

REVIEWS



Robert E. Carter, *Encounter with Enlightenment: A Study of Japanese Ethics*. Foreword by Yuasa Yasuo

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. xxxiii + 258 pp. \$23.95 paper, ISBN 0-791-5018-x.

IT WAS TIME someone took up the claims made by Arthur Danto in his 1987 book, *Mysticism and Morality*, that Eastern philosophies lack a developed idea of free will. Robert E. Carter tackles the challenge head-on in a comprehensive overview of Japanese ethics. In addition to chapters on Confucianism, Buddhism, Zen, and Shinto, he devotes additional sections to the core ideas of “not-doing” and “self-transformation.” The result is a highly readable introduction to the subject that reorganizes much familiar information in an effort to demonstrate the variety of ethical theories that have played a part in shaping Japanese morality.

Although the book is suitable as an undergraduate textbook, it is far from simplistic. Again and again Carter shows himself aware of the complexities involved in generalizing about “the East” or even about “Japan” when it comes to moral issues. On several occasions I had to flip back to erase a question mark in the margin or point ahead to a later passage in which what seemed to me an overstatement had been qualified and nuanced.

The chapter centered on Watsuji and Nishida, whose ideas have been perhaps the major stimulus to Carter’s interest in the subject, is the most substantial. Given that, one might have expected more of the chapter on Zen. The fact that his treatment draws on considerable direct contact with Zen masters sets up the expectation of clear answers to hard questions. To some extent he carries this off, but the brief response to critics of Zen’s complicity with the military imperialists of wartime Japan is not entirely convincing. In part this may be due to the fact that his principal counterfoil is Brian Victoria’s *Zen at War*, whose arguments are more easily disposed of than more carefully argued critiques of Zen’s silent complicities with the status quo. Since this is the clearest concrete case of applied ethics in the book, the author might have shouldered the burden more at length.

If there is one thing missing from the landscape of Japan, it is attention to the role that new religious movements have made on issues ignored by traditional moralities, issues like environmental pollution, world hunger, the oppression of minorities and minority economies, and the like. For Carter “modern Japan” seems

to end in the middle of the last century. While his sense of the “fundamentals” of Japanese ethics seems well placed, it is the application of these ideas to contemporary questions that is their real test, and for this reason the proliferation of new spiritualities in the past decades cannot be ignored. In this same regard, Shinto is presented as a tradition lacking in self-consciousness of its teachings and moral theory. (His principal authority for this seems to be a popular book by Stuart Picken which he takes a better liking to than those of other scholars of Shinto.) Efforts to clarify Shinto doctrine, to stiffen the academic requirements for ascending in the Shinto hierarchy, and to confront moral questions regarding the abuse of the natural world at least deserve some mention.

A more serious oversight, it seems to me, is the fact that Carter does not take the idea of virtue-based ethics as far as he might in demonstrating how the absence of a reliance on absolute principles need not end up in the paralysis of the moral conscience. Further examination of the strengths and weakness of Japan’s predominantly contextual morality (if we may use the term) could open the way to a dialogue of benefit to moralities East and West.

Not that Carter is not aware of these questions. Towards the end of the book he summarizes the problem handily with reference to Charles Taylor and Alisdair MacIntyre (194–97), but by that time it is too late to turn the questions back on the material that made up the bulk of the book. Taylor and MacIntyre have left the application of these questions to non-Western moralities for persons with just the sort of background that Carter brings, and we can only hope he will follow up on these matters at a later date.

The weakest part of the book—though it bothers me to have to say this—is the Foreword of Yuasa Yasuo. It is hard to decide whether to advise the reader to read this first or last. Begin with it and you are likely to be distracted by its numerous asides that do little to introduce the book that follows. Read it last and you are likely to feel slighted by the paternalistic tone of “instructing” the Western reader in the basics of Japanese history. Although it is laid out in such a way as to comment on each of the major chapters, there is some doubt that the chapters were actually read. Carter qualifies where Yuasa generalizes, and Carter poses theoretical questions where Yuasa piles up disjointed historical facts. I am bothered by this because I know that Carter considers Yuasa one of the most creative minds of his generation, as do I. The translation makes matters worse by cluttering up the text with unnecessary Chinese characters (there is a mistake on page xxviii) and tone marks for Chinese words. A careful editing would have eliminated some of the unnatural idioms and English usage. There are some gems in the Foreword, vintage Yuasa. But it is really not the right introduction to Carter’s study.

The amount of material Carter has read through in preparing this book is impressive. Although locked off from the original texts, his familiarity with existing translations and secondary literature raises the standard in a way that studies fixed on primary materials often fail to do. One cannot read *Encounter with Enlighten-*

ment without asking precisely the kinds of questions that need to be asked of the encounter between moral philosophies East and West.

James W. Heisig
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture