Article

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Korean Nunchi and Well-Being

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Abstract | "Nunchi" is a Korean term that indicates an expert facility in social interactions and especially the ability to interpret and utilize indirect communication with ease and alacrity. In this paper, I introduce and discuss the concept of nunchi with a focus on two main senses in which it is used: as a skill and as a burden. Then, I discuss the relation of nunchi to well-being and flourishing, both in specifically Korean cultural contexts and in social contexts more generally. Finally, I argue that because of nunchi's close relation to well-being and flourishing, that there is a strong case to be made for treating it as a virtue.

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Introduction

Nunchi (눈치, pronounced noon-tchee), a Korean word meaning literally "eye-measure," is not widely considered a virtue, even in Korean contexts, but perhaps it should be. *Nunchi* is the ability both to accurately read others' mental states by the subtlest of cues and to use this information to expertly steer social situations. The person who deftly directs conversation around sensitive topics has lots of *nunchi*, the person who constantly puts her foot in her mouth lacks it. In this paper, I introduce and discuss *nunchi*. I describe two broad senses of *nunchi* – *nunchi* as a skill and *nunchi* as a burden, and explain how each relates to well-being in both global and in specifically Korean contexts. Finally, I argue that *nunchi*, at least in the skilled sense, should be treated as a virtue.

Skilled Nunchi

Nunchi is a very familiar concept in everyday Korean life and language and has been the focus of quite a bit of Korean scholarship in psychology, communication, and business, but it is probably not widely considered to be deeply philosophically interesting. "*Nunchi*" has a broad semantic range, and I cannot provide a complete analysis of the term and its usage here. Instead, I will highlight some of the ways in which the term is used that are relevant for this paper. Robinson (1996) provides a review of some English-language descriptions of *nunchi*: "tact, *savoir faire*, sense, social sense, perceptiveness, an eye for social situations … to read one's mind, probe one's motives, [study] one's face, [grasp] a situation, [see] how the wind blows" (Martin, Lee, and Chang 1967), or a skill to determine "quickly and accurately…another's emotions, attitudes, and reaction or likely reaction to a given proposal or situations" (Kalton 1979). Choi and Choi (1992) describe two key features of *nunchi*: first, that *nunchi* is especially oriented towards "covert, implicit, or indirect communicative exchanges, and second that *nunchi* interactions include both "figuring-out" indirect communication and successfully "executing" acts of indirect communication (Choi and Choi 1992, 51). So, in the first major sense of *nunchi* that we'll be examining, *nunchi* means something like an expert,

automatic skill in perceiving and deftly reacting to dynamic social and group situations, especially in ways that adroitly track (either intentional or unintentional) indirect communication. Let's call this sense of the term "skilled *nunchi*." Skilled *nunchi* comes in several levels. A person might "lack" *nunchi*: they frequently miss fairly obvious social cues or might frequently be rude without realizing it. Importantly, a person who is *purposefully* rude does not necessarily lack *nunchi:* unfortunately, some of the worst bullies might have a great deal of *nunchi*. Less worryingly (and much more commonly) a person might have "slow" *nunchi*: they are not *completely* socially oblivious or frequently unintentionally rude to others, but they might occasionally fail to pick up on what in retrospect to them seem to be fairly clear social cues. A person who has "quick" *nunchi*, however, immediately picks up on even very subtle social cues and navigates them with ease. Interestingly, in Korean contexts, a person can be criticized for having "too much *nunchi,*" which indicates that either the person is overly strategic or sycophantic in social interactions, or alternatively that a person is overly deferential or submissive.

For our purposes, when I use the term "skilled *nunchi*" I will be referring to what we might consider "quick *nunchi*" or *nunchi* in the most positive sense, unless otherwise noted. In typical Korean usage, while these various attributions of *nunchi* can be used to indicate more general dispositions, they can also be used in discussing particular acts. For example, I might in general have *nunchi*, but in some specific instance commit a big social gaffe, and on that occasion, I lacked *nunchi*. In this way, *nunchi* corresponds nicely in structure to Whole Trait Theory, a view in contemporary personality psychology (see Fleeson 2001; Fleeson and Jayawickreme 2015; Jayawickreme and Fleeson 2017). Whole trait theory posits personality traits and personality states, which have "the same content as a corresponding trait but…for a shorter duration" (Jayawickreme and Fleeson 2017, 80). Fleeson and Jayawickreme (2017) give a helpful example: "I could have the [personality] state of extraversion for the few minutes I ride the new roller coaster at the amusement park and return to my more common [personality trait of] introversion after the ride" (81).

Some examples of *skilled* nunchi and the lack thereof might be helpful. Imagine two friends, Ann and Chul-soo, meeting each other for the first time in several months. When they last spoke, Ann told Chul-soo that she been expecting her romantic partner to propose marriage within the next few days. Thirty minutes into the conversation, Chul-soo suddenly asks Ann, without any avarice or ill-intent, whether she has is engaged yet. Chul-soo, in this situation displayed a lack of skilled *nunchi*. He should have known that Ann had some reason for not bringing up the previously expected engagement, and of the possible reasons why she chose not to, many would be embarrassing or even distressing to share. Alternatively, imagine two graduate students, Sera and Sam, who have recently started dating each other but wish to keep their relationship a secret from their colleagues. Sera, who is in the relationship, is talking to her friend and colleague Ahmed, and accidently lets slip information that implies she is dating Sam. But, Ahmed responds as if he simply did not pick up on the implication, though in fact he did (and if he has highly skilled *nunchi*, he likely knew of Sera's relationship already). If Sera also has skilled *nunchi*, she realizes that Ahmed picked up on the salacious information, and in choosing not to address it, indirectly communicates to her that her secret is safe with him.

It will be useful here to distinguish between skilled *nunchi* and several similar and related, but ultimately distinct phenomena. First, one might be tempted to equate skilled *nunchi* with emotional intelligence, which has been defined as "the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others" (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso 2000, 396; see also Mayer and Salovey 1997; Mayer et al. 2011). Skilled *nunchi* allows us to detect a wider range of mental states than only emotions, so it differs from emotional intelligence. Further, a person with skilled *nunchi* might not be particularly skilled at understanding and reasoning with *her own* emotions. Second, though skilled *nunchi* does not pertain only to indirect communication, its strong connotations of skill in indirect communication distinguishes it from the more general notion of social intelligence. This difference is subtle, in part because a person with lots of *nunchi* will almost always have lots of social intelligence, and vice versa. *Third*, since skilled *nunchi* includes expert perceptive capacities, and because a person with skilled *nunchi* can (intentionally) act impolitely should the situation require, skilled *nunchi* is not the same as tact, politeness, or civility – though again, they will often go hand-in-hand. Fourth, skilled *nunchi* is distinct from charisma, though they

too often coincide. Some people can be charismatic despite lacking skilled *nunchi* – think here of an energetic, hilarious, but completely tactless comedian. And some people can have lots of *nunchi* without being particularly charismatic – especially if they are shy or introverted. Fifth, skilled *nunchi* is different from mind-reading, the skill helpfully glossed by Hagop Sarkissian as "what we engage in everyday – inferring motives, meanings, and intentions from words, gestures, and expressions" (2010, 9). Skilled *nunchi* includes this mind-reading ability but is distinct from mind-reading in that *nunchi* relates not only to our perceptive abilities but also to our reactive behavior, and further it connotes a much greater emphasis on tracking indirect communication than the more generalized notion of mind-reading does. Finally, skilled *nunchi* is culturally distinct from all of these other notions insofar as it, in addition to tracking mental states like beliefs, emotions, and desires, also tracks group dynamics and shared feelings as well as *kibun* (기분), pronounced key-boon). *Kibun* is another important Korean concept, which refers to a mental state relating to mood, atmosphere, climate, dignity, and face. In Korean contexts (especially in professional contexts), there is typically a strong emphasis on maintaining *kibun* and avoiding social friction and conflict. Doing so well often requires *nunchi*, and any account of *nunchi* that does not refer to *kibun* is incomplete.

Philosophers with backgrounds in Western virtue ethics might be tempted to think that skilled *nunchi* is identical to or some form of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which Aristotle defined as "a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods" (*Nichomachean Ethics* IV.5). A person with practical wisdom can perform morally excellent acts across a wide variety of particular situations in which one must weigh competing moral and prudential concerns. But, this equation is incorrect. Skilled *nunchi* is, in fact, a much narrower concept than practical wisdom. A person with skilled *nunchi* might (and, in nearly all cases, does) lack (virtuous) practical wisdom, but a person with (virtuous) practical wisdom almost certainly has skilled *nunchi*. Skilled *nunchi* allows one to be excellent at certain types of complex and dynamic social interactions, especially those that involve indirect communication and especially ones where tracking *kibun* is vital. But a person might have skilled *nunchi* and fail to be generous, or courageous, or humble, or kind. In fact, people with skilled *nunchi* can be morally vicious – they may use their skilled *nunchi* to manipulate others for their own selfish ends.

Philosophers with backgrounds in Confucian ethics might wonder how skilled *nunchi* differs from *quan* □, "moral discretion" or "weighing." In the Confucian classic *Mengzi,* a character tries to trip up the eponymous Confucian philosopher Mengzi by posing what is meant to be an attack on the early Confucian emphasis on adherence to ritual. He asks Mengzi whether one should save a drowning sister-in-law even though doing so would break a traditional ritual rule that forbade direct physical contact between certain members of opposite genders (4A17). Mengzi replies, unsurprisingly, that "only a beast would not pull out his sister-in-law if she were drowning," and that this is a matter of *quan* (*Mengzi* 4A17). Saving a drowning person might require *quan* but it simply does not require skilled *nunchi*.

Burdened Nunchi

There is, however, another broad sense in which the term "*nunchi*" is used, and this sense is much less positive than that of skilled *nunchi*. Especially, *nunchi* in this other sense is often thought to place much greater burden on those with less power or status in social hierarchies (a graduate student must mind or "watch" her *nunchi* much more carefully than her senior professors need to) and, relatedly, *nunchi* in this sense is thought of in traditional Korean contexts of putting much more pressure on women than men, and on younger people than older people. In this negative sense, *nunchi* can mean something like skill in navigating extreme (and typically downward) social pressure. For example, in traditional Korean contexts, the maknae (막내 – pronounced "mang-nae"), or the youngest person (and often, though not at all necessarily the youngest woman) in a group, might have special social expectations to navigate – for example, ensuring that coffee and tea is procured before an office meeting. I will call this more negative sense of the term "burdened *nunchi*."

Burdened *nunchi* shares many features with skilled *nunchi*. It requires skill in indirect communication, both in interpreting the mental states that others intentionally and unintentionally communicate, and in directly and indirectly communicating with others. However, the purpose of burdened *nunchi* is often to smooth interactions with colleagues and superiors – even in situations when one would much rather not.

One must constantly act in ways that will not upset social harmony or the *kibun,* even when others (usually superiors) are treating one disrespectfully. Thus, burdened *nunchi* can be both exhausting and frustrating – one Korean school teacher told me that she wished she could escape from the *nunchi* of her job, and in that case, she was thinking of *nunchi* in the sense of burdened *nunchi*. Burdened *nunchi*, insofar as it restricts and constrains one's ability to speak or act as they would like to can quite often be closely related to a sense of *dabdabhae* (답답해) – a feeling of being so frustrated or stifled by external circumstances in which one cannot act or speak as they want to that it feels as if one is physically suffocating.

Now, it must be pointed out that the distinction I've drawn here between skilled *nunchi* and burdened *nunchi* is artificial. Like most words with rich and complex meanings, native speakers tend not to carefully distinguish between the different senses of the term, and switch between them often and with ease. However artificial the distinction I've drawn here is, I do think it helps us understand some of the complexity of the term *"nunchi*," and it will be valuable for thinking about how *nunchi* is related to well-being and virtue.

Nunchi and Flourishing

One major tradition in virtue ethics treats virtues as character traits or dispositions that are especially conducive or even necessary for human flourishing. Do skilled *nunchi* and burdened *nunchi* contribute to human flourishing or well-being? In this section, I argue that they do.

The case for skilled *nunchi* is more straightforward. Skilled *nunchi* can contribute to well-being or flourishing across a wide a variety of cultural contexts. Most directly, skilled *nunchi*, like social intelligence more generally benefits us in social situations. Consider the following three cases, in which Nathan possesses skilled *nunchi* and Lucy lacks it:

Case 1: Nathan and Lucy are professors. When Nathan's students begin to lose track of the lesson, Nathan immediately recognizes it. He sees their eyes glaze or squint, or start wandering around the room, their posture become more restricted, and generally notices their discomfort or their attention wandering. He is able to stop his lesson and re-engage the students. Lucy, on the other hand, is oblivious that her students are beginning to feel confused, and keeps the lesson moving forward, which only serves to further confuse her students when they do try to pay attention.

Case 2: Nathan and Lucy are at a get-together with several friends. At one point, someone asks Minha, a mutual acquaintance who has recently married, the rather tactless question of how soon she will be having a baby. Lucy thinks this is a fair question – she knows that Minha wanted to have children, so she waits expectantly for an answer. Nathan, however, notices the slightest of frowns in Minha's face, which she quickly hides. Using his skilled *nunchi*, Nathan infers that Minha's discomfort extends past the typical negative reaction to an impolitely private question, and instantly decides that it is especially appropriate to change the subject to spare Minha.

Case 3: Lucy and Nathan are fourth grade co-teachers. Thirty minutes after a group craft math activity finishes, the children begin a new social studies lesson. One of the students, Tucker, who is usually well-behaved, starts to act out. Lucy notices and begins to chastise Tucker. Nathan, however, intervenes and takes Tucker aside. He noticed that Tucker had not been not happy with his assigned groupmates in the craft activity (he wished to be put in a group with his friends), and infers that this is the reason Tucker is acting out. Nathan tells Tucker this. Tucker didn't realize it himself, but instantly realizes this was the cause of his acting out.

In the Korean context, skilled *nunchi* is especially important because of the ubiquity of indirect communication. In Korean culture, many types of direct communication can be interpreted as overly confrontational or disruptive of *kibun*. For example, if I wanted to go out to lunch with a colleague, instead of asking directly whether he wanted to go to lunch, I might instead ask whether he had eaten yet or whether he felt hungry. My colleague should then use skilled *nunchi* to infer that I am looking for a lunch partner. Similarly, if a teacher has just explained a new theory in her class, and asks her students whether they understand, they might all say "yes" enthusiastically because saying "no" might reflect poorly on the teacher's explanation and thus disrupt *kibun*.

So, stepping back, skilled *nunchi* contributes to

well-being or flourishing by helping us navigate social situations in which well-being (and thus flourishing) are at stake. But, what about burdened *nunchi*? As we've seen, burdened *nunchi* feels exhausting, constricting, and frustrating. Thus, it seems to be straightforwardly bad for well-being or flourishing. But, this inference is too hasty. Lisa Tessman (2005) has argued that there is a distinct and historically unappreciated set of "burdened" virtues "that, while practically necessitated for surviving oppression or morally necessitated for opposing it, carry with them a cost to the bearer" (4). These are virtues that "have the unusual feature of being disjoined from their bearer's own flourishing" (Tessman 2005, 4). Burdened *nunchi* is, I think, a type of or closely related to a burdened virtue. And so, while it might be logically closed off from contributing to flourishing, in certain contexts burdened *nunchi* might be necessary for well-being.

In the Korean context, obedience and deference to authority are traditionally emphasized virtues. Now, we must be careful here. This "culture of obedience" claim can be and has been easily exaggerated, and even problematically and erroneously weaponized in the form of "culture blaming" - for instance in cases of the tragic Sewol ferry disaster in 2014 and in several airline crashes (Ma 2014). Blaming nebulous aspects of a culture for highly specific, complex, multifaceted incidents is a morally fraught practice. The claim I am making here is different, and much more general – that deference towards authority is a historically important value in Korean culture and that this history still affects people today. It remains a common theme in Korean film, television, and literature, and permeates how Koreans might often view their own culture.

Consider the following case. A vice-principal at a middle school grows concerned that students are eating junk food and instead of throwing away the packaging, they litter by just throwing the empty junk food bags to the floor. Thus, he institutes a new rule that teachers must inspect students' backpacks every morning and confiscate all junk food. The teachers are not enamored with this new policy. Most obviously, it means extra work for them. Further, they are not convinced that the problem is as dire as the vice-principal seems to believe, and it seems that if littering is the issue, it would be more straightforward to just require students to be more proactive in picking up the trash. The teachers might also feel that it is morally inappropriate to have to root through their students' backpacks. Yet, for many of these teachers, especially those who are young, voicing their discontent at the policy directly to the vice-principal is a non-starter. Doing so could be seen as disruptive. Even those who do feel comfortable criticizing the policy to the vice-principal quickly give up: the vice-principal is quite stubborn. In this situation, the teachers might use their burdened *nunchi* to express their discontent. They might use their body language, tone of voice, or facial expressions to show to their own students that they would prefer not to search their backpacks, or they might tell the vice-principal "your new policy must have worked: there is much less litter now. Due to the policy's success, we probably do not need to enforce it as strictly anymore."

Burdened *nunchi* has the general structure of a burdened virtue. A person with greater social status would be able to more directly confront some issue head-on, instead of needing to carefully tip-toe around it using her burdened *nunchi*. Burdened *nunchi* becomes a survival skill for those without power or social status. There is little doubt that those whose social positions necessitate the use of burdened *nunchi* would be better off if they did not need to utilize it. Further, burdened *nunchi* can interfere with the development of non-burdened virtues. For example, it will be difficult to develop or acquire moral courage, and specifically the moral courage to confront those with greater social power or social status, if one is never put into situations in which acts of moral courage can succeed (e.g., if attempted acts of moral courage are viewed as simple disobedience and harshly punished without any positive outcome).

Skilled *Nunchi* and Virtue

Skilled *nunchi* can contribute to well-being or flourishing in a meaningful way, but is it a virtue? This is not an easy question to answer. The most directly relevant philosophical work here is likely Nancy Snow's (2009) *Virtue as Social Intelligence*. Therein, Snow explores a set of interesting claims concerning the relation of virtue and social intelligence: that some virtues are best characterized as forms of social intelligence, that some virtues require social intelligence to produce good results, and that having social intelligence will contribute to the virtuous person being able to use virtues not only to help others but to do so in ways that contribute to her own well-being (Snow 2009). Of these three claims, only the first does not

also apply to skilled *nunchi* – I can think of no other virtue that should be characterized as a form of skilled *nunchi*. However, it is clear that skilled *nunchi* can contribute to the success of virtuous acts in much the same was as social intelligence does: in giving us access to the mental states of others, it helps us to better commit kind or generous or caring acts, for example. Similarly, having skilled *nunchi* will help us to achieve our own life goals and to manage our own well-being in ways that least interfere with acting virtuously towards others.

There are, however, reasons to think that skilled *nunchi* might not be a virtue. One might argue that, given its sometimes negative connotations, and given that it is closely related to a burdened virtue, that we should not treat it as a virtue. But, it is not clear that this argument succeeds. After all, many virtue terms have senses and usages in which they do not indicate positive moral value. For example, one can be criticized for being "too kind," "too generous," or "too humble," even though kindness, generosity, and humility are virtues. But we can abstract away from these problematic associations to identify virtues of genuine moral value. Thus, the mere fact that some senses of the term *"nunchi"* fail to connote positive moral value does not mean that there is no sense of the term that represents a virtue. There is another argument nearby that is worth addressing here. One might claim that skilled *nunchi* is not a virtue because it is morally neutral – whether it produces good results or contributes to well-being or flourishing depends entirely on the presence of other virtues, such as kindness, compassion, and honesty. There is something to this argument, and I must admit that I find it partially plausible. Yet, at least in this form, it might be too demanding. After all, most virtues, if they could be held by a person who had no other virtues, would not reliably produce impressive moral results. A person who is honest but lacks kindness and tact is cruel, a person who is generous but lacks self-control, discretion, and street-smarts will give away money to unworthy causes, a person who is courageous but not morally wise will make bad moral decisions, courageously. Virtues support each other – and it seems that skilled *nunchi* supports other virtues and that other virtues support it.

Another concern might go something like this. *Nunchi* is deeply tied to acting with politeness, manners, etiquette, and civility. But, there are important ethical challenges related to all of these (Stohr 2012; Calhoun 2000; Olberding 2015, 2016). Not only do some situations morally require that we behave uncivilly, emphasizing civility as a virtue might encourage people to behave civilly even when they are morally obligated not to. For example, we might find ourselves choosing not criticize a person for a slightly offensive but clearly problematic comment made in casual conversation because doing so would feel impolite. One might claim that treating *nunchi* as a virtue exacerbates this problem, because behaving with *nunchi* might overvalue maintaining smooth social atmospheres or *kibun* compared to other important moral considerations. That is, concern for skilled *nunchi* might encourage us to overvalue concern for social harmony, atmosphere, mood, and face. I think this is, in general, a very important worry. But, while acknowledging that there are certainly situations in which morality demands that we behave uncivilly, we should first be careful not overestimate the numbers and types of these situations. There are many situations in which remaining civil while still subtly communicating moral disapprobation may be a better option that dropping all pretenses of civility. But, more importantly, when one realizes that she is morally obligated to behave uncivilly or rudely because of other important moral considerations, having skilled *nunchi* will allow one to do so in the most effective ways.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed two broad senses of *nunchi*. Skilled *nunchi* is an expert, automatic skill in perceiving and deftly reacting to dynamic social and group situations, especially in ways that adroitly track (either intentional or unintentional) indirect communication. Burdened *nunchi* is a skill in navigating extreme (and typically downward) social pressure. I discussed the relation between skilled *nunchi*, burdened *nunchi*, and well-being or flourishing. Finally, I argued that there some strong reasons for considering skilled *nunchi* a moral virtue.

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Endnotes

[1] For example, Samantha Brennan has discussed the potential moral value of "micro-sanctions" (see Brennan 2016).