

## *Moral Geography and Exploration of the Moral Possibility Space*

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BONGRAE SEOK

Alvernia University, Reading, Pennsylvania, USA (bongrae.seok@alvernia.edu)

Owen Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals, Varieties of Moral Possibility*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 362 + x

*This article reviews Owen Flanagan's latest book "The Geography of Morals, Varieties of Moral Possibilities" (2017). By exploring the space of moral possibility (i.e., diverse options and viewpoints of morality from different philosophical and religious traditions throughout the world), Flanagan argues that ethics is not simply a study of a priori conditions of normative rules and ideal values but a process of developing a careful understanding of varying conditions of human ecology and building practical views on living good life. The goal of this geographical exploration of the moral possibility space is surveying different traditions of morality and finding tractable ways of human flourishing. This article, by following the chapters of his book, explains his views on moral diversity and his interdisciplinary and naturalistic approach to ethics. It also discusses interactive and dynamic ways to expand the moral possibility space.*

Key words: Moral geography; Space of moral possibility; Naturalized ethics; Human flourishing; Moral emotion; Moral psychology; Anger; Self

Is Chinese biology different from American biology? Or is Japanese mathematics different from Indian mathematics? People often wonder about the significance of cultural or geographical diversity in academic disciplines. What about Chinese moral philosophy and Indian ethics? Does geographical difference matter in moral discourse on living good life? Is it important to study non-Western views on ethics and virtue? In this book, Owen Flanagan delivers convincing messages on the critical importance of studying broad possibilities of morality shaped by diverse cultural and social traditions.

The book starts with Flanagan's realization that moral philosophy is wrong-headed in two fundamental ways. First, the nature of morality as understood and debated in Western philosophy (generally understood as Western European philosophy) is misperceived and misguided. He believes that many Western schools of moral philosophy pursue an idealistic goal of justifying moral values and principles that are universally applicable to humanity. He states that Western moral philosophers "operate only or mainly with the resources of their own traditions, but claim to speak transcendently" (13). This general and universalistic tendency is based on a bad faith (a self-deceiving conviction) that one's pure philosophical intuition can transcend contingent restrictions of one's cultural and social environments and guide one to the universal standard of ethics that everyone can follow. As far as one believes in this type of culturally and historically alienated views of morality, one is easily imprisoned in disguised universality that hides one's parochial conception of morality. That is, monolithic and universal moral values conceived from transcendental and ahistorical viewpoints are fundamentally limited and biased.

Second, morality (moral values, principles, and justifications) is changing and transforming not just because of its social, historical, and political conditions under which it regulates human conduct but also because

of its own contingent nature, i.e., being sensitive and interactive to vagaries and contextual conditions of life. For him, ethics “is part of human ecology, concerned with saying what contributes to the well-being of humans, human groups, and human individuals in particular natural and social environments” (44). However, Western moral philosophy is “historically and ecologically unrealistic because it is transcendently pretentious” (7). He argues, by discussing Alasdair MacIntyre’s view, that this type of transcendental (“antiseptic and ecologically unrealistic”) viewpoint constitutes a defective tendency in traditional academic ethics (5). He states that morality, if it is conceived as a transcendental or a priori search for universal values and principles, is “fragile, subject to vagaries of temperament, personality, gender, class, culture, economics, and politics” (3). The fragility of morality, however, does not imply the weakness and feebleness of moral will or ineffectiveness of moral principles. Rather, it means intrinsically relational and interactive nature of morality to various aspects and dimensions of human life (human psychology, social relations, cultural embeddedness, political relevance, and other environmental constraints). In other words, morality is not permanently fixed, eternally given, or transcendently justified but continuously, constructively, and developmentally forming and transforming itself in its interaction with the diverse and varying conditions of human life.

Based on these two realizations, Flanagan starts to explore and discuss culturally diverse and psychologically realistic forms of morality that can help us to broaden our moral horizons and expand the possibility space of morality so that we are not trapped in the views that are neither given to us voluntarily nor accepted by us reflectively. The goal, however, is not simply exploring different traditions of morality and describing their diversity but finding tractable ways to live good life. Flanagan pursues an exciting and constructive possibility where one’s understanding of historically shaped, culturally developed, and socially embedded conditions of human life contributes to one’s constructive effort to build culturally relevant and psychologically realistic forms of ethics. According to him, ethics is not a study of a priori conditions of normative rules and ideal values but a process of developing a careful understanding of diverse and varying conditions of human ecology and build practical views on living good life in open and unbiased ways. Hence, geography of morals is essentially important in moral philosophy.

The book consists of four sections. In the first section (Part I), Flanagan critically discusses ahistorical and acultural approaches to morality that not only limit the scope of morality but also marginalize groups of people and their moral traditions. Most important, they distort and mispresent the essentially interactive and embedded natures of morality, i.e., culturally, socially, historically, and psychologically shaped and developed natures of what is right and good. As he states in the first chapter, *the Geography of Morals* follows this philosophy of naturalistic or naturalized ethics that is based on empirical (for example, anthropological and historical) observations of moral ecology. He also discusses philosophical openness for moral diversity. He states that if one does not fully understand the possibility space of human morality, “one is not aware of the full range of moral sources, not sensitive to the ‘varieties of moral possibility,’ and in danger of being ‘imprisoned by one’s upbringing’” (11). It is also important to keep the *broad* horizon of the moral possibility space because it is a reservoir of possible and viable options of morality from which one can draw and develop one’s own way of living good life without unreflectively and obsessively following one’s given values and norms of morality. He states that even notional possibilities can make important differences: “The space of possibilities divides into real and notional possibilities, changes that I could actually make in myself or my world, and changes that are practically or conceptually impossible for me or for people like us. But if I see no possibilities, then effectively there are none. And if I don’t see that how I conceive the kind of person I am. . . is itself a space with dynamic shape, porous boundaries, and various points of leverage, then it [the space] fixes me and limits my capacities for change and growth in ways that might seem necessary. . .” (12). Therefore, the moral possibility space, whether actual, imaginary, or notional, is the space of reflective and critical self-awareness and self-cultivation where even *conceptual* possibilities can make *practical* differences in becoming a better person or living a better

life. We need to take the moral possibility space seriously, to keep its broad horizon, and to understand its diverse options. For this reason, taking a lesson in moral geography itself becomes a moral lesson.

In the second section (Part II), Flanagan discusses fundamental issues of moral psychology such as moral nativism (a philosophical and cognitive viewpoint that proposes the existence of innate moral dispositions and abilities), moral modularity (a cognitive property observed in highly specialized and independently functioning moral senses), and moral emotions (a group of emotions that serve particular moral functions) from comparative, interdisciplinary, and culturally specific viewpoints. For example, he compares Confucian philosopher Mencius's views on moral sprouts (innate and affective moral dispositions that can be developed into ideal virtues) with Western theories of moral psychology such as Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory (chapters 4 and 5). He also discusses the 16<sup>th</sup> century Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers' debate on the psychological natures of Mencius' moral sprouts (whether they constitute a special category of dedicated moral abilities) and P. F. and Galen Strawsons' theories on moral emotion (chapters 4 and 6). Despite the seemingly different viewpoints and approaches, he finds deep and insightful connections among moral psychological theories of Confucianism, Buddhism, and latest theories of moral cognition in psychology and neuroscience. All these debates and discussions, according to him, are closely related to recent studies on first (biologically given) and second (developed) natures of human being (113): whether biologically given nature is good, whether it is best conceived as a growing organism (such as a moral sprout), how many moral organs or modules exist in the human mind, and how to grow and develop them.

In the third section (Part III), Flanagan discusses moral psychology and moral philosophy of anger. Anger is a basic and universal (i.e., cross-cultural) human emotion, but one can find surprisingly different and sharply contrasting discussions on anger in many philosophical or religious traditions. For example, Buddhists (such as Śāntideva) and Stoics (such as Seneca) believe that anger is a destructive, disturbing, and confusing state of mind: It should be extirpated rather than moderated or regulated. According to them, one should act morally and stop the perpetuation of evil but should never be angry at people, their actions, and decisions. Aristotle and most people in the West, however, believe that anger can be regulated, moderated, and contained so that it can be justified and rightfully expressed or experienced. Well-regulated and moderated anger, according to this view, can become a virtue. To explore these diverse options in the moral psychological space of anger, Flanagan discusses Śāntideva's Buddhist and Seneca's Stoic views on anger (chapter 8). He contrasts empirical observations of anger (chapter 9) and normative arguments for its extirpation (chapter 10). In these chapters, he discusses whether anger, i.e., a natural, spontaneous, but destructive emotion, can be modified, contained, or extirpated for the purposes of moral virtue and human flourishing. He finds diverse moral possibilities on anger and its varying degrees of acceptance in different philosophical traditions. Anger is definitely a wonderful example to understand how broad and diverse the moral possibility space is, and I think he provides a superb discussion on anger. However, if I can push the envelope a little further to test the limits of the moral possibility space, I like to see some discussion on other moral emotions in Confucian and Buddhist moral psychology to show how diverse and deep the moral possibility space can become. For example, in early Confucianism, shame (a particular form of moral shame) is regarded as an affective self-awareness toward ideal moral authority, not toward depressive memory of moral failures as shame is usually understood in many Western traditions. Additionally, embodied forms of moral emotions and moral practices that are developed through and maintained by bodily senses, reactions, and expressions discussed by Confucian and Buddhist philosophers are also unique Asian contributions to the possibility space of moral psychology.

In the last section (Part IV), different views of the self (chapter 11) and character (chapter 12) are discussed. The ideal vision of the autonomous self and the individualistic person constitutes the foundation of Western views on moral responsibility and moral virtue. However, Buddhism denies the permanent identity and the continuous existence of the self. The self is not only an obsessive illusion but also a cause of pain and

suffering. In between these contrastive views, one can find varying degrees of selfness and broad possibilities of the selfhood (for example, 228–31). It is, therefore, important to consider diverse philosophical options on the self and their implications in moral philosophy and moral psychology, specifically on the issues of moral development, virtue, and character. One can find a really wide moral possibility space here. It is also important to note that the moral possibility space is not limited to written texts. That is, cultural and social variances and diversities on moral values and thoughts are not only found in written texts but also observed in culturally embedded, non-textual activities, such as social, cultural, and religious practices and customs. To capture this broad and inclusive range of activities, Flanagan discusses psychological and anthropological studies in his geographical exploration of morality. He also talks about the arts: “the arts are a way we have of expressing insights about our nature and about matters of value and worth” (44).

In this book, geography means the study of culturally, historically, and socially embedded values and ways of living that are developed, studied, practiced, and continued in many different areas of the world. Simply, it is the study of the moral possibility space beyond the comfortable space of familiar moral norms and conventions in a given society or culture. As Flanagan argues, we need to open our eyes to see how different moral systems and values are possible outside of our own cultures. However, cultures and their moral traditions are not always static and enclosed. They are often dynamically interactive. Culturally embedded moral values or thoughts often cross their original geographical boundaries through migration, diaspora, and expatriatism. Considering the possibility and existence of spatially dispersed cultures and traditions, the moral possibility space can include interactive and dynamic forms of moral diversity. For example, moral thoughts of Chinese diaspora throughout the world can expand the moral possibility space with their unique and interactive *combination* of their native and foreign traditions. Additionally, moral geography, even with its *spatial* connotations, can include views from *temporally* distant (i.e., historical) cultures or societies. As one can see from Flanagan’s discussion of the rich moral psychological tradition of ancient Confucianism, moral traditions of ancient cultures can provide a deep reservoir of moral options that can further expand the moral possibility space. All these interactive changes, spatiotemporal variances, and their details are very complex and extensive. I don’t think they can be discussed fully and conclusively in any single book. Yet, I believe that Flanagan’s approach to moral geography can explore and discuss the dispersed, dynamic, interactive, and temporally distant territory in the moral possibility space because he emphasizes the critical importance of exploring broad conditions of human ecology through historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, and other empirical studies. I think his book takes important and inspiring steps toward the widely open and deep space of moral possibility, and I believe that he can further expand the space and explore the huge untrodden territory of ever growing and evolving moral options that include interactive changes and dynamic transformations of cultures and moral traditions.

In sum, Flanagan’s view can be summarized by the three stimulating and inspiring ideas: naturalized ethics (integration of empirical sciences and ethics, for example, in the form of natural teleology of first and second natures of human being), overcoming restricted WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) views on human nature and promotion of open, and ecologically interactive nature of ethics (ethics does not have a permanently fixed nature but it is continuously constructing itself by interacting with the changing human ecology). On the basis of the three foundations, he launches his expedition of the moral space of human ecology (through his discussion of moral modularity, anger, self, and character) and encourages us to find creative and viable thoughts on human flourishing and good life. I believe that, in this multicultural, comparative, and interdisciplinary exploration, he develops an exciting and viable form of world philosophy that is not limited by WEIRD views or trapped in a priori or ecologically blind conceptions of good life but firmly grounded on careful consideration of open and diverse views on human flourishing.

**Bongrae Seok** is associate professor of philosophy at Alvernia University in Reading, Pennsylvania (USA). His research and teaching interests include philosophy of mind, cognitive neuroscience, moral psychology, neuroaesthetics, and Asian comparative philosophy. He has published books and articles on cognitive modularity, cultural psychology, Confucian moral psychology, moral nativism, and moral reasoning. His recent books *Embodied Moral Psychology and Confucian Philosophy* (Lexington, 2013) and *Moral Psychology of Confucian Shame: Shame of Shamelessness* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) bring traditional topics of Asian philosophy to the forefront of cognitive science.