

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen C. ANGLE and Michael SLOTE, eds., *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*. New York and London: Routledge, 2013. 271 pages. ISBN 13: 978-0-415-81548-2 (Hardcover). 128.70 USD.

The recent surge¹ of interest in the relations between Confucianism and virtue ethics is well documented. One scholar has recently suggested that when it comes to constructive engagement between Confucianism and virtue ethics, “we are standing on a philosophical gold mine that we’ve only just begun to tap.”² The volume under review, comprising nineteen essays divided across four thematic strands, stands as clear evidence of the richness resulting from this theoretical excavation. The editors of the volume co-directed the 2008 NEH Summer Seminar for College and University Teachers, “Traditions Into Dialogue: Confucianism and Contemporary Virtue Ethics,” as well as the 2010 “International Conference on Confucianism and Virtue Ethics.” Although one could view this volume as the culminating product of these events, it is more accurate to regard it as a continuation of sustained attention to this theme, paving the way for future related scholarly endeavors.

Appropriately, the first six essays are devoted to “Debating the Scope and Applicability of ‘Virtue’ and ‘Virtue Ethics.’” At times, the authors of this section directly engage in debate with each other concerning a matrix of pertinent issues. An interesting example arises in the contributions of Lee Ming-Huei and Bryan W. Van Norden. Holding that the exhaustiveness of teleological ethics and deontological ethics obviates the possibility of a third type of ethics, Lee argues that Confucianism is a sub-type of either teleological (consequentialist) or deontological ethics. Lee’s claim suggests provocative implications for virtue ethics *in general*, and even more so *vis-à-vis* Confucianism. In response, Van Norden contends that with its emphases on flourishing, the virtues, human nature, and ethical cultivation, virtue ethics stands as a distinct ethical theory that calls the individual to become a better person. Van Norden insists that because Confucianism can improve our understanding of each of the four areas of virtue ethics, it warrants inclusion in his proposed “contemporary form of virtue ethics that synthesizes Aristotelianism with elements of other systems of thought, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism” (57). If it is granted that Confucianism might be accurately described as a type of virtue ethics, one will want to specify which variety (or varieties) of

¹ Recent books include: Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); May Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jiyuan Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (New York: Routledge); Bryan W. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² Justin Tiwald, “Confucianism and Virtue Ethics: Still a Fledgling in Chinese and Comparative Philosophy,” *Comparative Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2010): 55.

Confucianism is coherent with which variety (or varieties) of recognized (i.e., Western) virtue ethics. Engaging the classical representatives of the traditions in question, Chen Lai compares the ethical philosophy of Confucius's *Analects* with that of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Philip J. Ivanhoe compares the ethical philosophy of Mencius with that of Aristotle, as well as with the sentimentalist virtue ethics of Hume, and goes on to compare the ethical philosophy of Hume with that of Wang Yangming. Liu Liangjian deploys Mencian and Humean philosophies to address the "is-ought problem concerning human nature," as articulated in the recent work of Peter Singer. Especially intriguing is Wong Wai-ying's "Confucian Ethics and Virtue Ethics Revisited," an appendix to his "Confucian Ethics and Virtue Ethics,"³ published twelve years prior. The first section of this volume comes to a somewhat deflating close at Wong's conclusion that "it is doubtful that Confucian ethics can be classified as virtue ethics" (79). If rendered dubious of the prospects for fruitful comparative engagement between virtue ethics and Confucianism, the reader may view the remaining sections of the volume as collectively accepting the challenge of demonstrating the viability of this conceptual cross-pollination.

The following four essays are grouped under the heading of "Happiness, Luck, and Ultimate Goals." Michael Slote defends Isaiah Berlin's view that perfection of the virtues (or of happiness) is impossible, in light of inherent tensions between particular virtues (e.g., adventurousness vs. prudence; frankness vs. tact). Such complexities, Slote indicates, "can lead one to wonder whether any harmonious philosophical picture of harmoniously related virtues and goods can be adequate to *our* circumstances" (93). Because neither Confucian nor Aristotelian thinking appears to eliminate tensions among virtues, Slote argues, we should "explore the brave new ethical world that Isaiah Berlin has so prophetically adumbrated [...]" (93). Those bewildered by this conclusion will find succor in the essays that follow. Matthew D. Walker and Benjamin Huff each focus on *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing), with Walker comparatively engaging Aristotle with Mencius and Huff pairing Aristotle with Wang Yangming. Walker draws on Mencius's account of human flourishing to address the skepticism raised by Richard Kraut concerning the notion of *eudaimonia* being structurally inclusive (i.e., the notion that the relation obtaining between the putative parts of *eudaimonia* is analogous to that obtaining between a body and its parts). At the same time, Walker acknowledges, "if Aristotle and Mencius share similar views about the basic *structure* of flourishing, they have different views about its specific *content*" (100). Huff recognizes that when a virtue ethicist emphasizes *eudaimonia*, two pressures arise: that of wanting to identify the best possible way for a human to live, and that of wanting to identify the good as something achievable. Bringing Wang's *Instructions for Practical Living* and *The Great Learning* into dialogue with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Huff argues, "one's activities in almost any context will realize the highest good so long as they express virtue" (113). Sean Drysdale Walsh looks at varieties of moral luck

³ Wai-ying Wong, "Confucian Ethics and Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2001): 285-300.

in the ethical and political philosophies of Confucius and Aristotle. For instance, Walsh shows how circumstances could be such that both Confucius's *xiao ren* (petty person) and Aristotle's *hoi polloi* (the many) may act in a way that is compatible with what is moral, despite actually lacking virtue. At the same time, the *eudaimon* (happy, flourishing person) and the *junzi* (superior person) require some amount of luck in developing and maintaining virtue.

The next four essays address "Practicality, Justification, and Action Guidance." Displaying deftness with both ancient Greek and classical Chinese Confucian traditions, Yu Jiyuan demonstrates the emphasis each places on practicality, as opposed to being merely theoretical. Yu's essay highlights several suggestive reasons behind the confidence of ancient Greek and Chinese thinkers that virtue ethics can help make better persons. At the same time, Yu recognizes salient differences in what these thinkers require of their audience. Guided by a close reading of the *Mencius*, Xiao Yang contends that Mencius seems to believe that instrumental and prudential rationality is constitutive of rational agency. Interpreters of Mencius will find useful Xiao's collected paradigms of rationality in Mencius (Xiao 2013, 160-61). Huang Yong carefully illustrates the moral particularism characterizing the virtue ethical approach of the neo-Confucian Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, while Lo Ping-cheung convincingly argues for the robust presence of Confucian virtue ethics in several pre-Qin military treatises.

The volume closes with five essays considering "Moral Psychology and Particular Virtues." Sara Rushing discusses the conception of humility arising in the *Analects*, putting this notion into dialogue with its Christian counterpart, as well as classic and contemporary critiques. Alluding to *Analects* 4.15, Rushing provocatively raises the possibility that humility is the "unifying thread" binding all of Confucius's thought together (175). Andrew Terjesen proposes an alternative reading, asking whether empathy is the "one thread" running through Confucianism (201). In both cases, the question of how to properly translate *shu* (alternately translated as "reciprocity," "consideration," "understanding," "sympathy," etc.) is raised anew, adding to existing scholarship on this issue.⁴ Positioned as something of a rejoinder to Terjesen, Marion Hourdequin's essay poses the meta-ethical question of whether an adequate moral theory can be grounded in care and empathy alone. Citing passages from the *Mencius* and the *Analects* in which empathy seems to play a prominent normative role, Hourdequin answers in the negative, arguing that "something like the *Dao*" is needed "to ground the values and practices that direct empathy through the process of moral education" (218). Canvassing the thought of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, Stephen C. Angle investigates the status of conscientiousness as a virtue in Confucian thought, drawing the somewhat surprising conclusion that "conscientiousness certainly is not virtue," stipulating that conscientiousness had

⁴ See, for example, Herbert Fingarette, "Following the One Thread of the *Analects*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Thematic Issue S (1980): 373-405; Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Reweaving the 'One Thread' of the *Analects*," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 1 (1990): 17-33.

important value to early Confucians, but that it also constituted a danger (182). In an essay warranting attention in light of recent comparative scholarship focused on Confucian thought about justice,⁵ Kai Marchal interprets the Neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi as a virtue ethicist. Marchal's reading, which includes comparative analysis with the thought of Aristotle, is supported by the various treatments of justice(s) in Zhu Xi's thought.

A showcase of the fascinating and productive philosophical work that is made possible by cross-traditional dialogue, *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism* is an invaluable contribution to scholarship in ethical theory, Chinese philosophy, and comparative philosophy. That the contributors consistently aim their comparative analyses in the direction of current debates in virtue ethics and Confucian philosophy is particularly noteworthy. Far from merely a set of historical interpretations and comparisons (which would be of interest in its own right), *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism* puts these ideas to work in the present day. It is up to scholars of the future to build upon the plentiful resources of this volume to enrich the depth of the dialogue represented therein.

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⁵ See, for example, Chung-ying Cheng, "Justice and Peace in Kant and Confucius," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (2007): 345-57; May Sim, "Rethinking Virtue Ethics and Social Justice with Aristotle and Confucius," *Asian Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2010): 195-213; Erin M. Cline, *Confucius, Rawls, and the Sense of Justice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).