

*The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, Lorraine L Besser and Michael Slote (eds.).  
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The *Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics* is unusual among the recent crop of handbooks, encyclopaedias and compendiums in philosophy in a couple of respects. First, as well as presenting up-to-date surveys of the field, the *Companion* includes a number of entries that also engage in argument and negotiate tensions between different positions—some even questioning the nature of virtue ethics (VE) itself. These chapters, in particular, are philosophically interesting and they demonstrate the use of philosophical methodology in debates about VE. Secondly, the volume engages with non-western (primarily Chinese) perspectives on virtue theory and VE, with several chapters showing the potentially rich contributions VE can make to East-West engagement on conceptions of agency, character, right actions, dispositions, emotions and the question of a good life.

The *Companion* comprises thirty-six chapters organised in four parts. Part 1, “History of Virtue Ethics,” includes chapters on the nature and scope of VE insofar as we can comfortably identify and locate them in different traditions: ancient Greek, ancient Chinese, Hindu, Buddhist, Augustinian, Thomistic, Humean and Nietzschean. These chapters clarify, and complicate, how and what we think about VE—indeed, a section title such as “Scope of Virtue Ethics” might be more fitting than “History”. Interesting issues raised in Part 1 include: the gaps and vagueness in Aristotle’s account of virtue

(Frede); what an agent-based Yoga ethics might look like (Perrett & Pettigrove); Mencian VE characterised as a theory of moral foundations (Luo); potential tensions in a Buddhist account of virtue (Goodman); Xunzi's ritual propriety grounded in emotions, and its potential contributions to VE (Hutton); and how Augustinian holiness may not sit comfortably with elements of VE (Wetzel).

The chapters in Part 2, "Contemporary Approaches," present a broad array of debates in VE. Discussions relevant for comparative philosophy include the following: the tension between pursuing virtue for its own sake, and seeking the pleasures that accompany virtue's pursuit (van Zyl); empathetic concern for others as a criterion of right action (Frazer and Slote); the exercise of practical wisdom in dealing with a plurality of virtues (Swanton); different positions in theological VE (Herdt); deontological and VE interpretations of Confucian philosophy (Elstein); and the connections between VE and Virtue Epistemology (VEp)—for example, the place of open-mindedness and receptivity in an account of epistemic virtue (Battaly and Slote).

For this reader, the "Critical Interactions" (Part 3) are the most interesting discussions in the *Companion*. The contributors work through a number of important, and sometimes tenuous, relationships between VE and aspects of morality and/or moral theory. Collectively, they demonstrate the value and reach of VE, especially the way it exposes gaps and limitations of other moral theories. Some contributors also highlight challenges confronting VE and how variant accounts of VE might address these. One question discussed, for instance, is whether, from the perspective of Kantian anthropology (i.e., its awareness of the human condition), VE's eudaimonism is too optimistic in positing that happiness and virtue are coincident (Wood). Another contributor (Driver) asks: what might a consequentialist virtue theory look like? From the perspective of a lived moral life, another (Das) questions, what is distinctive about

VE if it cannot reliably motivate right action? And there are further interrogations. Can we articulate accounts of VE or character able to withstand the challenges posed by situationist psychological research (Besser-Jones)? How does VE stand in relation to feminist care ethics (Noddings) and to role ethics (Garcia)?

Part 4, "Applications," considers ways in which VE can inform debates in applied ethics, including the environment (Carfaro), world VE (Angle), moral education (Curren), political philosophy (Xiao), law (Solum), medicine (Walker) and business (Audi).

I would like now to discuss four specific ways in which the discussions in the *Companion* can contribute to comparative philosophy.

1. *Comparative VE methodology.* It is not possible to engage fruitfully with comparative VE without also considering methodological issues. At first glance, an East-West comparison seems simply to traverse philosophical cultures: we might, for instance, compare Mencius' and Aristotle's views on cultivation, note the shortcomings of each, and forge a way forward. But here is a catch: the 'Aristotle' we are comparing with Mencius has been developed over the last two and a half millennia, sometimes alongside dominant trends in western philosophical discourse, sometimes against it, and sometimes in spite of it (Frede, Snow). Similarly, there are dominant tendencies in interpreting ancient Chinese texts, for example, with Chinese-language literature on Confucianism being more predisposed to a deontological slant, while Anglophone studies prefer a virtues-based interpretation (Elstein). So which Aristotle are we comparing with which Mencius? And how do we ensure that our studies are sufficiently self-aware in a way that does not distort either view?

There is more we should be wary of: comparative philosophers need to be mindful of their selected terms of reference. Western philosophical discussions often operate on the assumption that VE is a *theory*. But did thinkers in East and South Asia in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE hold similar views on the place of moral theory? There is reason to think that even if early Chinese thinkers thought in theoretical modes, they did not give them priority in their methods of reasoning and persuasion (Tan 2016; Lenk and Paul 1993).<sup>1</sup> If correct, this creates difficulties for comparative work (Xiao). Another issue concerns VE's distinguishing features. When comparing VE with, say, Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist or Hindu views, which features are selected? A eudaimonistic life, character traits, dispositions, skill, attitudes, right action, the idea of good, emotions, sensibilities and perceptual capacities? Interrogation of the scope of VE (as some of the essays in Part 1 seek to do) will facilitate greater perspicacity in selecting criteria for comparison. None of these remarks suggest that comparisons cannot be fruitful. The point, rather, is to emphasise greater methodological self-awareness in comparative projects.

2. *VE and right action.* The fundamental questions “How should I live?” and “What ought I to do?” can direct our gaze in quite different—and sometimes incompatible—directions. As Das points out, “[s]ometimes, good people do the wrong thing and bad people do the right thing” (p. 331), prompting us to ask whether virtue (or character) can reliably motivate right action. Such concerns take us to what is at the core of VE: how do the motivational elements of character—elucidated in terms of traits, dispositions, complex dispositions involving intellect, sensibility, emotions etc.—motivate and explain right action (Das)? To close this gap, modified versions of VE propose that right action is what a virtuous agent might *characteristically* do, or what she might advise or approve of (Das). Yet, there remains the worry that these more

abstract versions of VE have not charted an account of motivation that gives VE's focus on inner states or dispositions a distinctive appeal.

In this context, consider, for example, how Buddhist philosophy traverses the twin issues of cultivation and right action. Buddhist *awakening* involves not only cognisance of the impermanent self but also the elimination of attitudes and emotions, such as avarice and pride. Moreover, there is a place for positive emotions, such as kindness and equanimity. In virtue terms, a person's renewed engagement with the world arises from a revised conception of mind and the cultivation of right emotions, both of which are developed in conjunction with the capacity for attention (Goodman). On the other hand, the key problem in Buddhist philosophy is *consequentialist*, centring on suffering and its alleviation. Both virtue and right action have a place in Buddhist cultivation, which involves the integrated, simultaneous development of intellect, emotions, attitudes and capacities—especially perceptive ones—that predispose a person toward altruistic actions. Perhaps Buddhist cultivation has important parallels with McDowell's (1985; 2009)<sup>2</sup> understanding of virtue as a perceptual capacity.

3. *VE, moral theory and situationism*. Empirical data from situationist psychology may mean that character is not motivationally reliable in relevant ways across situations (Doris 2002), or that it does not make sense to speak of character in the way many accounts of VE do (Harman 2000).<sup>3</sup> Even if we were to be wary of subjects' self-reporting and behaviours under test conditions, these data prompt a closer scrutiny of how VE explains and accommodates practical considerations in moral life (Besser-Jones). Modified versions of VE have been proposed to accommodate the data (Das; Besser-Jones). Scholars working in Confucian philosophy have also engaged with the

situationist challenge (e.g. Hutton 2006).<sup>4</sup> Here, however, I suggest a different response to the challenge, using the Confucian *Analects* as an example.

Acting well in particular situations is the starting point of morality in the *Analects* (Lai 2012).<sup>5</sup> The text contains collated conversations about official life and its demands, which reflect concerns of particular moments: existing practices are modified (*Analects* 9.3; 2.11); conflicting advice is given to two people on one occasion (*Analects* 11.22); and people are expected to tailor their responses in particular situations (*Analects* 5.22). A number of the conversations in the *Analects* incorporate a variant of the logical structure “When faced with Y, person X did Z”. For example, a quick glance at Book 1 reveals that, of its 16 passages, only passage 1.3 is a general claim. How do these conversations sit in relation to the overarching ethical views in the text? I suggest that the authors of the different conversations did not *use* moral theory as an explanatory and action-guiding tool. In other words, the text does not commit to (any particular) moral theory in such a way as to grant it conceptual priority. As a result, the gap between moral theory and situationist data does not arise or is not significant.

However, a different question surfaces: is it possible to construct a plausible account of moral life on the basis of situationally-focused episodes? One way to draw out the underlying assumptions of the *Analects* is to cast it in terms of exemplarism. Exemplarist moral theory, proposed by Zagzebski, holds that morality is defined by the exemplars we admire (2010).<sup>6</sup> According to this view, our moral domain is constructed from the actions, judgments, intentions and motivations of exemplars *in situ*. Could we interpret the *Analects* along the lines of exemplarism? Might the Confucian *junzi* be thought of as *an* exemplary person, living a life that we admire and emulate (Olberding 2012)?<sup>7</sup>

What insights can we draw from this engagement? We have seen how situationist empirical data can potentially pose a challenge to theories of virtue or character. One typical response is for virtue ethicists to present modified accounts of VE to accommodate the data. Alternatively, we might respond to the data by asking what an account of moral life might look like if it were to embrace, rather than shun, the practicalities of life in our accounts of morality. I propose that, in the *Analects*, *practicalities do matter*, and that exemplarism is one account of morality that allows these details to emerge. Further east-west engagements are likely to yield more ways to negotiate the domain between moral theory and the practicalities of life.

4. *VE and Virtue Epistemology*. The potential connections between VE and Virtue Epistemology (VEp) are worth exploring. We could raise questions about the nature of moral and epistemic virtues and critical overlaps between them, especially in attitudes and emotions that enliven and animate these virtues. For example, Zagzebski (1996) highlights open-mindedness as an important intellectual virtue within a responsibilist VEp.<sup>8</sup> Extending this view, Battaly and Slote (in the *Companion*) recommend that receptivity and empathy (moral virtues) are important correlates of open-mindedness (epistemic virtue).

The *Zhuangzi*, a 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE text aligned with the Daoist tradition, provides an example of how VE and VEp may be integrated. Clearly, the text does not embrace the level of sophistication we now see in contemporary VE and VEp debates. However, the *angle* it takes on a number of issues lends itself quite readily to the analyses in these areas. A number of stories in the *Zhuangzi* focus on the mastery of ordinary tasks such as wheel-making and butchering. These stories draw attention to the polished performances of the skill masters as well as the ways in which they have cultivated

themselves. Across the stories, different aspects of mastery are highlighted: attention, perception, sensibility, emotional dispositions, cognitive awareness, bodily control, and attunement to contextual conditions. The *Zhuangzi*'s skill stories are distinctive as they focus not on the *possession* of skill but on skill expressed in impressive *performances*. These accounts were also unusual among debates of the time because they emphasised detachment from one's own convictions about right and wrong (conceptions of ideal life and worthwhile pursuits, and the methods of pursuing them). In the *Zhuangzi*, these fixed views impede mastery. *In performance*—at the intersection of agency and action—the skill master needs to *see* what is salient to the task at hand: the cicada catcher sees cicada wings while the bellstand maker sees trees that are suitable for bellstands. Their responsiveness (*ying* 應) is open-minded in that it is liberated from fixed way of seeing things. The skill masters are experts because they are responsive to the situation at hand. In other words, they are more *perceptive* in the right ways than those who see and value things only in conventional terms.

This conception of open-mindedness is different from what Zagzebski (1999) and Battaly and Slote (*Companion*) propose as it emphasises *perceptivity* rather than *receptivity*. It is more closely associated with the idea that open-mindedness results from a person's awareness of his epistemological limitations (one such account is offered by Riggs 2010).<sup>9</sup> Not constrained by their epistemological limitations, some of the skill masters are said to have grasped the secrets of nurturing life (*Zhuangzi* 3). The text's details on responsiveness and perceptivity in a life lived well, have much to offer to the conversation between VE and VE<sub>p</sub>.

In closing, I recommend the *Companion* for research and for use in advanced level courses. The chapters are accessible and yet do not compromise on scholarly rigour. I have only scratched the surface here in seeking to demonstrate the kinds of

comparative debates its chapters could generate. The *Companion's* rich offerings also provide a compelling reminder for contemporary philosophical discussions to engage with and reap the benefits of East-West comparative philosophy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tan, Sor-hoon (ed.) (2016) *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing; Lenk, Hans and Paul, Gregor (eds.) (1993) *Epistemological Issues in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

<sup>2</sup> McDowell, John (1985) "Values and Secondary Qualities," in Ted Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 110-29; McDowell, John (2009) *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Doris, John (2002) *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Harman, Gilbert (2000) "The Nonexistence of Character Traits," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **100.1**: 223-26.

<sup>4</sup> Hutton, Eric (2006) "Character, Situationism, and Early Confucian Thought," *Philosophical Studies*, **127.1**: 37-58.

<sup>5</sup> Lai Karyn (2012) "Knowing to Act in the Moment: Examples from Confucius *Analects*," *Asian Philosophy*, **22.4**: 347-64.

<sup>6</sup> Zagzebski, Linda (2010) "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," *Metaphilosophy*, **41.1-2**: 41-57.

<sup>7</sup> Olberding, Amy (2012) *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: the Good Person is That*, New York & London: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Zagzebski, Linda (1996) *Virtues of the Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Riggs, Wayne (2010) "Open-mindedness," *Metaphilosophy*, **41.1-2**: 172-88.