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The Perfectibility of Human Nature in Eastern and Western Thought. By Harold Coward. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. Pp. 219. Paper \$24.95, £17.75.

Reviewed by **Warren Todd** Lancaster University

Harold Coward of course needs no introduction, and those familiar with his earlier works, such as *Yoga and Psychology* (2002), will notice a return to the question of perfectibility in his new book, *The Perfectibility of Human Nature in Eastern and Western Thought*. Coward is equally at home in Indian and Western thought, and it should be noted that the “Eastern” in the title basically means Indian (p. 1).

The Introduction to his new work does not have the same clarity as that found in *Yoga and Psychology*. Coward opens with T. S. Eliot’s “still point,” which leads on to a less than helpful lake-versus-stream analogy, which is apparently supposed to clarify the difference between “Hindu” and “Buddhist” views on perfectibility (p. 2). The implication here is that there is a single Hindu perspective on consciousness as well as a single Buddhist perspective. After reading the rest of the book, it will become quite apparent that Coward himself would not take such a claim seriously. Also, those readers unfamiliar with the *Yogācāra*, but more familiar with *śamatha* meditation, or Śāntideva’s ideal of tranquility, or with the Zen notion of “mirror-mind,” or even the Dzogchen notion of spaciousness, may be forgiven in thinking Buddhist perfectibility to be more analogous to a lake. It would appear at this point in the book that, in aiming for a more general audience, Coward has compromised somewhat through over-generalization. Thankfully, the rest of the book goes against this simplistic view, offering us a surprisingly broad range of Indian concepts and paths.

Once we escape the Introduction, then, we find Coward in full flow. Part 1 offers a summary of Western thought, beginning with philosophy. First, by introducing Passmore’s summary of classical views on perfectibility, Coward offers the useful distinction between “technical perfection” and the perfectibility of the human *per se*. The latter is either linked with a *telos* of happiness, or moral purity, or with an ultimate vision of God. Second, he highlights the European shift toward social progress, culture, and education as the means to perfectibility. Corruption is seen in social and political terms, rather than individual and religious terms (i.e., sin). It is legislation that clears the road, and freedom which leads to individual advancement. Third, the European debate then shifts to the question of commerce and the relative positioning of the classes. Humanity, as well as state and society, are struggling to reach ever higher forms. This ushers in the fourth stage, that of scientific progress and the possibility that genetic manipulation might bring the actualization of the long sought-after utopian society.

After this gallop through the history of Western Philosophy, Coward leads us through the history of Western Psychology. Emphasis is first placed on the “*tabula rasa*” view of the person, who, subjected to environmental conditioning, either succeeds or fails. Next we find Freud’s notions of gratification, scarcity, and repression, which contribute not to perfectibility but to civilization. It is Freud’s student, Carl Jung, who reinstates religion, giving it an archetypal role. Of course, Jung himself was

influenced by the East, and is thus a pivotal player in the East/West dialogue. Nevertheless, as Coward had already pointed out in *Yoga and Psychology*, even Jung was never convinced that humans were perfectible. William James seems more optimistic in that saintliness can be known in certain moments of consciousness. Similarly, Maslow posited the potential for peak experiences, where reality was seen to be as it ought to be. In the likes of Jung, Allport, and Maslow, Coward recognizes the notion that “perfecting oneself involves endless progress toward a constantly moving horizon” (p. 26), a concept he believes is being challenged by the Eastern-influenced transpersonal psychologies of Washburn, Tart, and Ornstein. Though Coward’s method appears chronological, one feels that the real intent is to show a progression in Western Psychology as it tends to assimilate the Eastern.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 cover the notion of perfectibility with regard to Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought, respectively. In Judaism, five roads to perfectibility are listed: “ceremonial holiness” (for the priests), “ethical holiness” or “righteousness” (for the prophets), “observance of the commandments” and “study of the Torah” (for the rabbis), “knowledge or mystic vision of God” (for the philosophers), and “restoration of harmony” (for the Kabbalists). Coward limits himself to description, except to say that perhaps the Kabbalists were the only Jewish group not to see “human nature as limited by human sinfulness and frailty” (p. 53).

Coward then adopts five phases in his examination of Christianity. First, the “Biblical” perspective is claimed to be one where Jesus’ view of human nature is “that of the Hebrew Bible” (p. 57). Coward seems to want to force home the point that Jesus never took a dualistic view of human nature (p. 56) and that, unlike the Greek notion of a “disembodied soul,” Jesus’ view assumed a “bodily resurrection” (p. 57). Again, in Paul, Coward wishes us to note that words like “flesh” and “body” are used in a “poetic sense” (p. 57) and have the same meaning as “desire” (pp. 57–58). Where the Greek word “*Teleios*” is used in Jesus’ call to perfection, Biblical scholars prefer to render this as “mature,” seeing perfection in “qualitative rather than quantitative terms” (p. 59). It is an ongoing process that “engages humans as a result of God’s initiative” (p. 60).

The second phase belongs to Augustine, who, as the “first Christian theologian to focus on human nature and its perfectibility” (p. 60), “rejected the Greek idea of the body as the soul’s prison” (p. 61). Man’s problem is with his “flawed will” (p. 62). Nevertheless, Augustine’s struggle with the will, as we all know, resulted in his rejection of physical sexuality, which Coward significantly describes as “unfortunate” (ibid.). Most importantly, our human perfection is “postponed to another time and place” (p. 63). Coward thus sees Augustine as providing the West with an “excuse” for postponing full actualization until the afterlife (p. 64).

Third in line comes Aquinas, the theologian “most dominated by the thought of ultimate perfection of humankind” (p. 65). Human perfection, for Aquinas, is a mixture of Aristotle’s contemplative life of happiness and a life of Christian love, ending in the silencing of the will and a sense of “beatitude” (p. 67), that is, “evangelical perfection” (p. 68). Nevertheless, “Absolute perfection” is only realized in the afterlife with the “soul’s beatific vision of God” (p. 70).

The fourth phase belongs to Luther and Calvin, both thoroughly rejecting the idea of human perfection. Better to admit one's sinfulness and rely on faith in God and the afterlife. Finally, Niebuhr and Barth even reject Luther's idea that man can make a certain amount of progress toward perfection by their own efforts, Niebuhr calling for a "complete trust in God's grace" (p. 76). Apart from the odd comment, Coward's treatment of Christianity is essentially descriptive.

Turning to Islam, Coward first notes that there is "no notion of original sin" (p. 81). According to the Qur'an, human effort (*jihad*) plus God's mercy can lead to earthly success (*falah*). Human nature is presented in a "more positive tone" (p. 83), and man is said to be "innately inclined to virtue" (p. 86). The possibility of human perfection, however, is most emphasized by the Sufis, who praised Muhammad as the "Perfect Man" (*ibid.*). Such teachings are especially associated with Ibn 'Arabi, who saw man as a divine creation and Muhammad as the perfect role model (p. 95). In contrast, al-Ash'ari argues that good and evil are "predetermined by God" (p. 87), which continues to be the orthodox view in Sunni Islam (p. 88). Adopting a middle ground, al-Ghazali taught that human perfection was to be reached through combining "knowledge of action" and "knowledge of revelation" (p. 89). Coward finds Islam's vision of humanity "spiritually rich and inspiring" (p. 99). Much ground is covered in part 1, and experts in these fields will probably find Coward's reading of these traditions provocative.

In part 2, Coward turns his focus to the East (i.e., India). Chapter 6 is meant to provide the background to Indian thought, though it also describes the thought of several Hindu schools. He starts by summarizing part 1, claiming that Western philosophy, psychology, and religion generally see human nature to be limited. By contrast, he claims that Indian philosophy and religion "understand the perfecting of our human nature as the purpose for which each of us has been created" (p. 103). Given Coward's own recognition (see the next paragraph) that the classical Indian worldview took existence (both matter and selves) to be without beginning, this is somewhat puzzling. Furthermore, while "purpose" can be taken for what human beings themselves understand to be their ultimate goal, it is not clear whether Coward thinks, against the evidence, that this purpose was externally given.

The Indian worldview is said to have four basic ideas: "*anadi*, *karma*, *samsara* and *moksa*" (p. 103). Coward emphasizes the major aspects of these as follows: *anadi* (beginning-less) implies that the world is cyclic and that there is "no first cycle" (p. 104); *karma* (action) is not deterministic, and thus leaves room for "free will" (*ibid.*); in *samsāra* (cyclic existence), how we use our free will determines in which realm we are reborn; and when the "last veiling of obstructing karma is removed," we find *mokṣa* (release). The idea he gives of bondage being due to believing that one is "separate from the Divine" (p. 106) clearly sits better with the theistic Hindu traditions than with the non-theistic Hindu systems, Buddhism, and Jainism.

Following this speedy gloss, no doubt due to the fact of his earlier work on the subject (*Mantra: Hearing the Divine in India and America*), Coward gives a compara-

tively lengthy explanation of the use of *mantra*. He then offers a brief introduction to the classic life stages (*āśrama*), though failing to mention that these stages may also be viewed as optional lifetime roles. Coward then shows how *mantra*, or the word, was fundamental in its function of purifying karma for so many Indian traditions. He concludes that “repeated chanting of mantras is an instrument for the perfecting of human nature” (p. 118).

Coward then turns his attention to Yoga, repeating an earlier claim that it prefigures Freud in the “analysis of the unconscious” (p. 119). He describes how through “disciplined self-effort” ego-consciousness may be transcended (p. 120). The point he wishes to drive home is that in “Yoga psychology” the essence of human nature is pure and that “unconscious desires can be excised” (ibid.). Interestingly, Coward has nothing to say here about Abhidharma, Mādhyamika, or Yogācāra thought, especially about how the latter shares a psychology of karmic seeds and storehouse consciousness with the Yoga School of Patañjali. Coward returns to the concept of the “word,” and likens the notion to John’s use of the “Word,” though he makes less of this comparison than one might expect. He then returns to his main thesis, and restates that whether they follow the Vedas (*āstika*) or not (*nāstika*), both Hindus and Buddhists agree that “the goal for all beings is to perfect or release themselves” (p. 124).

In chapter 7, Coward focuses exclusively on Hindu thought. He introduces the distinction between liberation in life (*jīvanmukti*) and liberation after death (*videhamukti*), claiming the former to be the most “popular” (p. 125). It is certainly the one that better suits Coward’s own thesis. He repeats that only when one has gone through all the life stages can one aim for liberation (pp. 128–129). This thesis, which ignores the renunciate tradition, seems to suit Coward’s own life-affirming stance. Śaṅkara may have thought otherwise. All in all, Coward senses a “very optimistic view” in the Upaniṣads regarding the “perfectibility of human nature” (p. 129). He offers a problematic theological reading of Śaṅkara, which leads him to posit a Houdini-like situation in which a free Self voluntarily binds itself, in order to give itself the “opportunity” (p. 135) to free itself. Perhaps it would have been better to highlight Śaṅkara’s fundamentally negative (almost Buddhist) evaluation of our existence.

Interestingly, Coward believes that the Buddhists may have offered India its first model of *jīvanmukti* with their concept of *nirvāṇa* (p. 146). More specifically, the Buddhist notion of *sopādhīṣeṣa-nirvāṇa* (i.e., with a remainder [of aggregates]) does indeed seem to offer Śaṅkara a model for his development of the theory of *prārabdhakarma*. Coward is to be praised for pointing out that Rāmānuja actually denies the possibility of *jīvanmukti* (p. 152), which arguably presents a more Western-looking theology and a clear counter to his (Coward’s) own thesis. It is also problematic when we look back to how Coward defined perfectibility in terms of “perfect freedom” (p. 3). After all, how could one be perfectly free if one is subject to bodily functions? (p. 153). Nevertheless, Coward does let Śaṅkara and Ramana (p. 154) off the hook by allowing them to posit that there is no difference between the perfection of

jīvanmukti and *videhamukti*, when in fact there are passages in the *Bhāṣyas* where Śaṅkara explicitly admits that a Brahman-knower may still make mistakes.

Coward concludes chapter 7 by suggesting that a major strength of Hinduism is the number of paths it offers for the attainment of perfection (pp. 155–156). The Hindu tradition then offers a “tour de force in its quest for the perfection of human nature.” Coward is clearly at home here.

Chapter 8 is devoted to “Buddhist Thought.” Coward quotes Rahula’s “A man and only a man can become a Buddha,” and glosses this (more generically) as “Buddhist perfection is open to anyone” (p. 158). He will later note that enlightenment (arhatship) is for monks and nuns, as well as lay people of either gender (pp. 172–173). Nevertheless, traditionally speaking, Buddhahood is actually restricted to males. He notes how Buddhism speaks of going from being an ordinary person to becoming a noble one (*ārya*) through experiencing an “inner intuition,” this perfection being realized “simply by one’s own effort” (pp. 161–162) through a “fusion” of pure motivation, wisdom, and action (p. 169). He later notes how scholars like Mahādeva and texts like the *Mahāvastu* made the Buddha out to be something beyond human (p. 175). The reader may be confused here into believing that this is a Mahāyāna invention, which it clearly was not. Nevertheless, Coward is right in saying that the “supremacy of the Buddha” was highlighted by the Mahāyāna (p. 176), which does seem to move the goalposts of perfectibility. His analysis leads up to Nāgārjuna famously equating *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa* (p. 179), which might appear to some as the total removal of the goalposts! Coward, however, does not fall into the nihilist trap and overall gives a useful account of Nāgārjuna’s enterprise. Finally, Coward offers a very brief account of Pure Land sects, which tend to be seen in Buddhist Studies as relying on “other-power,” though Coward, with some justification, sees them as still relying on “some individual effort” (p. 182).

The Conclusion is envisaged as a review of earlier findings (p. 185). Coward wants to draw a clear distinction between the Eastern and Western views of perfectibility. However, certain theistic Hindus (e.g., Rāmānuja) would seem to hold views closer to what Coward wants to call the Western view of seeing “humans as embodied souls” (p. 4). Furthermore, certain (non-Indian) Pure Land preachers (e.g., Hōnen) seem to believe that perfectibility is only possible in another realm. Both seem to counter Coward’s argument that all Eastern philosophies agree that we will find perfection “here on earth” (p. 190). In other words, the West does not have a monopoly on other-power, and many “Eastern” believers assume that “human beings depend upon God” (p. 5), be it Īśvara or Kṛṣṇa or Amitābha Buddha. While Coward may be right in seeing a certain tendency in the East/West split, his case is hampered on one side by what has been pointed out above, as well as on the other side by the Kabbalists and the Sufis, as he himself admits (p. 194). Also, if he believes that our next move ought to be the study of humanity in the “context of the natural ecosystems” (ibid.), he should probably turn to East Asia and Taoism.

All in all, this is an enjoyable and wide-ranging book, and one that is sure to provoke fruitful disagreement from scholars while introducing a complex field to students and the interested lay reader.