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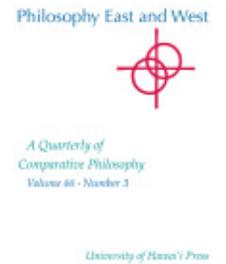
*Why Be Moral? Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers*  
by Yong Huang (review)

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instead channel their passions toward the production of rice (pp. 110–115). Ansart’s explanation of Seiryō’s philosophy is compelling: The distinction was less between the passions and the virtues than between two different categories of passions—great ambitions and “base desires” (*petits désirs*). The former are capable of using instrumental rationality to plan for long-range goals in the pursuit of interests, while the latter are focused on short-term gratification, and the former can prevail over the latter (p. 118). The virtues are now valuable as a “direct instrument” for “the achievement of a specific purpose or goal” rather than as ends in themselves (p. 118).

The establishment of that goal and the mobilization and coordination of the people’s egoistic passions to achieve it is the role of the State, which is central in Seiryō’s theory. Seiryō did not see that there was a natural mechanism (such as Smith’s invisible hand) by which individual passions work naturally to achieve the ultimate goal of the prosperity of society as a whole. Such passions are necessary to get people to work, but they must always be “manipulated” and “directed in a specific direction” (pp. 119–122). This view of government as constantly intervening was much closer to that of Hobbes than to that of Smith or Locke.

The remainder of the volume is devoted to demonstrating how other critics of the naturalist paradigm could not duplicate Seiryō’s accomplishment: a “new imaginary” of society that envisaged a shift to a contractual notion of social relations. The book, which includes a convenient glossary of the major thinkers discussed, offers a rather incomplete conclusion. Nevertheless, its discussion of Seiryō offers a major contribution regarding the generation of indigenous modern ideas in an otherwise “closed” society.

#### Note

1 – In accordance with Japanese tradition, names appear here in their customary Japanese order with family name first, and given names are used (as in the eighteenth century) to refer to individual thinkers.

*Why Be Moral? Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers.* By Yong Huang. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014. Pp. x + 357. Hardcover \$95.00, ISBN 978-1-4384-5292-0.



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*Why Be Moral? Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers*, by Yong Huang, is a book written for Western philosophers. Professor Huang claims that there are two ways of introducing a Chinese philosopher to Western audiences: first, by show-

ing them that the Chinese philosopher's ideas are ridiculous or inferior compared to the corresponding Western ideas, and second, by showing them that the Chinese philosopher has better answers to some Western philosophical questions than great Western philosophers. Huang thinks the first way is pointless and adopts the second way in this book, which "attempts to show that the Cheng brothers' neo-Confucian position is superior to the representative views [such as Aristotle's and Kant's] in the Western philosophical tradition" (p. 11). If Huang is right, then the philosophy of the Cheng brothers, two leading Chinese philosophers of Neo-Confucianism in the eleventh century, is no less worthy of study than the philosophies of Aristotle and Kant for Western scholars. The book begins with an introduction, which discusses some meta-issues about comparative philosophy and provides a brief biography of the Cheng brothers and an overview of the content of the book.

In chapter 1, Huang addresses the question "Why should I be moral?" First, he takes pains to clarify the question, which, in his view, should be understood as "What motivations do or can I have to be moral?" (p. 33). The person who asks the question knows that she should be moral but does not have the motivation to be so. Next, Huang argues that Plato, Hobbes, Hume, and Kant all fail to provide an adequate answer to the question. Huang then offers an interpretation of the Cheng brothers' view: one should be motivated to be moral because it is a joy to be moral as long as one has genuine moral knowledge, and the joy of being moral is worth pursuing since being moral is a distinguishing mark of being human. Finally, Huang argues that Aristotle's ethics cannot provide an adequate answer to the question even though it bears some striking similarities to the Cheng brothers' view.

In chapter 2, Huang discusses the view that virtue ethics is self-centered since it recommends that we be concerned with our own virtues. Huang takes this claim to be one of the central objections to virtue ethics. He argues that the Cheng brothers provide a version of virtue ethics that can better respond to the self-centeredness objection than Aristotelian eudaimonistic virtue ethics. Unlike Aristotelian eudaimonism, the Chengs' Neo-Confucianism holds that the virtuous person must "take care of not only the material well-being but also the character traits of others," and that one's own good and the good of others depend on each other (p. 98).

In chapter 3, Huang turns to the problem of weakness of the will as a challenge to morality: "If weakness of the will is possible, morality may become impossible, at least for some people" (p. 20). By this Huang seems to mean that if one does X due to the weakness of the will, then one cannot be held morally responsible for doing X. Huang argues that weakness of the will is possible only if "one's knowledge does not necessarily lead one to action" (p. 105). In light of his interpretation, the Cheng brothers solve the problem of weakness of the will by distinguishing two kinds of knowledge: knowledge merely from one's intellect, or superficial knowledge, and knowledge from one's heart, or genuine knowledge. They hold that genuine knowledge, which everyone is able to acquire, necessarily leads one to action. Huang concludes the chapter by arguing that the Cheng brothers' solution to the problem of weakness of the will is better than Socrates's and Aristotle's, for, among other reasons, the former (the Cheng brothers) can explain our common sense that there are

“two types of persons: one (for example) smokes without knowing that smoke is harmful, while another smokes with such knowledge” in terms of the distinction between superficial knowledge and genuine knowledge (p. 117), whereas the latter (Socrates and Aristotle), who claim that people do bad things simply because they are ignorant, cannot offer an explanation.

In chapter 4, Huang explores the Cheng brothers’ Neo-Confucian ethics of difference, the idea that one should “love different people differently, in ways that take into consideration the differences among objects of love” (p. 132). Huang argues that ethical generalism, such as the commonsense Golden Rule and Kant’s deontology, fails to deal adequately with the uniqueness of individual moral patients. He also explains how the Cheng brothers’ ethics of difference is different from the moral particularism advocated by Jonathan Dancy.

Chapter 5 focuses on the Cheng brothers’ conception of propriety (*li* 禮), which, according to Huang, is central to their political philosophy. Huang distinguishes three senses of *li* in the Cheng brothers’ philosophy: as external rules, as inner feelings, and as something constitutive of human nature. In his interpretation, the Cheng brothers hold that rules of propriety rather than rules of law should be the primary rules of society, for rules of propriety, which are created by Confucian sages, have their origin in human beings’ natural feelings, which in turn are based on human nature. Huang also argues that the Cheng brothers’ political theory is superior to Western political liberalism, of which Huang takes John Rawls’s philosophy to be a representative, for “[Confucian] sages certainly did a much better job than the parties in Rawls’s original position, as they appealed to people’s natural feelings and used them as the standard when they established rules of propriety” (p. 189).

While the first five chapters contain many interesting arguments, I am concerned about Huang’s argumentative strategy. In each chapter, Huang offers little positive argument for the Cheng brothers’ theory. Nor does he consider possible objections to it. Instead, he mainly focuses on revealing the flaws in the representative Western philosophies and interpreting the Cheng brothers’ theory. I worry that this is not sufficient to achieve his goal of showing that the latter is superior to the former. For example, consider the Cheng brothers’ answer to the question “Why be moral?” According to Huang, it is based on the assumption that the joy we take in performing moral actions is worth pursuing because being moral is a distinguishing mark of being human. This assumption might invite two objections. First, many philosophers and scientists such as Mark Rowlands and Frans de Waal argue that animals are also capable of being moral. Second, from the fact that X is a distinguishing mark of being human, it does not follow that the joy we take in X is worth having. People who find these two objections persuasive might think that the Cheng brothers’ answer to the question “Why be moral?” is no more adequate than the representative Western philosophers’ answers even if they accept Huang’s criticisms of the latter. Huang would need to respond to such objections to make his position more convincing.

In chapter 6, Huang offers an interpretation of the Cheng brothers’ moral metaphysics. He first clarifies the difference between moral metaphysics and Kant’s metaphysics of morals in light of the contemporary Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan’s

discussion. Then he argues that the Cheng brothers' moral metaphysics is a "benign metaphysics" in the sense that it is "likely immune to the criticisms of metaphysics raised by contemporary philosophy" (p. 196), for the ultimate reality posited by this metaphysics (i.e., *li* 理) is "not some fixed, reified entity, thing, or being, but is the dereified creative activity manifest in the ten thousand things in the world" (p. 196). This argument is hard to follow, for Huang never specifies or justifies "the criticisms of metaphysics raised by contemporary philosophy." It is unclear why he thinks that a metaphysical theory that posits some fixed entities is less "benign."

In chapter 7, Huang argues that contemporary Western hermeneutics has much to learn from the ontological turn of Confucian hermeneutics initiated by one of the brothers, Cheng Yi. He provides three reasons. First, Western hermeneutics is based on the tension between the author, the text, and the readers, whereas Cheng Yi unified the three by means of *dao*: readers can grasp *dao* through reading the Confucian classics, which are carriers of *dao*, for they were written by Confucian sages with an intention to illuminate *dao*. Second, unlike Western hermeneutics (including Heidegger's), Cheng Yi's hermeneutics is ontology, "since for him hermeneutics is essentially the hermeneutics of *dao*, the ultimate reality of the universe" (p. 224). Third, Western hermeneutics merely aims at understanding, but Cheng Yi's hermeneutics unifies understanding *dao* and practicing *dao* by holding that those who understand *dao* must be able to practice it. However, these three claims, even if true, only state the differences between Western hermeneutics and Cheng Yi's Neo-Confucian hermeneutics. To justify that the former has much to learn from the latter, Huang needs to do more work, such as showing that the former can better handle some interesting problems than the latter. In the Appendix, Huang shows how Cheng Yi's Neo-Confucian moral hermeneutics actually works by contrasting Cheng Yi's interpretation of two related controversial passages in the *Analects* with the conventional interpretations and explaining in what sense the former is superior to the latter.

On the whole, Huang has written an engaging and sophisticated book, though some of its core arguments need to be improved. Any student of comparative philosophy would benefit from reflecting on this book.

*Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue: Liberating Traditions*. Edited by Jennifer McWeeny and Ashby Butnor. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. Pp. 317. Paper \$34.00, ISBN 978-0-231-16625-6.



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In their excellent new volume, *Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue: Liberating Traditions*, editors Jennifer McWeeny and Ashby Butnor offer a vision for