

The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics
ed. Lorraine Besser-Jones & Michael Slote
(Routledge, 2015)

34

VIRTUE ETHICS AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The Structure of Ethical Theory in Early Chinese Philosophy

Yang Xiao

There has been a resurgence of “Confucian virtue ethics” in the field of the study of Chinese philosophy since the 1990s; scholars seem to have all been doing “ethics in early China” or “early Chinese ethics,” focusing on “Confucian virtue ethics.” One can find the following revealing statement on the back of a book entitled *Ethics in Early China: An Anthology* published in 2011: “Early Chinese ethics has attracted increasing scholarly and social attention in recent years, as the virtue ethics movement in Western philosophy sparked renewed interest in Confucianism and Daoism” (Fraser et al. 2011).

However, how should we understand the very idea of “ethics in early China”? How should we understand other conceptions often mentioned at the same time, such as “virtue ethics,” “theory of virtue,” “consequentialism,” “Confucianism,” “Mohism,” and “Daoism”? When we say that we “know” or “understand” something, it often means that we are able to locate it in a comprehensive picture of other things of a similar kind. This might have been one of the reasons why contemporary moral philosophers are obsessed with classification or typology of ethical theory. They almost always characterize their identity as a moral philosopher in terms of what type of ethical theory they believe in. In general, the landscape of contemporary moral philosophy is defined and mapped in terms of its “standard typology,” which classifies ethical theories into three types: consequentialism, Kantian deontology, and virtue ethics.¹ One feels that one has no

identity as a moral philosopher unless one can locate oneself on this “map.” For example, Peter Singer identifies himself, and is known by others, as “consequentialist” (more specifically, utilitarian), Christine Korsgaard “Kantian ethicist,” and Rosalind Hursthouse “virtue ethicist.” Of course, there are exceptions; the label “anti-theory” has been coined to refer to a group of contemporary moral philosophers who cannot be located on this map (Clarke and Simpson 1989). However, this is not a very helpful label since it is defined negatively. This is why the people we find in this group are extremely diverse: Annette Baier, Bernard Williams, John McDowell, Martha Nussbaum, Stuart Hampshire, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, Sabrina Lovebond, Roger Scruton, and Michael Oakeshott (Clarke and Simpson 1989). As we shall see, talking about the structure of one’s ethical thought provides a more nuanced framework, in terms of which we might be able to describe a larger landscape of ethical inquiry.

Scholars in the field of Chinese philosophy have recently tried to use the standard typology to classify early Chinese philosophy. It has become a dominant view in the English-language scholarship that Confucianism should be characterized as a type of “virtue ethics” and Mohism a type of “consequentialist ethics.”² However, the dominant view in the Chinese-language scholarship in mainland China and Taiwan has been a Kantian reading of Confucianism proposed and defended by Mou Zongsan and his students. It must be pointed out that among those who read Confucianism as virtue ethics, there are internal disagreements about what type of virtue ethics it is. There are also people who argue that Mencius is a consequentialist (Im 2011).

Notwithstanding their disagreements with each other, these scholars share one thing in common, which is that they all take the standard typology for granted, in terms of which their disagreements are formulated. There are many reasons why scholars have adopted the strategy of trying to locate Chinese ethics within the framework of the standard typology, and one of them is a very good practical reason. If one wants to legitimize *x* in moral philosophy, what could be more effective than characterizing *x* in terms of the standard typology in moral philosophy? What could be better than putting it on the map that is used by everyone? I do not think that this strategy of associating Confucian ethics with virtue ethics has ever been a collective conscious decision; it is probably just the result of good social instinct. It is partly due to the effectiveness of this strategy that the study of early Chinese ethics has gradually become a legitimate sub-field in moral philosophy in the English-speaking world since the 1990s (although, admittedly, it remains a marginalized sub-field).

Given that this strategy has now achieved its intended goal, I think it is time to get a better understanding of what we mean exactly when we use the phrase “Confucian virtue ethics,” and this implies we need to call into question the standard typology, as well as many assumptions of contemporary ethical theory that are associated with it. It is now safe to say that early Chinese ethics does not

fit the standard typology, and so much better for it. There is more than one way to do this. For example, one might look at the landscape of contemporary moral philosophy from a greater perspective, from which we could then easily see the limits of the standard typology. However, my strategy in this chapter will be to start from inside the standard typology itself.

The core idea of the standard typology is that the nature of an ethical theory should be characterized in terms of its structure. However, there has not been much discussion of the idea of the “structure of an ethical theory,” on which the standard typology relies (but see Williams 1985; Hurley 1989; Annas 1993; Kagan 1992, 1996, 2002; Slote 1995, 2001; Santas 1996).³ One of the main goals of this chapter is to get a better understanding of the idea of the structure of an ethical theory, as well as radically different ways to reconfigure the structures, which turn out to be needed if we want to characterize early Chinese ethics accurately.

Bernard Williams is one of the few contemporary moral philosophers who have argued that it is a mistake to try to construct ethical theories that can be formulated in terms of just one or two ethical concepts:

If there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics—the truth, we might say, about the ethical—why is there any expectation that it should be simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many? Perhaps we need as many concepts to describe it as we find we need, and no fewer.

(Williams 1985: 17)

One of the points I make in this chapter is that ancient Chinese philosophers never even tried to construct such kinds of ethical theories. What are the differences that make the difference? Here I can only mention two important differences between contemporary moral philosophers, on the one hand, and the Chinese “philosophers,” on the other. The first is that the former are university professors whose audience is other university professors, whereas the latter are political advisers whose audience is often political leaders, and many of them hold political positions themselves. They are trying to respond to a wide range of practical problems in various situations and spheres of life. I especially want to emphasize the fact that they face problems in violent and messy political life that require timely solutions. As we shall see, this fact is one of the main reasons why Mencius’ ethics has the unusual structure it has, and why it is not a “virtue ethics,” as it is defined according to the standard typology.

The second difference is that contemporary moral philosophers are people who have “ethics” as their “area of specialty” (often abbreviated as AOS in Jobs for Philosophers or on one’s CV), and they are not supposed to address problems in “political philosophy,” which is a different AOS. Specialization is an

important institutional feature of philosophy as a discipline today: A philosophy professor is always hired as someone with an AOS. As a consequence, contemporary moral philosophers do not address problems in political philosophy. However, the early Chinese “philosophers” were not aware of these boundaries, and they were addressing problems that we, today, would classify as belonging to both “ethics” and “political philosophy.” The early Chinese philosophers would have really appreciated Aristotle’s claim that ethics is part of political science.

A remark about my use of the term “ethical theory” is in order here. I use the phrase “ethical theory” in its broadest sense so that it really means “ethical-political theory.” It is important to emphasize that, for example, Mencius’ “ethical theory” is intended to be two things at the same time: (a) an ethics (in its narrow sense) for individuals about how they should live their lives, what kind of persons they should become, and (b) a political philosophy about how common life should be organized, what kind of way of life of a community is the best. I use the phrase “virtue ethics as political philosophy” to capture this feature of Mencius’ thought.

I also use the word “theory” in a broad sense to include any reflection, deliberation, and inquiry about what one ought to do, how one should live one’s life, how common life should be organized, or what specific public policies should be adopted to deal with a specific political problem. I do not use “theory” in the narrow sense in which Williams uses it when he argues that we should jettison ethical theories that make use of only one or two ethical concepts. As we shall see in the next section, these are exactly the kind of ethical theories covered by the standard typology, which have numerous built-in dogmas. One may say that there can be ethical theories without these dogmas.

The Distinction between “Virtue Ethics” and “Theory of Virtue”

A history of the classifications of ethics is a book waiting to be written. For our purpose here suffice it to say that the standard typology has grown out of John Rawls’ typology in his 1971 *A Theory of Justice*, which is probably the most influential classification of ethics in contemporary moral philosophy. The standard typology has inherited assumptions that are inexplicitly built into Rawls’ typology, notwithstanding the fact that the former leaves room for virtue ethics whereas the latter does not. It will pay us if we take a close look at Rawls’ typology.

This is the famous passage on the typology of ethical theory from Rawls:

The main concepts of ethics are those of right and the good; the concept of a morally worthy person is, I believe, derived from them. The structure of an ethical theory is, then, largely determined by how it defines

and connects these two basic notions. Now it seems that the simplest way of relating them is taken by teleological theories: the good is defined independently from the right, and then the right is defined as that which maximizes the good.

(Rawls 1971: 24)

The first distinctive feature of Rawls' typology is what we may call his "reductionist dogma," which is that there are only two "basic concepts" in ethical theory, the good and the right, in terms of which other ethical concepts can be derived. In the passage cited above, he mentions a third concept, the morally worthy person, but immediately adds that it can be derived from the two basic concepts. Rawls' reductionist project is inspired by Henry Sidgwick. In his "Foreword" to the 1981 reprint of Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*, Rawls mentions with approval Sidgwick's project to "reduce all the main moral conceptions to three" (Rawls 1981: vi).

For Rawls, since there are only two basic ethical concepts, there will be only two types of ethical theories: Kantian deontology (taking the right as its basic concept) and teleological theory or consequentialism (taking the good as its basic concept). Rawls does not take the concept of character or virtue as a basic concept, from which other ethical concepts can be derived. That is to say, he rules out the possibility of virtue ethics as a third type of ethical theory. This is where the standard typology comes in. The main difference between the standard typology and Rawls' typology is that the former does, whereas the latter does not, leave room for a third type of ethical theory, namely virtue ethics, which takes virtue as a basic concept.

In fact, Rawls explicitly states that virtue is a derivative concept. Later in the book he explicitly says that a person of moral worth is a "good person" or a person with "moral character" (Rawls 1971: 437). That is to say, the third concept, the concept of a morally worthy person, which he mentions in the passage cited above, is actually the concept of a virtuous person. According to Rawls, this is how virtue can be derived in a teleological theory:

[I]n a teleological doctrine, a conception of the good is given prior to and independently of the right (or the moral law); thus, for example, utilitarianism defines the right as maximizing the good (say, as happiness or the satisfaction of rational preferences), and moral worth of character as having, say, a character that can be relied on to lead us to do what is right.

(Rawls 2000: 222–223)

We shall call this a "theory of virtue" in a teleological or consequentialist ethics. Rawls' procedure has been followed by many consequentialists since then. For instance, Julia Driver, a self-identified consequentialist, has a chapter entitled

"A Consequentialist Theory of Virtue" in her book *Uneasy Virtue*. Her definition of virtue is the following: "x is a virtue iff it is a character trait that produces what the reasonable person would expect to be good consequences overall or systematically" (Driver 2001: 95).⁴

Similarly, a Kantian deontologist can also have a "theory of virtue." Rawls gives the following definition of virtue: "the fundamental moral virtues" are "the strong and normally effective desires to act on the basic principles of right" (Rawls 1971: 436). We may call this a "theory of virtue" in a deontology. It is similar to Kant's theory of virtue in his later writings, namely what Kant himself calls "the doctrine of virtue": "Virtue is the strength of a human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty" (Kant 1996: 6:394).

According to Rawls, for a Kantian, "once the principles of right and justice are on hand, they may be used to define the moral virtues *just as in any other theory*" (Rawls 1971: 192; emphasis added). I believe the phrase "just as in any other theory" is revealing here because it shows that Rawls is probably not aware that there is a significant difference between "virtue ethics" and "theory of virtue," and that the ways in which they conceptualize virtue are radically different. Rawls' remark would be correct only if "any other theory" means "consequentialism" or "classical utilitarian theory." That is probably what he means since he believes that there are only two theories (consequentialism and deontology), both of which treat virtue as a derivative concept. However, if "any other theory" includes "virtue ethics," his remark would be obviously false. For virtue ethics would take virtue as a basic, not a derivative concept.

It is important to emphasize the radical differences between "virtue ethics" and "theory of virtue." A "virtue ethics" is an alternative to consequentialism or Kantian deontology, whereas a "theory of virtue" can be derived within consequentialism or Kantian deontology. We should acknowledge the fact that the three ethical theories (virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontology) may all take virtue as an important concept. However, this should not be allowed to obscure another equally significant fact that the concepts of virtue in these three ethical theories are radically different because they have different locations in different structures or surroundings. What distinguishes and defines virtue ethics is that it takes virtue as a *basic* concept. To say it is *important* is not the same as to say it is basic.

What is the implication of the distinction between virtue ethics and theory of virtue for the study of early Chinese ethics? One important implication is that in order to show that Confucianism is a "virtue ethics," one has to show not only that there is a concept of virtue in Confucianism, but also that it is a *basic* concept. It seems that we have not yet seen such an argument in the secondary literature on Confucian virtue ethics (Xiao 2011). What the scholars have shown is that the Confucians have a concept of virtue and that they take it to be very important. But this is not enough to establish the intended conclusion that Confucianism is a virtue ethics. For the Kantians and consequentialists also have a concept of virtue, and they, too, think virtue is very important.

Scholars often use “virtue ethics” and “theory of virtue” interchangeably. This is understandable. These two terms are ordinary English phrases, and they do not necessarily have the connotation we intend them to have as technical terms.⁵ Not seeing that “virtue ethics” is different from “theory of virtue” is probably the main source of confusion among some critics of virtue ethics. Martha Nussbaum has argued that virtue ethics is a “misleading category” because Kant and Utilitarians also have their “virtue ethics” or “theory of virtue,” and they also take virtue to be important (Nussbaum 1999). It is not surprising that throughout her essay Nussbaum uses the two terms “virtue ethics” and “theory of virtue” interchangeably.

Not seeing that “virtue ethics” is different from “theory of virtue” is also a main source of confusion among some critics of the virtue ethics reading of Confucianism (Lee 2013). Lee Ming-Huei argues that his Kantian reading of Confucianism can also give an account of the fact that the Confucians have a concept of virtue and they take it to be very important. Lee’s conflation of virtue ethics and theory of virtue is largely caused by the fact that scholars who give the virtue ethics reading of Confucianism do, indeed, claim that the Confucians have a concept of virtue and they take it to be very important when they say that Confucianism is a virtue ethics.

The Uniformity Dogma

The fact that the standard typology rejects the reductionist dogma of Rawls’ typology should not prevent us from seeing another important fact—that there are common features it shares with the latter. The first important common feature is that the three ethical theories in the standard typology have the same “global hierarchical structure” as the two ethical theories in Rawls’ typology. To show that all these three ethical theories have the same formal structure, we just need to show that it is easy to give a formal definition of them. We shall use “*x*-based ethics” (*x* being the good, the right, or the virtuous, respectively) to refer to consequentialism (good-based ethics), Kantian deontology (right-based ethics), or virtue ethics (virtue-based ethics).

We say that *E* is an “*x*-based ethics” or “*x* ethics” if and only if:

- (1) *x* is logically prior to, and is defined independent of, all the other concepts in *E*;
- (2) all the other concepts in *E* can be derived out of *x*.

I shall call (1) the “independence” component and (2) the “derivability” component. Later in the chapter I shall use the “independence dogma” to refer to the assumption that *x* must be defined independently of the other concepts. It is clear that all the three ethical theories share one thing in common, which is that, in terms of their conceptual structure, they all have a “global hierarchical

APPLICATIONS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

structure”—there is the “bottom level,” on which we find the basic concept x , and the “upper level,” on which we find all the other concepts. I shall call them “ethical theories with a global hieratical structure.”⁶ In other words, the following three statements are equivalent and are to be used interchangeably:

- (a) E is an “ x -based ethics.”
- (b) The concept x is a “basic” concept in E .
- (c) E has a “global hierarchical structure” with the concept of x at the basic level.

We may say that (a) is about the “nature” of an ethical theory, and (b) and (c) are about its “basic concept” and “structure,” respectively. To claim that these three statements are equivalent is to claim that the nature of an ethical theory should be characterized in terms of its “structure” or “basic concept.”

I believe we are now in a position to understand an important historical fact that in the early history of the resurgence of virtue ethics a lot of energy has been spent on constructing a theory of right action out of a concept of virtue (Hursthouse 1991, 1999; Zagzebski 1996; Swanton 2001), and it has run into serious problems (Johnson 2003; Das 2003). This is because the virtue ethicists’ conceptualization of the structure of virtue ethics is modeled on the structure of the other two ethical theories in the standard typology. Having a global hierarchical structure means that a virtue ethics is supposed to be able to derive a theory of the right (right action) in terms of the concept of virtue.

There might also have been a further reason behind the virtue ethicists’ effort, which is that they are trying to respond to a major critique of virtue ethics, which is that it is not “action-guiding” in that it does not provide guidance about what the right actions are. However, they seem to have taken for granted a further assumption from consequentialism and Kantian deontology, which is that the *only* way for an ethical theory to be action-guiding is to have a theory of right action. As we shall see, this assumption is absent in early Chinese ethics, in which action guidance is provided in different ways, and this would also shape how these ethical theories are structured.

Now if “right actions” are not derived from the concept of virtue in an ethical theory (let us call it E), it means that virtue is not a basic concept in E . However, it might still be possible that some other concepts are derived from virtue. Of course, this is not the case with the standard virtue ethics.

For our purpose here, we need to introduce a concept to describe a common feature of the three standard ethical theories, which I shall call “global structural uniformity,” or simply the “uniformity dogma.” Note that virtue is *always* a basic concept in all spheres of life *within a standard virtue ethics*; virtue is *always* a derivative concept in all spheres of life *within a theory of virtue*. The standard typology leaves out the structural possibility that there could be an ethical theory,

in which virtue (or right action or good consequence) is a basic concept in some spheres of life, but a derivative one in some other spheres of life.

Imagine two possible configurations of the structure of a non-standard ethical theory. The first is an ethical theory that has a “uniformly” flat structure: none of the concepts are basic ones, in terms of which all the other concepts are defined. The second is an ethical theory, in which none of the concepts is basic globally and uniformly, but there are local “hierarchical sub-structures” with different basic concepts in different spheres of life. In this second type of ethical theories, some local sub-structures in certain spheres of life may have a hierarchical structure with a basic concept, even though the global structure is still a non-hierarchical one. No concept is a “globally” basic one, even though there are “locally” basic concepts.

It seems that Confucius’ ethics in the *Analects* is similar to the second type of ethics. Confucius takes the tradition of Zhou rituals as providing basic action guidance for non-virtuous people in most of the spheres of life.⁷ He then defines *zhili* (understanding rituals) or *haoli* (loving rituals) as an important virtue (Chen 2010; Xiao 2011). People should eventually acquire many virtues, including the virtue of loving rituals. So at least in the case of this specific virtue of loving rituals, the concept of *li* (rituals) is a basic concept, in terms of which the concept of the virtue of *zhili* or *haoli* (loving rituals) is defined. Note that the concept of rituals is not a “globally” basic concept in the global structure of the ethical theory in the *Analects*. This is because not *all* the other concepts in the *Analects* are defined in terms of the concept of rituals. So the global structure of the ethical theory in the *Analects* is still “flat,” even though there are local sub-structures within it that are “hierarchical.”

The Independence Dogma

There is another way to characterize the distinction between virtue ethics and theory of virtue in terms of Julia Driver’s distinction between “evaluational internalism” and “evaluational externalism”:

Evaluation externalism is the view that the moral quality of a person’s action or character is determined by factors external to agency, such as actual (rather than expected) consequences. This is to be contrasted with “evaluational internalism,” the view that the moral quality of a person’s action or character is determined by factors internal to agency, such as a person’s motives or intentions.

(Driver 2001: 68)

And the difference between virtue ethics and theory of virtue is that the former would entail “evaluational internalism” and the latter “evaluational externalism.”

As we have mentioned earlier, Driver is a “consequentialist” who also has a theory of virtue. What this means is that she takes the good as the basic concept, in terms of which virtue is evaluated. Driver says that the reason she wants to have an externalist evaluation of virtue is because she wants to preserve “the connection between the agent and the world,” and this is because “[w]hat happens matters to morality, and the externalist preserves this intuition” (Driver 2001: 70). Now since virtue ethics would give an internalist evaluation of virtue, which, according to Driver, is supposed to be unable to preserve the connection between the agent and the world, it is clear, as Driver would conclude, that one should prefer theory of virtue over virtue ethics.

I think we all should agree with Driver that what happens in the world matters and that ethical theory should preserve the connection between the agent and the world. However, this does not necessarily imply that adopting a consequentialist theory of virtue is the *only* way to preserve the connection. Nor does it imply that we must adopt Driver’s specific way of characterizing the good consequence, the “world,” or the “connection” between the agent and the world. The most distinctive feature of her approach is that she assumes that the good must be defined independently of the right.

It seems that contemporary moral philosophers all take this assumption for granted. When he articulates his typology, Rawls explicitly states: “the good is defined independently from the right” (1971: 24) or “a conception of the good is given prior to and independently of the right (or the moral law)” (Rawls 2000: 222). Driver must assume that the good is defined independently of virtue when she gives a definition of virtue in terms of the good: a character trait “is a virtue iff it is a character trait that produces what the reasonable person would expect to be good consequences overall or systematically” (Driver 2001: 95). Similarly, the concept of a virtuous agent must be defined independently of right action in Hursthouse’s definition of right action: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances” (Hursthouse 1999: 28). The idea seems to be a seemingly self-evident one: if *x* is not defined independently of other concepts in an *x*-based ethics, one would then end up giving a circular definition of the other concepts, and the ethical theory would have no “hierarchical” structure. In fact, it would not even be an *x*-based ethics.

The independence dogma is probably the most problematic feature of the standard typology. It implies that it cannot be a comprehensive typology because it leaves out all the ethical theories that do not accept this dogma. For example, it does not cover those ethical theories that do not define the good independently of the human relations and the virtues. As we shall see, this is exactly how Confucius and Mencius define the good. Note that we are not saying that they define the good in terms of *the right*. This is because they reject the thin concept of the right. Their starting point is thick concepts such as the human relations and the virtues. This should not have come as a surprise if we keep in mind that

they are political philosophers whose basic concept is *tianxia* (All under Heaven, or the best regime), which is described in terms of the human relations and the virtues.

Confucius might have been the first in China to make the observation that the virtue of filial piety and the parent–son relationship are constitutively defined in terms of each other. Mencius is the one who gives more systematic articulations. The following three concepts are at the heart of Mencius' ethics: *ren lun* (human relations), *ren xin* (human heartmind or human sentiments), and *ren xing* (human nature). For Mencius, they are connected in the following way: human relations (*ren lun*) are constitutively defined in terms of human sentiments (*ren xin*), and when human relations are fully developed and perfected, they are the full expression and realization of human nature (*ren xing*).

The term *ren lun* (human relations) did not appear in any texts before the *Mencius*.⁸ Mencius' account of human relations is arguably the most interesting and innovative part of his thought. One might say that Mencius' ethics is “heartmind-focused” in that Mencius focuses on human sentiments as the most important component of human relations. This might have given some scholars the impression that Mencius' ethics should be characterized as a sentimentalist virtue ethics or care ethics.

However, Mencius' ethics is also “relation-focused”. Mencius was the first to put the following five relations together as a set, and call them *ren lun* (human relations): father–son, ruler–minister, husband–wife, brothers, and friends, and to match them with five corresponding virtues: love, justice, separate functions, proper order, and truthfulness (3A4). This is one of the reasons why the later generations of scholars and ordinary people in China would eventually make the following term a very popular one: “*lun chang*” (literally meaning “relations and constants”). They eventually became known as the “Five Relations” (*wu lun*) and “Five Constants” (*wu chang*):

- a. the Five Relations (*wu lun*): father–son, ruler–minister, husband–wife, brothers, and friends.
- b. the Five Constants (*wu chang*), namely the five cardinal virtues: benevolence, justice, ritual propriety, wisdom, and sincerity.

The reason that virtues are referred to here as “constants” is because they are by definition constant and stable dispositions. Traditional Chinese ethics is largely a human relations-focused and virtue-focused ethics, and this tradition started with Confucius and Mencius.

Confucius and Mencius anticipated several contemporary philosophers in the West who also take human relations to be at the heart of ethics. Avishai Margalit has introduced a helpful analytical distinction between two types of evaluations of relations: the “goodness or badness of a relation” versus the “goodness or badness *within* a relation”:

APPLICATIONS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

In my account of ethics, *good* and *bad* are to be directly attributed to relationships. For example, a sadomasochistic relation is bad, whereas mother-daughter relations are good. . . . There is, however, a need to distinguish between good and bad *within* the relation and the good and bad *of* the relation. In saying that the mother-daughter relation is good, we are talking about the goodness *of* the relation. But we are sorely aware that such good relations can turn sour and become bad relations. When this happens, however, it is badness *within* the relation, not the badness *of* the relation.

(Margalit 2002: 85)

Mencius famously says that the father-son relation is a "substantive relation" (*da lun*) for human beings (2B2). Here he is certainly talking about the goodness of human relations. Margalit's distinction can help us understand why it is consistent for Mencius to hold the view that the father-son relation is a good one (2B2), and at the same time also hold another view that a specific father-son relation can still become a "bad" one in certain circumstances or situations (4A18).⁹

So it is clear that Confucius and Mencius believe that it matters whether the five human relations exist in the world and whether the existing ones are good. In other words, they do believe that what happens in the world matters. However, what happens in the world is not defined independently of human relations, as in Driver's consequentialist ethical theory. And when Confucius and Mencius say that human relations are good, they are saying at the same time that virtues are good because the former are constitutively defined in terms of the latter.

In other words, in contrast to a consequentialist description of "what happens in the world," one of the most important features of Confucius' and Mencius' description of the world is their use of conceptions such as "human relations." They rely on conceptions that have concrete and determined contents, which are both descriptive and normative. They are what Han Yu (768-824) calls "determinate conceptions" (*ding ming*) as opposite to what he calls "empty placeholder" (*xu wei*). Han Yu's example of empty concepts is *dao* (a way, a way of life, a way of organizing society). His examples of determinate concepts are *ren* (humaneness, benevolence) and *yi* (justice). In some aspects, especially in terms of the contrast between "emptiness" or "contentlessness" of *xu wei* and the "determinacy" or "contentfulness" of *ding ming*, Han Yu's distinction is very similar to the distinction between what Iris Murdoch calls "empty moral words" and "normative-descriptive words" (Murdoch 2001: 8, 31, 40-41) or what Bernard Williams later calls "thin" and "thick" concepts (Williams 1985: 129, 143-145).¹⁰

The Chinese word for "substantive" in Mencius' phrase "substantive relation" (*da lun*) is "*da*" (literally meaning "big" or "great"), and is often used by Mencius to mean "substantive," "important," or "significant." We can also find the same phrase "*da lun*" (substantive relations) in the *Analects* (18.7). In some important

aspects, this idea is not dissimilar to Bernard Williams' idea that loving relations are the "substance" of human life (Williams 1981: 18). However, there are also important differences between Mencius and Williams. Here we have to make a distinction between two levels: On one level, both Mencius and Williams emphasize the importance of human relations in our lives. However, on another level, their reasons or justifications are different. Mencius says that when people had "full belly and warm clothes," but without "human relations," they would "degenerate to the low level of brutes" (3A4). Here he is making a point about the goodness of relations: they are good because they make us human; they are true expressions of humanity. This clearly indicates that the word "human" in the concept of "human relations" is meant to be both descriptive and normative, and is based on Mencius' theory of human nature. Williams seems to be making a much weaker claim. It is a social and psychological fact that unless "deep attachments to other persons" exist, "there will not be enough substance or conviction in a man's life to compel his alliance to life itself. Life has to have substance if anything is to have sense, including adherence to the impartial system" (Williams 1981: 18).

Mencius' Political Solution to an Ethical Problem

I want to give one more example to show that the reason why the structure of Mencius' ethical-political theory is different from that of a standard virtue ethics is because Mencius is doing political philosophy. More specifically, I want to show how Mencius gives a political solution to an ethical problem. One may characterize his solution as belonging to political economy or moral economy.¹¹

What is Confucius' and Mencius' account of the condition under which a father-son relation can be said to be good? If we collect all the relevant passages in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, we can reconstruct the classical Confucian account of the parent-child relation.

Here is a partial sketch. We say that "A parent-child relation is a good one" only if the following happens in the world (we are using A to refer to the son):¹²

1. A's parents' well-beings are being cared for when they are alive and being properly buried according to the rituals when they die.
2. A is the agent who does the deeds in (1).
3. A does the deeds in (1) with the right motives (attitudes, emotions, and sentiments).

I shall further label these conditions as follows:

1. the "outcome" component;
2. the "agent" component;
3. the "motive" component.

APPLICATIONS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

Confucius and Mencius emphasize that most of these conditions are necessary and none of them is sufficient. A large number of passages in the *Analects* and the *Mencius* are about the importance of (3). It often takes the form: (1) is not sufficient and (3) is necessary. The following two passages are representative:

Zilu asked about being filial (*xiao*). The Master said, "Nowadays people think they are filial sons when their parents are cared for (*yang*). Yet even dogs and horses are cared for to that extent. If there is no respect (*jing*), where is the difference?"

(*Analects*: 2.7)

To feed a human being without love (*ai*) is to treat him like a pig. To pity (*ai*) a human being without respect (*jing*) is to treat him like a pet. Deference and respect is but a gift that is not yet presented [to other human beings].

(*Mencius*: 7A37)

However, there is a problem that Confucius seems not aware of. Note that (1) is about the need for the external goods in the actual world, and that (3) is about the presence of the good inner motives behind the son's actions. It is obvious that when (3) is fulfilled, it does not imply that (1) will necessarily be fulfilled. Imagine a son who has the right motives but is extremely poor. He will not be able to care for his parents. Another way to put the point is to say that Confucius seems to be unaware that (3) is not sufficient, and (1) is necessary. In other words, good motives are not sufficient, and external goods are necessary.

We can find words put into Confucius' mouth in some of the later texts, in which this problem is addressed. The following passage is from the *Book of Rituals*, which is put together in the Han Dynasty, but a lot of the materials came from earlier periods:

Zilu said, "Alas for the poor! While their parents are alive, they have not the means to care for them; and when they are dead, they have not the means to perform the mourning rituals for them." Confucius said, "Bean soup, and water to drink, while the parents are made happy, may be pronounced filial piety. If a son can only wrap the body round from head to foot, and inter it immediately, without a shell, that being all which his means allow, he may be said to discharge the rites of mourning."

(*The Book of Rituals*, 4.2)

However, the problem can become worse. What if a son cannot even afford the kind of minimal means Confucius mentions in the passage cited above? And the

problem becomes the worst when a parent has lost all of his or her loved ones. Mozi, who lived after Confucius and before Mencius, was the first to address this problem. He asked the questions of how “those who are old and without sons could have what they need to live out their lives” (15.9; Johnston 2010: 145), or how “those who are old and without wives and children could have the means of support and nourishment through their old age, and those who are young and weak and without father and mother could have the means of help and support to grow into adulthood” (16.4; Johnston 2010: 149–151).

Mozi addresses this problem in the chapters on *jian ai* (universal and equal care). His solution to the problem is that each and every one should care for everyone else equally. It is the obligation of each and every individual to do their best to care for all the parents in the world. His solution is often read as a consequentialist one, very similar to Peter Singer’s solution to world poverty.¹³

It is probably due to Mozi’s influence that Mencius takes this problem seriously. He puts the problem as follows: “Old men without wives, old women without husbands, old people without children, young children without fathers—these four types of people are the most destitute and have no one to turn to for help” (1B5). As we can see, this formulation of the problem is similar to Mozi’s formulation of the same problem. However, Mencius has a different solution. He argues that it is the government’s obligation to take care of those who do not have loved ones to care for them. He wants to set up institutions and public policies to solve the problem. His solution is part of his political philosophy or moral economy, which he calls “politics of humanity” (*ren zheng*). Mencius insists that “politics of humanity (*ren zheng*) must start with land demarcation” (3A3). He outlines a blueprint of how to demarcate lands so that there will always be common land in each village preserved for everyone to work on, which would then provide external goods so that people’s basic needs are met and no one is cold or hungry (3A3, 1A3, 1A7, 7A22). A modern incarnation of this idea is Sun Yat-sen’s “principle of livelihood,” one of the three principles of his political philosophy.

When Mencius talks to rulers, trying to persuade them to adopt his public policies of *ren zheng*, he sometimes tries to show that the ruler already has in their heartmind the right motive to do so. For example, in one of the most famous passages (1A7), he shows to King Xuan of Qi that since he already has shown compassion for an ox about to be scarified or an innocent person about to be executed, he just needs to extend it to the people. However, it must be pointed out that this is what is going on in *the first part of 1A7*.

No other passage of early Chinese texts has had more ink spilled over it than 1A7. However, scholars tend to focus on only the first part of 1A7. They do not notice that after Mencius fails to make King Xuan extend his compassion to the people, he tries something else in the second part of 1A7. As I have argued elsewhere (Xiao 2013), what Mencius does in the second part is to show to the king

that it is (instrumentally) rational for him to adopt Mencius' compassionate public policies. More specifically, Mencius argues that the best means to fulfill the king's desire to unify the world is to practice *ren zheng*.

The difference between the first and the second parts of 1A7 is the following. In the first part, Mencius is hoping that the king will "act virtuously," which means that his adopting *ren zheng* policies would be an expression of his compassion for the people. In this scenario, the king would have the right motive for the right action. This is often characterized as the king adopting the *ren zheng* policies "for its own sake." However, in the second part, Mencius is suggesting something much less demanding: the king would adopt the *ren zheng* policies because it is the best means to an end he desires. It is an action that is done because it is rational to do so, and it does not have to be motivated by his compassion for the people. It is a good thing that the king adopts the compassionate public policies, even though he does it "not for its own sake."

There is a distinction between "acting virtuously" and "a virtuous action," a distinction which can be traced back to Aristotle. Only a virtuous agent can "act virtuously," whereas a non-virtuous agent can do a "virtuous action." The difference is that when a virtuous agent "acts virtuously," her action is an expression of the virtuous motive, whereas a non-virtuous agent does not have the virtuous motive behind her "virtuous action." We may say that Mencius seems to be aware of such a distinction. Mencius is a political realist in the sense that he believes that in the spheres of political life we cannot wait for the rulers to become virtuous agents who can then act virtuously; it is good enough if one can get them to adopt virtuous policies. One could put this dramatically by saying that "People are starving to death right now. We can't wait for the ruler to cultivate himself to become a virtuous ruler. It is enough if he adopts a compassionate policy right now. It does not matter what motivates it."

Although we have examined only a partial picture of various complex structures of ethical theories, we can already see how Confucius' and Mencius' virtue ethics as political philosophy can shed light on contemporary ethical theory and virtue ethics, and vice versa. Indeed, an inquiry into how ethics and political philosophy are intertwined, and how the interactions between them shape the structure of an ethical-political theory, can enlighten us about not only Chinese philosophy but also about ethics and political philosophy in general.

Related Topics

- Chapter 3, "The Stoic Theory of Virtue," Tad Brennan
- Chapter 5, "Why Confucius' Ethics is a Virtue Ethics," May Sim
- Chapter 6, "Mencius' Virtue Ethics Meets the Moral Foundations Theory," Shirong Luo
- Chapter 16, "Pluralistic Virtue Ethics," Christine Swanton
- Chapter 22, "Kant and Virtue Ethics," Allen Wood
- Chapter 23, "The Consequentialist Critique of Virtue Ethics," Julia Driver

VIRTUE ETHICS AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Chapter 24, "Virtue Ethics and Right Action," Ramon Das
Chapter 27, "The Situationist Critique," Lorraine Besser-Jones
Chapter 29, "Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics," Nel Noddings

Notes

- 1 The standard typology can be found in countless textbooks as well as monographs since the 1970s. A useful and representative book is *Three Methods of Ethics: A Debate* (Baron et al. 1997). Each of the authors wrote a chapter on one of the three types of ethical theory: Baron on Kantian deontology, Pettit on consequentialism, and Slote on virtue ethics. There are also people who want to characterize themselves in terms of their metaethical positions. This goes beyond the scope of this chapter.
- 2 Some representative books are Nivison (1996), Ivanhoe (2000), Van Norden (2007), Sim (2007), Yu (2007), and Angle and Slote (2013). There are too many articles on this topic to be listed here. Many scholars would take Daoism as a type of virtue ethics as well; but there is no book-length study on this topic yet. There is also a rapidly growing body of literature in Chinese scholarship on Confucianism as virtue ethics.
- 3 I have discussed the structure of an ethical theory in connection to early Chinese ethics; see Xiao (2010, 2011).
- 4 As far as I know, Driver is the first to make the distinction between "virtue ethics" and "theory of virtue."
- 5 The pair of terms used here, "virtue ethics" versus "theory of virtue," though not ideal, seems to be better than the pair of terms used by Monika Betzler in her edited volume, *Kant's Ethics of Virtue* (Betzler 2008), which is "virtue ethics" versus "ethics of virtue." Since the word "ethics" appears in both terms, it is easy to overlook the difference between "virtue ethics" and "ethics of virtue." This seems to be what has happened in Lee (2013).
- 6 I borrow the term "hierarchical structure" from Julia Annas (Annas 1993). Similar ideas can also be found in other scholars (Hurley 1989; Slote 1995, 2001).
- 7 With regard to this emphasis on the necessity of tradition, Confucius is similar to Michael Oakeshott and Alasdair MacIntyre.
- 8 We might want to say "in any *received* texts" because we now have found the term "*ren lun*" in some recently excavated texts that were written before Mencius' time.
- 9 It is interesting to note that what Mencius says in 4A18 is that in situations in which a father becomes the teacher of his son there will be resentment and bitterness between them because a teacher is supposed to criticize a student, which inevitably gives rise to resentment. The conclusion is then that fathers should not become teachers of their own sons and they should send them to other teachers. Mencius says that this is a case in which a father-son relation becomes bad due to the situation (*shi*), not due to the nature of the father-son relation. We may imagine how Mencius might have responded to the situationist challenge to virtue ethics.
- 10 Murdoch made the distinction in her essays published in the 1950s. Williams has acknowledged that he had heard the idea from Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in a seminar in the 1960s (Williams 1985: 218n7).
- 11 There is a large body of literature on moral economy, a term first coined by E. P. Thompson. I shall not discuss it here.
- 12 The phrase "only if" here is meant to indicate that these are not sufficient conditions. Confucius has articulated other conditions elsewhere in the *Analects* (e.g., 1.11, 4.20). As we shall see, it is also not entirely clear that they explicitly and consistently take (1) as a necessary condition.
- 13 This is not the only reading of Mozi. But I shall not discuss this issue here.

References

- Angle, Stephen and Slote, Michael (ed.) (2013) *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism* (New York and London: Routledge).
Annas, Julia (1993) *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press).

APPLICATIONS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

- Baron, Marcia, Pettit, Philip, and Slote, Michael (1997) *Three Methods of Ethics: A Debate* (London: Wiley-Blackwell).
- Betzler, Monika (ed.) (2008) *Kant's Ethics of Virtue* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter).
- Chen, Lai (2010) "Virtue Ethics and Confucian Ethics." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 9 (3): 275–287.
- Clarke, Stanley and Simpson, Evan (1989) *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism* (Albany: SUNY Press).
- Das, Ramon (2003) "Virtue Ethics and Right Action," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81(3): 324–339.
- Driver, Julia (2001) *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Fraser, Chris, Robins, Dan, and O'Leary, Timothy (ed.) (2011) *Ethics in Early China: An Anthology* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press).
- Hurley, S. L. (1989) *Natural Reasons: Personality and Polity* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Hursthouse, Rosalind (1991) "Virtue Ethics and Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20(3): 223–246.
- (1999) *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Im, Manyul (2011) "Mencius as Consequentialist," in Chris Fraser, Dan Robins, and Timothy O'Leary (eds.) *Ethics in Early China: An Anthology* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press).
- Ivanhoe, P. J. (2000) *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).
- Johnson, Robert (2003) "Virtue and Right," *Ethics* 113(4): 810–834.
- Johnston, Ian (2010) *The Mozi* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Kagan, Shelley (1992) "The Structure of Normative Ethics," *Philosophical Perspectives* 6: 223–242.
- (1998) *Normative Ethics* (Boulder: Westview Press).
- (2002) "Kantianism for Consequentialists," in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Kant (1996) "The Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, tr. Mary Gregor, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Lee, Ming-huei (2013) "Confucianism, Kant, and Virtue Ethics," in Stephen Angle and Michael Slote (eds.) *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism* (New York and London: Routledge).
- Margalit, Avishai (2002) *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Murdoch, Iris (2001) *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge).
- Nivison, David (1996) *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court).
- Nussbaum, Martha (1999) "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" *The Journal of Ethics* 3(3): 163–201.
- Rawls, John (1971) *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- (1981) "Foreword," *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edition (Indianapolis: Hackett).
- (2000) *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Santas, Gerasimos (1996) "The Structure of Aristotle's Ethical Theory: Is it Teleological or a Virtue Ethics?" *Topoi* 15: 59–80.
- Sim, May (2007) *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Slote, Michael (1995) "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20(1): 83–101.
- (2001) *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Swanton, Christine (2001) "A Virtue Theoretical Account of Right Action," *Ethics* 112 (1): 32–52.
- Van Norden, Bryan (2007) *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Williams, Bernard (1981) *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (1985) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

VIRTUE ETHICS AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Xiao, Yang (2010) "Chinese Ethical Thought," in John Skorupski (ed.) *Routledge Companion to Ethics* (London: Routledge).
- (2011) "Holding an Aristotelian Mirror to Confucian Ethics?" *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10(3): 359–375.
- (2013) "Rationality and Virtue in the Mencius," in Stephen Angle and Michael Slote (eds.) *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism* (New York and London: Routledge), pp. 152–161.
- Yu, Jiyuan (2007) *The Ethics of Aristotle and Confucius: The Mirror of Virtue* (London: Routledge).
- Zagzebski, Linda (1996) *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).