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BOOK REVIEW

Stephen C. Angle and Michael Slote, eds. *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*. New York and London: Routledge, 2013. 271pp., ISBN: 9780415815482.

Virtue Ethics and Confucianism, edited by Stephen C. Angle and Michael Slote, is a welcome addition to the growing literature on cross-cultural and comparative ethics. This collection is composed of selected papers from a 2010 conference of American and Chinese scholars on the topic of Confucianism and virtue ethics. The essays are divided into four divisions, each loosely organized around a particular theme.

The first section, titled "Debating the Scope and Applicability of 'Virtue' and 'Virtue Ethics,'" considers the relationship between contemporary virtue ethics and Confucianism. Chen Lai's opening essay draws attention to a discontinuity between Confucian moral thought and both ancient Greek and contemporary forms of virtue ethics. The term *de* (德), often translated as "virtue," may mean either "virtuous conduct" or "virtuous character" (15–16). Further, Confucius himself links internal virtuous attitudes like filial piety (*xiao* 孝) to their appropriate external expression in the rites (*li* 禮) (17). For Confucius, then, the rites are not merely the appropriate manifestation of a virtuous inner life, but are themselves conceptually on par with virtuous dispositions. Indeed, Chen questions whether it would even make sense to think of Confucian virtues independently of the rites (18). Chen Lai's analysis suggests that Confucius cannot really be classified as a virtue ethicist, since virtue alone is not the basic moral term in his ethical system.

Other papers in this section take a more complimentary approach. Philip Ivanhoe argues that both Mencius and Wang Yangming, in articulating conceptions of human flourishing, fall under the virtue ethicist classification (28–29). A distinctive feature of both their accounts is the stress placed on the sage as a virtuous moral exemplar (32–33, 40). Another significant feature of Mencius' virtue ethics is its emphasis on the importance of family and societal relationships as partly constitutive of human flourishing (42–43). Similarly, in his chapter, Bryan Van Norden explores ways Daoist and Confucian accounts of human flourishing can help us develop virtue ethics as a category (59). In Daoist texts, for instance, we find a distinctive emphasis on skillful activity as possessing intrinsic value. Van Norden makes this point with reference to the well-known example from the *Zhuangzi* of the butcher who effortlessly carves up the ox carcass. In his act of carving, the butcher aligns himself with the patterns of the universe (61). Van Norden also suggests that the Confucian emphasis on

artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation are valuable additions to contemporary conceptions of flourishing (62–63).

Both pieces are excellent examples of comparative philosophy, and I agree with the authors that attention to the richness of Chinese texts can enrich contemporary accounts of virtue and flourishing. The authors' attribution of the label "virtue ethicist" to Confucian authors, however, raises a general concern that I have about the framing of the collection as a whole. Multiple chapters demonstrate that Chinese thinkers place great emphasis on the importance of virtues and human flourishing in moral life. But, as the editors acknowledge (7), we can distinguish between a virtue theory, which explains the role of virtuous dispositions within a moral system, and virtue ethics, in which virtue is a fundamental moral concept in a strong enough sense to distinguish the theory from deontology and consequentialism.[1] Consequentialisms and deontologies, of course, can also incorporate sophisticated accounts of virtue and flourishing into their systems. Elsewhere Van Norden provides a book length development of his view that Confucianism is a species of virtue ethics, but as far as I can tell none of the chapters included in this collection provide arguments for this position.[2] Therefore, it might have been better to frame the collection as a comparative study of virtue, rather than as an investigation into the intersection between Confucianism and virtue ethics proper. Much of this collection should be of interest to deontologists and consequentialists looking to deepen their conception of virtue. Likewise, elements of Confucian virtue theory might be better understood as a *sui generis* moral system, a position perhaps more in line with Chen Lai's chapter.

The second section of the collection, titled "Happiness, Luck and Ultimate goals," mainly deals with accounts of human flourishing, but it also includes an interesting chapter by Sean Drysdale Walsh on moral luck in Aristotle and Confucius. Walsh points out that both Aristotle and Confucius accept that doing virtuous actions helps develop virtuous dispositions. This suggests that whether or not we become virtuous depends largely on the rulers, governments, and teachers who influence how we act before we are virtuous, such that we therefore possess moral good fortune if we are born into conducive circumstances (116–17). Some people are also born lucky, in the sense that their natures are particularly attuned to developing virtue (117–18). One role of a good government is to mitigate against the possibility of bad moral luck, by encouraging virtuous activity (123). Although I appreciated Walsh's treatment of

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[1] Driver, Julia. 1998. "The Virtues and Human Nature," in *How One Should Live*, edited by Roger Crisp, 111–30. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 113, footnote 1.

[2] Van Norden, Bryan. 2007. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

this topic, it may have been improved by at least a brief comment on whether something is distinctive about Confucian moral luck in relation to contemporary treatments of the topic.

Most of the remaining pieces in this section focus on accounts of human flourishing in Confucian ethics. Matthew D. Walker, in "Structured Inclusivism about Human Flourishing," argues that Confucian ethics avoids a weakness of Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia,* often translated as "happiness." A number of scholars have defended an inclusivist interpretation of Aristotle, in which *eudaimonia* is held to be a composite whole, constituted by various intrinsic goods, including virtuous activity (94). Kraut has objected that this implies *eudaimonia* is a mere collection of goods, rather than a whole in its own right (94). Walker argues that Mencius holds an inclusivist theory of human flourishing that avoids this difficulty (95). Although Mencius identifies human flourishing with the full development of human nature (*xing* 性), all components of human nature are not equal. Most important are the virtuous dispositions of benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智). Also relevant is our sensual nature shared with animals, in particular enjoyment of the sense pleasures of sights, sounds, tastes and so on (96). These various components of flourishing are not a mere aggregation, however, but rather a hierarchically ordered functional whole, in which the higher virtuous nature restrains and guides the lower desires (97–99).

The third section, titled "Practicality, Justification and Action Guidance," largely consists of essays considering the applicability of Confucian virtues to daily life. I found Lo Ping-cheung's "How Virtues Provide Action Guidance: Confucian Military Virtues at Work" particularly interesting. His exploration of the rich history of Chinese texts dealing with warfare provides a valuable resource to an under-analyzed aspect of contemporary virtue theory. Focusing on the group of texts that come to be known as The Seven Military Classics, Lo Ping-cheung discusses how the military virtues provide guidance on both when and how to engage in combat (141). In Wu Tzu's *Art of War*, for instance, the four virtues of "awesomeness, virtue, benevolence and courage" are attributed to successful generals (142). Often the relevant virtues are simply listed, and I would have appreciated a fuller explanation of them.

I found Lo's treatment of Taigon's *Six Secret Teachings* particularly interesting. In Taigon's view, generals have important traits of courage, wisdom, benevolence, trustworthiness, and loyalty (143). Taigon also gives ten excesses exhibited by commanders, some of which are interestingly paired with what would usually be considered virtuous dispositions. These excesses include, for instance, "being benevolent and unable to inflict suffering," and "being trustworthy and liking to trust others" (143). Although Lo's own emphasis is on showing that the virtue

tradition of Chinese military texts should be viewed as an applied virtue tradition (150–51), this intermingling of vices with apparent virtue also invites theoretical questions. For instance, does the inclusion of apparent virtues in the dispositional weaknesses of generals suggest a virtue particularism? Further, it invites reflection on how virtue and vice interact. This chapter provides a particularly obvious example of a strong feature of the collection as a whole, in inviting further reflection on distinctive features of the Chinese virtue tradition.

The final section titled "Moral Psychology and Particular Virtues" treats several individual virtues, or at least potential virtues, that the various authors consider important to the tradition as a whole. Sara Rushing argues that humility is an important virtue in Confucius' Analects, even though it receives little explicit attention from Confucius himself (173). Kai Machal and Andrew Terjesen consider the importance of justice and empathy respectively. The collection ends with an interesting article by Marion Hourdequin, in which she argues that empathy must be directed properly if it is to provide moral guidance, a point she makes by referencing the famous story of King Xuan and the sacrificial ox as told by Mencius (212–13).

In his article in this section, Stephen Angle provides a study of the role of conscientiousness in early Confucianism, arguing that it plays an important role, but is distinct from and inferior to virtue proper (191). Angle defines conscientiousness as "consciously ensuring that one does one's duty," (183) and claims that although it cannot be translated by a single term (191), it is given a careful analysis in the early Confucian tradition. Confucius himself distinguishes the conscientious person from the closely related hypocritical village worthy. Both are alike in that their behavior, which conforms to prescribed actions, does not match their psychology. Both, therefore, often act again their inclinations when they perform correct action. The conscientious person, however, is superior in that he consistently, and for the most part successfully, follows the right course of action (183). Confucius also emphasizes the importance of conscientious action in developing full virtue, a position adopted by other early Confucian thinkers. Nevertheless conscientiousness is inferior to real virtue, since the conscientious person's motivation may fail, in which case s/he will not perform the correct action (183).

According to Angle, Mencius is even more ambivalent in his attitude towards the conscientious person. The problem is not so much that such a person unreliably performs virtuous action, but that such persons "encourage a culture of doing no more than one's duty" (185). Given the degeneracy of the age, the conscientious person's standards are likely to be particularly low (185). Instead, in line with his distinctive position that we have innate moral proclivities, Mencius encourages the development of full virtue (185–86).

Like both Mencius and Confucius, Xunzi also sees conscientiousness as a

valuable tool for the developing student, but inferior to full virtue (186). Interestingly, he explicitly distinguishes between scholars, who successfully model behavior on virtuous exemplars, the gentleman, whose dispositions partly track proper action, and the sage, whose transformed inner nature results in effortless virtuous activity (187–88). Not surprisingly, given his rejection of Mencius' claim that we have innate virtuous proclivities, Xunzi gives a stronger role to conscientiousness in overcoming our initially depraved desires (186–87).

Angle's fine essay is an example of why I strongly recommend this collection. He illustrates persuasively that the Confucian tradition is a valuable resource for thinking through the benefits and drawbacks of a potential virtue with which contemporary virtue theory has also shown ambivalence. One benefit of his account is in using conscientiousness to illustrate the distinction between the fully virtuous sage, and one in process of developing virtue. As he points out, it also illustrates the role of rule-following as a transitional but also transformative aspect of developing virtue (191). I also appreciated his choice of what we might call a semi-virtue for his object of analysis.

I was surprised, however, to find Angle focusing mainly on Confucian critiques of the conscientious person emphasizing the instrumental value of the virtues. For Confucius, the conscientious person is unreliable in his actions (183–84), while for Mencius, the conscientious person aims at too low a standard of virtue (185). But surely a deeper drawback of a lack of virtue must reference the intrinsic value of virtue itself. A conscientious person who adopted a high moral standard and successfully acted in accordance with it would, I imagine, remain morally deficient in Mencius' and Confucius' accounts. Directly addressing this deficiency might strengthen Angle's distinction between the virtuous person and his conscientious counterpart.

Although I have only discussed a limited selection of the essays in this collection, I hope to have given some indication of its value, both to specialists of Confucian philosophy, as well as those like myself who are intrigued by the possibility of comparative study of the virtues. I strongly recommend the collection as a whole, and thank Stephen Angle and Michael Slote for their efforts in bringing it forward.

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