

# Target-centred virtue ethics: Aristotelian or Confucian?

Philippe Brunozzi & Waldemar Brys

To cite this article: Philippe Brunozzi & Waldemar Brys (2023): Target-centred virtue ethics: Aristotelian or Confucian?, *Inquiry*, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2023.2220125](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2023.2220125)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2023.2220125>



Published online: 05 Jun 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# Target-centred virtue ethics: Aristotelian or Confucian?

Philippe Brunozzi <sup>a</sup> and Waldemar Brys <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Philosophy and Science, Southeast University, Nanjing, People's Republic of China; <sup>b</sup>School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

## ABSTRACT

We raise the following problem for so-called target-centred virtue ethics. An important motivation for adopting target-centred virtue ethics over other forms of virtue ethics is its supposedly distinctive account of right action: an action is right if and only if and because it is virtuous, and what makes an action virtuous is that it hits the target of the virtues. We argue that the account is not distinctive of target-centred virtue ethics, because it is an account that is widely endorsed by Neo-Aristotelians. Hence, the argument of this paper undermines a central motivation for adopting target-centred virtue ethics. As a solution, we suggest that there is theoretical room for a target-centred account that is not Neo-Aristotelian, and we draw on the work of Confucian philosopher Wáng Yángmíng to provide one. We defend the resulting account by arguing that it has the advantage of being able to offer us a more plausible response to the self-centredness objection that has long been a problem for Neo-Aristotelians.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 9 March 2023; Accepted 28 May 2023

**KEYWORDS** Virtue ethics; right action; Neo-Aristotelianism; Wang Yangming; Confucianism

## 1. Introduction

What does a virtue ethical account of right action amount to? If anything, it amounts to saying that 'an action is right if, only if, and because it is virtuous'. (Smith 2018, 241) Hence, virtuous-making features of actions are right-making features. But what *is* a virtuous-making feature? Which features of an action make the action virtuous, hence morally right?

One option is to say that an action has virtuous-making features because the action expresses something virtuous about the agent who performs (or would perform) it. That is, an action is a benevolent action

---

**CONTACT** Philippe Brunozzi  philippe\_brunozzi@posteo.de  Department of Philosophy and Science, Southeast University, Southeast University Road, Jiangning District, Nanjing, 211189, People's Republic of China

if and only if it expresses the agent's benevolence (e.g. her benevolent motives, character traits, or other relevantly benevolent states of the agent). This amounts to saying that an action cannot be a benevolent one if it is performed from ulterior motives. On such a view, the fact that an action is virtuous is explained in terms of the virtues of the agent. Slote takes such a view to be typical of *agent-based* virtue ethics:

An agent-based approach to virtue ethics treats the moral or ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic (as opposed to deontic) ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals. (Slote 2001, 5)

A common objection raised against such an agent-based account of right action is that it collapses the plausible distinction between doing the right thing and doing it from the right motives. If right actions are virtuous actions, and an action is virtuous if and only if it is done from the right motives, then it follows that we cannot do the right thing from the wrong motives. But given that it is plausible that we can do the right thing from the wrong motives, agent-based virtue ethics fails to capture a plausible ethical distinction and is therefore problematic (Brady 2004; Van Zyl 2009; 2011; Smith 2018, 243).<sup>1</sup>

A second option for a virtue ethical account of right action is this. One might propose that an action has virtuous-making features partly because the action expresses something virtuous about the agent who performs it and partly because of 'the nature of the action itself – [...] what it is that is done'. (Foot 2001, 72) For example, an action is benevolent partly because it is performed from benevolent motives, benevolent character traits, etc., and partly because it is the benevolent thing to do in that situation (e.g. saving a child from drowning). Hence, the action might still count as a benevolent action even if the agent performs it from ulterior motives. Such a mixed account of what makes an action virtuous is still recognisably virtue ethical, even though only *some* of the virtuous-making features of actions are explained in terms of the virtues of the agent. We take such a mixed account to be an instance of *Neo-Aristotelian* virtue ethics (Annas 2011, 42–47; Foot 2001, 72–73; Hursthouse 1999, 123–125).

In contrast to the Neo-Aristotelian account of right action, which has been the predominant one among virtue ethicists, some have recently proposed a third option: actions have virtuous-making features because they 'hit the targets of the virtues' (Swanton 2003, 233). We consider

---

<sup>1</sup>For a response, see Slote 2010, 83–106; cf. Van Zyl 2019, 114–115. As the agent-based account is not the focus of this paper, we do not further evaluate it here.

their reasons for doing so in Section 4. For now, it should be noted that, on first glance, such an account seems to offer us a genuine alternative to both agent-based and Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethical accounts of right action: an action is virtuous *not* because its virtue is even partly derived from something virtuous about the agent, but rather because it stands in a specific relation to the targets of virtue. This is characteristic of so-called target-centred virtue ethics, originally proposed by Swanton (Swanton 2001; 2003; 2010; 2021)<sup>2</sup> and recently developed by Smith (Smith 2017; 2018; 2020). We call the corresponding virtue ethical account of right action the *target-centred account of right action*.

In this paper, we argue that the target-centred account of right action, as it is offered by Swanton and Smith, is difficult to distinguish from the Neo-Aristotelian one. Although both Swanton and Smith claim that a target-centred account contributes something new to the debate on what it means for actions to be morally right within a virtue ethical framework, we disagree. The target-centred account seems to be Neo-Aristotelian in all but name. If Smith is right that the main motivation behind target-centred virtue ethics *in general*, and the main distinguishing factor of it, is that it offers us a new and more successful account of right action (Smith 2017, 311–313), then our argument in this paper undermines an important motivation for adopting target-centred virtue ethics more generally.

Although we argue that current efforts to articulate an alternative to Neo-Aristotelian accounts of right action fail, they do so largely because they rely on a theoretical framework that remains distinctively Neo-Aristotelian. Hence, we suggest that there might be theoretical room for a target-centred account that is not Neo-Aristotelian. We provide an outline of such an account in the final part of the paper – an account largely inspired by the work of Míng Dynasty Chinese philosopher Wáng Yángmíng 王陽明 (1472–1529).

## 2. What is a target-centred account of right action?

A virtue ethical account of right action is one on which right actions are virtuous actions. But when is an action virtuous? Virtue ethicists who propose a target-centred account of right action take the following thesis to be distinctive of their answer:

---

<sup>2</sup>Although we acknowledge that there might be other forms of target-centred virtue ethics, we accept Smith's claim for the sake of argument that Swanton's version 'remains the most prominent in the literature' (Smith 2020, 1). Henceforth, whenever we mention 'target-centred accounts' without qualification, what we mean is the Swanton/Smith variety of it.

TARGET: An action is virtuous in respect to a virtue  $v$  just in case it hits the target of  $v$ . (Smith 2017, 313; see also Smith 2018, 243; Smith 2020, 2; Swanton 2003, 228)

To get a better grasp of what it means to hit the target of a virtue, it will be helpful to consider what a target of a virtue is supposed to be. According to Swanton, each virtue has a field, that is, 'the domain of its concern or operations' (Swanton 2021, 144), and each virtue is directed towards an aim within that field. That which the virtue aims at within the field is its target. The field of the virtue of friendship is friends or potential friends, and the aim might be to 'express affection, share intimacies, promote the good of friends, spend time with friends' (Swanton 2021, 144.) among other things. Presumably, in a situation where a child is about to fall into a well, the target of the virtue of benevolence is the action of saving the child from falling into the well.<sup>3</sup> But Swanton is clear that saving a child can be done in various ways, for example, it can be done from ulterior motives, like wanting to impress the mother, or it can be done from genuine care about the child's well-being. And so the way the action is performed (that is, the agent's motives from which she performs it, the character traits she expresses in her performance, the instruments she uses, the extent towards which she acts, the timeliness of her action, etc.) contributes to hitting the target of the relevant virtue (Swanton 2021, 137; see also Swanton 2003, 236). Hence, one cannot fully hit the target of a virtue  $v$  without performing the action in the right way.<sup>4</sup>

Such an account of what it means to hit the target of a virtue may lead one to wonder why the way that a target-hitting action is performed should be part of what it means to hit a target. After all, if my shot is only evaluated by whether it hits its target, then it is not clear why the way in which I hit the target (e.g. my motives for shooting) should factor into evaluating my shot.

Proponents of a target-centred approach might respond that this misunderstands what counts as a relevant target of a virtue. The claim is not: in a situation where a child is in danger of drowning, saving the child constitutes *hitting the target* of benevolence and doing so

---

<sup>3</sup>Given that Swanton defines the field of benevolence as 'items having a good' (Swanton 2021, 144) and its aim as successfully promoting the good or well-being of items within that field, we take it as plausible that the target of benevolence in our example consists of promoting the well-being of the child. See also Swanton 2003, 233.

<sup>4</sup>For an argument that the recurring use of 'right' in this context does not make the target-centred account of right action circular, see Smith 2017, 320; see also Smith 2020, 5; Swanton 2021, 137–138.

from genuine care for the child's well-being constitutes the way in which the target is hit. No, we should rather conceive of the different ways in which an action should be performed as *dimensions of the target* of the relevant virtue, and these dimensions are cashed out in terms of the Aristotelian mean. As Swanton puts it: 'hitting the targets of the virtues is what Aristotle calls hitting the "mean"'. (Swanton 2021, 137) That is, the motives from which I save the child or the character traits I thereby express are constitutive parts of the target of benevolence in that particular situation – they are different dimensions of the target. Therefore, if I save a child from the right motives, then the fact that I perform the action *in this way* contributes to making the action a benevolent one. It is a benevolent-making (hence right-making) feature of the action.

Introducing dimensions to the targets of virtues allows proponents of the target-centred account to claim that an action can be more or less virtuous in respect to virtue *v*, depending on how many dimensions of the target of *v* it hits and to what extent it does so. Accordingly, the virtuousness of an action comes in degrees – that is, it can have more or fewer *v*-making features. Smith calls an action *virtuous enough* in respect to *v* just in case the action hits sufficiently many dimensions of the target of *v* well enough for it not to be vicious (Smith 2018, 242). Of course, an action can be virtuous enough in respect to *v*<sub>1</sub>, but fail to be virtuous enough in respect to *v*<sub>2</sub> – for example, it can be benevolent but unjust. But if the action is virtuous enough in respect to *sufficiently many* virtues, then the action is *overall virtuous* (Smith 2018, 249; Swanton 2021, 147–153). The threshold below which an action fails to be *overall virtuous* might be indeterminate (see Van Zyl 2014, 124–125; Smith 2018, 250–251; Swanton 2021, 258–260). But Swanton and Smith emphasise that on their account of right action, a person does not have to *fully* hit the target of *all* the relevant virtues for her act to be right. All that is required for an action to be right is that the action is overall virtuous (Smith 2018, 242, 249; see also Swanton 2003, 228, 242–243).<sup>5</sup>

Now that we have summarised what a target-centred account of right action entails, how its proponents conceive of the targets of the virtues, and what it means to perform a target-hitting action, we can move on to the main issue of this paper: how does a target-centred account differ from more common Neo-Aristotelian ones?

---

<sup>5</sup>The reason for avoiding the claim that a person performs a right action only if she *fully* hits the targets of all the relevant virtues is simple: such an account of right action would be implausibly demanding (see Smith 2018, 247–248).

### 3. Hitting the targets of virtues across dimensions

Our argument in this section is that current target-centred accounts of right actions are not as substantially different from Neo-Aristotelian ones as they might seem to be, and that, for proponents of target-centred accounts to offer us a genuine alternative account of right action, they should reject the Neo-Aristotelian framework that informs them. In Section 5, we provide an outline of one possible way of developing such a target-centred account. For now, we give arguments for thinking that current target-centred accounts fail to be sufficiently distinct from Neo-Aristotelian ones. A helpful way for us to introduce our argument is by analogy to Sosa's account of performance normativity.

Sosa takes an archery shot to be fully successful if and only if (i) it hits its target (i.e. the shot is *accurate*), (ii) it manifests the agent's competence (i.e. the shot is *adroit*), and (iii) it hits its target because it manifests the agent's competence (i.e. the shot is *apt*). Hence, a shot's success is explained by its accuracy, adroitness, and aptness (abbreviated as AAA). A shot that is merely accurate but fails to manifest the agent's competence – in other words, a *lucky* shot – is less successful of a shot than one that is both accurate and competent (Sosa 2011, 4).

Important for our purposes is the claim that the accuracy and competence of a shot contribute to its success in different ways – that is, they are two different kinds of success-making features of performances. What makes it true that a shot is competent is that it expresses something competent about the agent. Therefore, a shot's success is partly explained by the manner in which the agent performs the shot. But what makes it true that a shot is accurate is that it hits its target. And for that, the shot does not have to be competently performed. Hence, there are those success-making features that actions have by virtue of being performed in a certain way (e.g. competently or incompetently) and those that actions have by virtue of achieving the aim constitutive of the action (e.g. hitting or missing the target).

The distinction between the way that a shot's *accuracy* and a shot's *competence* explain the success of a shot is analogous to a distinction long familiar to Neo-Aristotelians – namely, that between an action being virtuous and being virtuously performed. Call it the *virtuous-virtuously* distinction (abbreviated as VV). This is how Roger Crisp describes it:

A virtuous action in certain circumstances is what is required in those circumstances and what a virtuous person would do in those, or relevantly similar, circumstances. A virtuous action is done virtuously (at least in part) when it is

done, for the right reasons, [...] from a firm disposition to perform actions of such a kind (that is, from a virtue). (Crisp 2015, 268–269)

To illustrate, I do not already have to *be* a generous person for me to perform a generous act, say, of giving a lavish farewell gift to my colleague. I can perform such an act by merely following the instructions of my teacher. But if I do so, then my gift-giving is not performed in the way a generous person would perform it – although it is still a generous action. A generous person would give the lavish gift because it is the generous (i.e. virtuous) thing to do, rather than because someone instructed her to do so. Hence, a generous person would do it for the *right* reasons, from the *right* motives, etc., and her action would be thereby a generous action *generously performed*. The VV distinction allows Aristotle at EN II.4 to argue that we become just by performing just actions (1105a29–1105b12), because we do not already have to *be* just to perform just actions, and such a distinction between acting virtuously and performing virtuous actions features prominently in Neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue ethics (Foot 2001, 72–73; Annas 2011, 41–45; Hursthouse 1999, 123–125; see also Vasiliou 2013, 180).

The parallel between a Neo-Aristotelian VV-based account of virtuous action and Sosa's AAA-account of performance normativity is this. For the Neo-Aristotelians, an action is virtuous in respect to *v* if and only if (i) it is an appropriate kind of action producing the required outcome in respect to *v* (e.g. an act of saving a drowning person where that would count as benevolent), (ii) it is virtuously performed, thereby manifesting an agent's virtuous state (e.g. her virtuous motives, character traits, emotions, etc.), and (iii) it is the appropriate kind of action because it is virtuously performed.<sup>6</sup> What explains that an action is virtuous in respect to *v* is, then, analogous to what explains that a shot is successful (on Sosa's account of performance normativity). Just as a shot is successful partly because of the way it is performed and partly because of its accuracy, so an action's virtue in respect to *v* is partly due to the way the action is performed and partly due to the kind of action that it is.

---

<sup>6</sup>Condition (iii) is hardly ever discussed, but it seems to us that any virtue ethical theory that comes with an account of right action can and should accommodate it (although, perhaps, not every virtue ethical theory must offer an account of right action; see Van Zyl 2019, 98–101). The reason why condition (iii) matters is that, for example, if your attempt to save a person from drowning ends up saving the person *indirectly*, namely by way of inspiring a third party (who just happens to be there) to save the person, then your action is less virtuous than if you had saved the person through your own efforts. Hence, it is plausible that an action which satisfies (i) and (ii) but not (iii) is less virtuous than one that satisfies all three conditions.

Highlighting the parallels between a Neo-Aristotelian account of virtuous action and Sosa's account of performance normativity helps bring out a possible contrast between the Neo-Aristotelians and target-centred virtue ethicists. Recall that on a target-centred account of right action, an action is virtuous in respect to  $v$  if and only if it hits the target of  $v$ . This might seem as if, on such a view, what explains that an action is virtuous in respect to  $v$  is confined to Sosa's accuracy-condition: if the target is hit, the shot is accurate. And if the shot is accurate, the performance is successful. Such a view would provide us with an account of right action that substantially differs from the Neo-Aristotelian VV-based one. But a quick glance at what Swanton and Smith call the 'dimensions of the target' of a virtue should disenchant us of interpreting the target-centred account in this way.

What constitutes the target of a virtue  $v$  on the target-centred account is not only the *kind* of action that is supposed to be performed, but also the *way* the action is performed – that is, hitting the target involves hitting it across its various dimensions. Hence, it involves performing the right kind of action relative to  $v$  from the right motives, at the right time, using the right instruments, etc. Therefore, it would be false to say that, on a target-centred account of right action, accuracy is the only virtuous-making feature of actions. For a shot to be accurate, it need not be done in any particular way – that is, it need not be competently performed. But proponents of a target-centred account are clear that, whether an action hits the target of a virtue cannot usually be evaluated independently of the way the action is performed.<sup>7</sup> Swanton clearly rejects the view that we can evaluate actions that are, say, caring actions merely in terms of accuracy-conditions: 'Even if an act is beneficent, considerably benefiting another, it would be odd to describe it as caring if one is not acting for the sake of benefiting the other but one's motives were ultimately selfish or manipulative'. (Swanton 2021, 141) Therefore, on a target-centred account, what explains that an action is virtuous with regard to  $v$  is analogous to what explains the success of a shot on Sosa's AAA-account of performance normativity.

If this is right, then a target-centred account of right action is not as distinct from a VV-based Neo-Aristotelian one as it might seem. An analysis of virtuous actions in terms of *hitting the target of the virtues* does not offer us an alternative to a VV-based Neo-Aristotelian account of right

---

<sup>7</sup>And that is true even though proponents of a target-centred account allow that in some cases the *way* an action is performed is not relevant for evaluating the action's virtue (see, e.g., Swanton 2021, 140–141). We return to this point in the next section.

action. The reason is that, on a target-centred account, what explains that an action is virtuous in respect to  $v$  is that it hits the target of  $v$ , and hitting the target of  $v$  just is to perform not only an appropriate kind of action in respect to  $v$ , but also to perform it in an appropriate way.

This is why it seems to us that target-centred virtue ethics is but Neo-Aristotelianism in disguise. However, it need not be. We suggest that the most promising way of developing a genuine alternative is by rejecting the VV-based Neo-Aristotelian analysis of virtuous action. We offer one possible way of doing so in Section 5. But before we do that, we defend our position by considering two objections that proponents of a target-centred approach might raise.

#### 4. The (alleged) difference that targets make

In the previous section, we have argued that a target-centred account of right action is, in the end, not much different from a VV-based Neo-Aristotelian one. Proponents of a target-centred approach might disagree, arguing that the two accounts of right action continue to differ in two ways. First, an appeal to the targets of virtues provides us with a different account of *which* actions are virtuous, and, second, it offers us a substantially different account of what *makes* an action virtuous. In what follows, we discuss each of these points in turn.

The first objection is this. On a target-centred account, not every dimension of the target of a virtue is salient in every situation (Swanton 2003, 236–237; Swanton 2021, 140; Smith 2020, 4). That is, in some situations, an agent's motives are not salient to hitting the target of a virtue  $v$ . Whether the motives from which an action is performed, the instruments with which it is performed, etc., are salient to hitting the target of  $v$  depends on the details of the situation and on the nature of the virtue that is involved – and in some situations, for some virtues, the *way* in which the agent performs the action might not be salient at all. Swanton therefore tells us that, for an action to be just, it sometimes need not be motivated in any specific way (Swanton 2021, 140–141). Proponents of the target-centred account might think that such flexibility in determining whether and how an action hits the target of the virtues is a crucial difference between their view and a VV-based Neo-Aristotelian account of right action. What makes a difference, so they might hold, is that, for Neo-Aristotelians, the way in which an action is performed seems to *always* be relevant to how virtuous an action is, given the VV-structure of virtuous actions that they are committed to. For example,

an action of saving a child virtuously performed is *always* more virtuous than an action of saving a child non-virtuously performed. Therefore, on a VV-based Neo-Aristotelian account, it is false that, in some situations and for some virtues, the way an action is performed is irrelevant to how virtuous the action is.

We do not believe this objection is successful. There are two reasons for this. First, nothing commits Neo-Aristotelians to the view that all dimensions of the target of a virtue are equally as salient in every situation – indeed, we agree that any virtue ethics that comes with such an overly strong commitment is implausible. But there is nothing that *theoretically* bars us from adopting a Neo-Aristotelian account of right action on which all (and only) *salient* aspects of the mean are relevant to how virtuous the action is, and what counts as salient could very well depend on the context of the situation. Hence, we do not need to appeal to the targets of virtues to accept the view that, in some circumstances, the motives from which an action is performed, the instruments with which it is performed, etc., may not contribute to how virtuous an action is. For example, there is nothing that bars Neo-Aristotelians from saying that, when Agamemnon awards the spoils of war to his generals according to merit, then he is acting justly in doing so, regardless of whether the spoils themselves have been acquired justly or not.

Second, even if Neo-Aristotelians *were* committed to such a strong view on the salience of a target's dimensions, this would not avoid our main argument against the target-centred account – namely, that such an account operates with the same conception of right action as the Neo-Aristotelian one and, because of this, fails to provide a sufficiently distinct alternative to the VV-based Neo-Aristotelian approach. At best, such a target-centred account remains a variation on a Neo-Aristotelian theme: it is that Neo-Aristotelian account which rejects the view that all dimensions of the target of a virtue are in every situation constitutive of the virtue of an action.

The second objection that proponents of a target-centred account might raise is that, even if their account and the Neo-Aristotelian one make the same predictions as to which actions are virtuous (and hence right), the two accounts part ways when it comes to explaining what *makes* an action virtuous (Smith 2020, 3–4). They might take Neo-Aristotelians to give the following account of virtuous actions: an action is virtuous if and only if (and because) it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in a particular situation. Hence, they might believe that, according to the Neo-Aristotelian account, if an action of saving a

child from drowning is a benevolent action in a situation C, then the reason *why* it is benevolent (i.e. what *makes* it benevolent) is the fact that a virtuous person would characteristically save the child in C. Both Swanton and Smith seem to take the Neo-Aristotelians to be committed to such a view on what makes an action virtuous (Swanton 2003, 227–228; Smith 2017, 311–313; Smith 2018, 243). For example, they deem Hursthouse to be expressing this view in her famous slogan that, ‘an action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances’. (Hursthouse 1999, 28) This, so the objection continues, is different from the target-centred account, on which an action is virtuous because it hits the targets of the virtues and not because it is an action that a virtuous agent would characteristically perform. Therefore, the fact that proponents of a target-centred account would agree with the Neo-Aristotelians that the way an agent performs an action is a virtuous-making feature is not enough to show that the target-centred account is but Neo-Aristotelianism in disguise. What matters, so they argue, is that the two accounts offer us two competing views of what a virtuous action is.

Our answer to this objection comes in two steps. First, Hursthouse’s slogan is not an account of what makes an action virtuous. Second, Neo-Aristotelians explain what makes an action virtuous in a way that does not substantially differ from the target-centred account. That is, although a Neo-Aristotelian explanation of what makes an action virtuous does not appeal to the targets of the virtues, we believe that this does not amount to a competing explanation of virtuous action. Let us consider each of the two steps in turn.

To elaborate the first step of our answer, it will be helpful to briefly dwell on the difference between an account of *which* actions are virtuous and an account of what *makes* an action virtuous, given that the two can overlap but do not have to. Consider the following analogy. We can tell which objects are radioactive by using a geiger counter, but it would be absurd to say that the geiger counter readings make an object radioactive. No, what makes an object radioactive are its unstable atomic nuclei that lose energy over time. A geiger counter is able to detect this energy, hence it can reliably tell us which objects are radioactive, and so it offers us a reliable method for detecting radioactivity. An account of what makes an object radioactive involves a definition of radioactivity, whereas an account of which objects are radioactive provides us with a method for detecting radioactive objects. Analogously, an account of what makes an action virtuous involves a definition of

what it is for something to be a virtuous action, while an account of which actions are virtuous provides us (*inter alia*) with a reliable method for telling which among our options is the virtuous one.

Hence, it should be clear that the two questions regarding *which* actions are virtuous and what *makes* them virtuous can come apart.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to Hursthouse's slogan, we believe that asking oneself what a virtuous person would characteristically do given one's circumstances might be a reliable method for finding out which action is virtuous, but the reason why the action is virtuous is *independent of* and *explanatorily prior* to the fact that the virtuous person would perform the action. That is, there is something virtuous about the action that the virtuous person is excellent at detecting – just like a geiger counter is excellent at detecting something radioactive about uranium. Therefore, we take Hursthouse's slogan to be telling us: when you decide what to do, consider what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in your circumstances.<sup>9</sup> We do not take the slogan to be giving us a definition of what a virtuous action is. Hence, there are reasons to doubt that Hursthouse's slogan marks an essential difference between a Neo-Aristotelian and a target-centred account of right action.

This brings us to the second step of our response. Neo-Aristotelians explain what makes an action virtuous in a way that is similar to the target-centred account. To illustrate the similarity, let us consider the manner in which Julia Annas explains virtuous actions. She does not explain virtuous actions in terms of actions that virtuous agents would characteristically perform, and although she does not provide us with an explicit definition of virtuous actions, she has the following to say:

Someone may do the right thing, when this is, for example, a generous action, and do it from a generous disposition — that is, in the appropriate

---

<sup>8</sup>This is so not only for proponents of virtue ethics. For a general discussion, see also Bales (1971) and Driver (2011, 118).

<sup>9</sup>Hursthouse herself introduces the slogan as part of her answer to how virtue ethics can provide us with action-guidance (Hursthouse 1999, 26). This suggests that Hursthouse might have taken the slogan to provide us primarily with a decision-making procedure rather than what she calls 'action assessment' (Hursthouse 1999, 49), i.e. a definition of virtuous actions. Although Hursthouse sometimes takes the slogan to offer us both a decision-making procedure and action assessment (Hursthouse 1999, 49–51), she says that, with regard to moral dilemmas, '[w]hen the dilemma is resolvable, this [i.e., the slogan] provides the appropriate action guidance (the morally right decision is to do what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances); but if we take it as also providing the action assessment, it says the wrong thing [...]. When the dilemma is irresolvable, it appropriately provides no action guidance, but still says the wrong thing if we take it as providing action assessment'. (Hursthouse 1999, 78). In an earlier publication, Hursthouse makes it clear that 'virtue theory is not committed to any sort of reductionism involving defining all of our moral concepts in terms of the virtuous agent'. (Hursthouse 1991, 227) We thank an anonymous referee for this reference.

circumstances and in appropriate ways, suiting the contribution to the need. (Annas 2011, 44)

What is it that *made* (rendered, etc.) the action right? [...] Surely, if I need to justify my claim that standing up to that person *is* the right thing to do, I have plenty to say. It is the brave thing to do, I may say, and then point out various features of the situation that call here and now for bravery, rather than patience, and so on. (Annas 2011, 48)

It seems to us that Annas is implying the view that we introduced in the preceding section – namely, that an action is made virtuous in respect to *v* by being (i.) an appropriate kind of action producing the required outcome in respect to *v*, by being (ii.) performed from appropriate states of the agent, and by being (iii.) an appropriate kind of action because it is performed from appropriate states of the agent. That is, an agent performs a brave action if and only if (i.) she stands up to a person when the situation calls for it, (ii.) she does it fearlessly, and (iii.) she stands up to the person because she manifests her fearlessness.<sup>10</sup> What does this mean for the apparent difference between a target-centred and a Neo-Aristotelian account of what makes an action virtuous? Consider how Smith describes the target-centred account:

If the aim or rationale of benevolent action is to promote others' good, then, according to a target-centered account, an action's successfully promoting others' good is what makes it benevolent [...]. (Smith 2017, 313)

On this view, what makes an action benevolent is that the agent hits the target of benevolence, and hitting the target of benevolence *just is* performing an appropriate kind of action relative to *v*. Hence, what makes an action benevolent is that the agent performs an appropriate kind of action relative to *v*. From this, it follows that benevolent actions are explained in terms of property (i.) – but, given that targets have various dimensions, benevolent actions are also explained in terms of properties (ii.) and (iii.).<sup>11</sup> That is, what makes an action virtuous is partly that the

<sup>10</sup>Philippa Foot advocates for a similar view when she describes three 'sources of goodness' that actions have: 'Firstly, goodness can come from the nature of the action itself [...]. Secondly, the end for which an action is done is an independent source of goodness or badness in it. [...] A third source of goodness or badness in an action lies in its relation to the agent's judgment of whether he or she is acting badly or well'. (Foot 2001, 72–73) What is not a source of goodness is that a virtuous agent would characteristically perform the relevant action.

<sup>11</sup>As Smith rightly points out, it is often the case that, '[f]ully hitting the target of a virtue involves success or correctness in respect to multiple dimensions. [...] One may, for example, help the right people (those in need) and to the right extent but not in the right manner (begrudgingly)'. (Smith 2020, 4) That it might not be *always* the case that conditions (ii.)–(iii.) are constitutive of the target of a virtue need not concern us here. The important point is that there can be dispute about (ii.)–(iii.) and that (ii.)–(iii.) *can* be constitutive of hitting the target.

action manifests an appropriate state of the agent in respect to *v*, and that it is of the appropriate kind because it manifests an appropriate state of the agent.

Therefore, it follows that the target-centred account does not offer us a competing account of what makes an action virtuous, and so the second objection can be avoided. The target-centred and the Neo-Aristotelian accounts are, in the end, not so distinct after all.

Provided that the above argument is on the right track, we suggest that the best way to provide a *genuine* alternative to Neo-Aristotelianism is by rejecting its VV-based analysis of virtuous actions along conditions (i.)-(iii.). That is, an action's virtue should be entirely conceived of as analogous to a shot's accuracy. A genuine target-centred approach, we suggest, should be an accuracy-based approach, one that does not take the analogous equivalent of a shot's adroitness and aptness to bear on the question of whether the action is virtuous. In what follows, we provide an outline of what such an account might look like, largely inspired by the work of Ming Dynasty philosopher Wáng Yángmíng.

## 5. Towards an alternative target-centred approach

According to Wáng Yángmíng, an action is morally right if and only if it instantiates what Wáng Yángmíng calls *lǐ* 理.<sup>12</sup> The term *lǐ* is a difficult term to translate, given that it has different uses in different semantic contexts. For purposes of clarifying our argument, we propose to focus on the normative entailments of *lǐ* and will thus render it as 'what is appropriate', taking inspiration from Tien, who conceives of *lǐ* in terms of 'the way a thing or state of affairs ought to be' (Tien 2010, 296).<sup>13</sup> To be more exact, an action that instantiates *lǐ* is an action that is appropriate given the details of the situation – it is a fitting action. Note that Wáng's account remains a distinctively virtue ethical one, since what is appropriate is described in terms of virtue notions. To illustrate, consider Wáng

---

<sup>12</sup>Since our goal in this section is not exegetical, we confine ourselves to providing only a rough outline of Wáng Yángmíng's views. However, we believe that the following sketch is supported by much of the scholarly work that has been done on Wáng Yángmíng. That being said, providing a fully detailed interpretation would bring us too far afield.

<sup>13</sup>Angle prefers to translate *lǐ* as 'coherence'. As he stresses, coherence should not be understood as 'merely being-patterned', but as 'the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together'. (Angle 2009, 32–34) The reason is that things can exhibit patterns without being valuable or intelligible. Other scholars prefer to render *lǐ* as 'pattern' or 'principle' (Ivanhoe 2002, 22). Although scholars diverge when it comes to translating *lǐ*, most seem to agree that *lǐ* has normative connotations. Hence, we take following Tien's rendition to be justified. We thank an anonymous referee for pressing this point and helping us clarify it.

Yángmíng's own example of a *lǐ*-action given in the *Chuánxílù* 傳習錄, our principal source for his views: it is the action a son performs when he prepares a warm bed for his parents during the winter (*Chuánxílù*, §3).<sup>14</sup> Wáng Yángmíng is clear that the son's action is *filial*, and that the relation between instantiating *lǐ* and being a filial action is not an accidental one. What it means for the son's action to be filial *just is* for it to instantiate *lǐ*. Likewise, what it means for a minister to perform loyal actions towards a ruler *just is* for the minister's actions to instantiate *lǐ* (*Chuánxílù*, §3). Hence, according to Wáng Yángmíng, an action is virtuous (hence right) if and only if it instantiates *lǐ*.<sup>15</sup>

But what makes an action instantiate *lǐ*? That is, what exactly are an action's *lǐ*-making features and how do they compare to Sosa's AAA-account of what makes a performance successful? Recall that, according to Sosa, a shot is successful if and only if it is accurate (i.e. hits the target), adroit (i.e. manifests the agent's competence), and apt (i.e. hits its target because of the agent manifesting her competence). Does Wáng Yángmíng similarly suggest that an action's virtuous-making features are analogous to the success-making features of performances?

No. According to Wáng Yángmíng, an action does not have *lǐ*-making features by expressing something virtuous about the agent. That is, the way that an action is performed is not constitutive of instantiating *lǐ*. If a person acts rightly from virtue, then the fact that she does it from virtue (i.e. that her action is adequately caused by a reliable disposition to act rightly) is not what makes the action right. Although Wáng does not make this point explicit, it is suggested by various remarks scattered throughout the *Chuánxílù*. For example, in a letter to Lù Yuánjìng 陸元靜, Wáng Yángmíng praises a number of eminent historical figures for their moral accomplishments. Though they acted rightly, Wáng Yángmíng emphasises that they were not completely virtuous agents. They received some education, but they 'cannot be said to have completely understood the learning or to have heard the Way fully' (未可盡謂之知學, 盡謂之聞道) (*Chuánxílù*, §165).<sup>16</sup> Hence, when acting rightly, they did so 'in most cases unnoticeably in accord with the subtle Way' (自多暗合道妙) (*Chuánxílù*, §165). That is, they instantiated *lǐ*, but what *made* their action instantiate *lǐ* was not a matter of expressing virtuous emotions

<sup>14</sup>The printed version of the *Chuánxílù* that we refer to is Wang (2011).

<sup>15</sup>'Right' and 'wrong' are rendered as *shì* 是 and *fēi* 非. See, for example, *Chuánxílù*, §206, §208, or §265.

<sup>16</sup>All translations of Wáng Yángmíng's works come, with slight modifications, from Wang (1963). The 'Way' (*dào* 道) is described in this passage as 'innate knowledge [of *lǐ*] (*liángzhī* 良知) (see the following footnote and *Chuánxílù*, §265). To fully hear the Way means to fully grasp *lǐ*.

or character traits, given that it is unclear whether they were expressing them in their actions. If such a person were to have more insight and morally better character traits, she would be performing right actions more frequently. Her actions, however, would not have thereby been rendered 'more' right than before. Here and elsewhere, the text does not consider the possibility that an action can be made 'more' right by being virtuously performed.

This likewise applies to the main addressee of the *Chuánxílù* – namely, the student seeking moral improvement. Although students do not yet express virtues when they act, they can nonetheless perform virtuous actions. In their daily social interactions or when they perform rituals, they can instantiate *lǐ* and perform virtuous actions without being aware of it. That is, they can instantiate *lǐ* through 'equilibrium and harmony without knowing how they achieved it' (中和而不知其故) (*Chuánxílù*, §195).<sup>17</sup> Given that an agent does not have to be aware that her action is instantiating *lǐ* for the action to be virtuous (hence right), the way that an action is performed does not bear on the action's rightness. What makes an action instantiate *lǐ* is that it is of the appropriate kind with regard to *lǐ*. Wáng Yángmíng even goes so far as to admit that those scholars who fundamentally misunderstand the nature of morality may nonetheless 'succeed in getting it by incidental deeds of righteousness' (做得個義襲而取) (*Chuánxílù*, §101, see also §102). Just as a shot's accuracy is determined by whether the shot has hit its target (and to what degree it did), so likewise is an action's virtuousness determined by whether the action is of the appropriate kind in respect to *v*. It is not determined by the virtues that the agent expresses in her acting.<sup>18</sup>

Our claim is further supported by the following general considerations. According to Wáng Yángmíng, we are endowed with an 'innate knowledge [of *lǐ*]' (*liángzhī* 良知), which provides us with a standard for what

<sup>17</sup>To be more exact, the passage says that students can 'steep themselves in equilibrium and harmony [and thus instantiate *lǐ*] without knowing how they achieved it' (入於中和而不知其故). According to Wáng, we humans come to know *lǐ* (i.e. what is appropriate) through our 'heart-mind' (*xīn* 心). As an aside, on Wáng's view, this knowledge consists of 'innate knowledge [of *lǐ*]' (*liángzhī* 良知) (*Chuánxílù*, §206; see also §10) that is provided by our 'heart-mind' (*Chuánxílù*, §318, §165). For this knowledge to become effective and, hence, for us to do 'what is appropriate', the heart-mind has to be in a state undisturbed by self-regarding desires (*yù* 欲), which basically is the state alluded to in the above quote as 'equilibrium and harmony' (see also *Chuánxílù*, §88, §92, §162, §202, §207). The relation between being in such a state and instantiating *lǐ* we take to be a causal relation, rather than a constitutive one. That is, the former disposes the agent to instantiate *lǐ*, rather than constituting (or being a part of) what it means to instantiate *lǐ*. We return to this point in the next paragraph.

<sup>18</sup>Wáng Yángmíng is not clear on what exactly it means for an act of righteousness to be 'incidental', but given the context of the passage, we suspect that a person incidentally performs a virtuous action if she performs a virtuous action without performing it virtuously (e.g. if she acts for the wrong reasons).

is right and wrong: ‘Your innate knowledge is your own standard. When your intentions and thoughts are directed [at some matter], your innate knowledge knows that it is right if it is right and wrong if it is wrong’ (爾那一點良知，是爾自家底準則。爾意念著處，他是便知是，非便知非) (*Chuánxílù*, §206).<sup>19</sup> The question that is relevant for our purposes is whether our emotions and character traits are constitutive of instantiating *lǐ* – that is, whether for an action to instantiate *lǐ*, it has to express something virtuous about the agent. To answer this question, we would like to refer to the following passage from the *Chuánxílù*:

Pleasure, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hate, and desire are the seven emotions. These seven are also natural to the mind. But you should understand innate knowledge [of *lǐ*] clearly. Take, for example, sunlight. We cannot pin it down to any definite direction or place. When the brightness of the sun shines through a small crack, sunlight is located there. [...] When the seven emotions follow their natural courses of operation, they are all functions of innate knowledge [...]. However, we should not have any selfish attachment to them. When there is such an attachment, they become selfish desires and obscurations to innate knowledge. (喜, 怒, 哀, 懼, 愛, 惡, 欲, 謂之七情。七者俱是人心合有的, 但要認得良知明白。比如日光, 亦不可指着方所; 一隙通明, 皆是日光所在 [...]). 七情順其自然之流行, 皆是良知之用 [...]; 但不可有所着。七情有着, 俱謂之欲, 俱為良知之蔽) (*Chuánxílù*, §290)

Although the passage raises a number of exegetical issues that are beyond the scope of this paper, there is one point to be made here. Wáng Yángmíng distinguishes our ‘innate knowledge [of *lǐ*]’ and our emotions (*qíng* 情). They are distinct states of the mind.<sup>20</sup> What distinguishes them seems to be this: emotions are introduced as means that allow our ‘innate knowledge [of *lǐ*]’ to become effective.<sup>21</sup> Provided they are not interfered by us, that is, provided we do not ‘have any selfish attachment to them’, our emotional reactions motivate us to do ‘what is appropriate’ (*lǐ*) in the situation. As Wang also puts it, once they ‘follow their natural courses of operation’, our emotions are a ‘function’ (*yòng* 用) of ‘innate knowledge [of *lǐ*]’, moving us to instantiate *lǐ*. But if this is so, emotions (and character traits) are not constitutive of instantiating *lǐ*. They do not make the action right, they only help us to bring about right actions.

<sup>19</sup>See also footnote 17. Our take on *liángzhī* 良知 follows Chen (2019, Ch. 7), and Lederman (2022).

<sup>20</sup>See also Chen Lai’s discussion of this passage (Chen [1991] 2005, 191–193). We cannot go into further detail here on the relationship between ‘innate knowledge [of *lǐ*]’ (*liángzhī* 良知) and the emotions (*qíng* 情).

<sup>21</sup>Although Wáng Yángmíng does not mention character traits in §290, we can safely assume that they too are to be distinguished from ‘innate knowledge [of *lǐ*]’: innate knowledge is not a character trait.

On the above reading, then, the only *li*-making feature of actions is that the action is appropriate, that is, it scores with respect to accuracy. We do wish to emphasise that this does not mean that emotions and character traits are of little philosophical importance to Wáng Yángmíng. On the contrary, having appropriate emotions and character traits continues to be relevant in two ways when it comes to instantiating *li*. First, emotions are the means through which our knowledge of ‘what is appropriate’ can become effective. Second, although performing an action from virtue does not make the action ‘more right’, Wáng takes an agent’s virtuous motives and character traits to have an important instrumental role. Being virtuously motivated disposes an agent to do what is right, and the more an agent is disposed to do what is right (i.e. the more fully she possesses virtuous character traits), the more likely it is that she will perform right actions. In this way, there is a difference between, say, an agent that characteristically exhibits virtuous motives and one that does not. But the difference does not concern the rightness of their actions. It concerns the agent being a reliable right-action-performer.<sup>22</sup> Virtuous motives and character traits thus remain fundamental to leading a fully moral life – though only in an instrumental sense.

This brief sketch offers a rough idea of what a target-centred account that draws on the work of Wáng Yángmíng might look like. On the face of it, it clearly deviates from the Neo-Aristotelian analysis of virtuous actions. On the target-centred account under consideration, whether an action manifests a virtue can tell us something about the agent, that is, it can tell us whether she is a virtuous person, but it cannot tell us whether her action is virtuous. This is because what makes an action virtuous is independent of (and explanatorily prior to) the virtue of the agent who performs it. While such a view is compatible with Swanton and Smith’s claim that an agent’s character trait is a virtue if and only if it disposes her to do what is right (i.e. to hit the targets of the virtues), it rejects the claim that an action is made virtuous by being performed in a virtuous way. Likewise, while the proposed account shares with the Neo-Aristotelians the view that actions have virtuous-making features that are analogous to the accuracy conditions of a shot, it parts ways in that it suggests, while the Neo-Aristotelians deny, that accuracy is all that there is to

---

<sup>22</sup>To illustrate, suppose that the target of archery is the performance of successful shots, and suppose that a shot is successful iff it hits the bullseye from competence. It follows that an archer who aims at the target of archery thereby aims to hit the bullseye from competence. Hence, as Miracchi puts it, the fundamental aim of the archer is not that the target be hit, but that the archer hits the target qua manifestation of her competence (Miracchi 2014, 356).

virtuous actions – that is, what sets it apart is an accuracy-centred account of right action. Therefore, in contrast to the target-centred account proposed by Swanton and Smith (see Section 4), such a Wáng Yángmíng inspired target-centred account dispenses with an underlying Neo-Aristotelian analysis of virtuous actions and hence fares better in offering us an alternative virtue ethical account of right action.

It is beyond the scope of our paper to further evaluate and defend such an alternative target-centred account. To conclude this section, we would like to briefly mention just one advantage of a Wáng-style target-centred account. In our view, it has the advantage of being able to avoid the self-centredness objection that has been brought forward against virtue ethicists. Swanton, for instance, introduces her target-centred account partly as an account that is supposedly capable of blocking this objection (Swanton 2021, 133–136). But we do not think that she succeeds in doing so. According to Swanton's target-centred account, what it means to be a virtuous agent is to characteristically aim at the target of the virtues. But if one part of the target of a virtue  $v$  is that the agent performs an action from virtue (say, from specific motives or character traits), then the fundamental aim of the virtuous person is not only that a particular action be done, but also that she performs the action qua manifestation of her virtue. That is, her goal is not only, e.g. that the drowning person in the river be saved, but also that *she herself* save the drowning person, because saving the drowning person through her own efforts (and from virtue) constitutes fully hitting the target of  $v$ .<sup>23</sup> This, however, makes the virtuous agent still appear as a particularly self-centred person.

A view inspired by Wáng Yángmíng might fare better in this respect. It holds that the characteristic aim of the virtuous person is the target of the virtues, but the target of e.g. benevolence is that someone's suffering be relieved. The aim of the virtuous person is not that she relieve suffering qua manifestation of her own virtue. Within the framework of such an accuracy-centred account of right action, having virtuous motives and character traits is thus unlikely to become the central concern of the agent. A virtuous person will of course need to take care to cultivate

---

<sup>23</sup>That difference is suggested by Wáng Yángmíng's distinction between a fully virtuous person, a person who reliably hits *lǐ* and thus exemplifies the 'highest good' (*zhìshàn* 至善), and someone who is merely 'dressing like an actor and acting out the details [of the appropriate action] correctly' (扮戲子, 扮得許多溫清奉養的儀節是當) (*Chuánxìlù*, §4). The difference between them is not that the latter does something wrong. It is that the former is far more reliable at performing virtuous actions. Wáng stresses the importance of reliability more explicitly in *Chuánxìlù*, §76. See also Angle 2009, 56–60; Chen [1991] 2005, 73–74, and the discussion in Yu 2014, 33–37.

and maintain virtuous emotions and character traits, but having the latter will not be her reason for engaging in self-cultivation. The virtuous agent's reason for cultivating and maintaining her *virtue* is that being virtuous disposes her to perform the appropriate actions. Hence, the account sketched here avoids the self-centredness objection.

## 6. Conclusion

What is new about target-centred accounts of right action? We have argued that the currently predominant version of the target-centred account commits us to a Neo-Aristotelian view of what makes actions virtuous. The worry is that target-centred virtue ethics is but Neo-Aristotelianism clad in the terminology of targets. But there seems to be a way around this worry – and that is by rejecting the Neo-Aristotelian framework that underlies it. We have drawn on the work of Wáng Yángmíng to suggest a possible way of doing so. On the resulting target-centred account, there is only one kind of virtuous-making property of actions. It is the property that the action has just in case it is of the appropriate kind with respect to virtue  $v$ , that is, just in the case it is accurate.

Such a Wáng Yángmíng inspired accuracy-centred account of right action differs from Neo-Aristotelian and agent-based accounts of right action in the following way. On the Neo-Aristotelian account, there are two kinds of properties that make actions virtuous: those properties which the action has just in case it manifests something virtuous about the agent and those properties it has just in case it is of the appropriate kind with respect to  $v$  (and hence independent of the virtue of the agent who performs it). On an agent-based account, there is only one kind of virtuous-making property – namely, the property that an action has just in case it manifests a virtuous motive or character trait. Our proposed Wáng Yángmíng inspired target-centred account agrees with the agent-based one that there is only one kind of virtuous-making property, but it disagrees on what that property is. On the proposed account, an action is virtuous if and only if it is of the appropriate kind in respect to  $v$ .

We believe that a target-centred account that operates with just one kind of virtuous-making property and thus rejects the Neo-Aristotelian framework offers us a genuine alternative virtue ethical account of right action. Though this alternative awaits further development, we hope to have shown that drawing on sources like Wáng Yángmíng helps to contributing to contemporary debates in virtue ethics.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Kai Marchal, Li Jianyun 李健芸, Karyn L. Lai and Nicholas Smith for helpful discussion. We especially thank Markos Valaris for feedback on an early iteration of the paper. Finally, we thank two anonymous referees for helpful comments.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by UNSW Scientia.

## ORCID

Philippe Brunozzi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8245-1395>

Waldemar Brys  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5829-289X>

## References

- Angle, Stephen C. 2009. *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Annas, Julia. 2011. *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bales, R. Eugene. 1971. "Act-Utilitarianism: Account of Right-Making Characteristics or Decision-Making Procedure?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8: 257–265.
- Brady, Michael S. 2004. "Against Agent-Based Virtue Ethics." *Philosophical Papers* 33: 1–10. doi:10.1080/05568640409485132.
- Chen, Lisheng (陈立胜). 2019. *The Workings of Sagehood: A Study of Wang Yangming's 'Extending liangzhi' and His Theory of Practical Cultivation* [圣人之机: 王阳明致良知功夫论研究]. Beijing 北京: Sanlian shudian 三联书店.
- Chen, Lai (陈来). [1991] 2005. *The Boundary between Being and Non-Being: The Spirit of Wang Yangming's Philosophy* [有无之境: 王阳明哲学的精神]. Beijing 北京: Renmin Chubanshe 人民出版社.
- Crisp, Roger. 2015. "A Third Method of Ethics?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90: 257–273. doi:10.1111/j.1933-1592.2012.00607.x.
- Driver, Julia. 2011. *Consequentialism*. New York: Routledge.
- Foot, Philippa. 2001. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 1991. "Virtue Theory and Abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20: 223–246.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 1999. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2002. *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

- Lederman, Harvey. 2022. "The Introspective Model of Genuine Knowledge in Wang Yangming." *The Philosophical Review* 131 (2): 169–213. doi:10.1215/00318108-9554691.
- Miracchi, Lisa. 2014. "Getting Things Done." PhD diss., Rutgers University.
- Slote, Michael. 2001. *Morals from Motives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Slote, Michael. 2010. *Moral Sentimentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Nicholas R. 2017. "Right-Makers and the Targets of Virtue." *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 51: 311–326. doi:10.1007/s10790-016-9571-8.
- Smith, Nicholas R. 2018. "Right Action as Virtuous Action." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96: 241–254. doi:10.1080/00048402.2017.1352611.
- Smith, Nicholas R. 2020. "Target-Centered Virtue Ethics." In *Handbuch Tugend und Tugendethik*, edited by Christoph Halbig, and Felix Timmermann, 1–14. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Sosa, Ernest. 2011. *Knowing Full Well*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Swanton, Christine. 2001. "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action." *Ethics* 112: 32–52. doi:10.1086/322742.
- Swanton, Christine. 2003. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swanton, Christine. 2010. "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement." *Philosophical Topics* 38: 157–180. doi:10.5840/philtopics201038218.
- Swanton, Christine. 2021. *Target Centred Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tien, David W. 2010. "Metaphysics and the Basis of Morality in the Philosophy of Wang Yangming." In *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, edited by John Makeham, 295–314. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Van Zyl, Liezl. 2009. "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Action Guidance." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6: 50–69. doi:10.1163/174552409X365928.
- Van Zyl, Liezl. 2011. "Rightness and Goodness in Agent-Based Virtue Ethics." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 36: 103–114. doi:10.5840/jpr\_2011\_3.
- Van Zyl, Liezl. 2014. "Right Action and the Targets of Virtue." In *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, edited by Stan van Hooft, 118–129. Durham: Acumen.
- Van Zyl, Liezl. 2019. *Virtue Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Vasiliou, Iakovos. 2013. "Aristotle, Agents, and Actions." In *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: A Critical Guide*, edited by Jon Miller, 170–190. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, Yangming (王陽明). 1963. *Instructions for Practical Living, and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*. Translated by Wing-Tsit Chan. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wang, Yangming (王陽明). 2011. *The Complete Works of Wang Yangming* [王陽明全集]. Edited by Wu Guang 吳光, Qian Ming 錢明, Dong Ping 董平, and Yao Yanfu 姚延福, 2 vols. Shanghai 上海: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社.
- Yu, Zhenhua (郁振華). 2014. On Knowing How in Morality and Metaphysics: An Inquiry Based on Ryle and Wang Yangming [论道德-形上学的能力之知-基于赖尔与王阳明的探讨]. *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* 中国社会科学 12: 22–41.