

RECENT WORK

CONFUCIANISM AND VIRTUE ETHICS: STILL A FLEDGLING IN CHINESE AND COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

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The past couple of decades have witnessed a remarkable burst of philosophical energy and talent devoted to virtue ethical approaches to Confucianism, including several books, articles, and even high-profile workshops and conferences that make connections between Confucianism and either virtue ethics as such or moral philosophers widely regarded as virtue ethicists (Angle 2009, Chong 2007, Ivanhoe 2002, Sim 2007, Van Norden 2007, Yearley 1990, Yu 2007). Those who do not work in the combination of Chinese philosophy and ethics may wonder what all of the fuss is about. Others may be more familiar with the issues but have doubts about the fruitfulness of this line of inquiry. All of us, however, are in the enviable position of setting the stage for what looks likely to be a much larger, future generation of philosophers working across Western and non-Western traditions. It is therefore worth asking whether a constructive engagement between Confucianism and virtue ethics is worth turning into a significant, multi-generational research agenda.

Most answers to this question will fall somewhere between two poles. At one end is the view that the line of inquiry has run its course, if ever there were a course to run in the first place; at the opposite end is the view that we're only just getting started. And then there is a wide range of more moderate views falling between these two positions. Normally I would be among the moderates, but on this issue I am an extremist. Far from having exhausted the potential of virtue ethical approaches to Confucianism, I think we are standing on a philosophical gold mine that we've only just begun to tap. In what follows I would like to explain briefly why I take this to be the case.

1. VIRTUE ETHICS IN THE PRESENT DAY

I will start with a brief description of virtue ethics as understood in contemporary

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moral philosophy. To be sure, several scholars have already found that this literature can be used to enrich their understanding of Confucianism, and this is reason enough to undertake comparative analysis. But in my view we can make a stronger case than this. If there are areas of contemporary philosophy to which Chinese thought could give more than it takes, virtue ethics must be among the most promising, so it is worth saying a bit more about the state of the subfield of virtue ethics at present.

If a philosopher calls herself a virtue ethicist today, it is likely because she believes her moral theory competes (favorably) with rule-deontology and consequentialism. Virtue ethics in this sense has to do with the way that ethical norms are derived or explained. It presupposes that virtue (or perhaps approximate notions like flourishing) is more basic than rules of action and the maximization of good states of affairs. Whereas a consequentialist might say that keeping a promise to a friend is right because it gives rise to the greatest possible amount of happiness or well-being, a virtue ethicist might say it is right because it is honest or trustworthy, or simply because it is what a person of admirable character would do. With only a few exceptions, most contemporary ethicists take the explanatory primacy of virtue to be definitive of virtue ethics. Philosophers who work extensively on virtue but do not think it more basic than the right or the good often reject the label ‘virtue ethicist’ for this very reason, no matter how prominent a role they think virtue analysis should play in ethics (Hurka 2000).

As a theoretical rival to consequentialism and rule-deontology, virtue ethics is still in its earliest stages. The sort of fine-tuning that has been going on for decades in the contemporary literature on consequentialism and rule-deontology (e.g., on the difference between act and rule consequentialism, or how best to cut the distinction between acts and omissions) does not dominate the contemporary literature on virtue ethics. Much of the work is still at the ground level, so to speak. Three dimensions of this work stand out as needing considerably more enrichment. First, the current literature tends to prioritize a relatively narrow range of virtues. Probably the largest group of virtue ethicists tends to draw from updated lists of Aristotelian virtues, which—relative to the Chinese tradition—are particularly concerned with self-control, reason, and respect for persons. The other major approach draws on the sentimentalist tradition and treats care or empathy as the most important or basic of virtues (Slote 2001). Second, there is little consensus in the current literature about the nature of virtue. Michael Slote has argued that traits are virtuous if they are “fundamentally admirable” (2001). Others, influenced by the ancient Greek tradition, think that character traits are virtues only if they contribute directly to the trait-holder’s flourishing, understood as the development and exercise of morally significant natural dispositions and capacities (Hursthouse 1999). Finally, only a handful of contemporary virtue ethicists have begun to articulate truly systematic accounts of how right action and other moral notions can be derived from virtue (Hursthouse 1999, Slote 2001, Swanton 2003). Others declare themselves virtue ethicists but have yet to spell out in detail the relation between virtue and other moral

notions, and show how their accounts might answer some of the strongest objections to them. Indeed, some scholars (including this author) think virtue ethics remains something of a catch-all category, where a theory qualifies as a species of virtue ethics so long as it holds that assessments of character have at least *some* independent explanatory power, which is not derived entirely from right action or the maximization of good states.¹ To this extent ‘virtue ethics’ has become something of a convenient label for any character-oriented position that stands outside purer forms of consequentialism and rule-deontology.

For each of the dimensions in which contemporary virtue ethics needs ground level work, the Confucian thinkers can expand considerably the range of concepts and arguments that virtue ethicists entertain. Consider the first dimension, which has to do with the prioritization of virtues. Bryan Van Norden has noted how different principles of organization lead Confucians to emphasize benevolence, wisdom, the kind of moral integrity that is motivated by a sense of shame, and the complex array of stylistic sensibilities that constitute ritual propriety (2007: 350-54). Western virtue ethicists have much to say about sensitivities to role-dependent responsibilities (as parent to child, friend to friend, supervisor to subordinate, etc.), but lack much of the subtlety of Confucian analyses. To my knowledge, none have made much of the parallels between deference to one’s older brother (*ti* 悌) and deference to one’s elders more generally. Famously, and perhaps most perplexingly for Western virtue ethicists, the Confucian thinkers put tremendous emphasis on the developmental role of filial piety, from which the sensibilities and dispositions of so many other virtues are cultivated (Ivanhoe 2007). *Neo-Confucianism* holds out the prospect of developing virtue ethical theories that have yet to be imagined in the recent Western literature, particularly those that consist in developing some sense of unity or oneness with others, most famously expressed in the neo-Confucian refrain, “forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things” (*tian di wan wu wei yi ti* 天地萬物為一體). In his recent work, Philip J. Ivanhoe has begun to develop the several ways in which this feeling of connectedness can be distinguished from mere empathy and other forms of fellow feeling (Ivanhoe *ms*). Stephen Angle has explored at length the importance of appreciating how one fits into a coherent or harmonious whole (2009). On nearly all of the virtues which the tradition touches, the Confucians show their characteristic attention to the potential trade-offs between love and a sense of obligation, natural spontaneity and reverence, and unselfconsciousness and self-control.

Turning to the second respect in which present day virtue ethics stands to be enriched, Confucian thinkers also help to expand dramatically considerations about how virtues should be distinguished from other dispositions or states of character.

¹ For example, the virtue ethicist Philippa Foot thinks the wrongness of some horrific acts, on a par with atrocities of Hitler and Pol Pot, are largely or entirely a matter of their intrinsic properties, independently of their relationship to character (2001: 99-115). David Copp and David Sobel suggest that this picture of moral explanation will work only if her theory of virtue is “married with an independent free standing theory of right and wrong” (2004: 544).

Earlier we saw that Aristotelian virtue ethicists tend to say a virtue must have some close relationship to the possessor's flourishing. Van Norden argues that Confucius and Meng Zi also see virtues as having a necessary relationship to flourishing, although he observes that they distinguish *between* virtues differently, seeing the distinctions "almost exclusively in terms of spheres of experience" rather than (partially or entirely) in terms of specific psychological faculties (2007: 350-51). Rosalind Hursthouse believes that virtues have some sort of non-accidental relationship to the moral agent's well-being, such that she is generally better off when she has the virtues and worse off when she doesn't (1999: 167). This too is an issue about which classical Confucians like Meng Zi have considered views (*Meng-Zi* 2A6). And once again, the neo-Confucians are especially useful in expanding the range of possibilities into territory only barely imagined in the Western literature. They are distinctive in stressing that the most important virtues must either model or contribute to the world's life-producing processes (*sheng sheng* 生生), which arises out of a textured conception of life-production that they develop in opposition to the Buddhists.² Finally, Dai Zhen insists that human virtues are necessarily outgrowths of the natural, interpersonal dispositions that regulate the five basic Confucian relationships (*wu lun* 五倫), which are characterized by the ability to both give and receive in a reciprocal manner.³

So much for the first and second dimensions in which Confucianism could enrich contemporary virtue ethics. Let us now turn to the third, which contemporary moral philosophers often take to be a definitive feature of virtue ethics: the logical or explanatory primacy of virtue over right action and the maximization of goods. Several authors of recent works on Confucianism and virtue ethics have argued that the Confucians do indeed regard virtue as logically primary. Ivanhoe has long argued that the classical Confucians prefer to explain right action in terms of the expression and cultivation of "distinctively human excellences" rather than moral maxims or principles (2002: 1-11). Angle maintains that the neo-Confucians regard stable dispositions of moral perception as more basic than moral rules (2009: 51-59). Van Norden holds that notions of flourishing and good character have a more central role in the ethics of Confucius and Meng Zi, although he rejects the view that these or any other characteristically virtue ethical notions have absolute explanatory primacy (2007, 2009: 306-07).

It would not be a healthy field if there were not detractors. In a recent talk, Lee Minghui has insisted that Confucian ethics falls decisively on the side of deontology. His argument in brief is that teleology and deontology exhaust the range of possible moral theories, and that deontology is distinguished from teleology by the fact that it ultimately grounds ethical claims in moral as opposed to non-moral goods, an

² See Zhu 1986: v. 1, p. 108, section 10.

³ See Dai 1996: chapters 32-33, pp. 309-13. The "Five Relationships" are father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, ruler and ruled, and friend and friend. Confucians traditionally see these as playing the most important role in maintaining social harmony and cultivating moral virtue.

assumption that the Confucians share (2010). Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames maintain that the conceptual apparatus of Confucianism is fundamentally incompatible with an array of Western moral theories, virtue ethics among them. On the Confucian view, they suggest, human beings are constituted entirely by their roles, which they find incompatible with the position that virtues are necessarily drawn from universally shared features of human nature that are “developed by rationality.”⁴ Manyul Im and Dan Robins have defended consequentialist readings of specific Confucian philosophers. Im observes that Meng Zi often rebuts the Mohists by arguing that they will better succeed at obtaining their desired good or benefits (利 *li*) by aiming at them indirectly, suggesting that Meng Zi rejects subjective consequentialism (consequentialism as a decision procedure for individual agents) in favor of objective consequentialism (consequentialism as an objective criterion of rightness) (2010). Robins argues that Xun Zi prefers (his own version of) the Way because it is “uniquely capable of promoting order in human societies” (2007: section 7).

These criticisms are important and should be taken into account, but I do not think they close the book on virtue ethical approaches to Confucianism (not that all of these critics mean to suggest such). For one thing, they focus on just one of the dimensions in which contemporary work on virtue ethics stands in need of more ground level contributions: namely, ways in which virtue can be construed as having explanatory primacy over other ethical notions. So long as Confucianism still offers abundant resources to the other dimensions of virtue ethics it can still make tremendous contributions. For this purpose, the Confucian tradition simply needs to meet the standard of offering a wide array of competing, nuanced accounts of the nature of virtue and the psychological structure of various individual virtues, a standard that Confucianism well exceeds. Furthermore, some of the criticisms—such as Rosemont and Ames’s—seem primarily concerned with Aristotelian ways of explaining ethical norms. Aristotelian theories are just one among several viable species of virtue ethics, most of which have yet to be filled out. As noted earlier, in fact, I think that virtue ethics is typically treated as a catch-all category, used to describe any theory that emphasizes characterological norms and does not conform neatly to theories that treat either right action or the good as the sole or primary basic moral notions. Construed so broadly, there must surely be many species of virtue ethics under the sun, and it would be shocking if Confucianism did not have something to offer.

Furthermore, more conceptual and interpretive work needs to be done before we can truly test the hypothesis that any one thinker has views about explanatory primacy that are consistent with any one of the three major moral theories. It might help to see a more rigorous attempt to distinguish Confucian justification from explanation: just because a philosopher justifies a practice or virtue in terms of its consequences, it does not follow that she believes we can provide a proper explanation or account by appealing to its consequences. (To be sure, this poses a challenge to defenders of consequentialist and virtue ethical readings alike.) A more

⁴ 2009: 45. Here Rosemont and Ames appear to focus on Aristotelian variants of virtue ethics.

pressing issue is whether Confucians, when they appeal to consequences to justify (or explain) the rightness of an act, assume that the value of those consequences is agent-neutral. If a theory holds that the value of a particular person's health fundamentally depends on the point of view from which it is being considered, then most (but not all) consequentialists say this theory collapses into non-consequentialism (Pettit 1997, Portmore 2003). Settling the matter of agent-neutrality would require a close look at so-called "hard cases" like Meng Zi's hypothetical about King Shun and his father (*Meng-Zi* 7A35). If Meng Zi thinks—as he appears to think—that a sage-king like Shun should give up the empire for the sake of his father's safety, even at the risk of depriving the people of their peace and prosperity, it would take some philosophical acrobatics to show that this view is consistent with consequentialism as it is usually understood today.

2. VIRTUE ETHICS IN AS A WAY OF "DOING ETHICS"

So far we have been taking virtue ethics on the terms of present day moral theorists, according to which the explanatory primacy of virtue (or closely related notions) is its definitive feature. But there are other ways of giving virtue primacy over right action and the maximization of goods, some of which might have been embraced more readily by the great Confucian philosophers. One form of primacy that strikes me as particularly promising concerns not how ethical values are derived, but rather how ethics is done. On this construal, a thinker is a virtue ethicist if she believes that in engaging in higher-order moral reflection, the first or primary task should be to understand things like the nature, psychological structure and ways of cultivating good character, rather than the principles of right action or their relationship to various goods. A person can be a virtue ethicist in this sense without being a virtue ethicist in the sense invoked by present day virtue ethicists. One might think that a virtuous state of character is whatever state that maximizes social harmony, but think that those who properly engage in higher order ethical reflection (call this "ethics proper") should be more concerned with the relevant states of character than with the good to which they conduce. On this account, an essential feature of virtue ethics is the conviction that ethics, when done rightly, attends to character first.

There are a variety of possible reasons to hold this view. Maybe we think that reflection about character has a more intimate relationship to making oneself a good person, which should be the first order of business in ethics proper. Perhaps we believe that in the vast majority of everyday cases the right course of action is relatively uncontroversial, whereas there is considerably more room for debate about the feelings, attitudes, and responses that one should have when faced with the demands of the world. Some might hold that we cannot fully settle questions about good states or right action without cultivating the virtues necessary for good judgment in the first place. Or maybe we just find higher order reflection on virtue to have more intrinsic ethical value than higher order reflection on moral rules or the like.

This offers a way of characterizing virtue ethics that most present day scholars of Chinese thought will happily ascribe to the Confucian thinkers. If we were to

compare the Confucians to their Western counterparts on this conception of ethics, it would touch upon some weighty meta-philosophical issues that seem to have fallen out of favor in the past few centuries.

To take just one example, the Stoics insist that philosophy should be regarded as something like the practice of medicine, but applied to diseases of the soul rather than diseases of the body. For them, the aim of higher order moral reflection (and philosophy more generally) is to uproot what many describe as flaws of character, such as wrongheaded desires and predispositions to affirm—reflexively or unthinkingly—false beliefs that inflict suffering on the self (such as the belief that death is harmful to the dead). This way of understanding ethics proper, which Martha Nussbaum calls the “medical conception of ethical inquiry,” runs through the Hellenistic tradition (Nussbaum 1994: 13-47).

If we were to look for ways in which Confucians can enrich this conception of ethical inquiry, it would be hard to decide where to begin. Cicero insists that philosophy should be a way of doctoring *ourselves* (Nussbaum 1994: 14). It would be well worthwhile to ask what Xun Zi might say about the idea that higher order moral reflection should provide us with that sort of autonomy so readily. Wang Yangming adopts (from the Buddhists) a medical conception of his own to describe the learning of sages and worthies (Ivanhoe 2009: 122-23, 131-32). The neo-Confucians—especially Lu Xiangshan—share with some of the Hellenists the view that a person should find ethical arguments and ideas engaging and easy to grasp in order to have the right transformative effect on her (Ivanhoe 2009: 39, 96, Nussbaum 1994: 15-16). But compared to the Hellenists, the neo-Confucians have considerably more to say about the preferred relationship between newly acquired knowledge and the beliefs and dispositions of judgment that a person already has, which is a central concern in the debate about the “extension of knowledge” (*zhi zhi* 致知).⁵ The Confucians also have a remarkable array of considered views about the ways in which ethical inquiry depends on ethical practice, and it would be a shame to neglect the rich conceptual resources that Chinese philosophy offers in thinking about how to internalize (and eventually act spontaneously on) the fruits of our ethical inquiries.

Constructive work on Confucianism and virtue ethics has only just gotten off the ground. As we have seen, debates about the viability of this work have focused largely on the explanatory role of virtue and flourishing. I hope I have shown that this is only one dimension of virtue ethics to which Confucianism could make a substantial contribution, and that contemporary virtue ethics—still a fledgling itself—stands in need of the very philosophical resources that are at the heart of Confucian and neo-Confucian thought.⁶

⁵ For example, see Zhu and Lü 1992: volume 3, and Chan 1967: 88-122.

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