides the self-sustaining joys that the one could not have accessed prior to such *askesis* (Meyer, 2025 122–25). Similarly, Jacobs (2025a, 97–98) identifies Maimonides' views of tradition and ritual—a point of reference perhaps closer to Western philosophers—as a challenge to this intellectualist prejudice.

In light of the volume's ambition to potentially inform us of "the consequences of certain institutional arrangements or policies," that might reshape public life, one pressing question arises from this exploration of ritual: to what extent do rituals require a monoculture to be efficacious? To serve as effective tools for crafting character—especially when character is being formed before a certain maturity of self-awareness develops—ritual needs a critical mass of adherents who "opt in" to establish a connection between the ritual behavior and the norm that it expresses. Only then, it seems, can violation of the ritual become a *sign of vice*. Yet the tradition of social-contract theory and liberal-democratic norms that have shaped Western societies tend to

conceive of “public reason” as something that transcends any specific expression of it in public ritual. This is necessary to accommodate a plurality of religious and cultural identities in the polity, which might have different ideas not only about what norms are important, but also about what ritual behaviors might best express them. Thus, one wonders how—if at all—ritual could function as a form of moral *askesis* in a way that might reshape public life in liberal-democratic societies.

Another noteworthy topic that one finds across the essays in *Moral Agency* is the question as to how different traditions understand the achievement of complete virtue. Several essays acknowledge that the crafting of moral character involves something like a progression from journeyman to master in the fashioning of moral character; from incomplete to perfect virtue; or from the periphery to the source of true virtue. In and of itself, it is interesting and unexpected to see that this picture of moral development holds across Eastern and Western traditions of moral philosophy, and verifies the editors’ assertion that there are overlapping interests common to the two traditions. For example, Kim Doil argues in his contribution that

> In Neo-Confucian philosophy, there is a significant emphasis on transcending what this chapter terms “self-centeredness” (*si* 私). This transcendence surpasses the confines of a single virtue or character trait, as it represents a deeper, foundational ethos that profoundly shapes the development of moral character and agency (2025, 236–37).

This vision of sagehood, however, appears incompatible with Aristotle’s “greatness of soul” (*megalopsychia*), which is a strictly self-oriented virtue, as both Angier (2025, 38–39) and Ivanhoe (2025, 17) point out. Heffernan (2025, 185) comparing Aristotle and Augustine, argues that for Augustine, people can craft their character to a significant degree, but encounter a limit due to the inheritance of original sin, which gives the will in each person an irremediable inclination toward the bad; true virtue is found only through God’s grace. And G. Felicitas Munzel (2025) argues for an alternative to the rationalist reading of Kant (according to which sentiments function as *incentives* only, but never as morally-salient *justifications* for the determination the will), proposing instead

that Kant recognized that the feeling of the sublime is *necessary* for concepts of reason (e.g., the categorical imperative) to determine the will; for otherwise reason alone is too weak to overcome our inclinations. Thus, for Kant too, we can speak of the accomplishment of something like perfect virtue when reason and affect are in harmony about the determination of the will. Meyer (2025b, 274–75) adds an important qualification to Munzel's conclusions, however, showing another unexpected insight that emerges from this volume: for Kant, moral sagehood, or the "holy will"—a will that experiences no conflict between the concepts of reason and the incentives of feeling—is impossible because our wills remain rooted in sensuality; whereas for Buddhists, Confucians, and Daoists, moral sagehood is a real possibility, owing, in part, to their view that moral training acts on what Meyer calls the "heart-mind."

While Aristotle receives ample attention in *Moral Agency*—as is expected, given his centrality to Western virtue ethics—one unsatisfying feature about the selection of essays is the absence of a piece devoted to articulating a positive interpretation of the transition from habituation (*ethismos*) to the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), which Aristotle says completes the dispositions acquired through habituation (or possessed by nature), bestowing the agent with complete virtue (*NE* 1144b1–1145a5). Within the scholarship on the Nicomachean Ethics, one finds the acknowledgment of a gap between *ethismos* and *phronēsis*, along with various attempts to bridge it—something that Thomas Angier (2025, 32–34) deftly summarizes in his contribution. But the essays in this volume deal with the gap using two strategies: (1) by denying that Aristotle has an adequate account of this transition, or (2) by supplementing Aristotle with Eastern sources. Angier takes the first strategy, arguing that Aristotle lacks a plausible account of the transition from *ethismos* to *phronēsis*, owing to his sharp differentiation between *phronēsis* and craft-expertise (*technē*). In Angier's (2025, 37–38) view, Aristotle's picture of *phronēsis* is committed to an "involuted' structure of moral motivation. The *ultimate* goal of the virtuous agent is their own happiness, which is (more or less) identical with *eupraxia*, or continuous virtuous action stemming from virtuous character. But the good of others or the goods

obtaining in external states of affairs stand as "penultimate" to this aim. This structure of motivation is incompatible with craft-expertise, which aims to produce goods or states of affairs that are external ("*para*" ends) to the agent, and which for the same reason seems be a better model for capturing virtuous action: the virtuous person should think *first* of the external good to be achieved, both from the perspective of virtuous intention and good deliberation (Angier, 2025, 39). Moreover, children must first learn that their actions are good because they are attentive to the interests of others or produce certain good external states of affairs, not because these actions will ultimately make them happy. Since these structures of moral motivation seem incompatible, it is difficult to see how Aristotle could ever produce a satisfactory account for the transition from *ethismos* to *phronēsis*. Meyer (2025b, 265–67) appears to adopt the second strategy for dealing with the problem of *phronēsis*, arguing that Aristotle's conception of *phronēsis* may approach something closer to Eastern thought in relying on a type of contemplation (*theoria*) that eastern philosophies might recognize as forms of mindfulness meditation. This interpretation—though it plausibly utilizes resources within Aristotle's corpus—relies on the work of Matthew Walker (2018) and Paula Gottlieb (2021), both external to the volume. It is admittedly refreshing to see novel ways of understanding Aristotle's conceptions of *theoria* and *phronēsis* in light of resources from Eastern philosophy. In this regard the volume accomplishes its stated aim of using resources from Eastern and Western philosophy to discover issues common to each tradition as far as regards the crafting of moral character. Nonetheless, a chapter devoted to a more positive articulation of Aritstotle's conception of *phronēsis* remains something to be desired, especially since *phronēsis* pertains to one of the volume's main themes, i.e., how Eastern and Western traditions understand the accomplishment of complete or perfect virtue.

The complexities involved interpreting the role of *phronēsis* in Aristotle's ethical thought also highlight one of the difficulties inherent in the *Moral Agency*'s ambitions. Classic texts in each tradition contain their own exegetical problems—apart from any cross-cultural comparison—that scholars have tread quite thoroughly, leaving long trails of secondary literatures that can be contentious in

their own right. The decisions that one makes about such problems may significantly impact the conclusions that one draws about any cross-cultural comparison. Although the ambition of the volume is to accomplish more than mere comparative philosophy, inevitably some likenesses and differences must be established between two texts or traditions, and the decisions one makes about well-known interpretive problems can significantly impact the judgment as to how close or distant two traditions might be. Questions such as "*Whose* Aristotle," or "*Whose* Kant?" tend to haunt the comparisons that the authors draw in their work. As a reader, judging the veracity of such comparisons is also difficult, requiring as it does an acquaintance with philosophical traditions and secondary literatures that are vast in their own right.

Finally, it is worth considering how *Moral Agency* positions itself with respect to the framework of Intercultural philosophy and post-colonial critiques of comparative philosophy. In *Philosophy East/West*, Ergas and Todd (2016, 2) present Owen Flanagan's (2011, 1–2) threefold schema for characterizing modes of Intercultural philosophy: (1) "mere" comparison and contrast; (2) "fusion" or synthesis of eastern and western philosophies; (3) a "cosmopolitan" philosophizing that is "critical" yet has an "ironic openness" to all positions. Generally, the essays in *Moral Agency* do not attempt to integrate traditions; most fall within the cosmopolitan style, though they strike one as more serious than ironic: one intuits a conviction in them that the inquiry into virtue *matters* because of the stakes involved in our current historical moment. For example, Ivanhoe (2025, 24–25) provocatively uses Confucian resources to argue that China's Social Credit System and use of Mass AI surveillance are *antithetical* to the Confucian concepts of virtue and harmony. Other essays envision the exploration of moral self-cultivation as a resource that could revitalize the Humanities (Meyer 2025b) or even aid the study of desistence in the field of criminology (Jacobs 2025b, 288–89). Even those contributions which are more strictly comparative in nature, such as Hanner's comparison of Vasubandhu and Parfit, yield generous insights that would be unfairly denigrated as "mere" comparisons.

A decent summation of the post-colonial critique, articulated by Daya Krishna (1988) goes as follows. Intercultural philosophy aims

to establish—at least as a *starting* point—that there are similarities, differences, or perhaps even identities between terms and concepts from the philosophies of different civilizations; indeed, without such basic comparisons, little else can be said. However, this inquiry, born out of Western institutions of learning with their distinct intellectual lineages, tends to center the conceptual architecture of Western philosophy, asking how closely the intellectual works of other civilizations approximate its concepts. Comparative philosophy thus inevitably reproduces the set of possible comparisons available to it from within the conceptual architecture of Western philosophy, and in so doing predetermines what can be said about philosophy from other civilizations. *Language* is one of the primary points for this sort of critique to gain traction, since most Intercultural philosophy relies on translations of the core texts, and appears to be conducted primarily in English. Richard King's "Disciplining Religion," which asks whether Buddhism can intelligibly be called a "religion," is a good example of the insights that are possible when scholarship takes such a critique seriously.

Although *Moral Agency* does not address this sort of post-colonial critique head-on, its contributors by and large engage in comparative philosophy with an awareness of the problem raised above. Meyer, for instance, deliberately centers the Eastern conception of the "heart-mind," stating that he intends to "[. . .] reverse the usual 'West looking East' optic by asking what points of contact can be identified when looking at key Western writers through the lens of important Eastern concepts of character ethics" (Meyer 2025b, 251). Other contributors likewise show less compunction about criticizing revered Western philosophers from the perspective of Eastern frameworks: both Ivanhoe and Angier identify Aristotle's "greatness of soul" (*megalopsychia*) as suspect from the perspective of Eastern virtue ethics, since it appears to be a strictly self-oriented virtue. Thus, overall, the editors of *Moral Agency* have done a fine job selecting contributions that cover the expected authors and topics in a volume doing Intercultural philosophy oriented around virtue ethics, while remaining sensitive to the methodological issues surrounding Intercultural philosophy.

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