**REVIEW**

Inner Virtue. By NICOLAS BOMMARITO. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 193. Price £39.99.)

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Nicolas Bommarito elegantly argues that “someone’s inner life [can] make them a morally better or worse person” (p.3). Although actions matter morally, so do pleasures, emotions, habits of attention and other aspects of our inner life, even if they’re never expressed in outer behaviour. Underlying the thesis is *moral care*, a disposition “to care about moral goods”, “the only unconditionally good trait one can have” (p.172). Our moral cares and concerns are manifested across our actions, attentions, emotions, pleasures, and thoughts. “It’s not merely what we do that makes us virtuous or vicious”, says Bommarito, “but what happens to us on the inside”, too (p.6).

The book has many virtues. The writing is crisp and personable, the examples engaging and accessible, the philosophising pleasingly informed by everyday experience. Bommarito also engages Buddhism, Confucianism, and Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, always using them thoughtfully and productively, not as a trendy gesture to diversity. Such rich resources help persuade us that a morally good person has “a certain kind of inner life”, an idea fallen from view due to a late modern ethical focus on actions and consequences (p.6). The inner life of the virtuous, moreover, has “desirable pluralities”, with the emotions, thoughts, pleasures, and attentional habits of virtuous people showing a pleasing “cultural and personal diversity” (pp. 41, 172).

Chapters one and two set up the claim that the essential feature of a virtuous person is *care for moral goods*. Caring about justice is shown outwardly in actions, but also inwardly. One is pleased by acts of justice, angered or saddened at injustice, attends to unfolding cases of wrongdoing, and so on. Inner states are virtuous when they manifest moral concerns, even absent any outward expression - my pleasures, emotions, and attentions may be wholly inner. Conversely, inner states are vicious when they manifest a lack of concern for moral goods or manifest one’s concerns for things that are morally bad. The news of a colleague’s horrible accident elicits a feeling of malicious pleasure, or nothing but unblinking indifference.

Chapter three argues that pleasures are relevant to moral character if they manifest moral concerns. I’m pleased to hear you got your promotion, since I care about how your life goes; this reflects well on my moral character, whereas my pleasure in a cool breeze on a hot day doesn’t (p.48). Although such virtuous pleasures can be dulled by nonmoral factors, like fatigue, the real worry are vicious pleasures, such as *Schadenfreude* (pp.55ff). In practice, most pleasures are “mixed hedonic states”—my pleasure at your promotion is partly sincere, partly dutiful, and partly uncomfortably intermingled with jealousy. Bommarito contrasts this with the form of virtuous pleasure that Buddhists call *mudita*, a “sympathetic joy” in the good fortune of others, “the hedonic manifestation of the part of us that selflessly cares about others”, even those who aim to do us harm (p.75).

Chapter four turns to emotions, these also being virtuous when they manifest moral concerns. In usual circumstances, a virtuous person feels “gratitude toward those who benefit them, sympathy toward those who suffer”, with Bommarito adding caveats for benefits that come from backfiring attempts to harm us and for cases of deserved suffering (p.82f). Mostly our emotions are expressed outwardly – grateful hugs, tears of sympathy – but not always. Some emotions are kept private in our hearts, not worn openly on our sleeves. Moreover, there are major variations in the emotional profiles and expressive tendencies of the virtuous, within and across cultures. Moral heroes are neither “emotional clones” nor unemotional drones, those both being intolerably “inhuman” (pp.173, 112). Interestingly, Bommarito also thinks virtuous emotions can be irrational, whether in their “intensity” or “extension”—caring either too much or for improper objects (like a broken doll no-one wants, in Bommarito’s charming example). Such irrational emotions reflect well on one’s character, since they still “manifest our moral concerns in the emotional realm”, albeit imperfectly (p.123).

The fifth chapter – the last substantive one – turns to attention. Bommarito rejects Murdoch’s and Weil’s claim that attention *itself* has moral value, arguing that it only has moral value insofar as it manifests our moral concerns. The cruel and the kind both attend to others’ suffering, but respond differently, as cruelty exploits what kindness tries to ease (pp.133ff). Not all attention is morally charged – familiarity, expectations, and sensory intensity play their own roles in structuring attention. The virtuous person, though, aspires to “actively attend”, to align their habits of attention with their concerns, steering clear of the vices of scrupulosity, indifference, and inattention (pp.146ff). Bommarito argues that such virtuous habits of attention include gratitude and modesty. Attending to the external sources of one’s own benefits is a component of gratitude, which is why we’re more impressed by generous acts that register a discerning attentiveness to others’ subtle, non-obvious needs and sensitivities (p.154).

Modesty, for Bommarito, is slightly different, involving a pattern of *inattentiveness* to one’s own good qualities, their value, and one’s own role in bringing them about (p.164). But this seems problematic: the moral valancing of self-attention depends on the social situation of particular moral agents. The oppressed may *need* to attend actively to their repertoire of good qualities: such stock-taking may be integral to their ability to survive in a hostile world. Inattention to the extent and value of one’s good qualities might be a luxury only the more privileged can afford. Bommarito ought to say more about the ways that intersectional social identity is related to his claim that “modesty is still a virtue for most of us” (p.168).

The brief closing chapter sums up, offering the useful advice that appreciation of inner virtues and vices should dampen our confidence in our moral appraisal of others. Pleasures, emotions, and habits of attention are often difficult to perceive, either reliably or at all: “much of what is relevant to whether or not someone is a good person is concealed from our view” (p.175). Quite right, but this points to two further sets of issues. First, should an aspiring moral exemplar actively try to express outwardly their moral pleasures, emotions, and attention in outer conduct, rather than leaving them in the invisibility of the inner? Confucians use ‘ritual conduct’ to provide socially recognised ways of outwardly expressing inner moral concerns and emotions, to facilitate effective social intercourse. Bommarito might need to be more prescriptive about whether a virtuous life ought to involve disciplined efforts to express inner virtues through outer conduct, given the importance of being able to make reliable appraisals of others’ moral character (p. 174).

A second issue concerns the relation of inner virtue to the aesthetics of character. The Buddhist and Confucian traditions, among others, use trained monastic and ritual conduct to help moral aspirants to consistently express their own inner qualities through forms of bodily comportment that are experienced, by others, as aesthetically pleasing – as *beautiful*, no less. If manifest in virtuous comportment, one’s inner life may become genuinely beautiful, serving to attract others to the moral life. Bommarito’s account could draw upon the aesthetics of moral exemplarity found in the ancient Asian traditions, although they reject his distinctions between moral, aesthetic, and social virtue and vice—for Confucians and Daoists, insensitivity to the beauties of ritual and nature, respectively, are morally serious failings of character.

*Inner Virtue* offers an interesting, compelling account of the moral significance of inner life – welcome as a corrective to the contemporary moral philosophical focus on action, and as a revival of much older traditions of reflection on virtue.

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