A PARADOX OF VIRTUE: THE DAODEJING ON VIRTUE AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Hektor K. T. Yan
Department of Public and Social Administration, City University of Hong Kong

Based on a reading of chapter 38 of the Daodejing 道德經, this article examines the question of moral motivation in relation to moral philosophy in general. It starts with a philosophical interpretation of the text and its main argument is that Laozi 老子 puts forward a view that might be termed a “paradox of virtue”: the phenomenon that a conscious pursuit of virtue can lead to a diminishing of virtue. The view that the focus of the Confucian (or the virtue ethicist) on the virtues and characters of agents can lead to moral defects is supported by an example from Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. This article proceeds with a comparison of one key passage from Mencius with the aim of showing that a fundamental picture of morality and moral motivation is shared by both Laozi and Mencius. Finally, the views of Peter Winch, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Rosalind Hursthouse are discussed to demonstrate that the insights of Laozi pose compelling challenges to a particular way of moral thinking that is common among the branches of modern moral philosophy, including virtue ethics.

A central question in moral philosophy is one concerning the role of a moral theory. This concern is reflected when the question of whether a moral theory can effectively guide human behavior is raised. Such a question has a deeper conceptual significance because the very desirability of a theory being action-guiding can be called into question. For example, with regard to utilitarianism, it is questionable whether a moral agent should always act according to the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Similarly, the idea that the morally good person always has to act according to duty has raised deep suspicion among moral philosophers. The question of what should be the motivation behind a truly moral act has haunted philosophers since the moment Glaucon and Adeimemus posed their challenges in Plato’s Republic. Having said this, this does not mean that moral motivation is a timeless, universal philosophical problem, for it is only most acutely felt as a problem in cultures where moral thinking presupposes an element of theorizing: a culture characterized by moral homogeneity is probably free of such concerns.1

Here I will discuss some issues related to moral motivation. These are based on a reading of the Daodejing, since I am trying to show that this text has much relevance to contemporary moral philosophy, especially in relation to virtue ethics. Before we move on to discuss the relevant passage from the Daodejing, it would be beneficial to familiarize ourselves with the historical context. Putting aside the exact dating of early Daoism, we can be confident in saying that early Daoism arose from an intellectual atmosphere with an ancient tradition, Confucianism, already in place.2 Since
the present article is focused on issues relating to virtue, we should start with a very brief overview of key Confucian ideas on the virtues. In addition to a distinctive focus on the ethical dimension of rituals, Confucianism made numerous references to virtues such as ren, yi, and li. To give a few memorable examples, we can see that Confucius’ own formulation of the “Golden Rule” is made as an attempt to expound the virtue of shu, while ren is defined and explained from different perspectives throughout the Analects. Mencius, living a few generations after Confucius, expanded and refined the virtues ren, yi, li, and chi and examined their initial developments in a human being. The impression we get here is that a (potential) follower of Confucianism is always urged by its advocates to focus on virtues such as ren or yi—to govern according to ren, or simply to become ren or yi. Taking Daoism as an alternative school of thought, I am going to examine Daodejing chapter 38 as a criticism on this general picture of Confucian moral thought. In particular, I shall argue that the Confucian explicit attention to the virtues, according to Laozi, raises problems about moral motivation, and this can potentially be morally corrupting. If we accept the controversial view that Confucianism is a form of virtue ethics, the Daoist challenge can show that Confucianism as a virtue ethics does not always appear superior in relation to the claim that a virtue ethics can avoid the danger of “moral schizophrenia” that is usually considered a potential problem for consequentialist and deontological ethics.

Chapter 38 of the Daodejing by Laozi begins with what appears to be a paradoxical remark on de (“virtue” or “excellence”). The entire passage reads:

The opening line, shang de bu de, shi yi you de, is particularly perplexing and will be the focus of my attention. The Daodejing has received diverging and even contradictory interpretations, and it is not the concern of the present article to offer a theory that gives a consistent interpretation of the whole text. Instead, its primary aim is to make sense of this opening line and to elucidate its insights on morality and virtue in relation to wider concerns in moral philosophy in general.

The passage continues with the line xia de bu shi de, shi yi wu de. As it stands, the meaning of this is not particularly clear either. Immediately after this, there are two further statements made about shang de and xia de. But these statements do not seem to offer clarification of the earlier lines; their own ambiguity results in different readings of the text. D. C. Lau and Chen Guying interpret the phrase wu yi wei in line two as “from no ulterior motive” and “without conscious motivation,”
respectively. This reading of the text is consistent with the ideal of non-action and naturalness found in the Laozi. However, this leaves the apparent paradoxical phrase shang de bu de unexplained. If Laozi had wanted to say that the practice of a kind of shang de (“superior virtue”) does not involve intention or ulterior motive, he could have said something like (shang de) wei er bu shi 為而不恃. If we take into consideration the fact that the uses of the negative bu elsewhere in the Daodejing are quite definite and literal, it would appear that the notions of intention or ulterior motive are quite irrelevant and unnecessary in the clarification of the phrase bu de. I propose to take the phrase shang de bu de more literally: the superior or better kind of virtue is not essentially an instance of virtue, or the person of superior virtue does not act virtuously. Interpreted this way, the opening lines of chapter 38 can be translated as follows:

[The person of] superior virtue does not act virtuously, therefore he/she/it has virtue;
[The person of] inferior virtue acts or tries not to lose virtue, therefore he/she/it has no virtue.

This more literal interpretation gives de 德 a paradoxical character, for it says that acting virtuously does not produce virtue. In other words, the pursuit of virtue or goodness itself produces the very opposite effect, namely a lack of virtue or a diminishing of virtue. In this sense it is comparable to what is sometimes known as the paradox of hedonism, where a focused and conscious attempt to obtain pleasure actually reduces pleasure or produces displeasure.

The line that follows, which claims that de 徳, ren 仁, yi 義, and li 禮 are different states of decline after the loss of dao 道, provides a useful clue for understanding the chapter. This implies that what differentiates these states has moral or ethical significance. According to the author of the Daodejing, dao, de, ren, yi, and li form a kind of moral hierarchy. However, the differences between the four states are far from concrete and informative, for they differ only in terms of two seemingly bare distinctions: first, between wu wei (“non-action,” or “not acting”) and wei zhi (“acting on something”) and, second, between wu yi wei and you yi wei. The interpretation of yi wei as a kind of intention or ulterior motive brings us to some familiar thoughts about morality, namely the idea that being truly moral or virtuous involves acting morally or virtuously for its own sake. This idea can be found, for example, in Aristotle and Kant. For Aristotle, an important element of virtue (arete) is that one acts virtuously for virtue’s sake, as opposed to acting virtuously for a good reputation or for usefulness. For Kant, a moral action is exemplified by the fact that one adopts the Moral Law as one’s maxim for action; acting from inclination or for the sake of self-interest, by itself, constitutes no moral worth. Laozi seems to be making a similar point when he maintains that the states of superior and inferior de are not distinguished by the actions performed (for in either state agents “do not act,” i.e., wu wei) but by whether or not intention or ulterior motive is present. This accords well with Laozi’s representation of li 禮 (which, coincidentally, is a Confucian ideal). Outwardly, we may interpret the person of li to be acting with ulterior motive; as a result,
when the expected consequence is not at hand, she resorts to the use of force. This, argues Laozi, cannot be the paradigm of good character and behavior.

Although this seems like a plausible interpretation, it does not help to clarify the opening lines, *shang de bu de, shi yi you de; xia de bu shi de, shi yi wu de*. Although Heshang Gong (ca. third to fourth century C.E.) tries to understand *bu de* in terms of the ideals of naturalness and non-action (*wu wei*), we still need additional explanation in order to understand how *bu de* and *bu shi de* can be related to naturalness and non-action. Even if we grant this, the relationship between naturalness and intentional or ulterior motive remains unclear. In the face of this uncertainty, I propose that we may understand chapter 38 as containing two different remarks about *de*. The remark in the second half of the chapter is concerned with the relation between *de* and intention: different states of *de* and other ideals of moral virtues are contrasted with each other, and their differences do not lie in the actions themselves but depend on whether or not the people who practice the virtues treat the virtues in an instrumental way. The passage, therefore, implies that moral degradation occurs when virtue is practiced as a means to some end outside virtue itself. The opening remark, by contrast, examines the reflexive aspect of the virtuous agent—how the people who practice virtues look at themselves as moral agents, and this exposes a danger that appears paradoxical.

To illustrate the proposed interpretation I will take an example from Aristotle’s discussion of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics* books 8 and 9. Aristotle states that one’s good friend is like one’s *other self*, as one cares about the well-being of one’s other self one cares and attends to one’s friend(s) as well. He says that the (good) self-lover is the person who chooses to do the fine deeds for herself so she aims to be virtuous consciously. Then Aristotle makes the following statement:

> And it is true that the good person would act much for the sake of his friends and country, and he would die if it is necessary, for he would forsake money, honor, and the goods which are much desired entirely, acquiring for himself the fine thing. He would by all means choose [ἐλοιτ’ ἄν] to feel intensely for a short period of time than mildly for a long period of time, and to live a year finely than many years randomly, and one fine and great act than many small ones. (1169a18–25)

It should be noted that, first of all, our concern here is *not* whether or not the good person is egoistic. No doubt it is extraordinary to make great sacrifices such as dying for one’s friends or country; but the reasoning behind this act, which is stated by Aristotle here, seems problematic. If one is making a sacrifice simply for the sake of another person, the consideration whether this act itself is a truly fine or great one seems unnecessary. Now suppose there arises a situation when a friend in need requires one to make some sacrifice. Of course, one may consider the moral factors, surrounding circumstances, and one’s own position in order to decide whether or not to help the friend. But the weighing of this fine action against other fine actions of smaller or greater magnitude is out of place, since it is not a response to the need of the friend and the circumstances at all. The presence of such a consideration may cast doubt on the genuine goodness of the action itself. We may say that to act vir-
tuously or finely is a response to one’s particular surrounding circumstances at a particular moment; a comparison of the relative fineness of actions in other contexts signifies a failure to respond to the immediate situation. Therefore, although the person may act inappropriately and be criticized for not doing the fine action, that one can (legitimately) choose to do this great fine thing rather than others on the basis of their relative significance is morally objectionable.

The flaw here lies not in whether the agent is behaving egoistically or altruistically, but in the fact that the agent fails to attend to the immediate particulars. We may say that the virtue expressed by making the sacrifice is marred. In other words, the goodness of the action is diminished due to some conscious urge to act virtuously on the agent’s part. This is, then, a case of xia de bu shi de shi yi wu de. Now let us consider Laozi’s person of “superior benevolence” (shang ren). In response to the same situation, she would probably make the sacrifice according to the moral ideal of ren 仁 (“benevolence”), but she does not weigh the fineness or greatness of this action against others. We can still say that both persons here act admirably by making their sacrifices, provided that the person of “inferior” virtue does not act so for the sake of some evil or harmful outcomes. Although the actions of both of them resemble de, we can discern a moral difference in character between the two.

Now it seems that this is exactly a case where the conscious pursuit of virtue or goodness itself produces the very opposite effect, namely, if not a lack of virtue then a decrease in virtue or goodness. We may compare this phenomenon with the distinction between the criterion of rightness and decision procedure in the discussion of modern utilitarianism. As a teleological (or consequentialist) moral theory, utilitarianism identifies the maximization of happiness or preferences as the criterion of rightness. However, as it is often suggested, if a moral agent always tries to act in order to maximize happiness, it is likely that this would actually lead to the failure to maximize happiness. In response to this, it is argued that utilitarianism should be taken only as a theory concerning the criterion of rightness, rather than a method of decision making. Aristotle’s discussion of friendship in book 9 of the Nicomachean Ethics has a teleological overtone. It may be correct to say that the good self-lover actually does what is fine or beneficial to himself and others (in making the sacrifice). So, the good self-lover’s act may meet the criterion of rightness if it is defined in terms of the beneficial and the praiseworthy. However, if he incorporates this very criterion of rightness into his decision procedure, then his actions may become counterproductive or less admirable. In Laozi’s language, this falls short of being completely good since, shang de bu de, the person of superior or true virtue does not act virtuously in an important sense.

It is noteworthy that the distinction above depends on particular circumstances; for in another context the conscious pursuit of virtue itself may not necessarily be self-defeating. The virtue of justice is an example here. As pointed out by Bernard Williams, the virtue of justice may consist in consciously acting justly precisely because it is just to do so, and not because of other reasons. The particular nature of the “paradox of virtue” must be understood contextually: it is not necessarily
true that a conscious attempt to attain virtue makes it defective. So, this very fact suggests that Laozi’s criticism is basically directed to character traits and attitudes, rather than types or kinds of acts. If this is correct, the “paradox of virtue” can be a danger to moral agents with different theoretical assumptions. Just as an Aristotelian can become less admirable due to being self-absorbed, a Kantian can lose sight of reality if she is exceedingly concerned with whether she acts for the sake of duty.18

In his discussion of the Kantian idea that a truly moral act must be done for the sake of duty, Peter Winch presented a line of argument comparable to my interpretation of the Daodejing here.19 Winch used two different examples in arguing his case. First, there is the character in Ibsen’s The Master Builder who, when receiving a guest, sees the event as an occasion where she is meant to fulfill her duty. Second, Winch introduces an example from Simone Weil, who invites us to consider a father who simply enjoys playing with his son “out of pure joy and pleasure.”20 Contrary to Kant’s view, Winch invites us to look at the two cases as particular examples and see what we want to say about them. Accordingly, although Ibsen’s character acts in a Kantian manner, our judgment (based on our understanding of Ibsen’s play) points to the possibility that the character actually exhibits a kind of moral corruption. The father who does not play with his son for the sake of duty can be seen in a similar anti-Kantian light: that he does not act according to a maxim does not necessarily rule out the possibility that his act lacks any moral worth.

Laozi’s criticism brings forward the tension between our notion of being good (or virtuous) and the common characteristics of theoretical reflection itself. Intuitively it seems desirable to be able to respond to one’s surroundings according to sound moral principles or theories. At the same time, it appears crucial that our reaction must be guided by an acute perception of the particulars. From this perspective, Laozi’s remarks act as a reminder that suggests that the ideal of true virtue or goodness cannot be captured by reference to the qualities of acts alone; rather, it is a state of the moral agent.

Putting aside the objection above, even if Laozi’s analysis of the characteristics of virtue is correct, it is not immediately clear how the highest state of virtue, which is not practiced self-consciously, can be obtained, let alone whether it is intelligible as a moral ideal. As is well-known, Laozi put forward a view that aligns goodness (in both the moral and non-moral senses) with being ziran 自然 (“natural”) or acting according to dao 道 (“way”).21 The working of dao is deemed to be a nourishing force benefiting beings in both the natural and human spheres. In chapter 8, water is regarded to be “close” to dao itself because of its nourishing nature. However, upon close examination, the concept of goodness within the Daodejing cannot be based on or derived from the concept of naturalness itself. Here I propose three possible interpretations of Laozi’s position, with no claim that these are exhaustive of all possible alternatives.

First, “nature” in the Daodejing can be understood in a literal way, as referring to the totality of the phenomena in the existing world. Understood thus, nature contains, in addition to all the nourishing and benefiting features, destructive forces con-
trary to the well-being of many species including human beings. Therefore, taking this aspect of nature into account, it could be argued that nature is amoral or morally neutral. In other words, since nature is morally neutral, acting according to nature does not have a definite moral significance.

Second, it may be argued that nature or dao has a metaphysical meaning above the literal sense. But this reasoning seems question-begging: it is like saying that the metaphysical dao is beneficial or good because certain aspects of nature are beneficial or good because of the working of the metaphysical dao.

Third, in order to make sense of Laozi’s picture of morality and goodness without letting it collapse into circularity or vacuity, it seems necessary to employ the more controversial interpretation of nature as essence, or the essential qualities of things. This implies that the essential qualities of a thing are not something inherent in the thing in question, as in the case of a triangle necessarily having three sides. Rather, the kind of essence referred to here is something that can be lost to the thing in question, as in the case where Laozi states that the dao is actually lost or abandoned (chapter 18). It might be said that it is within our ability to act according to our essence, but it is possible that it is not the case that we act in this way. And when we are actually acting according to our essence (i.e., following the dao), it can be said that we are most truly ourselves, in the sense that our most defining qualities are actualized.

The question of how we become virtuous or good by acting according to the dao or nature finds no explicit answer in the text of the Daodejing. To further explore this topic I propose to examine Mencius’ view on the foundation of morality alongside the view of Laozi. This offers some evidence that the views of Mencius and Laozi are not as dissimilar as they are usually thought to be. While the social and ethical ideal for Mencius is the peaceful unification of the country under a just and benevolent emperor, Laozi prefers a return to the small-scale agrarian society of earlier times. However, this does not exclude the possibility that the two philosophers share some very similar views on moral psychology, for they are only disagreeing on the content of what is actually good for human beings in a particular society. Laozi’s paradoxical remarks on virtue suggest that acting virtuously is not primarily a contrived attempt to fulfill certain goals. This idea finds expression in a famous passage from the Mencius, which forms the core of his views on morality and virtue:

All human beings have the xin 心 (“heart” or “heart-mind”) of non-cruelty to human beings. The ancient kings had the xin of non-cruelty to human beings; therefore, there was the government of non-cruelty to human beings. If, with the xin of non-cruelty, one practices the government of non-cruelty to human beings, to rule the world would be like using something in one’s palm. The reason I say that all human beings have the xin of non-cruelty is because if we suddenly see a helpless infant about to fall into a well, everyone would have the xin of worry and pain [or compassion]. This is so neither because one wants to have good repute among the neighbors and friends, nor because one wants to avoid the name of being malevolent. From this we can see that not to have the xin of compassion is inhuman. . . . (Mencius 2A6)
Due to the lack of space, I cannot deal with the interpretation of *xin* 心 ("heart-mind") here. In this passage, Mencius invites us to imagine a simple, ordinary situation, uncomplicated by unusual customs or conventions. He appeals to our intuition and attempts to show that the basis of refraining from doing harm or offering help to others in need is basically one’s feeling and emotional response to one’s surroundings, a kind of “primitive reaction.” One may ask, “What is the reason for helping the infant?” In reply, Mencius would point out that one should have compassion for the infant who is about to get hurt. However, there seems to be little room for asking the question “What is the reason for having such compassion?” For, to grasp the meaning and significance of the notion of compassion implies taking seriously the harm that may affect beings sufficiently similar to us. To put the point here differently, we may say that taking for granted the need to attend to the suffering of the infant in this instance itself constitutes the perspective or the attitude of the moral bystander here: it is not the case that one is left with the question of whether one should care about the well-being of other people after one has already acquired the virtue of compassion. From this perspective, the very act of asking the question above signals a kind of disagreement that implies deep divergence in ethical attitudes and values: an adequate level of agreement in attitude is lacking in order for the discussion to proceed.

We might compare this picture of morality in Mencius with certain trends in contemporary thought. Ludwig Wittgenstein states:

> Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end—but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.27

Mencius here seems to hold the view that the justification of morality, as a form of human practice or a “language game,” in the end lies in certain forms of reactions and related attitudes. Human beings, their needs, and reactions in the context of human relationships, give sense to morality. True propositions and beliefs by themselves, isolated from human beings and their activities, have no bearing on moral practices and human conduct. To highlight the importance of attitude and action in comparison with belief, Wittgenstein states:

> “I believe that he is not an automaton,” just like that, so far makes no sense. My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.28

From the perspective of human activities and the interactions between human beings, holding the belief that a person is not an automaton is compatible with a variety of attitudes that may have very different practical and ethical consequence. For example, viewing a human being as having a soul can lead to many different kinds of moral attitudes: one may think that the salvation of the soul of a human being depends on the grace of God or that a human being, having a soul, deserves unconditional respect. Since such beliefs remain lifeless if disconnected from people’s
actual ways of living, this suggests that it is attitude or action that gives meaning and significance to human practices and the “language game.” In this sense, attitude and action are important conditions that belong to our complex practices. For Mencius, what distinguishes human beings from brutes is morality understood in terms of different kinds of *xin*, namely certain basic ethical attitudes and reactions. Now if morality is taken to be an expression of some complex combination of attitudes or “primitive reactions,” the absence of such attitudes or primitive reactions has ethical significance. For Mencius, in an ordinary case where an infant is about to get hurt, not being able to respond in any appropriate way casts doubt on the possibility of an ethical discourse. This is not to say that all ethical reasoning and discussions must proceed from a shared Mencian background; what is implied is that some kind of agreement in attitude is necessary for ethical discussion to go on.

The message from the Mencian passage can be seen as the claim that morality and ethics are not simply isolated pieces of true propositions unrelated to human life. It remains true that how ethical differences can be reconciled will depend on a variety of philosophical and cultural factors. With the absence of some basic agreement and consensus, a consequence is that morality can deform into certain self-interested or prudential concerns as in the case when behavior can only be checked by means of reward or punishment.29

The perspective that I have been sketching may provide a means for us to clarify our notion of moral disagreement. Imagine a person who characteristically acts without regard to the suffering or welfare of others—an amoralist, or a Thrasymachus if preferred. It can be misleading to say that the amoralist and a moral person disagree over whether a particular act is right or wrong for the reason that the difference in their moral background and outlook can be so great that it precludes a common morality or a moral language. To say that they disagree over a moral issue ignores the significant possibility that what could constitute a right action for an amoralist can be radically different from that for the moral person.

The worry that Mencius is putting forward a reductive theory of morality and virtue should disappear if we extend our focus to the whole work. Although *xin* or “primitive reaction” plays a fundamental role in moral development, to Mencius other factors such as reasoning and cultural understanding are also crucial. Primitive reaction or *xin*, in this sense, is at most necessary rather than sufficient for our full moral development. Mencius’ model of morality and virtue is not a purely “intuitionist” one that totally excludes the role of thinking and reasoning. He does emphasize that rationality can be used to improve one’s moral character, for example in a kind of “extension” where one’s concern toward one’s family and relatives is extended to other human beings on the ground that they are not significantly different.30 The emphasis on cultural understanding in Mencius deserves more careful and complete attention. To a modern reader of the *Mencius*, a large part of the work consists of seemingly unimportant discussion by interlocutors questioning whether a person, sometimes a sage or sage-king, acted correctly or righteously in some very specific circumstances. For example:
Chunyu Kun said, “Is it prescribed by the rites that, in giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other?”

“It is,” said Mencius.

“When one’s sister-in-law is drowning, does one stretch out a hand to help her?”

“Not to help a sister-in-law who is drowning is to be a brute. It is prescribed by the rites that, in giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other, but in stretching out a helping hand to the drowning sister-in-law one uses one’s discretion.”

Bearing in mind such examples, which emphasize the importance of the context and the surrounding circumstances of an action, it should become clear that being moral or virtuous for Mencius is a complex phenomenon that involves the ability to make fine, sensitive judgments: virtue consists in acting *and* reacting to particular circumstances in a perceptive way. In this sense, it is possible to say that virtue and the virtuous person are one—she acts virtuously *from* virtue by responding to the needs and suffering of other human beings in an appropriate way relative to the surrounding circumstances. In doing so, a virtuous person can be seen as acting spontaneously in an important sense. Mencius characterizes this as “acting *from* benevolence and righteousness” as opposed to “acting benevolently and righteously,” for some ulterior motives. Seen from this perspective, Mencius’ picture accords with Laozi’s position: the person of complete virtue or “superior” virtue is not consciously acting in a virtuous way.

Despite the fact that traditional scholarship views Mencius and Laozi in very different terms, we can discern a common underlying picture of morality and virtue in their writings. Morality, as understood by both philosophers, is seen as firmly rooted in human and social relationships, and both recognize that actions and attitudes are important aspects of moral practice. Once actions and attitudes are understood as taking an essential role, it would seem clear that the relationship between actions or attitudes and morality is different from the relationship between belief and morality. Since it is the case that attitudes or actions play an important role in giving sense to our ethical practices, *beliefs* about virtue and morality by themselves are only part of the complete picture of virtuous or moral behavior. One might even say that the notion of moral or virtuous behavior is like a by-product of moral or virtuous behavior itself: a person can act virtuously and morally *by* responding appropriately toward the surrounding circumstances, but the conscious belief that one is acting virtuously or morally is neither necessary nor sufficient for the virtuous behavior itself. While this does not entail that the thought or belief that one ought to be virtuous is necessarily incompatible with acting virtuously in the sense of responding appropriately to one’s surroundings, the possibility that an excessive concern with the notion of virtue and goodness can lead to corruption can serve as an adequate explanation of the paradox of virtue. According to the model of Mencius and Laozi, the notion of virtue and being motivated to act virtuously are two different concepts, so in this sense virtue is “non-virtuous.” At this point the “paradox of virtue” can be understood in terms of the insight that if virtue involves responding to the needs of others in particular circumstances, the focus on the virtues themselves can be inappropriate. In this sense, if one loses sight of the concrete particulars, such as actual people.
and their needs, and centers one’s attention on the abstract notions of virtue or morality itself, one departs from virtue.

If my argument here is sound, then a virtue ethics that puts emphasis on the virtues instead of general principles (such as utilitarian ones) does not appear superior in relation to the dimension of moral motivation. If the utilitarian, who always acts according to the principle of greatest happiness, is having “one thought too many,” then the follower of virtue ethics has to face a similar difficulty. If the explicit thought whether one is acting according to a particular virtue can be morally corrupting, then it appears that there is a need to split virtue ethics into two halves: one used as an action-guiding theory for moral agents and another used only as a criterion of correctness. However, this does not seem to be the only possible outcome. The view that acting self-consciously with a particular virtue in one’s mind is neither necessary nor sufficient for the act to be truly virtuous or moral has been put forward by Rosalind Hursthouse.33 By making use of a schema developed by Bernard Williams, Hursthouse argues that a virtuous person performs a virtuous act for reason(s) X. The insightful point is that X need not be explicitly related to any particular virtue. For example, a courageous person may perform a truly courageous act because he thinks it is the right thing to do or because he thinks that the injustice must be rectified. This account of the virtuous person and the virtuous act allows the possibility that the virtuous person does not need to act having the virtue in question explicitly in mind.

Ingenious though it is, Hursthouse’s account does not free itself completely from the “paradox of virtue.” The main problem here is the general character of the account: to say that the virtuous person performs a virtuous act, V, for reason(s) X is not very different from saying that the virtuous person performs a virtuous act because it is a virtuous act or that the virtuous person acts from virtue. To reiterate Winch’s point, without the aid of a particular context, we are left without any resource to determine whether the agent acts in a morally admirable or deplorable way. The defective character of such a general account will become more obvious if we consider the actual decision-making process of the agent. What we have here is a dilemma: (1) If the agent who acts because of reason X has in his mind the relevant virtue, there is the danger of corruption. (2) If the agent who acts because of reason X does not have in his mind the relevant virtue, then the account itself can only suggest how we may attribute the virtuous act to the agent but not explain his act in terms of a virtue.

It is beyond the scope of this article to consider other possible responses to this problem. Winch suggests to us that it is a mistake to believe that there are general kinds of behavior that are morally good without qualification. Arguing against the main current of moral philosophy of his day, he tried to demonstrate that moral philosophy has to pay attention to the particulars.34 What we can do, accordingly, is “to look at particular examples and see what we do want to say about them; there are no general rules which can determine in advance what we must say about them.”35 Winch’s insight here can be applied in our interpretation of Laozi and Mencius. For Laozi, it is with the aid of rich metaphors (such as the comparison of goodness to the
qualities of water in chapter 8) that we are able to comprehend the complex nature of the moral good. This emphasis on the particulars can also help us to see why the use of examples plays a significant role in Mencius’ writing.

Putting aside the question above whether virtue ethics has within itself resources to deal with the “paradox of virtue,” we can see that some traditions of philosophy hold an instrumental view of virtue. For example, some interpretations of Aristotle suggest the view that the virtues are a crucial part of human excellence and flourishing. If one takes such a view superficially, the attention to particular people may be diverted to something else, namely one’s own flourishing. Therefore, when someone tries to become virtuous under such a conception of virtue, she may actually become less virtuous, and this is an instance of the “paradox of virtue.”

What I have offered above is one way to understand virtue in Mencius and Laozi. This perspective can have further implications for certain kinds of philosophical enterprise. I have tried to present a picture of virtue that is rich and complex; it implies that to be truly virtuous requires correct feeling, perception, and corresponding action. Not only is it the case that there is more than just arguments and abstract theorizing in a correct understanding of moral thinking. There is even the possibility that certain uses of argument can be perplexing. When a virtuous person is asked why she helps another person, she may simply reply that the other person is in need (as in the case of the infant about to fall into the well). In this sense, her acting is a particular practical response to a particular object. To insist on further explanations and justification for this practice may lead to confusion and distortion, since it is to demand some extra reasons or motives, which are not necessary when the person is simply responding to the needs of others. However, this seems to be the usual question raised by philosophers. Instead of taking the view that we need to help others simply because of their suffering or needs, philosophers tend to offer reasons for this self-sufficient view by making claims like “we need to help others in need because of utility, happiness, the moral law, or rationality.” In doing so, the original justification to help another person, which is a response to a highly contextualized and particular situation, is replaced by some general considerations. In addition, the claim that we need to help others because they are in need is implicitly assumed to be inadequate. If we were persuaded by this, we risk looking for the foundation of morality in the wrong place. Philosophy, in this context, is corrupting. It is no accident that Mencius and Laozi distrust language and argument.

Notes

The author would like to thank P. J. Ivanhoe and the late R. A. Sharpe for their support and comments.

1 – See Kekes 1985.


3 – See Analects 12.2 and 15.24.
4 – For example, see *Mencius* 1A1, 1A5, and 3B5.


6 – See Chen 1970.

7 – Previously David S. Nivison has identified another version of the paradox of virtue; see Nivison, “The Paradox of ‘Virtue,’” in Nivison 1996, pp. 31–43.


9 – See *Daodejing*, chap. 2.

10 – Compare the translation by John C. H. Wu: “High Virtue is non-virtuous; Therefore it has Virtue. Low Virtue never frees itself from virtuousness; Therefore it has no Virtue” (Wu 1961, p. 77).

11 – See the notes in Chen’s edition.

12 – Note that D. C. Lau’s translation of chapter 38 is based on a reading different from Chen’s.


14 – For a discussion on Aristotle’s theory of friendship in relation to egoism and altruism, see Madigan 1991.

15 – Taking 為之 as “acting according to a conventional moral ideal” as opposed to 無為, “not-acting.”


17 – See Williams 1980.

18 – For Laozi’s own thoughts on the relationship between self-consciousness and moral virtue, see chapters 22, 24, 34, 51, and 63.


21 – See, for example, chapter 25.

22 – Compare Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1.

23 – Feng Youlan first emphasized the similarities between Mencius and Laozi in his *Zhongguo zhexue shi* (I owe this point to P. J. Ivanhoe). See also Hansen 1992, where Mencius and Laozi are discussed, following Feng’s insight.

24 – My translation.

25 – For an interesting discussion of *xin* and *xing* in Mencius, see Ames 1991.


27 – See Wittgenstein 1969, section 204. Compare section 475 of *On Certainty*: “I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants
instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.” See also Wittgenstein 1953, I, section 485.


29 – Compare Analects 2.3.

30 – See, for example, Mencius 1A7. Compare 2A9. See also “Motivation and Moral Action in Mencius” in Nivison 1996.

31 – Mencius 4A17, translation by D. C. Lau, in Lau 1970. Some other passages of a comparable nature include 4A26, 6B7, 2B9, 1B8, 5B7, 5B4, 5A8, 5A3, 5A2, 5A1, 4B30, and 4B24. See also 1B2, where differences in contexts and circumstances reveal important moral distinctions.

32 – As the needs of others vary from circumstance to circumstance, our response to them should adjust accordingly. In this sense, virtue is particular in nature and this allows the possibility of diversity and variation; there may be different but more or less appropriate responses to the same situation. Knowledge of what the particular virtues are may not be useful to secure the virtues because we need to have perceptual sensitivity in order to respond appropriately to different situations. In Confucianism, the development of moral sensitivity consists of training in poetry, ritual, and music.


34 – For a discussion on Winch’s philosophy, see Lyas 1999.

35 – Winch 1968, p. 182.

References


