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Do Ancient Philosophies Help Us Understand Modern Psychologies?

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Abstract

People from Western and East Asian cultures exhibit systematic differences in perception, attention, and cognition. Why do people from these cultures think differently? According to an influential proposal, psychological differences between Westerners and East Asians reflect, and may derive from, differences between ancient Greek and ancient Chinese philosophies. Here, we critique this proposal in two ways. First, we argue that the way ancient Greek philosophy is represented in the cultural psychology literature is skewed, highlighting differences between ancient Greek and Chinese beliefs, and obscuring similarities. Second, we argue that no causal mechanism has been offered by which ancient philosophies could give rise to modern cross-cultural differences.