

Dispositions, Virtues, and Indian Ethics

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Abstract: According to Dhand “one could argue that all Indian ethics have been primarily virtue ethics” (2002, 358). Many have indeed jumped on the virtue bandwagon, providing *prima facie* interpretations of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist canons in virtue terms. Others have expressed firm skepticism, claiming that virtues are not proven to be grounded in the nature of things, and that, ultimately, the appeal to virtue might just well be a mere *façon de parler*. In this paper, we aim to remedy this. Our intent is not to provide a catch-all interpretation of the different Indian schools. Our goal is, more modestly, to offer a *theory* of virtues in Indian philosophies, as a framework for theorists and interpreters who see the diverse traditions as amenable of systematic virtue analysis. Our theory grounds virtues in the reality of genuine moral dispositions, and in a system of beliefs where morality is understood as transformative in nature.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics; Hinduism; Jainism; Buddhism; Dispositions; Causal Powers

1. Introduction

Dhand claims that Indian ethics is “reminiscent of the genre of virtue ethics developed in the West,” and that “one could argue that all Indian ethics have been primarily virtue ethics” (2002, 358). Since then, a number of scholars have argued that an Indian virtue ethics is indeed present (Chakraborti 2006; Van Den Bossche & Mortier 2008; Bilimoria 2014; *inter alia*). Yet others have expressed firm skepticism. Mohanty reports that “it has often been said that the Indian philosophies did not develop a moral theory” on the ground that appeal to virtue does not equate to the presence of a proper theory, since virtues are not proven to be grounded in the nature of things (2017, 66). Perrett and Pettigrove, echoing a similar skepticism, have recently warned us against “overvirtuing” Indian ethics. They urge us to consider whether Indian virtue ethics is “one that consists primarily in the advocacy of the virtues” or, instead, one where virtues really “possess a sufficient degree of explanatory primacy for the theory to be considered a virtue ethic” (2015, 55). Skeptics warn us of the fact that from the consideration that virtues are advocated within an ethical system, we cannot infer that they indeed play a primary role in that theory. We welcome their caution. But, in this paper, we argue that the main Indian philosophies go well beyond virtue-advocacy. In all the three canons—the Jain, the Buddhist, and the Hindu—, virtues have solid ontological foundation—viz. they are grounded in the nature of things—and a primary explanatory role—viz. as moral dispositions whose exercise produces merits and moral progress.

We understand our task as requiring a degree of intellectual humility. In arguing in favor of our claim we do not want to put forward the claim that *all* Indian ethics is virtue ethics. Indian ethics is not a monolithic corpus where one philosophical current can claim supremacy over others.¹ Hence, our intent is not to affirm the supremacy of any ethical framework, nor

¹ Vivekananda’s Vedāntic ethics is often presented as a clear-cut case of Virtue ethics by many (see Ranganathan 2017c, 124; 2018, 60; Davis 2017, 137; Medhananda 2022, 11). But Ranganathan argues that

to provide a catch-all interpretation of all the many different Indian ethical traditions. These traditions might very well be understood on their own terms, rather than as species of some Western school. So, our goal is, more modestly, to offer a *theory* of Indian virtues—or moral dispositions—, a general framework for theorists and interpreters who see Indian ethical traditions as systematic and amenable to virtue analysis. Thus, firstly, what we are after is not *interpretation* but *explication*: a systematization of the reasons (explicit or implicit) that explain the use of the term “virtue.”² Secondly, as will be clear in the sections to come, in order to meet the skeptics’s demand we must describe how the ontology of Indian virtues works *vis-à-vis* the ontology of moral dispositions (that is, virtues); and how moral dispositions fulfil their explanatory job—that is, how they explain moral agency and moral progress. Indian ethical traditions are diverse, and each includes different schools holding different philosophical positions. As we will see in § 3 the internal “mechanics” of the virtues is deeply intertwined with the metaphysical assumptions underpinning the ontology of dispositions. Since different schools disagree on some aspects of the underlying canon’s ontology, we expect that each school generates a slightly different rendition of the ontological “mechanics” of the virtues (more on this in § 5). We believe that each of these renditions must be assessed in appropriate venues. Hence, the scope of this paper is limited,

Yoga’s ethics or Bhakti cannot be associated with Virtue ethics because “whereas Virtue Ethics claims that the good (virtue) causes the right action, Bhakti claims that the right action [which is worship] causes the good outcome” (2017b, 252). Reading the ethics out of the mythology is equally controversial since, as Harzer points out, these sources do not present one moral theory as the “true” one, but often employ the fictional device of personifying moral theories onto the characters, thereby presenting many at the same time (2017, 321-323; Dhand 2002, 369). The Jain tradition is almost exclusively identified as a form of virtue ethics (see Soni 2017; Ranganathan 2016a; 2016b; *inter alia*). Buddhist scholarship is not equally cohesive. Harvey (2000), Keown (2001), and Heim (2020), and Hanner (2021), *inter alia*, have argued for a virtue reading of Buddhist ethics. Others, such as Davis (2017, 137), Ranganathan (2018, 64), and Chakrabarti (2017, 214) frame some Buddhist ethical traditions, and Nyāya in particular, as Perfectionism Consequentialism. According to Edelglass, Śāntideva’s ethics cannot be fully equated with (at least Aristotelian) Virtue ethics because it incorporates elements of classic Consequentialism (2017, 242). For a case of Buddhist ethics as universalist consequentialism see Goodman (2009) and Clayton (2006). For a response to Goodman and Clayton see Fink (2013). Harris (2015), and MacKenzie (2017). Siderits (2003) takes Buddhist ethics to represent a form of aretaic utilitarianism.

² On interpretation vs explication see Ranganathan (2017a, 7).

and programmatic in nature. It lays out the preliminary foundation for a more in-depth, future assessment of the nature of dispositional nature of virtues. What we argue, as a starting point, is that there is a general core that all of them further develop: that morality is transformative in nature and that the ground of morality rests on the existence of genuine moral dispositions.

We will proceed in a systematic fashion. In § 2 we briefly introduce the state of art of the scholarship on virtues in Indian philosophies, and set the boundaries of the problem we intend to address in this paper. In § 3 we begin by examining the notion of virtue in relation to the notion of dispositions. We argue that, across the ethical board, virtues are identified as moral dispositions, *good* potencies or dispositions *for* the good. In § 4 we firstly connect the commitment to genuine moral dispositions with the broader conception of morality as “active,” or transformative in nature. Secondly, we explicate the notion of active morality in relation to that of the “exercise” of moral dispositions. Hence, we examine how moral dispositions *qua* virtues manifest, and the proper manner in which their exercise must be curbed to enhance moral progress. We conclude that, contrary to the skeptics (more on this in a moment), the appeal to virtues is far from being a cosmetic affair, or a mere cataloguing. In each tradition, virtues are unified in a system and grounded in the nature of things.

2. On Overvirtuing Indian Virtue Ethics

Despite virtue theorists disagreeing on a number of issues, there are a few minimal claims that virtually everyone endorses. The first is that morality is primarily about someone's character, rather than about someone's actions; about what kind of person to be, rather than what to do (see Anscombe 1958; Annas 1993; Kraut 1989; Zagzebski 2004; Hursthouse 1999; *inter alia*). Someone's character, in turn, is a matter of instantiating (global) moral

dispositions, which are dispositions for the good or the bad.³ The second is that, in Virtue ethics, a theory of value is prior to the theory of moral rights: what to do (obligatory, permissible, impermissible) is defined in terms of good and bad. Deontic notions are thus grounded in the aretaic notion of virtues and vices, which are explanatory prior and (morally) fundamental. Finally, morality cannot be fully captured by appealing to universal, general laws, but it is rather an *activity*: one develops and refines the moral character, and acquires or loses moral dispositions, by cultivating oneself. In brief, an ethics is virtue-based if and only if it grounds morality in real features of agents (moral dispositions) and explains moral conduct and moral progress on the basis of the mixture of moral properties that the agent bears and exercises.

Like Dhand, many have jumped on the virtue bandwagon. Chakraborti, for instance, claims that virtues in Hinduism can be best accommodated by a version of Agent-Centred/Agent-Based virtue ethics (2006, 93). Bilimoria agrees with Chakraborti and explores the role of *phronēsis* in Aristotelian Virtue ethics in connection with that of *vyavasāyātmikābuddhih* in *Yoga-Śramaṇa* (2014, 297-300). In the context of Buddhism, Garfield (2017), Hanner (2021), Fink (2003), and MacKenzie (2017) argue that virtues are the subject of systematic philosophical reflection and are non-reducible sources of moral actions. Within the Jain tradition, Soni explores the *vīrya* (virtue) as the essential trait of *jīva* (self), understood as the centre of moral responsibility (2017, 155).

Likewise, much has already been said about the non-derivative normative status of virtues vis-à-vis other normative principles. Garfield (2017), Keown (2001) and Heim (2020) emphasise how Buddhist virtues cannot be reduced to a set of moral prescriptions of imperative, and, by contrast, that Buddhist ethics understand the agent's moral development

³ For a discussion of the distinction between global vs local dispositions/virtues see Miller (2003). The distinction will not bear on the discussion ahead.

through the exercise of virtues. Similar remarks are put forward by Soni (2017) and Ranganathan (2016a; 2016b) in respect to the Jaina tradition. The same dissatisfaction with general, prescriptive rules is echoed by Heim in the *Dharmaśāstra Dānanibandha* (2017), by Sinha (1988), and Gupta (2006) in the context of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and by Van Den Bossche and Mortier (2008) in the *Vajjālaggam*. The general verdict seems to be that morality is fundamentally a matter of “internal subjective dispositions” (Sinha 1988, 192) that “oblige only under certain circumstances” (Gupta 2006, 381).

Nevertheless, Perrett and Pettigrove are suspicious that all this virtues goings-on within Indian ethics might be just a mere *façon de parler*. According to them, mere advocacy, or “cataloguing,” is not sufficient for a theory to qualify as Indian virtue ethics. Probably referring to Devaraja (1962, v–vi) and Deutsch (1969, 62), Mohanty reports that:

“It has often been said that the Indian philosophies did not develop a moral theory. The task of a moral theory, one may continue, is not merely to produce a catalogue of do’s and don’ts, of virtues and vices, rights and duties, but also to (i) unify them in a system, and (ii) ground them either (a) in the nature of things (i.e. in a metaphysics) or (b) in the nature of humankind (i.e. in a philosophical anthropology) or (c) in a supreme moral principle from which they all, in their systematicity, can be derived. Obviously, [they] did not quite do any of these.” (2017, 66)

When Perrett and Pettigrove warn us not to “overvirtue” Indian ethics, we take them as requesting friends of Indian virtues to show *how* virtues get a systematic foundation and how they explain moral behaviour and moral progress. In other terms, to provide evidence of virtues being ontologically and explanatorily substantial. *Prima facie*, to those familiar with the ontology of dispositions, Perrett and Pettigrove’s concern is legitimate. Azzano, *inter alia*, argues that the truth of dispositional sentences does not immediately commit to the existence of genuine dispositions (2019). And because virtues are dispositions, virtue-talking is not *prima facie* committing to the reality of genuine moral dispositions. Even though theorists of virtues seldom emphasize the connection between virtues and the underlying ontology of dispositions, Azzano and Raimondi argue that the connection between the two is

tight (2023). We start our quest by arguing that the connection is also evident within Indian ethics. To this we now turn.

3. Properties, Dispositions, and Virtues

So far, we have used virtues and moral dispositions interchangeably. This is because virtues, despite being referred to as character traits, correspond to certain ontological posits: dispositional properties, or potencies, that bestow their bearers with certain abilities. Dispositional properties are properties *for* (or directed to) a certain manifestation. Aristotle calls these properties *pros-ti*, the *toward-something* (Marmodoro 2018, *inter alia*). The idea is that a disposition is a property that tells us what something would do in certain circumstances, viz. fragile objects might break if struck. The “doing” of this property is dubbed “manifestation,” a state of affairs that the property brings about, or causally produces (see Mumford & Anjum 2011; Groff 2021; Ingthorsson 2021; *inter alia*). Manifestations are triggered in certain circumstances or interfered (even systematically) in others. The link between the disposition and the manifestation is what underpins and explains behaviour because dispositions “are meant to generate patterns in the behaviour of their bearer, which, albeit not exceptionless, are most often than not detectable” (Azzano and Raimondi 2023, 3-4).⁴

In the Hindu tradition, references to the dispositionality of things abound. The notions of force, capacity, or influence (*śaktyā*) and power or strength (*vīrya*) are often used to mean potency/tendencies to produce/act (respectively *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.10.22, 3.5.51, 4.24.18, 6.2.19, 6.4.1-2; *Gīta* 9.40; *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 17.212). Paradigmatically, the notion of

⁴ In this section we will talk of attributes, quality, and properties interchangeably. We are also aware that each canon works with a preferred ontology of properties, namely as universals (Hinduism), modes (Jainism), and tropes (Buddhism) (see Siderits 2022; Bartley 2015; *inter alia*). For the purpose of this paper, unless required, we will ignore the metaphysical details, for they don’t impinge on our arguments. We will, however, say more about the influence of these details in § 5.

“one’s own nature” or “intrinsic nature” (*svabhāva*) is either cashed out in dispositional terms (see *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 6.199, 8.207) or directly translated as “one’s own natural dispositions” (*svabhāvabhāva*) (see *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 10.63.26).⁵ The notion of virtue too is characterised dispositionally. Virtues are, first of all, properties or potencies, viz. *gunās*, that can be possessed by an individual (*guṇin*, possessor of qualities) and that determine her actions through their manifestation. Although in the *Vajjālaggaṃ* (see Van Den Bossche and Mortier 2008, 98) and in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, among others, the notion of *gunās* is directly associated with virtues— or “pious” qualities, or “modes of goodness” (3.9.23, 11.20.1, 11.19.40, 11.20.3)—, many others, such as the *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (24.41) and the *Gīta*, maintain the distinction between the morally loaded use of *gunās* and the ethically neutral use—as “human qualities,” “attribute,” “property,” or “potency” more in general (see Bodewitz 2019, 368). Similar semantic volatility affects the Buddhist canon. The *Majjhima Nikāya* uses *gunās* for “qualities” and *kuśala* for “virtues” or “good qualities”—those conducive to happiness (*sukha*) or awakening (*bodhi*) (see Ñānamoli & Bodhi 2005, 524-525). But the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* uses *sīla* and *kuśalaguna* interchangeably, to indicate both qualities and good qualities (50.4.2). Similarly, the *Visuddhimagga*—a formative text of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition—uses *sīla* sometimes referring to the general category of qualities, sometimes more specifically to moral dispositions (see also Hanner 2021). In (1.38), for instance, we read the more neutral rendition of *sīla* as dispositions: “But in the world the nature of such and such beings is called their disposition (*sīla*) of which they say: “This one is of happy *sīla*, this one is of unhappy *sīla*, this one is of quarrelsome *sīla*, this

⁵ Bartley argues that the Abhidharma notion of *svabhāva*—particularly as it is discussed in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*—is similarly characterised in dispositional terms as “the capacity to do something. ... the nature of a white atom is to contribute to a white surface and bring about a certain perception. ... it seems that they are not characterized in categorical terms but rather in dispositional ones, that is to say, in terms of their capacity to interact with other dharmas” (2015, 46-47).

one is of dandified *sīla*’.”⁶ The SarvāStivāda school tends to use, more often than not, *sīla* in its moral connotation (see *Abhidharma-mahā-vibhāṣā-sāstra* 723c).⁷ In the neutral sense, in the SarvāStivāda Abhidharma, dispositions or potencies are referred to as *śakti* or its synonymous: *bīja* (seed), *sāmarthya* (capability) (see *Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra* 621c–622a, 631c–633b; also Siderits 2022, 69). There are seldom any references that connect both *sīla* and *śakti* with *gunās*. This is likely because Buddhist schools, as it is well-known, are generally nominalist and so disagree with the Jain and Hindu schools on the reality/fundamentality of properties.⁸ According to Jain ontology, both substances and qualities are real. Substances (*dravya*) are that “which is characterized by origin, persistence and decay, without changing its ‘own-nature’” (*Pravacanasāra* 2.3-6) and are the “substratum cause.” Substances possess qualities (*guṇa*) (*Tattvārthādhigamabhāṣya* 5.37) which “are themselves devoid of any qualities” (*Tattvārthasūtra* 5.41) and “[are] (actually) the distinguishing character of one substance from another” (*Tattvārthādhigamabhāṣya* 5.38).⁹ As Siddhasena remarks (*Sanmati-tarka* 1.7-9), while the category of substance is associated with “being” and that of *gunās* with “becoming,” this is a distinction of thought (that is, standpoint). In reality, *gunās* are not independent existents but dynamic states, or *modes* of the substance. Similarly, Kunda Kunda argues that the quality of a substance is the result of the manifestation of the substance’s intrinsic nature and, therefore, the two are not distinct (3.103). The souls (*jīva*) too are substances (*dravya*) (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 5.3) and so have qualities (*guṇa*), and psychic dispositions (*vīrya*; *bhava*) that set them apart from matter.

⁶ A similar neutral rendition of *sīla* as disposition is given by Vasubandhu in the *Pañcaskandhaka-prakaraṇa*, “And what are dispositions (*sīla*)? They are contact, mental attention, feelings, cognitions, volitions, zest, confidence, memory or mindfulness, meditational concentration, insight, faith, inner shame, dread of blame, the root-of-the-beneficial of lack of greed, the root-of-the-beneficial of lack of hostility, the root-of-the-beneficial of lack of confusion, vigor, tranquillity, carefulness, equanimity, attitude of nonharming, attachment, aversion, pride, ignorance” (Anacker 2005, 66).

⁷ See also Dhammijoti (2009, 380).

⁸ More on this is a moment.

⁹ See also Matilal (1981).

In the *Samayasāra*, *bhava* are “modification of the (empirical) self according to its nature” and, in turn, that from which “the self is produced” (3.102).

As it is well-known, Siddhasena’s as well as Kunda Kunda’s endorsement of the non-duality of substances and qualities—or Perspectivalism (see Siderits 2022, 55-56)—is in antithesis with the sharp ontological distinction, introduced by the Vaiśeṣika and the Sāṃkhya school, between *dravya* and *gunās*. Perhaps, the Vaiśeṣika and the Sāṃkhya are the closest to the Aristotelian substance ontology. In the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* (1.1.15), *gunās* are what identify substances and account for their difference and, as in the *Tattvārtha-sūtra*, are described as “inhering in substances, not possessing attributes” (1.1.16). In the *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, the qualities are basic constituents of the fabric of the world. The one God is the “Lord of qualities” (6.13.16) and “begins with works (*karman*) which are connected to the qualities (*gunās*), and distributes all existences (*bhava*). In the absence of these qualities, there is disappearance of the work that has been done (This which is regarded as earth, water, fire, air, space)” (5.14.4).¹⁰

The *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* takes the “tri-guna” too to be “potency of activity (*mahat-tattva* or *sūtram*, power to act)” and “cause of manifestation of the universe” (11.09.20). The tri-guna are the *gunās* of *sattva* (essence), *rajas* (energy) and *tamas* (mass) that, only later, would come to be identified with psychological traits, existing in different proportions in an individual.¹¹ In this broadly, ethically neutral sense, both virtues and non-virtues are *gunās*. Even the tri-guna are more often than not described dispositionally in terms of what they are for, and their manifestations:

¹⁰ A similar remark is present in the *Chāndogya Upanishad*, in which the quality of the good is said to: “subsists in the form of the (constituent) cause in all such products as the Regions—earth, fire, sky, heaven. Similarly, the idea of the Regions and other products is always accompanied by the idea of the 'Good' (which is their cause)” (2.2.1).

¹¹ See also: “Know Goodness (*sattva*), Activity (*rajas*), Darkness (*tamas*) to be the three qualities of the Self, with which the Great One always completely pervades all existences.” (*Manusmṛiti* 12.24). On *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* see also *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (1.8.18, 3.5.46) and *Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa* (2.19.173, 195-7).

“Sattva, rajas, tamas, thus, the qualities (*gunás*) born of material nature, Bind fast in the body. ... Of these, sattva (virtue), free from impurity, illuminating and free from disease, binds by attachment to happiness, And by attachment to knowledge. ... Know that rajas (passion) is characterized by passion. ... By attachment to action.. Know indeed that tamas (sloth, darkness) is born of ignorance. ... This binds fast, Arjuna, With negligence, indolence, and sleepiness.” (*Gīta* 14.7-9)

“They say the fruit of good action is sattvic and without impurity, But the fruit of rajasic action is pain, And the fruit of tamasic action is ignorance.” (*Gīta* 14.16)¹²

In line with the Jain school, the Hindu tradition seems to understand *gunás* as genuine ontological posits, and (at least some of them) as “efficacies toward something,” “potentialities” (*śakti*) (*Dasapadārtha-Sastra* I.8) or “potencies for” (*Vaisesika-sutra* 6.1.4). Likewise, in *Dasapadārtha-Sastra*, attributes inhere in substance which “produce their effects in virtue of potentialities” (notes on 2.1.2). When it comes to potencies or dispositions, the kind of realism shared by the three Indian schools is neatly reflected in their rendition of the notion of dispositional nature; as exemplified in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* and the *Pramānavārttika*:

“The effect is existent (*satkāryam*) (in the cause, prior to its production); for that can be no production and manifestation of that which is non-existent; there can be no connection between of the cause with the effect (if the latter be non-existent); (some connection must exist between the cause and the effect, since) the production of every thing is not possible from everything else; there can be production of one thing from another, if the two are mutually related as the producer and the producible (and such relation cannot be possible if the effect be non-existent); and the cause and the effect are identical, (so that the one cannot be non-existent, while the other is existent).” (*Sāṃkhya Kārikā* 9)

“For fire, which has a distinct potentiality for smoke, has [being] its cause as its nature. If smoke were to come into existence from what is not the cause of smoke, then it would be without a cause. That whose nature something is seen to conform to in the manner of concomitance and exclusion, is its cause. Hence, there is no coming about from what is different.” (*Pramānavārttika*, *svārtha-anumāna* 37-38; in Gillon 2009)

¹² For a comprehensive list of manifestations of the rajasic and tamasic qualities see (*Maitri Upanishad* 3.5.5; *inter alia*).

The passages contain crucial elements characterising dispositions. Let us explain. We have said above that dispositions, or potencies, are causal properties, viz. properties that (regularly) “produce” their manifestations. The *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* (14) refers to *gunás* of this sort as *kāranaguna* (“quality of the cause,” or “causal property”) (see also *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* 7.1.6). Īśvara Kṛṣṇa explains that the *kāranaguna* and their manifestations are not connected accidentally because “production” *cannot* occur between any element whatsoever. It occurs only if something is suitably connected as producer and product. These are dubbed “identical” because one cannot exist without the other. In contemporary parlance, the reason why a disposition *x* regularly brings about a manifestation *y* is because of a relation of metaphysical necessity *R*, such that *Rxy* (Bird 2007; Mumford 2004; *inter alia*).

Manifestations are connected “internally” to the dispositions, such that one cannot exist without the other—“the effect is existent with the cause”—and if the one is exercised “there is voidness of failure to produce the effect” (*Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* X.II.2). Similarly, Dharmakīrti, focusing on the “potency” of fire, argues that its effect depends ontologically on it. In this sense, the cause has a “nature” to produce the effect, and the “indispensability of effect with respect to cause is due to the former’s arising from the latter” (Gillon 2009, 203). What the discussions in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* and in the *Pramāṇavārttika* have in common, is thus the idea that a single potency contributes causally with a single manifestation, or single contribution to a causal outcome (see Raimondi 2022; Baltimore 2020). Despite sharing a similar notion of dispositionality, we cannot expect any Buddhist school to follow the Vaiśeṣika in the ontological claim that powers are properties. Firstly, because, as nominalists, they cannot equate potencies with properties. For a nominalist either (i) there are no properties (understood as universals) or (ii) properties only exist derivatively. Secondly, because, as antiessentialists—for example Nāgārjuna and Dignāga—they reject the idea that things have an internal or intrinsic essence. By no means these two tenets have prevented

Buddhist schools from attributing reality to dispositions or potencies or causal powers (*arthakriyāsamārtha*) to perform “causal roles” (*arthakriyākāritva*). Potencies are so important for Buddhist metaphysics that to have potential is taken to be the mark of the real: “Whatever has causal powers (*arthakriyāsamārtha*), that really exists (*paramārthasat*) in this context. Anything else is declared to be customarily existent (*saṃvṛtisat*). These two are particulars and universals” (*Pramāṇavārttika* 3.3). But these potencies are not “things” (*Abhidharma-mahā-vibhāṣā-śāstra* 633a; *Tattvasaṃgraha-pañjikā* 509; *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha* 14f).¹³ They are conceptualised, in line with a certain brand of contemporary dispositionalism (Groff 2021; *inter alia*), as causal activities (causal *kāritra*). These activities have manifestations (*samudācāra*), and are distinguished between activities that sustain existence (*phala-grahaṇa/phalākṣepa*), and productive activities:

The potencies (*śakti*) of two kinds, activity (*kāritra*) and efficacy/capability/capacity (*sāmarthya/vṛtti/vyāpāra*). It is only the activity of inducing or projecting a dharma’s own fruit (*phalākṣepa* = *phala-pratigrahaṇa/phala-parigrahaṇa*) that is called *kāritra*. This does not exhaust the set of efficacy of a given dharma; it also has efficacies that are not *kāritra*. ... [As for] their capability to contribute causally to the arising of a different entity, this is not *kāritra*, but efficacy” (*Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra* 631c–632b)

“If [a power], with regard to the production of the fruit within a series of a different species, can serve only as a condition assisting its arising—this is an efficacy, not a *kāritra*” (*Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra* 409c)

The productive activities are those whose exercise produces something novel. In contrast to the *Sāṃkhya* and *Vaiśeṣika* ontologies, Buddhists are noninherentist (*asatkāryavādins*), and so they deny that manifestations (*samudācāra*) are internal or preexisting in the cause. In line with some contemporary conceptualization of dispositions’s manifestations (see Heil 2012; *inter alia*) they deny that each potency has its own manifestation. They see the manifestation

¹³ The Vibhajyavāda tradition understand the notion of potency as basic, akin to the notion of energy (*svalakṣaṇa*) (see Bartley 2015, 56-57).

as coming together (*samāgri*) or “total cause” (see Siderits 2022, 75), or the mutual exercise of potencies, occurring with conditional necessity: “In our school, we hold that when the necessary conditions obtain, conditioning forces arise not having existed previously. But these conditions are various and at times they assemble together and at other times do not” (*Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra* 632b–633a).¹⁴

What, then, are the virtues? Simply speaking, qualities *for* the good. As elements of the *jīva*, Jain’s *vīrya* are powers for right action (*anantavīrya*) (see also Ranganathan 2016a, 6) or virtuous dispositions (*pariṇāma*) (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 6.3). In the *Samayasara*, virtues are *subha bhava* (good dispositions), which are associated with *punya* (good conduct) and which *tend* to lead to happiness (3.102). In the Hindu canon too the semantic extension for “virtue” varies depending on the texts. In the *Manusmṛiti* it is translated as *sattva*, although occasionally virtues are described as the “result of Goodness (*sattva*) as the mark of that quality (*gunās*)” (12.31), suggesting a distinction between properties, on one hand, and virtues as the good nature of a property, on the other.¹⁵ In the *Gīta*, *sattva* (see 17.1; *inter alia*) and *dharma* (see 14.27; *inter alia*) are used interchangeably. The most general rendition for virtues is “good qualities,” “potencies for the good,” or “mode[s] of goodness/the good” (*sattvam*) (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 11.22.13; *Gīta* 14.5; *Vaisesika-sutra* 6.1.4). The Buddhist virtues of the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (*Sutta* 3 to 8 of The Book of Tens), and the *Dasakanipāta* (V3-9) are the *sīla*, the virtuous behaviour is *sīlāni*, and the virtuous person

¹⁴ This is what in the Mahāyāna Yogācāra tradition is understood as simultaneous causation.

¹⁵ This distinction might suggest that it is accidental whether a property has a virtuous nature. But in Hinduism the connection between these *gunās* and their (good) manifestation they are for is non-accidental, and part of the nature of the *gunās*. The necessity of this connection is crucial, and it spills over into the epistemology of morality. For example, in the *Chāndogya Upanishad* we are told that simply meditating on the goodness suffices to know what is the right action to perform (II.i.4). Similarly, at the end of Section I of the Meditation of the whole Sāma we read that “If anyone knowing thus meditate upon Samā as good, all right duties would readily come to him and accrue to him”. Gupta (2006, 394) and Sinha argue that a connection between *gunās* and their *pros-ti* dimension is present in the *Gīta* too, where *gunās* are understood as “potentialities”—another term for dispositions— and where the ethical subject is one “enmeshed in the *gunā* structure” and hence “entangled in a world of possibilities” (1988, 147).

a *sīlāvanta* (see *Tikanipāta*, *Sutta* 46, 1.152; see also *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* 49, sec. 8.2.1). A similar use of *sīla* can be found in the Mahāyāna tradition where it is used to describe the good of virtuous behaviour (*śīlapāramitā*) (see *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, *śīlapāramitā*, 23).

In all three canons, the use of virtues is reminiscent of the Aristotelian formal features of virtue as qualities tending toward an outcome, which is an intrinsic good.¹⁶ The good of the Jain virtues, which are the innate nature of the soul, consists in them tending toward the production of right faith (*samyagdarśana*), right knowledge (*samyagiñāna*), and right conduct (*samyakcārita*). The state resulting from the possession of these virtues is the virtuous or “righteous” state (*dharmya*) (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 9.28), that “which is the consequence of virtuous disposition (*pariṇāma*)” (6.3). Similarly in the Buddhist canon, the *sīlāvanta* is disposed to manifest right speech (*samma vaca*), right action (*samma kammanta*), and right livelihood (*samma ajiva*) (*Samyutta Nikāya* 56.11). In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, Buddhist virtues are presented as “having a purpose” of leading toward “freedom from remorse,” which in turn leads the *sīlāvanta* to the Theravāda Buddhist moral ideal (or good) of the *arahant* (*Cetana Sutta* 11.2; *Kimatta Sutta* 11.1). Whether or not the state of *arahant* is achieved, the good of virtues is conceived as “support of beings” in this life and in the afterworld, since “what you do with body, speech, or mind that is yours; taking that you go; that's your follower, like a shadow, that never leaves. Thus, you should do what is fine” (*Samyutta Nikāya*, *Aputtaka Sutta*, 3.20).

¹⁶ The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic good is often presented in terms of admired vs. admirable qualities (see *Vajjālaggaṃ* 76; *inter alia*). Some are qualities that are admired (such as being powerful or rich), in the sense that people would have them rather than not. The good of these qualities is external, while that of the admirable qualities is internal. While the latter are sometimes conducive to the former, it is never the case that the opposite occurs (see *Vajjālaggaṃ* 76.689). More on the superiority of virtues over richness and power in *Mahābhārata* (43). A similar distinction, in the Buddhist canon, using *admirable* qualities for virtues can be found in (*Itivuttaka* 3.48).

In the *Manusmṛiti*, the *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, and the *Mahābhārata* we read that the good outcome is a natural outcome of the virtues:

“If while a man performs an act his disposition is sātṭvika, or “chiefly penetrated by the quality of Goodness”, he will reap its reward” (12.81)¹⁷

“Through virtuous conduct he obtains long life, through virtuous conduct desirable offspring, through virtuous conduct imperishable wealth;” (4.156)

“Do not doubt virtue because you do not see its results, Pāñcālī. Without doubt the fruits will manifest in time. ... The fruits of true virtue are eternal and indestructible, leading one to the highest regions of happiness” (*Mahābhārata* 24)

“Whoever has qualities (*gunās*, distinctions) is the doer of the deeds that bring recompense; and of such action surely he experiences the consequence. Undergoing all forms, characterised by the three qualities (*sattva*, *raja*, *tamas*), the individual self roams around according to his deeds” (*Śvetāśvatara Upanishad* 5.13.7)¹⁸

And in the *Vajjālaggaṃ*, where the virtuous man is described against the profile of the common man, we are told that the virtuous man does good for the sake of the good:

“The is the nature of everybody, namely, to do good in response to something good. But to do good to others even when no good has been done to them by others, well, that is the nature of the virtuous. ... At the time of world-dissolution, (even) the mountains stir; the oceans transgress their boundary-line; but even at that time, the good do not slacken their determination to stand by their commitment”(4.39)¹⁹

What is perhaps strikingly common to the traditions is what is dubbed the “primary” function of virtues. In the Hindu tradition, the primary function is to “suppress inordinate affection and hatred” (*Manusmṛiti* 2.6) and “destroy (the effect of) inauspicious marks.” (4.156). The *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* point out that the function or activity of virtue cannot just be

¹⁷ For a similar remark see the *Bṛihad-Āraṇyaka Upanishad* (4.4.5).

¹⁸ As emphasised by Bühler, in the *Upaniṣads*, *dharma* confers “specific features on account of specific function that they have to perform” (1964, 25).

¹⁹ This is somehow reiterated by Yudhiṣṭhira addressing his wife: “None should ever perform virtue with a desire to gain its fruits. Such a sinful trader of virtue will never reap the results. I practice virtue only because I desire to follow the Vedas and satisfy the Lord.” (*Mahābhārata* 24).

the removal of hindrances (*nivritti*), since the destruction of demerits can also be achieved via gifts of the Gods.²⁰ Hence, they must also promote the good (*pravritti*). A virtuous act is an act “which brings about fulfilment as its fruit by the path of the annihilation of obstacles” (1.1.1). Similarly, when Buddhist virtues are described in functional/activity terms (in accordance with the ontology), we are told that:

“Its function has a double sense: Action to stop misconduct, then achievement as the quality of blamelessness in virtuous men. So what is called *sīla* should be understood to have the function (nature) of stopping misconduct.” (*Visuddhimagga* 1.20-1.21)

“It is on account of the thought with which one makes the vow of undertaking (*abhyupagama-citta*) — serving as the assisting accompaniment (*saparivāra*) — that the immorality practiced from beginningless time comes to be relinquished upon the undertaking of the moral practice. This is like the long accumulated darkness in a room being banished on the arrival of a bright lamp. The same applies in the case of a moral practice counteracting an immorality. It is to be understood in the same manner that the path [as the counteragent] counteracts a defilement” (*Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra* 623b)

Likewise, the virtues of the Jain canon work toward stopping, regulating, and even destroying the influx (*āsrava*) of matter that becomes karmas. So, for example:

“The practice of these virtues (*dharma*), and the thought of good that these virtues bring about and of the evil that the opposites of these bring about, lead to stoppage (*samvara*) of karmic inflow. ... When wrong-belief (*mithyātva*) is restrained by virtuous thought-activity, due to auspicious disposition, it becomes quiescent and no longer obstructs right faith” (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 6.3-8.9)

All three traditions examined admit the reality of genuine dispositions—according to their ontology— and align with the general idea in virtue ethics that virtues are dispositions that tend toward the good. Nevertheless, what counts as good might vary from one virtue ethical tradition to another. In other terms, it is possible that the same ontology of moral dispositions underwrites different moral ideals. For some canon, it is difficult to pin down this ideal univocally. The Hindu canon advocates for a variety of merits, in a variety of venues, that are

²⁰ See Chandrakanta’s commentary of (1.1.4)

seldom directed toward a unique moral good but, more generally, toward worldly prosperity (see *Mahābhārata* 18.5.62; *inter alia*) or also toward spiritual well-being—such as in the Sāṅkhya and the Vedānta traditions.²¹ For the Jain, given the emphasis on the equality of life, nonviolence and austerity are the primary moral ideals (see *Daśavaikāḍhika* 1.1). For some others, enlightenment and purity constitute the ultimate goal toward the removal of misery (*dukkha*)—as with the case of the virtue of mindfulness (*Smṛti*) and nonattachment (*Arāga*) underlying and informing all the other virtues in the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna traditions.²² Even within the same tradition, similar moral dispositions lead to different moral ideals, as in the case of the ideals of Arahant and Bodhisattva. In general, the ontology of dispositions is *per se* neutral about which of the things are deemed good. What the ontology requires is just that every disposition disposes its bearer toward a certain good behaviour in a nonaccidental way (see Van Buiten 1957, 36).

The issue has nonetheless generated considerable discussion. Some, like Bilimoria, argue that Brāhmanical-Hindu, Upanishadic, Smārta, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Jain ethics, are all similar in that they share a core of the same virtues (2017, 41). It is indeed true that the three cardinal virtues, viz. compassion, nonviolence, and selfrestrain (see *Bṛihad-Āranyaka Upanishad* 5.1; *Mahābhārata* XXIV, appendix IV), are also considered so for the Buddhist

²¹ The main cataloguing of virtues comes from the *Arthaśāstra*, the *Vāmana*, the Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, the *Vana Parva*, the *Vajjālaggaṃ*, Vātsyāyan's *bhāṣya*, the *Manusmṛiti*, the *Gīta*, and the *Nyāyāsūtras*. These virtues include: noninjury, truth, goodwill, mercy, patience, purity, charity, forbearance, self-restraint, tranquillity, generosity, honesty, kindness, forgiveness, purity of conduct, modesty, and simplicity (see Doniger 1988, 95; Dhand 2002, 358; Matilal 2002, 54; Van Den Bossche & Mortier 2008, 90).

²² These virtues are so crucial for the Buddhist and Jain traditions that reference and illustration of their merit can be found in a variety of venues, from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Tattvārtha-sūtra*, among others. The collection of virtues for both traditions is, unsurprisingly, similar. The Pāli canon *The Four Sublime States* emphasises four main virtues, or “sublime states of mind” loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) (see Thera 1994, 14-23). Likewise, in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, we find virtues (understood as perfections) such as generosity (*Dānāpāramitā*) (chp. XIX), wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) (chp. VII-VIII), vigor, diligence, or perseverance (*Vīryapāramitā*) (chp. XLV), and patience (*Kṣāntipāramitā*) (chp. XXIV). In the *Tattvārtha-sūtra* (an authoritative book for both of Jainism's major sub-traditions *Digambara* and *Śvētāmbara*) we see the virtues include *sarāga* (characterised by virtues of tranquillity), *praśama* (incessant fear of worldly existence), *saṃvega* (compassion for the worldly beings), *inter alia* (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 7).

(see Thera 1994, 14-23), and the Jain tradition (see *Tattvārtha-sūtra* 9).²³ Moreover, according to Bilimoria (2014), Chakraborti (2006), and Davis (2014) the copresence of moral and intellectual virtues is necessary for moral self-cultivation. Whether this is evidence enough to establish a unique moral ideal operating in all the canons we don't dare to say. However, as we understand it, there is a *prima facie* reason to maintain that similarities of virtues cannot be taken to establish similarities of moral ideals. Let us explain.

In traditional virtue ethics, things deemed good are certain ideals from which the person and those around would benefit. So, for example, if we are persuaded of the importance of fairness and equity, we would claim that justice is good and, consequently, that it is good or virtuous to be just. If justice is deemed prior, or conducive to other virtues, then justice is a moral ideal. Thus, the quality of *being just* corresponds to justice as a virtue. But the question of *why* justice is good does not pertain to ontology, nor to ethical theory in general, but to the theory of value and the metaethics behind it.²⁴ Let's take the case of Rāma (the protagonist of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*) accepting his exile. The kind of obligation he fulfils is toward his father. Rāma's actions have the effect of Daśaratha remaining in accordance with his *dharma*. They are an expression of Rāma's *filial piety*. The decision is an opportunity for him to display his quality. But we can only deem Rāma good, and his *gunās* good, if we first explain why *filial piety* is a good character trait to have. And to do so we need a story of how *gunās* are connected with the good. It seems, then, that facts about the similarities of virtues cannot determine similarities of good, rather it is the other way around.

Hence, we maintain that, within Indian Ethics, different traditions have different priorities of virtues and different exemplars of moral ideals. We confess to side with Battaly (2008) in

²³ In particular, for a discussion of the similarities between Jain and Buddhist virtues see Weber (1867, 175, 187).

²⁴ In a similar fashion, Medhananda argues that this is a metaethical question and, as such, it falls beyond the scope of normative ethics (2022, 22).

thinking that it is unlovely to try to find a sole winner, a unique concept of moral ideal or a unique list of virtues. In the context of Indian ethics, it is perhaps even unproductive for it would damage the diversity of ethical conceptions. Within Indian ethics, the pluralism advocated by Battaly is fully realised.²⁵ Finally, we won't touch on the important question of how to situate the good of the Hindu *mokṣa* or the Buddhist *nibbana*, or the Jain *śreyas* (spiritual bliss) whether higher in degree or on par with the moral, mundane good. For the sake of the present discussion, we will not touch upon the subject, as our argument holds independently of considerations regarding these states. We also do not feel compelled to discuss spiritual goods in the context of developing an Indian Virtue theory. As Krishna (1991), Perrett (1998), Bodewitz (2019), and Bhargava (1968), *inter alia*, have argued, *moral* and *spiritual* good, although sometimes intertwined, must be kept distinct.²⁶ In light of these considerations, we leave the discussion of supra-moral goods, and how moral dispositions might or might not contribute to achieving the former, for future works.

4. Manifesting the Virtues

In the previous section, we have presented a preliminary examination of the dispositional nature of virtues. We have argued that all three traditions understand virtues dispositionally, as qualities disposing their bearer toward the good; most importantly for our goal, that they are grounded in the nature of things. But is the possession of such qualities sufficient to dub someone virtuous? For traditional virtue ethics, the answer is in the negative: virtues must

²⁵ For a discussion of value pluralism in Hindu ethics see Perrett (1998, 61-62).

²⁶ As Daya Krishna points out “*Mokṣa* then is not *dharma*, that is, it does not belong to the domain of moral action even though the latter may prepare the ground for the true knowledge of the self to arise and thus, in a sense, to also bring it into being” (1991, 39; see also Perrett 1998, 55-56). Similarly, Bodewitz argues that the notion of *sukṛtām* and *pūṇyam* must not be confused with *gunā* on the ground that the first two refer to “merit” and the latter to “virtue”; the formers are associated with spiritual goods, and have nothing to do with moral goods (2019, 396-401). Bhargava argues that the path of the virtues (*śubhopayoga*) and the path toward spiritual bliss (*śuddhopayoga*) must be kept distinct (1968, 5) and that “Jaina ethics does not confuse the science of spirituality (*mokṣaśāstra*) with science of social righteousness (*dharmaśāstra*)” (Bhargava 1968, 37).

also be exercised and exercised *skillfully*.²⁷ Virtues must produce the appropriate manifestations and must be supported, as a precondition for moral conduct, by the appropriate moral discernment. In this section, we will first discuss why, in the context of Indian ethics, the mere possession of virtue is not enough. The answer is: because morality is understood as an *activity*, rather than a rule-following affair. Secondly, we will examine the virtues's typical manifestations and then the need for moral discernment. Let us start with the first question.

According to virtue ethics, morality is an *active* affair which involves thinking, feeling, *and* doing when and where it is appropriate, and not a mere application rules of conduct.²⁸ The notion of activity in relation to morality figures prominently in the Jain canon. Dharma is, first and foremost, a “principle of motion” of which *Loka* (physical world) is pervaded (see *Pravacanasāra* 2.36; *inter alia*). As Ranganathan (2017a, 23) and Soni (2017) argue, motion is understood as the exercise of dispositions, which constitute activity, and “a way to cash out the dispositionality of virtue” (2017, 160). Right activity is quite literally a function of virtue on this account: “*Exercising* of physical, vocal, and mental dispositions constitute Yog (activity); that leads to the incoming of Karma; the virtuous Yog leads to the acquisition of Punya (merit)” (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 6.1-4) (*italics added*).

According to the *Tattvārtha-sūtra*, regular exercise of the virtues results in acquiring merit *and* stopping (*saṃvara*) demerit, viz. the inflow (*āsrava*) of karma (9.1-2). Kunda Kunda, in his discussion of perfect asceticism, stresses that “[t]hat is perfect asceticism, when one

²⁷ Soni (2017) and Garfield (2017) have already adumbrated that moral development is a matter of the “dispositionality of virtues” (2017, 160) or “exercise of virtues” (Garfield 2017, 274).

²⁸ For instance, Gupta argues that in the *Gītā* there is “value placed on repeated performance according to certain rules. Is repeated performance the key to becoming virtuous? One does not become virtuous by following a rule but by doing virtuous deeds. Virtue is excellence in character, which one can acquire by repeated performance of some action” (2006, 391).

practises his course ever intent on knowledge preceded by faith and exerting in the practice of (primary) virtues” (*Pravacanasāra* 3.14).

For Aristotle too, the praise that comes from being virtuous is indeed grounded in the fact that being virtuous is something we *become*. We are deemed courageous, for example, when we *repeatedly* display courage when the situation calls so that the right display of courage, or honesty, is shaped by all the previous situations that we have decided to confront *actively*. Prominently, the Buddhist *Āṅguttara Nikāya* emphasizes quite clearly the Aristotelian idea that we become virtuous “by confronting morally challenging situations more often than not.” (Azzano and Raimondi 2023, 13):

“It's through adversity that a person's endurance may be known, and *then only after a long period, not a short period*. ... There is the case where a person, suffering loss of relatives, loss of wealth, or loss through disease, does not reflect. ... Suffering loss of relatives, loss of wealth, or loss through disease, he sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. And then there is the case where a person, suffering loss of relatives, loss of wealth, or loss through disease, reflects, 'That's how it is when living together in the world. That's how it is when gaining a personal identity. When there is living in the world, when there is the gaining of a personal identity. ... ' Suffering loss of relatives, loss of wealth, or loss through disease, he does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught.” (*Thana Sutta* 4.192.3)

In the Buddhist canon, the exercise of the virtues is what sustains the *saṃskāras*, the process of transformation, or “mental formation,” where “one becomes what one does” (Keown 1996, 343; Fink 2013, 670). Crucially, since Buddhist ethics is concerned primarily not with actions but with developing a moral vision (Garfield 2022, 11), and since, in turn, that makes *saṃskāras* a gradual achievement (see also King 1964, 51; Garfield 2017, 275), mere possession of virtues is largely insufficient. As claimed in the *Dhammapada*: “Think not lightly of good, saying, “It will not come to me.” Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the wise man, gathering it little by little, fills himself with good.” (9, *Papavagga*, 121-122). This gradual achievement is manifest and recognized by others in “discussing. ... dealing. ... living with a person”; yet, it is possible to see the extent to which someone is

endowed with the virtues “only after a long period, not a short one” (*Āṅguttara Nikāya, Thana Sutta*, 4.192).²⁹ The theme of morality as an activity is far from being a unique characteristic of the Buddhist and the Jain canon. It has a recognized prominent role in *all* three traditions (see Dhand 2002; Krishna 1991; Garfield 2017; Soni 2017; *inter alia*). As per the *Pravacanasāra*, the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* describe virtues as that from which “the action of the ultimate atoms arises” (4.2.7). At the beginning of creation, motion arises in the most fundamental elements only in conjunction with a soul carrying the consequences of the previous moral conduct. On the other hand, the *current* conduct of the pious person (*sadhus*) is shaped by the “constant/incessant (*nirantaram*) practice” that “by slow degrees” (*Śrī Brahma-saṃhitā* 5.59) gradually enhances the virtues and removes impurities:

“One should therefore understand what is duty and what is not duty by the regulations of the scriptures. Knowing such rules and regulations, one should act so that he may gradually (*śanaiḥ*, step by step, again and again) be elevated.” (*Gīta* 16.24) (italics added)

“[the] inauspicious disturbances can be gradually (*śanaiḥ*, step by step, again and again) removed by constant remembrance of Me, by congregational hearing and chanting of My holy names, or by following in the footsteps of the great masters of yoga.” (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 11.28.40)

“According as to one acts, according to how one conduct himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. ... One becomes good by virtuous actions” (*Brhadāranyaka Upanishad* 4.4.5)

Practice is, then, not just a means to progressively harvest the good (*śanaiḥ* as “step by step”), but a means to gradually hone them (*śanaiḥ* as “again and again”). And, by virtue of this process, *become* good. Unlike other qualities, virtues can in fact be possessed to a higher

²⁹ Similar considerations are emphasized in the *Khuddaka Nikaya (Patisalla Sutta* 6.2). It is interesting to notice that some Buddhist texts, the *Visuddhimagga inter alia*, echo the notion of “active morality” in relation to the virtues. Here the immoral person is often referred to as “the wretch,” often translated as “the corpse” (*chava*) (see *Catukkanipāta, Sutta* 53, 2.55-59). As Buddhaghosa points out, the immoral person is “dead” or “inactive” due to the absence of virtues. Interestingly, a similar remark is advanced by Vasubandhu in the *Pañcaskandhaka-prakarāṇa*, where he links the notion of death and life to the possession of dispositions: “What is birth! It is any arising of a stream of motivating dispositions which has not already arisen, as regards any collection of events taking part in an organism. And what is decrepitude? It is an alteration in the stream of those like that.” (Anacker 2005, 71).

or a lesser degree, with excellence being the highest. In other terms, dispositions are gradable (Azzano and Raimondi 2023, 13). Practicing is a way of strengthening the virtues, to exemplify them to a higher grade.³⁰

Let us now move to the second question. We have said above that morality is an *activity* of the virtues, which involves thinking, feeling, *and* doing when and where it is appropriate. It is indeed a feature of dispositions that they are multitrack (Vetter 2013; *inter alia*): if moral, they manifest in feeling, thinking, and acting, in the appropriate circumstances in the right way (Timmons 2001, 270). At times, when the circumstances are unfavorable, the dispositions still exist, but remain unmanifested, as, for example, the *Vajjālaggaṃ* reminds us: “The fire, like the company of good (righteous) people evermore delight (people) [but] virtues spread out and make themselves felt only when they are in the proper surrounding” (70.655-65, 678).³¹ When, instead, the circumstances are right, virtues manifest. But what are these three manifestations? In the case of generosity, for example, this is manifested virtuously when it is about donating the right amount, to the right people, in the right circumstances. Likewise, courage disposes its bearer to feel the right amount of fear, against the right people, at the right time. As Aristotle writes: “virtue is concerned with feelings and action, in which excess and deficiency are in error and incur blame, while the intermediate condition is correct and wins praise, which are both proper features of virtue. Virtue, then, is a mean in so far as it aims at what is intermediate.” (Aristotle 1998, 44 [1106b]). Because virtues are concerned with feelings and actions, they do have three distinct manifestations: an *affective*, a *behavioural*, and a *cognitive* one. In the *Vajjālaggaṃ* the nature of the good man (*sujana*) is entirely described in multitasking terms: “He does not get angry. When he does,

³⁰ The *Tattvārtha-sūtra* refers to high-grade dispositions as those virtues that become factors-of-action (*karaka*) for permanent “dislodgement” (*apādāna*) of inauspicious (*aśubha*) or destructive (*aghāti*) karmas.

³¹ See also *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras*: “But the non-existence of cause does not follow from the non-existence of the effect” (1.2.2).

he has no evil thoughts. When he has evil thoughts, he does not express them. When he does express them, he is ashamed.” (4.33). Likewise, in *Mahābhārata*'s twelfth book Shanti Parva, the sage is described as: “one into whom words enter like frightened elephants into a well and never come out. He hears no evil of others. He remembers no evil. When dispraised, he is silent.” (12.237.10).

The *sujana* or *supuruṣa* (good man) must display a correct *emotional*, *cognitive*, and *linguistic* attitude. Take, for instance, where Kṛṣṇa must come to the aid of Arjuna, hesitant to fight his kin and fatigued before the battle. Arjuna, despite being a great warrior, has lost his resolve: he *feels* concerned about the implications of his actions, and that makes him hesitant and powerless (see Bilimoria 2014, 298-30). But he is in fact not. Arjuna is both (morally) *courageous* and (intellectually) *cautious*, thus displaying both *moral* and *intellectual* virtues. Arjuna, when the time comes, answers the call and acts with valour in battle. But the emotional manifestation of caution “obfuscates” that of valour and courage, and alerts him to be reflective. And by doing so Arjuna’s emotional response *does justice* to his courage.³² As per the Aristotelian tradition, courage and caution are here intimately tied, such that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* ([1115 a7-1116 a15]) they are rolled into one.³³ Arjuna’s felt concern stems from the *intellectual* virtue of caution. His concern, of “not being able to see justice in this situation” (Bilimoria 2014, 299) is precisely the concern of a cautious person: “of failing to see something important, of misleading someone, of damaging our cognitive powers; or fear of one’s own dispositions that may undermine epistemic performance—laziness, impatience, boredom” (Roberts and Wood 2007, 220). Simply, in this case, the virtue of

³² As Bilimoria puts it: “what if emotions have other values and [causal] efficiencies (*bhāvaka*)?...Have not his emotions made Arjuna a little more reflective, muddled though he is now, than he might otherwise have been about his proper duties?” (2014, 299).

³³ As Roberts and Wood put it: “Courage is not recklessness, and the courageous person is typically cautious. Because he is brave, the perceived prospect of harm does not master him, but he does take it intelligently into account. He wants to minimize the potential harm”(2007, 224).

caution manifests primarily in its emotional track. That a correct emotional response is taken in high regard is evident also in the case of the Buddhist and Jain traditions. The Jain's notion of *samvega* is an aspect of both right belief (*samyaktva*) and right faith (*samyagdarśana*). It is not, however, a cognitive one. Rather, *samvega* is the “perpetual fear of the cycle of existence” (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 6.24) or “of worldly existence” (1.2). But, notably, its display causes the influx of life-karma (see *Tattvārtha-sūtra* 6.21) and so it has a positive connotation as it is a manifestation of the desire for emancipation. Thus, in the *Adisvara-caritra*, we find it so described:

“Attachment to the principles told by the scriptures is called ‘right-belief’ (*samyakśraddhāna* or *samyagdarśana*), and is produced by intuition or instruction of a Guru. [...] Right-belief is marked by . . . desire for emancipation [and] disgust with existence . . . It is called desire for emancipation (*samvega*) when there is disgust with the objects of the senses on the part of one meditating on the results of karma and the worthlessness of *samsāra*.” (1.3.14)

A similar role for emotions, this time for the bodhisattva, is emphasized in the

Bodhisattvabhūmi:

“because a bodhisattva has received the morality from somebody else, he feels a sense of other-oriented embarrassment when he fails in training. Because the bodhisattva has a pure aspiration to be moral, he feels a sense of self-oriented shame when he fails in training. By making corrections after transgressing, and because he has a feeling of admiration that stops failure from happening in the first place, the bodhisattva becomes free from regrets in two ways. Thus, because of correctly receiving [the morality] and because of having a pure aspiration this bodhisattva feels a sense of embarrassment and shame; with a sense of embarrassment and shame he keeps the morality he has received; and by keeping it is free from regret.” (1.10.1)

In the morality chapter (*Śīla-pāṭala*), Asanga includes in the “essence of Bodhisattva’s morality” the “having developed a respect for remaining free of transgressions.” This quality manifests in the affective dimension of shame upon violation of precepts. Yet this shame has an important role: it “keeps the morality” intact, by causing the Bodhisattva to stir away from transgression or to swiftly restore his path if transgressions are committed. As per the case of the Hindu virtues, the virtues of the Bodhisattva are those of “body and speech for the sake of

[achieving] enlightenment, following acceptance of the morality discipline. All of that [virtue], in brief, is called “the morality of acquiring virtuous qualities” (1.10.2.2). According to Śāntideva’s ethics too what cultivates the *bodhicitta* (or enlightenment of the mind) is the “cultivat[ion] [of] perfections that are dispositions to act, feel, think” (see Edelglass 2017, 241; see also Harvey 2009). In general, the virtuous person on the path to nonattachment exhibits “self-control over body, speech, and mind” (*Aṅguttara Nikāya, Tikanipāta, Sutta 52, 1.156*; see also *Sutta 58, 1.165*) and that “for having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind” (*Chakkanipāta, Sutta 63, 3.415*).³⁴ Good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, and good mental conduct are “categorically what should be done” (*Aṅguttara Nikāya, Ekamsena Sutta, 2.18*). The same is reiterated in the *Itivuttaka*: “This was said by the Blessed One, said by the Arahant, so I have heard: “There are these three kinds of good conduct. Which three? Bodily good conduct, verbal good conduct, mental good conduct. These are the three kinds of good conduct.” (65.3.16).

The path itself “is just this noble eightfold path; that is, right intention, right speech, right action” (*Tikanipāta 62, 1.180*) and, in turn, the virtuous behaviour “generate much merit in three ways. What three? By body, speech, and mind” (*Tikanipāta 46, 1.152*).³⁵ The *Tamonata Sutta* is clear on the value of pursuing all the tracks of the manifestations of virtues:

“And how is one the type of person in darkness who is headed for light? He engages in good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct. Having engaged in good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct, he — on the break-up of the body, after death — reappears in the good destination, the heavenly world. This is the type of person in darkness who is headed for light.” (4.85)

³⁴ On the dimensions of virtues in connection with *cetanā* see again Keown (2001, 218).

³⁵ This achievement is also called Purity and results in the possession of pure qualities, or *viśuddhaśīla*. “Pure in body, pure in speech, pure in mind, without taints: they call the pure one, accomplished in purity, “one who has washed away evil.” (see *Tikanipāta 120, 1.271-272*). Details on how virtuous behaviour generates virtuous merits can be found in (*Tikanipāta, 163-182, 1.297-299*).

What works for the person in darkness who is heading for the light works for the person of “flawless character” too:

“Let a man guard himself against irritability in bodily action. ... let him practice good conduct in deed. ... Let a man guard himself against irritability in speech. ... let him practice good conduct in speech. ... Let a man guard himself against irritability in thought. ... let him practice good conduct in thought. ... The wise are controlled in bodily action, controlled in speech and controlled in thought.”(*Khuddaka Nikaya*, 17, *Kodhavigga*, 231-234)

Like the “wise man” of the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, the “man of knowledge” of the *Pravacanasāra* is “controlled in three ways—mentally, verbally, physically” (3.37-38). As Soni remarks (2017, 163), the multitrack manifestations of virtues figure prominently in the *Tattvārtha-sūtra*. The very notion of Yog (activity) is characterized as “[t]he action of the body (*śarīra*), the organ of speech (*vacana*), and the mind (*mana*) is called yoga (activity)” (6.1).

Virtuous activity requires, nevertheless, a further element. Virtuous activity (*punya*) is the cause of merits (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 6.3) and of the stoppage of karmic influx (9.1) but only if activity stemming from virtues is “controlled” or “curbed well” (*gupti*) (9.2-4). Indeed, according to Aristotle, the good of a thing—virtues included—is not just its having a function, but the “well” or “right” performing of this function. Because virtues are possessed by agents, appropriate performing of the function of the virtues belongs to the sphere of practical rationality (*phronesis*). A virtuous behaviour, then, is the appropriate manifestation of the virtues in accordance with, or *guided by*, the intellect (Aristotle 1998, 42 [1106a]). The emphasis on practical rationality aims at stressing one fundamental issue, common to Aristotle and, as we will show in a moment, the three canons: that acting morally requires the (practical) ability to skillfully analyze situations, to understand when to act, and to which proportion. In other words, to have the discernment required to *control* the virtues.

The theme of control over virtues clearly cuts across the ethical board. The virtues of the five vows (*vrata*) mentioned in the *Tattvārtha-sūtra* are said to be reinforced by “control of speech (*vacanagupti*), control of thought (*manogupti*), regulation of movement (*īryāsamiti*)”(7.4). Similarly, in the *Manusmṛiti* the nature of the ascetic Tridaṇḍin is described as characterised by control over his three faculties:

“That man is called a (true) Tridaṇḍin in whose mind these three, the control over his speech (*Vāg-daṇḍa*), the control over his thoughts (*mano-daṇḍa*), and the control over his body (*Karma-daṇḍa*) are firmly fixed. That man who keeps this threefold control (over himself) with respect to all created beings and wholly subdues desire and wrath, thereby assuredly gains complete success.” (12.10)³⁶

Gonda points out that the Vedic notion of *sukrtām* (well-done) and of *buddhi* (mental understanding/control/intelligence) is best interpreted as something correctly carried out (1966). Likewise, Gupta argues that “the notion of a golden mean and the discussion of the role of *buddhih* in the *Gītā* have Aristotelian overtone” (2006, 390). The *Gītā* clearly connects the notion of understanding with the notion of virtues and moral practice:

“That intellect which understands (*buddhih*) when to act and when not to act, What is to be done and what is not to be done, And what is to be feared and what is not to be feared, Along with the knowledge of bondage and liberation, Arjuna, is sattvic (virtuous)” (30)

“The mind, indeed, is unstable, Kṛṣṇa, Turbulent, powerful and obstinate; I think it is as difficult to control as the wind; The Blessed Lord spoke: Without doubt, O Arjuna, The mind is unsteady and difficult to restrain; But by practice, Arjuna, it is restrained.” (VI.34-35)

Why is control over one’s virtue required? Again, the three traditions seem to offer, from different stances, a univocal answer: because morality cannot be learned in the abstract but requires experience. In the *Mahābhārata* we are told rather explicitly that:

³⁶ See also *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (7.5.23-24) and *Skanda Purana* (6.1.126).

“Morality cannot be ascertained by logic, *nor even in every case by a study of the scripture*. One must seek the guidance of experienced and wise elders to learn its subtleties. All this I have heard from the ṛṣis, O Pārtha” (*Mahābhārata* chapt.24) (italics added)

“Many persons say, on the one hand, that the scriptures indicate morality. I do not contradict this. *The scriptures, however, do not provide for every case ...*” (8.69.253-255) (italics added)

In the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, the point is further elaborated. Here Īśvara Kṛṣṇa introduces the distinction between two kinds of moral dispositions: *sāmsiddhikāh* and *vaikṛtikāh*. The firsts are good dispositions someone is born with, dispositions of nature springing from *Prakṛti*. The second are “incidental or acquired” and are brought about by personal effort (43). Both are required to “ascent to higher plane” (44), since knowledge of *Puruṣa* (transcendental self) cannot be achieved without experience, and experience is not possible without the acquired dispositions (52). Control is what allows the growth in virtue that can occur in experience.³⁷

Similar recommendations are reiterated by Kunda Kunda in a passage of his Jain treatise, the *Pravacanasāra*:

“One does not attain liberation (merely) by the (study of) scripture. ... one who has faith cannot attain Nirvāṇa, if he is devoid of moral discipline. The man of knowledge, who is controlled in three ways, destroy[s] within a breath the Karma which a man devoid of Knowledge could destroy in hundred thousand crores of lives” (3.37-38)

Regarding moral discipline, Doshi stresses in his commentary to the *Tattvārtha-sūtra* that:

“the emphasis is on the right approach. One should have right thinking, and right conviction, and he should behave in light of that conviction. ... What is needed is to have the right *discernment* to make out what is right and what is wrong. The vigour for putting the understanding into practice is bound to follow. The right discernment is thus the basic requirement” (14-15) (italics original)

³⁷ For an account of acquired dispositions in the ethics of the *Gīta* as second-order desires, from which actions for the sake of the good and for the sake of their fruits stem, see Perrett (1998, 19-24).

Right discernment is here important for two reasons. First, because the aspect of “coordinating” the manifestation of virtues is exquisitely practical—viz. it’s a function of one’s discernment. Secondly, because although some of us are born with good qualities, some others—the majority of us—must acquire them via experience; and doing so requires conscious effort, and striving to achieve the same (*Tattvārtha-sūtra* 1.3). Kunda Kunda goes further in arguing that *all* of us require moral discernment. Right perception, right knowledge, and right conduct are what the real self, the “all-knowing master of scripture”(1.10), rests upon (*Samayasara* 1.2). The study of the scriptures (*adhigama*), or even intuition (*nisarga*), are sufficient to offer an understanding of the pure self in its path to liberation (*nischaya mōksha marga*). Through the real point of view (*nischaya naya*) (*Samayasara* 10.277) “the real self realizes oneness (*ekatva*) with own-nature (*svabhāva*)” (1.3).³⁸ However, while it is prescribed not to forget about the real point of view (4.156), it is also prescribed not to forget about the *vyahavara naya*, the practical-empirical point of view; that through which the self understands itself as distinct from the external world, its qualities, its conduct, belief, and so on (1.7). From the *nischaya naya* standpoint we can attain clear comprehension of the virtues (1.13), but it is from the *vyahavara naya* that the ordinary man realizes that his nature, despite pure, is contaminated by karma (see also Krause 1929, 3). Hence, *vyahavara naya* is the ground of a form of practical knowledge necessary for the ordinary man, for two important purposes. First, moral discipline is necessary for liberation. Indeed, the path of liberation is understood in terms of a process of purification, the conditions of which includes progressing into different “levels” or “states” of the virtues (*guṇasthānas*) (2.56; 3.10.112).³⁹ This progress cannot be achieved solely via “concentration

³⁸ Notice that knowledge of scriptures is (partially) right knowledge, but this knowledge is different depending on the points of views. From the *nischaya naya*, the self *is* right knowledge, whereas from the *vyahavara naya* the self *has* right knowledge (see *Samayasara* 8.276-277). Both, however, are important, as we shall see in a moment.

³⁹ For a chapter-length discussion of all *guṇasthānas* see Barghava (1968, 205-219).

of the mind on the idea of bondage” (9.291). Achieving the “spotless state of the self” is only possible by integrating the practice of moral discipline (9.305-306). This, in turn, can be done from the *vyahavara naya* point of view, within which the self understands itself as the one who “produces, shapes, binds, causes to modify, and assimilate karmic matter” and is the “producer of vice and virtue” (3.107-108; see also Barghava 1968, 34). Secondly, as Kunda Kunda remarks, it is necessary to avoid the “undesirable attitude” that a man focused only on scriptures might develop:

“If the ultimate nature of the Self is pure and unsullied, if it is identical with the liberated Self or *Moksha Jīva*, then the ordinary man may argue, why should I unnecessarily worry myself about *moksha-mārga*, or the path to Salvation, when my soul is already pure and liberated in nature. Both ethics and religion would appear to him superfluous, and prescribing a course of conduct for realising the same would all be vain and useless, because the ideal is already there. This perverse moral attitude is also to be avoided and this could be achieved only by emphasising the *vyahavara* point.” (2.46)

In the Buddhist tradition, this idea of moral discernment is sometimes presented as already contained in the meaning of moral dispositions themselves. Indeed, in the *Visuddhimagga*, *sīla* is used to indicate both the set of dispositions and their “consistency.” As in *Tattvārtha-sūtra*, here the discernment is required to “coordinate” the manifestation of virtues:

“In what sense it is virtue? It is virtue (*sīla*) in the sense of composing (*sīlana*). What is this composing? It is either a coordinating (*samādhāna*), meaning noninconsistency of bodily action, etc., due to virtuousness; or it is an upholding (*upadhāraṇa*), meaning a state of basis (*ādhāra*) owing to its serving as foundation for profitable states.” (1.19)

But moral discernment has a much larger role to play in the Buddhist canon. In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, and the *Visuddhimagga*, the Buddha is referred to as *Bhagavat*, which is translated as “the one who possesses the good qualities” (*Bhaga* –that is, *guna*, quality– *vat* –that is, possession) but also as “the one who is skilful in analysing (the dharma)” (*Bhaga* –that is, to analyse– *vat* –that is, skills) (see 1.4; see also Chödrön 2001, 109). In Part ten of the scripture, the Buddha is called *Sāstā* (teacher)

not only because he possesses the virtues, but because he teaches what should be done (*kūsala*) and what should not be done (*akūsala*). In other words, the Buddha *qua* teacher imparts how to be skillful at employing the virtues (4.10). For the Buddha, Dhamma is for one “who is concentrated [alt. translation = whose mind is centered], not for one who is unconcentrated” (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*, *Aṭṭhakanipāta*, 4.229; *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* 2.8c-9a). Similarly, in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva puts great emphasis on moral discipline as the capacity to sustain focused attention (*samprajanya*) for the sake of the transformation of the whole person (see also Edelglass 2009, 390-392). This skillful possession (or right/centered understanding) can be found discussed in a variety of other venues, as standing for the fact that *sīlāni* cannot be achieved by abstract knowledge, speculation, or blind adherence to moral precepts, but requires practical and evaluative skills (see also Acharya 2016, chap.4; Bodhi 2012, 34; Ñānamoli & Bodhi 2005, 24-25; Nelson 2009, 202).⁴⁰ As per the *Samayasara*, Buddhist moral discernment depends essentially on experience. As Garfield nicely puts it “[b]uddhist moralists recognize no special category of agent causation that privileges that locus as a center of responsibility [so] moral progress and moral experience, rather than moral responsibility, are foregrounded in moral reflection” (2022, 5). In the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* we are told that the Buddha “appear[s] in this world in order to cause sentient beings to enter the path of the wisdom” (2.7a-b), and because he is a (moral) example, equally his teachings are made of examples of moral situations that one can face. In other terms, teaching the Dharma with skillful means (*upāya*) means teaching morality as we can find it in experience (2.5c; *inter alia*). These means of teaching are skillful because they have to adjust to the level of experience of the listener. They have to “deeply penetrate the dispositions of sentient beings” (7.26a), which is possible only after having understood the

⁴⁰ Regarding the venues see also the *Majjhima Nikāya* (see *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* 1.47-55, 2.197), and the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (see *Maggasaccaniddeso*, *inter alia*).

“desire and deep-rooted inclinations of sentient beings. ... according to their capacities”

(2.7b-c; see also 10b-c):

“All the buddhas teach the Dharma
That they have attained
Through the immeasurable power of skilful means,
For the sake of sentient beings.
Completely knowing their intentions,
Their various ways of practice,
Their wishes and capacities,
...
The Buddha teaches by means of sutras, verses,
Stories of his past deeds, and of past events,
Miraculous tales, explanatory tales,
Allegories, poems, and exegeses”
(2.8a)

The *upāya* of the Buddha himself depends on the experience acquired in his practice of Dharma. In turn, those who follow the path find in experience the virtues required to persist in the path of the *bodhisattva mahāsattvas*—those who are willing to “preserve the sutra” (11-14):

“Such people as these
Are praised by the buddhas.
They are courageous.
They are persevering.
They are known as those
Who follow the rules of good conduct.”
(11.34b)

While understanding the nature of reality is necessary for liberation, it is ultimately insufficient and requires overcoming attachment through moral discipline (see Edelglass and Garfield 2009, 7). The acquisition of an always higher level of virtues comes from the fact that the walk of the path is essentially a walk of moral learning where every moral situation must be assessed individually. The acquisition of kindness, tranquility, non-violence (14.37b), compassion, honesty (38b), and patience (39a) is but a result of such training, viz. the kind of knowledge or state of mind necessary for a virtuous action to be fully virtuous.

Harvey (2009) argues that, in the *Sammā-ditthi Sutta*, the root of wholesome action is based on these virtues as elements that oppose unwholesome conduct. We agree with Harvey, since the virtuous man is indeed the result of eliminating vices, such as greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and ignorance (*moha*), *inter alia* (see also Davis 2014, 316). In this sense, the function of virtues is to interfere with the working of vices; a function which is in line with the underlying Buddhist assumption about human nature. As Gowan emphasizes, vis-à-vis Aristotelian virtue ethics, “[f]or the Buddha, our enlightened nature is deeply flawed, and only extraordinary measures can overcome this. Aristotle’s conception of nature is quite different: the virtue develops our nature but they do not radically transform it” (2004, 163). In this respect, *Sutta* 68 of *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is illuminating of the interfering actions of virtues *qua* dispositions:

“[Suppose they ask:] ‘But what, friends, is the reason unarisen hatred does not arise and arisen hatred is abandoned?’ You should answer: ‘The liberation of the mind by lovingkindness. For one who attends carefully to the liberation of the mind by loving-kindness, unarisen hatred does not arise and arisen hatred is abandoned. This friends, is the reason unarisen hatred does not arise and arisen hatred is abandoned.’” (1.201)

On the other hand, actions stemming from such virtues are, at the same, evidence of someone having the right acquired perception of reality, and hence the right motivation behind her conduct. A good action for example is nonetheless wrongful if performed out of ignorance (*moha*), but it is good if it is well-thought or well-intentioned (*cetanā*) (see Keown 2001, 218-221). Thus, those who are guided by good qualities speak at a proper time, act in the proper way, and think the proper thoughts (see *Tikanipāṭa* 69.1.203-205; *inter alia*).

5. Conclusions

Contra to the skeptics *a la* Perrett and Pettigrove (2015), in this paper we have argued that Indian philosophies do achieve the task required from a moral theory. The appeal to virtues is

far from being a cosmetic affair, or mere cataloguing. In each tradition, virtues are unified in a system, grounded in the nature of things, and that of humankind. In other words, Indian virtues are ontologically and explanatorily substantial. Moreover, our findings tend to support certain interpretations, already mentioned at the end of § 3, according to which “even though, the different Indian philosophies disagree about such problems nature of self or the position of a liberated soul, yet as far as the practical side of morality is concerned, they seldom differ” (Bhargava 1968, 72-73). As we understand it, this support is merely circumstantial. We have claimed in § 3 that similarities in the ontology of virtues does not license similarities to moral ideals. Different moral ideals entail different sources of normativity for virtues; which in turn reflects in different virtue theories. All three canons might very well be realists about virtues as moral dispositions, and yet they might differ in whether the resulting theory of virtue is oriented toward well-being, viz. eudaimonistic *a la* Aristotle (see Hursthouse 1999; Annas 1993; Kraut 1989; *inter alia*), or whether they are agent-based or exemplarist in nature (see Zagzebski 2004; Slote 1995; *inter alia*), target-centered (Swanton 2003; *inter alia*), Platonic (see Murdoch 1971; Chappell 2014; *inter alia*), a mix of these, or something else entirely. Assessing this is a matter of both further *explication* and further *interpretation*. Further explication is required since, as mentioned in § 1, different schools have different understandings of the nature of potencies or dispositions. And, as Garfield nicely puts it “while we do not generally think of metaphysical insight as an important moral quality in most Western ethical theory, from a Buddhist perspective it is essential to morality” (2022, 129). While, for example, the Vaibhāṣika school understands dispositions as continuing in existence, the Vibhajyavāda (or Sautrāntika) school maintains that dispositions have only momentary existence. In this case, we might expect the metaphysical difference to be a moral difference-maker, and the two schools to disagree on whether or not a virtue, when exercised, does or does not act as a sustaining cause for the individual’s moral progress.

Famous antiessentialist positions, such as the one of Nāgārjuna and of Dignāga, run counter to the attribution of essence or intrinsic nature to things; and, hence, by extension, to virtues. If virtues lack dispositional essence, or if we cannot think of their manifestation as internal to the virtues (see § 3), the resulting virtue theory must be constructed as a form of nominalist dispositionalism, where generic essences, instead of individual one, are predicated of individuals, suitably understood (see Vogt 2022). In this case, we would expect the locus of the exercise of virtues not to be within a single agent, but within an assemblage (*samāgri*) of mutual causes and conditions within which the agent is immersed (*pratītya-samutpāda*). And regarding the Hindu canon, while the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school, in its *asatkārya-vāda* theory of causation, argue that the manifestation of a disposition is best understood as a novel product obtained via generation in combination with other existing dispositions, the Sāṃkhya school propounds, in its *satkārya-vāda* theory of causation, that manifestations preexist in the dispositions (see again § 3). This disagreement neatly maps into the current debates about the dispositions-based theories of causation, between what is dubbed mutual manifestation model, and the contributions model (see Baltimore 2020; Raimondi 2022). We might expect the two schools to disagree over the manifestation of virtues being a single affair where one can instantiate a virtue independently of other virtues; or it is rather a plural affair, where virtues must be instantiated in concert, if at all. Overall, we might expect different notions of the exercise of dispositions—and hence of virtues—to affect why and how virtues manifest, and how moral progress unfolds and is defined. These differences require close inspection.

What is further required is the *interpretation* of the sources where moral behaviour is described in action. These sources are often collections of stories and parables—like the Buddhist Jatakas Stories—and mythologies—such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, in their many versions. Careful assessment of the moral behaviour of the characters might reveal more perspicuous details concerning the flavour of each virtue theory under scrutiny;

as well as important information about how the spectrum of virtuousness and viciousness is composed, viz. the many ways for someone to be virtuous (completely virtuous vs. continent) or be vicious (incontinent vs. malevolence). Theorists of dispositions (Mumford & Anjum 2011; Bird 1998) have argued that dispositions can be employed to model the behaviour of things as resulting from external interference, or additive and subtractive internal composition. Extending their work, Azzano and Raimondi (2013) have shown that this model can be applied to elucidate different types of viciousness and vicious profiles. Hence, we believe that dispositions could, again, play a role in explaining the spectrum of virtuousness and viciousness within which the characters of those stories and mythologies lie. We leave these two important tasks for future work.

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