DETERMINISM, RESPONSIBILITY, AND ASIAN PHILOSOPHY

Mark Siderits
Department of Philosophy, Seoul National University (emeritus) msideri@ilstu.edu

The essays included here grew out of an international conference on East-West comparative philosophy held at Seoul National University on 15–16 October, 2010. The topic of the conference was “Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Asian Philosophy.” The problem of determinism and moral responsibility has been much discussed in recent Western philosophy, but as yet there is no agreement on how to resolve it. Most fundamentally the problem concerns the compatibility of determinism about mental states with the sort of freedom that is thought to be required for agents to be morally responsible for their actions. Suppose it is true that all our psychological states, including our beliefs, desires, and intentions, are caused by prior events. If psychological determinism were true, would it be justifiable to praise or blame agents for their actions? Could anyone then truly be morally responsible for the actions they perform? In recent decades there has been a great deal of work on this question, but there is still no consensus as to what the solution might be.

The aim of the conference was to explore this issue using resources from the Asian philosophical traditions. While the problem of determinism and responsibility has a long history in Western philosophy, it is often said that this issue is essentially unknown in Asian philosophy. An initial question is to what extent this is true. It is possible, for instance, that some components of the issue are discussed by Asian philosophers, but in ways that simply make its presence less than fully transparent. But even if the issue is essentially unknown in both South Asian and East Asian traditions, it is still possible that important lessons can be learned from this comparative silence. For instance it might be that by looking for the source of this silence we would find reasons to reject some of the assumptions that the issue rests on. Or it might be that we would stumble across resources that make possible a hitherto unknown solution to some part of the problem. These are the sorts of questions the conference was meant to examine.

Two of the conference participants were individuals who have made important contributions to the recent debate over determinism and moral responsibility: Ishtiyaque Haji (Department of Philosophy, University of Calgary), and Kenton Machina (Department of Philosophy, Illinois State University). They were invited in order to lay out the details of the current discussion for scholars of Asian philosophy, and to provide feedback concerning suggestions about ways that Asian traditions might be said to approach the issues involved. The remainder were scholars working on the East Asian and South Asian philosophical traditions. The consensus was that all the participants learned much that was new. But, as with any conference, further study, reflection, and discussion were needed if any new glimmerings were to bear fruit.
The five papers included here represent some of the fruits of that process of refinement. The following are the contributors to this special issue.

**Kyung-Sig Hwang** is a professor in the Department of Philosophy at Seoul National University. His research interests lie principally in virtue ethics and the theory of justice.

**Myeong-seok Kim** is an assistant professor in the Academy of East Asian Studies at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul. He trained in Chinese philosophy at Seoul National University and the University of Michigan. His Ph.D. dissertation was on the development of the ethical theory of emotions in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, and he is interested in ethics and moral psychology in Chinese philosophy, ancient Greek philosophy, and the early modern British moralists.

**Eun-su Cho** is a professor in the Department of Philosophy at Seoul National University. Her research interests revolve around East Asian Buddhism, including such topics as the philosophical thought of Wŏnhyo and the role of women in the Buddhist monastic order.

**Duck-Joo Kwak** is an associate professor in the Department of Education at Seoul National University. Her research interests are, broadly speaking, existentialism and education, as well as the work of Stanley Cavell.

**Hye-chong Han** is a research fellow at the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation in Seoul. Her research interests are curriculum development, moral education, and teacher education, but she brings to her work in this area an extensive knowledge of the classical Indian tradition.

**Mark Siderits** is an emeritus professor in the Department of Philosophy at Seoul National University. His research has focused largely on the area of intersection between analytic metaphysics and the Indian Buddhist philosophical tradition.

The contribution of Kyung-Sig Hwang, “Moral Luck, Self-Cultivation, and Responsibility,” finds in the Confucian tradition a kind of two-tiered approach to the issue, one that accepts a sort of compatibilism at the level of practical deliberation, but is (implicitly) committed to hard determinism in its ontology. Any such two-tiered approach is, of course, open to the objection that it makes responsibility little more than a noble lie. Hwang suggests that in its conception of self-cultivation and allied teachings, Confucianism may be seen as making our possession of responsibility-entailing freedom a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, thereby opening up an interesting line of reply to this objection.

Some scholars claim that the Confucian tradition lacks the conceptions of free choice and responsibility at work in the Western debate, and that this explains the absence of a parallel debate in East Asian philosophy. The essay by Myeong-seok Kim, “Choice, Freedom, and Responsibility in Ancient Chinese Confucianism,” disputes this claim, taking particular aim at the argument often given in its support to the effect that classical Chinese lacks lexical equivalents for such terms as “choice” and “responsibility.” Kim also claims that at least in Xunzi and perhaps in Mencius as well one can find something like the libertarian view that persons are responsible for their actions insofar as they possess a kind of contra-causal freedom. He then seeks to defend this view against Galen Strawson’s argument to the effect that such ultimate freedom is impossible.
The essay by Eun-su Cho, “Repentance as a Bodhisattva Practice,” has as its focus the thought of the seventh century C.E. Korean Buddhist philosopher Wŏnhyo. The text she analyzes teaches that one should repent of one’s wrongdoings, which raises the question of how feelings like repentance, shame, and guilt could make sense if, as Wŏnhyo also affirms, there is no self to serve as agent, and actions are likewise not ultimately real. Behind these claims Cho sees Wŏnhyo’s adherence to the Madhyamaka denial not only of a substantial self but as well of any presumed ultimate reality lying behind the appearance of a self. This refusal of metaphysics leads to an interesting strategy for resolving the debate over determinism and moral responsibility, one that might allow a sort of conventional truth to both sides without having to address the question whether they are ultimately compatible.

In “The Issue of Determinism and Freedom as an Existential Question,” Duck-Joo Kwak and Hye-chong Han investigate the question whether a robust sort of freedom is to be found in the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā. Taking their cue from the thought of Stanley Cavell, they find in the Gītā not the metaphysical issue of the relation between universal causal determinism and the ability of agents to do otherwise, but an existential question: is there any way to escape the disappointment we feel when the meanings of our plans and projects are shown to be ultimately without any grounding in the way things are? They see in the Gītā’s teachings on the self and its realization a response to this question that may represent an improvement over any attempt to solve the question of freedom and determinism understood metaphysically.

My own contribution, “Buddhist Paleocompatibilism,” seeks to develop an alternative form of compatibilism about determinism and moral responsibility based on the Buddhist distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth. The key point is that in some readings of this distinction, there are no semantic relations between statements that are conventionally true and statements that are ultimately true. If determinism is understood as ultimately true while the claim that persons are responsible for their actions is conventionally true, then the two theses cannot be incompatible, since incompatibility is a semantic relation.