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Educating for Virtue Across Multiple Cultural and Religious Contexts: On the Problem of Commensurability

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Abstract

This aim of this paper is to explore the concept of intellectual and moral virtue across cultural, religious, and philosophical points of view—with special attention to the role of education in the formation of virtue. The central ambition of this paper is to determine if virtue is a concept that transcends cultural contexts and, should it do so, to what extent? It is shown that certain ubiquitous virtuous character traits are valued across cultural lines, and that similar understandings of virtue emerge in almost all cultural and religious contexts. Despite this, it also clear that virtue functions differently across cultural and religious contexts, and that the expression of virtue may itself look very different. This is demonstrated through various religious texts, works of philosophy, and traditional proverbs from several important traditions: Chinese, South Asian, Greek philosophy, and African moral theory. I conclude with a discussion of challenges facing virtue-based theories.

Introduction

The virtues are by no means a new topic in moral and character education—an understatement to be sure. Indeed the topic moral virtue and more recently, intellectual virtue, continues to interest scholars in many disciplines. Much of this renewed interest can be traced back to Elizabeth Anscombe's (1957) seminal article, "Modern Moral Philosophy," wherein she urges a break from Kantian and Utilitarian ethics, and a return to classical Greek moral theory rooted in virtue. Shortly thereafter the philosophical field of *virtue ethics* was born. A few decades later, responding to an intractable epistemological conundrum put forth by Edmond Gettier (1963), Ernest Sosa (1980) published a now classic article entitled, "The Raft and Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundationalism." Therein he levied his considerable philosophical prowess to put forth a new approach to epistemology—one employing virtue as a powerful epistemological concept. Others found his approach appealing, and soon scholars like Loraine Code (1987), James Montmarquet (1993), and Linda Zagzebski (1996) were discovering novel ways to understand the relationship between belief formation and intellectual virtue. This movement, now called *virtue epistemology*,

occupies a central place in the canon of contemporary work in the theory of knowledge.

What is striking in both cases—virtue ethics and virtue epistemology—is how versatile and powerful the concepts of moral and intellectual virtue are. This prompted three questions: (1) how do other cultures understand virtue; (2) to what extent do these conceptions converge and diverge; and (3) to what extent will multiple conceptions of virtue result in *incommensurability*? Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman (2004) faced similar worries during the early stages of their large-scale empirical and philosophically grounded study of virtue in multiple cultural contexts. They too confronted the possibility that virtues are incommensurate across cultural lines:

When we undertook our project, we started by creating our own list. With little modesty, we asserted that our list included strengths and virtues valued in all contemporary cultures around the world. But when we showed our list to colleagues, we encountered the frequent objection that there are no strengths and virtues valued across all cultures. Indeed, we were told that the subcultural variations along regional, socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic

lines in just the contemporary United States precluded a universal list even for the here and now. We took these criticisms seriously and worried about reifying characteristics valued only at the turn of the new century by upper-middle-class European American academics (p. 33).

It is fair to assume, I believe, that many scholars of comparative education will express similar uncertainties about this project. After all, we live in the age of postmodernity—an age that casts doubt on the project of categorization. As such, I have undertaken this project with great caution and intellectual humility.

This aim of this paper is to explore the concept of intellectual and moral virtue across cultural, religious, and philosophical points of view—with special attention to the role of education in the formation of virtue. The central ambition of this paper is to determine if virtue is a concept that transcends cultural contexts and, should it do so, to what extent? Notably, the perspectives I cover are deeply complex, and only cursory coverage can be given of each. For the sake of clarity, then, when speaking of the Yoruba and Akan peoples, I am largely concerned with role of virtue in their cultural practices; my discussion of Confucianism and Buddhism draws mainly from religious texts and practices, and Greek notions of virtue (unsurprisingly) are drawn largely from philosophical sources. It is shown that certain ubiquitous virtuous character traits are valued across cultural lines, and that similar understandings of virtue emerge in almost all cultural and religious contexts. Despite this, it also clear that virtue functions differently across cultural and religious contexts, and that the *expression* of virtue may itself look very different. This is demonstrated through various religious texts, works of philosophy, and traditional proverbs from several very important traditions: Chinese, South Asian, Greek philosophy, and African moral theory. I conclude with a discussion of challenges facing virtue-based theories.

Virtue in Cultural Context

According to Ninian Smart (1999), three world regions have been particularly influential in the history of religion and ideas—China (Taoism and Confucianism), South Asia (Buddhism and Hinduism), and the West (Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) (p. 2). I follow Smart's lead, but add African culture because of its historical and cultural richness. I survey how virtues are understood and function within several of these philosophical and religious traditions. This discussion, while regrettably brief, provides sufficient ground for making some general observations.

Chinese Virtue – Confucianism

Confucianism was conceived against a backdrop of political turmoil. The Zhou Dynasty (1040? – 256 B. C. E.) had recently disintegrated and the king's authority was severely diminished. What power remained was concentrated in the hands of a number of dukedoms that imposed their own taxes, raised their own armies, and often waged war on each other—and people suffered. Bryan W. Van Norden (2007) offers the following intriguing quote from a leading minister of Jin:

Our ruler has here 4,000 chariots of war. Even if he acts contrary to the Way, it is still necessary to fear him; if he, beyond that, is acting in accordance with the Way, who can prove his opponent? An ox may be meager; but if it fall upon a pig, would you not fear the pig would die? ... If we lead on the multitudes of Jin, using also the forces of the other states? ... if we come thus to punish Lu for its offenses ... what can we seek that we shall not get (p. 33)?

Although the minister was cognizant of the Way (*Dao*)—the principles that govern the meditative life—other concerns clearly trumped it. In fact, brute reality showed that leaders depended more upon force and cunning strategy for prosperity than adherence to the Way. This sort of thinking was out of tune with the general regard ordinary people had for the Way. These person looked to a distant past when “Heaven” granted Kings

power and success based on their possession of *dé* (virtue) and their respect of the Way. This bifurcation generated deep social tension.

It was this chaos into which Confucius was born. The son of a once prosperous family, he made the study and teaching of the old traditions his life's work. Needless to say, his teaching took root. Confucianism is undoubtedly the most instrumental system of thought to emerge from China. According to Norden (2007), Confucius "provided the intellectual background against which all later thinkers react, and he started a movement that continues to be socially and philosophically influential more than two thousand years later" (p. 65). Confucianism's influence soon spread out across East Asian and eventually spanned continents. However, Confucianism is a misleading term. Confucius did not "invent" a brand new religion or system of thought. Rather he expanded on a centuries-old Chinese tradition. Xinzhong Yao (2000) explains:

It is true that as a distinctive 'school' Confucianism began with Confucius. It was Confucius who explored deeply and elaborated extensively on the basic principles of what was to become Confucianism, and it was Confucius and his disciples who succeeded in transmitting and transforming their ancient culture. But it would go too far to suggest that Confucianism was 'created' solely by Confucius and Confucianism was sustained exclusively by the faith in Confucius. In this sense, the word 'Confucianism' is a misnomer for the tradition that is normally referred to as *ru jia*, *ru jiao*, *ru xue* or simply as *ru* in China and other East Asian countries (p. 17).

Nevertheless, Confucius' role was crucial. In virtue of clearly articulating the central tenets of *ru*, and doing so in a compelling and clear way, Confucius revitalized the tradition. What, then, did he have to say?

Confucius was primarily concerned with humans and the principles that shaped humanity.

In particular, he believed that healthy social relationships were essential for a prosperous society. To this end, he advanced two especially important theses: Persons can teach and learn goodness, and a peaceful society is only possible when it is ruled by wisdom (Yao, 2000, p. 26). From these theses, Confucius eventually developed his four key ideas—those that would eventually become the foundation for the Confucian tradition. First, Confucius continued to promote *dao*, which literally translates as "path," "road," or "way." Following *dao* was the basis for moral and peaceful social conditions. Second, Confucius promoted rituals (*li*), which were thought to be instrumental for the cultivation of virtue, and a means of educating persons in the ways of *ru*. Third, he stressed the importance of humaneness (*ren*). Those who practiced *ren* would demonstrate a concern for the wellbeing of others and an avoidance of self-aggrandizement. And, fourth, Confucius promoted general virtue (*dé*). Confucian virtue was understood as a deeply held moral authority that granted persons power to act righteously. Confucius was especially concerned with the cultivation of *dé* among the aristocracy who were ultimately responsible for the prosperity of society (Yao, p. 26). Taken together these four components roughly describe the tenets of Confucianism. Of course, generations of scholars and religious leaders have expanded and transformed classical Confucianism. In the following section, I focus largely on primary sources—the works of Confucius themselves and the five virtues they advance.

The central virtue and one of the guiding principles for Confucius is *ren*. *Ren* functions as a kind of moral attitude and is comprised of various "building block" virtues. When these blocks are fitted together a person will display what Confucius calls "humanity." This is *compassionate* humanity (a concerned regard for the dignity of humans) and is central to the Confucius' social philosophy. The person who possesses *ren* is "a man [sic] who is strong, resolute, simple, and slow to speak is near to humanity" (Confucius, 2010, bk. 1 chap. 14). He seems to suggest that rashness and loquaciousness impede one's ability to understand the human condition. As noted,

however, *ren* is made up of several other virtues (*dé*). These are described in the analects:

Zizhang asked about *ren*. The Master said, “He who can enact five things in the world is *ren*.” When asked for details, he went on, “Reverence, tolerance, trustworthiness, quickness, and generosity. He is reverent, hence he receives no insults; he is tolerant, hence he gains the multitudes; he is trustworthy, hence others entrust him with responsibilities; he is quick, hence he has accomplishments; he is generous, hence he is capable of being placed in charge of others (Confucius, 2010, bk. 17 chap. 6).

These virtues work together and are dependent on each other. One’s generosity should be characterized by earnestness; one’s truthfulness prompts diligence, and so forth. Confucius never talks about the virtues in isolation. Virtue epistemologists have noted this interrelationship between virtues although the issue is a “thorny” one (Zagzebski, 1996, p. 156). Finally, according to Lee Rainey (2010), the moral virtues (*dé*) culminating in (*ren*) are expressed via ritual (*li*) (pp. 34-35). In fact, the cultivation of virtue is directly tied to ritual and education.

Education: The Cultivation of Virtue through Ritual and Self-Reflection

Confucians believe that virtues are acquired through cultivation and education, and/or some mixture of both. “Its chief aim is to educate the learner to be fully human and to become a qualified member of the community of trust, and its primary approach is to enhance self-cultivation and develop students’ capabilities of fulfilling their responsibilities for themselves, for their families and for society at large” (Yao, 2000, p. 283). The goal of Confucian education (which is true of many cultures) is ultimately tied to the social prosperity of the community. Confucius (2010) writes, “Cultivate yourself to bring comfort to the people” (bk. 14, chap. 42). Learning begins with oneself but extends to others. He takes this

one step forward, arguing that a love of learning is requisite for many of the virtues.

If, you love *ren*, but you do not love learning, the flaw is ignorance. If you love knowledge but you do not love learning, the flaw is unruliness. If you love faithfulness but do not love learning, the flaw is harming others. If you love straightforwardness but you do not love learning, the flaw is offensiveness. If you love valor but you do not love learning, the flaw is causing chaos. If you love incorruptibility but you do not love learning, the flaw is recklessness (Confucius, 2010, bk. 17, chap. 8).

The desire to learn—that is, to take an active hand in acquiring new understanding—plays an important role for Confucius. Students who train their minds have the tools available to achieve positive ethical outcomes; they have the necessary know-how and know-that to exercise virtue. Moreover, learning itself refines and strengthens these virtues. Without learning, however, the impulse to behave virtuously may never obtain or (worse still) may result in vicious behavior. There is another important point to be made: “love of knowledge” is also an *intellectual virtue*—one that plays a very important role in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood (2007), for example, argue that the love of knowledge is a central epistemic virtue. Those who love knowledge are prone toward fact checking, persistence, and open-mindedness. In short, those who love learning also love knowledge (pp. 153-182).

Finally, I wish to note a few important features of traditional Confucian education—features that putatively nurture the aforementioned virtues. Educators in the Confucian tradition stress deep reflection, which involves intense study and careful analysis of the subject matter. The ultimate goal of this educational activity—at least on the traditional account—is the perfection of the person. Quite contrary to the Christian view of “original sin” and essential wickedness of human nature,

Confucius held that persons were fundamentally good. Education, then, provided a way to move toward this perfection. Chinese students have amassed a well-deserved (almost stereo typical) reputation for being extremely diligent and hardworking. This might be attributable to the philosophical (and educational) foundation laid by Confucius and his followers. The very first lines of the *Analects* illustrate how important study was to Confucius: “The Master said: To study and at due times practice what one has studied, is this not a pleasure?” For Confucians, education is a lifelong process of self-cultivation that emphasizes strength of will and determination. Timothy Bergen (1995) explains that Chinese emphases on “perfectibility, learning, rationality, effort, and will-power” are closely related to one another in Confucian literature, and that “this fact sheds light upon how Eastern learners view education and explains why effort is seen as important in the process of human perfectibility” (p. 45). In the language of virtue: Chinese educational culture values diligence and steadfastness with respect to learning.

South Asian Virtue – Buddhism

Buddhism is among the largest and most influential religions in the world. Its primary concentration is in the region of South Asia, which includes India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Burma. Leslie Alldritt (2005) estimates that there are approximately 360 million Buddhists in the world, making it the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam (p. 4). It has been estimated that over half of the world’s population lives in areas significantly influenced by Buddhism (Harvey, 1990, p. 1). Numerous varieties of Buddhism exist, although three broad schools are dominant: the Southern variety where Theravada Buddhism is prevalent, the Eastern version which mixes Chinese religious tradition with Buddhism, and the Northern variety found in Tibetan culture—the modern inheritors of ancient Indian Buddhism (Harvey, 1990, p. 4). The following analysis draws from the sacred canons of each of these schools with the intention of providing a general account of Buddhist understandings of virtue.

The founder of Buddhism, Siddhārtha Gautama (500? – 350? B.C.E.) was born and taught near the Ganges River in Northeastern India. However, the historical facts about his life remain contested. Most accounts, though, assert that he was born into a wealthy family and with the prospect of hold power. Michael Carrithers (1983) offers the following sketch:

The Buddha was born the son of a king, and so grew up with wealth, pleasure and the prospect of power, all goods commonly desired by human beings. As he reached manhood, however, he was confronted with a sick man, an old man and a corpse. He had lived a sheltered life, and these affected him profoundly, for he realized that no wealth or power could prevent him too from experiencing illness, old age and death. He also saw a wandering ascetic, bent on escaping these sufferings. Reflecting on what he had seen, he reached the first great turning-point of his life: against the wishes of his family he renounced home, wife, child and position to become a homeless wanderer, seeking release from this apparently inevitable pain (p. 2).

Despite Carrithers own admission that his account is only roughly true, it nevertheless explains an important feature of the Buddhist religion. The Buddha’s path to enlightenment originated in his confrontation with the existence of pain and suffering. Carrithers goes on to describe how the Buddha began his spiritual journey by practicing meditation and self-mortification. These proved ineffective until one day he determined to quietly reflect upon the human plight. From this tranquil contemplation he achieved an awakening—solving the “enigma” of suffering. For the next forty-five years he spread his message of enlightenment, and a world religion was born (p. 3).

To grasp how Buddhists understand the concept virtue, it is necessary to cover the basic teaching of Buddhism. According to Stephen Laumakis (2008), the most important concept in all Buddhist thought is the notion that who we

are is product of our thinking. Just as the body is shaped by food and exercise (or lack thereof), so too can we “maintain, shape, transform, and indeed, strengthen” our minds’ “powers by meditative practices and exercises” (p. 40). To control the mind and thus perception is the goal of Buddhist religious experience. Bearing this insight in mind, let us briefly consider the tenets and practices of Buddhism as manifest in the Middle Way, Four Noble Truths, and Eightfold Path.

The Three Teachings

The Buddha taught that a way between extreme asceticism and hedonism existed—what came to be known as the Middle Way. The Buddha discovered that self-denial and mortification produced debilitating emotional and physical suffering, and failed to live up to its promises. While, on the other hand, hedonistic enjoyment of life’s pleasures failed to fulfill his desire for peace, worldly pleasure was too fleeting to bring lasting joy. The Middle Way, however, “gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment...” (Laumakis, 2008, p. 47). Metaphysically, the implications of the Middle Way are that human souls are not fixed and eternal, nor are they destined for ultimate annihilation. Instead, they are *annatta*—lacking a fixed self (Laumakis, p. 270). Epistemologically, the Middle Way suggests cautious path between naïve certainty and total skepticism about our beliefs.

The Four Noble Truths capture the basic teachings of the Buddha and are modeled on Indian medical science: confirming that patient is sick, diagnosing the sickness, prescribing treatment, and implementing the cure. The Truths follow this pattern. The first noble truth simply states that *dukkha* (suffering and pain) exists—both existential and physical *dukkha*. This is the starting point of the Buddha’s thought. The second Noble Truth is more complex. It states that the causes of *dukkha* are linked in a causal chain that begins with “contact” with the world, others, and ourselves. This contact produces sensation, which in turn producing craving, and craving produces

suffering when it is unrequited. The third Noble truth states that the cessation of these causes of *dukkha* is possible. Finally, the fourth Noble Truth prescribes the *Way* to overcome *dukkha*—the Eightfold Path (Laumakis, 2008, pp. 52-60).

The specifics of the Buddha’s Middle Way are laid out in the Eightfold path. These steps are (Olson, 2005, p. 54):

Right View or Understanding

Right Thought or Purpose

Right Speech

Right Behavior

Right Livelihood

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

The term “path” suggests that one takes consecutive and linear steps toward enlightenment. This is a misunderstanding as these steps occur simultaneously. Moreover, the word “right” indicates that one correctly perceives the true state of affairs or reality. These steps are also divisible into three main categories: Wisdom, Meditation, and Moral Action. The first category—Wisdom—indicates that one grasps the Four Noble Truths and their implications for life. “This is the greatest wisdom that one can achieve in this life. These are skillful, useful, and beneficial views. If you attain this wisdom, you are liberated from the cycle of pain and sorrow” (Olson, p. 55). Grasping this Wisdom recommends taking steps toward addressing the existence of *dukkha*. Meditation, the second category, explicates this massive mental struggle to free the mind of evil states. Controlling the mind and cultivating strength of will are essential because the mind defaults to craving and grasping for things that lead to suffering. The final category—Moral Action—involves our conduct in speech, behavior, and livelihood. Here Buddhists believe that the reduction of *dukkha* depends upon our willingness resist participating in the causal

chain of suffering. Put differently, when we resist repaying an evil with another evil we stop the chain reaction that promulgates further suffering. This final category gets us closer to a Buddhist theory of virtue.

Buddhism and Virtue

Three steps on the Eightfold Path deal explicitly with moral action. It is not surprising that Buddhists have written extensively on moral character. According to Damien Keown (2005), “There is more to the Buddhist moral life than following rules. Rules must not only be followed, but followed for the right reasons and with the correct motivation. It is here that the role of the virtues becomes important.” He goes on to claim that the precepts (rules) and virtues are two sides of the same coin. Precepts are essentially “a list of things a virtuous person would never do” (p. 12). Like many other religious traditions, Buddhist virtues are supposed to be habituated so that they come forth naturally from a person’s character. This corresponds with Zagzebski’s (1996) observations about the motivational component of intellectual and moral virtues—the view that they impel us to act and think in particular ways (p. 167). Likewise, the virtues counteract their *dukkha* producing opposites—*klesas* (what we call vices in the West). In other words, those who are virtuous are less prone toward generating more suffering in the world.

Perhaps the most influential list of virtues was composed in the Mahayana tradition. In this tradition, the bodhisattva (an enlightened person or being) practices six core virtues—referred to as the *paramita* or Six Perfections. These include generosity, morality, patience, perseverance, meditation, and insight (Keown, 2005, p. 17). However, earlier it was noted that followers of the Buddha must struggle to avoid negative thinking. This fact directly affects the way that such virtues are practiced. Suppose an enlightened Buddhist monk decides to minister to the needs of homeless people. He discovers an alley where the homeless are living in cardboard boxes. They are dirty, underfed, and sickly. A natural human response would be to place

oneself in these persons shoes, and to be filled with despair.

To become emotionally identified with her would be like a person without any ability to swim jumping into a lake to save a drowning child, which would result in a double drowning. It is necessary for a compassionate person to be cool-headed and emotionally self-controlled, a posture similar to that of a medical doctor analyzing a patient and prescribing a remedy in a detached manner—which does not mean a cold-hearted, uncaring way. The Buddhist goal is to strive for the spontaneous exercise of compassion (Olson, 2005, p. 69).

Thus the monk has learned to control his mind. He understands (insight) the situation and feels appropriate amounts of compassion and generosity. He also understands that his ministrations—while good and noble—will make only a small difference. And he perseveres; he returns to that ally each day, all the while refusing to succumb to *dukkha*.

Education: Obtaining Virtue through the Five Precepts

Virtue is taught via the Five Precepts that *lay* Buddhists are encouraged to follow in both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions. These include a respect for life, avoidance of theft, abstinence from sexual misconduct, avoidance of untruthfulness, and avoidance of drunkenness. The precepts “are meant to be followed by Buddhists at all times, the object being to establish a habit-formation of virtuous and restrained conduct, in opposition to the unwholesome tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion...” (Story, 2009, para. 7). Living by these principles not only encourages self-control and moral behavior, but also places a person in a positive—habit forming—state of mind that affects deep change. Helmut Klar (2011) offers several methods for inculcating the Five Precepts into a child’s education. First, he notes that imitation (of parents and teachers) is of central importance. When parents take their

dharmic responsibilities seriously, and live those convictions out, children will imitate them. Klar also encourages parents to celebrate Buddhism with their children. This can be done by keeping images of the Buddha in the home, and celebrating festival days. Finally, he notes the importance of reading and discussing Buddhist texts with children, especially the Five Precepts (pp. 2-6). Taken together, such activities are foundations for “learning by heart”—that is, fostering a deep regard and love of Buddhism from a very early age.

Cultivation of virtue is integral to following the Middle Way of the Buddha, and thus assumes privileged place in Buddhist monastic education. Future monks are taught the necessity of cultivating inward virtues in both ritual-based education and their philosophical training. George B. J. Dryfuss (2003), a Westerner who studied in the Dalai Lama’s temple for 15 years, describes several ways this is done. First, he points out that newly arrived monks are immersed in rigorous ritual life. New monks, for example, are encouraged to recite texts with specific and highly precise inflection. This is thought to preserve textual meaning, but it is also thought to cultivate the virtues of conscientiousness and carefulness (pp. 86-87). If monks decide to pursue scholarship in the monastery, their training regimen intensifies significantly. They continue to memorize large portions of text (largely philosophical texts) but add to this education training in debate—the primary method of teaching for many monastic teachers. The central goal of which is to produce perspicuity of thought and critical reasoning skills. As noted earlier, however, the skills (or virtues) do not operate in isolation from other virtues. The monk, whose thoughts penetrate truth, is one whose character is deeply virtuous (Dryfuss, p. 170).

Greek Philosophy

Virtue has a long history in Western (European) thought—particularly through the influence of Greek philosophy and Christianity—and one could fill several volumes tracing its extensive influence. Instead, I provide a very rough sketch of virtue by highlighting

some key concepts that emerge from Greek philosophy and contemporary virtue ethics.

The two key concepts that preoccupied ancient Greek moral theory were virtue (*arête*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*). Prior to Plato and Aristotle, however, the two concepts were nearly synonymous. “[Virtue] amounts, roughly, to success in life, where such success is measured largely if not entirely in external terms—in the extent to which one has acquired the typically recognized good things in life: wealth, power, friends, and the like” (Meyer, 2008, pp. 3-4). The distinction between virtue and happiness on this account is blurry. Virtue is understood almost exclusively by its external manifestation, e.g., one is virtuous when one is obviously successful. In Plato and Aristotle, however, virtue is redefined as an internal characteristic or trait (Meyer, p. 4). One might act courageously, for example, but one is courageous only insofar as courage is a deeply engrained character trait.

Aristotle is probably the most influential Greek philosopher to articulate a concept of virtue. He begins by noting that our actions generally have a goal (*telos*)—a reason for having done them. “Every skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good” (Aristotle, 2004, p. 3). Indeed, if our actions lacked some sort of goal they would be essentially meaningless. Aristotle also distinguishes between two forms of *tele*: there are goals that facilitate achieving other goals, and there are goals that we pursue *for their own sake*. Consider the act of making cookies. There are a whole series of steps I must take in order to make (and eat) a batch of cookies. I have to run to the market and purchase the ingredients, prepare the batter, knead the dough, pre-heat the oven, and so forth. Each of these steps is a *telos*—but each points toward a greater *telos*: to enjoy a batch of fresh cookies. This greater *telos*—enjoying cookies—explains the steps I took along the way. “The ubiquitous human phenomenon of doing things for reasons, therefore, depends on there being at least one thing we pursue for its own sake” (Meyer, 2008, p. 52). Of course, there are many things we pursue for their own sake—friends, lovers,

children, prosperity, pleasure, and so on. But, as Aristotle notes, “we choose them also for the sake of happiness, on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness; whereas happiness no one chooses for the sake of any of these nor indeed for the sake of anything else” (p. 3). In short, for Aristotle happiness is the ultimate good and the *telos* for which we should all strive.

What role do virtues like courage, honesty, and practical wisdom play in the acquisition of happiness? To address this question, two points need to be clarified. First, Aristotle tells us that our basic function—that which makes us distinctly human—is our capacity to reason. Roger Crisp (2004) offers an interesting and helpful analogy. “It is worth remembering that in Greek a horse that ran fast could be said to have a ‘virtue’ or excellence, in so far as it performed well its characteristic activity” (p. xiv). A horse has a virtue when it performs well in one of its basic functions. Many take Aristotle to be endorsing what has come to be known as the “function argument, which takes the following form (Meyer, 2008, p. 63):

1. Happiness is “doing well.”
2. Doing well means performing our human function well.
3. Our human function is reasoning.
4. Therefore, happiness consists in using our reason well.
5. Therefore, happiness is activity of excellence of reason.

When persons reason well—the basic function—they do so because they exercise virtue. Nafsika Athanassoulis (2011) elaborates: “If the function of man [sic] is reason, then the good man is the man who reasons well. This is the life of excellence or of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is the life of virtue—activity in accordance with reason, man’s highest function” (para. 32). Thus happiness is the byproduct of reasoning well—of virtuous reasoning. This leads to a second consideration.

Second, the *nature* of reason is tied to Aristotle’s understanding of the bipartite soul. Briefly, the soul is divisible into rational and non-rational parts (Aristotle, 2004, pp. 103-104). The rational segment is the source of the *intellectual virtues*—the chief of which is practical wisdom. It is less obvious how the non-rational part of the soul relates to reason. Once more a division is created—this time into a part concerned with things like nutrition, but also a part that has “more in common with reason, and is capable both of opposing it (in the case of a weak-willed person, for instance) and of obeying it. The virtues of this second sub-part are the virtues of character: courage, generosity, and so on” (Crisp, 2004, p. xiv). Thus, excellent (virtuous) reasoning is tied to both virtues of character and intellectual virtues. As a consequence, those who are morally and intellectually virtuous experience *eudaimonia*.

Education: Cultivating Virtue through Education and Habituation

How, then, are the (moral and intellectual) virtues acquired? In the first place, Aristotle (2004) thinks they are acquired through different and separate means: “intellectual virtue owes its origin and development mainly to teaching, for which reason its attainment requires experience and time; virtue of character (*ēthos*) is a result of habituation (*ethos*), for which reason it has acquired its name through a small variation on ‘*ethos*’” (p. 23). Thus Aristotle’s virtues are acquired in two ways—through teaching (intellectual virtues) and habituation (moral virtues). Let us consider intellectual virtues first.

Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of intellectual virtue: the contemplative and the calculative. According to Dunne (1999), contemplative virtues are learned deductively—that is, one starts with the general and moves toward the specific (pp. 49-63). These virtues include *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *nous* (intuitive reason), and *Sophia* (philosophical wisdom). *Episteme* or “scientific knowledge” provides a good example. One can (putatively) only acquire this virtue deductively—that is, by listening to descriptions, considering

explanations, and studying the arguments of one's instructors. The upshot is that it is acquired through teaching, *not habituation*. The calculative virtues, on the other hand, are more difficult to restrict to the result of teaching alone. In brief, the calculative virtues include *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *techne* (skill). These virtues "enable one to attain 'variable' (contingent) truths that are 'in agreement with right desire'" (Battaly, 2006, p. 202). Moreover, each is acquired via inductive and deductive teaching. Practical wisdom, for example, is obtained through listening and considering lectures about "what is noble and just" (Aristotle, 2004, p. 6). Thus one learns practical wisdom via deduction. But induction is also important. This entails learning through practice—e.g., practice adjudicating and considering particulars—which begins to look very similar to *habituation*. I consider this point in more depth in the following chapter.

The moral virtues, as noted above, are acquired through habituation. "We become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by temperate actions, and courageous by courageous actions" (Aristotle, 2004, p. 23). In short, we become virtuous by *practicing* virtue, which has the clear implication that the moral upbringing of students cannot be taught by instruction alone. It requires that children consistently practice virtuous acts thereby acquiring truly virtuous character traits. The matter is complicated, however, by Aristotle's claim that one cannot become truly morally virtuous without the presence of the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom.

It is clear from what we have said, then, that we cannot be really good without practical wisdom, or practically wise without virtue of character. Moreover, on these lines one might also meet the dialectical argument that could be used to suggest that the virtues exist in isolation from one another. The same person, it might be argued, is not best suited by nature for all the virtues, so that he will already have acquired one before he has acquired another. This is

possible in respect of the natural virtues, but not in respect of those on the basis of which a person is said to be really good; for he will possess all of them as soon as he acquires the one, practical wisdom (p. 118).

This is because the complexities of life often demand we discern a how to act properly. This interdependence of intellectual and moral virtues is at the heart of Aristotle's argument for the unity of the virtues.

African Concepts of Virtue

There is a vibrant philosophical community on the African continent. For example, in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Kwasi Wiredu (2004) assembles an impressively diverse collection of essays addressing topics like the philosophy of mind, history of African philosophy, logic, and moral philosophy—all from a distinctly African perspective. But what is African philosophy? Somewhat simplified, there are presently two general perspectives on African philosophy—the traditional and the anti-ethnophilosophical. According to Wiredu, "Traditionalists have tended...to restrict the concerns of modern African philosophy to issues having some connection with traditional African thought and culture." On the other hand, the anti-ethnophilosophers argue that "the modern world presents intellectual challenges which may not all admit of such a derivation, and to abstain from involvement with them on the grounds of a non-African origination is unlikely to prove a blessing to Africa in the modern world" (p. 4). The division, then, centers on the role of Western thought. This issue extends beyond the concerns of this chapter. I would note, however, that the notion of virtue advanced here draws from traditional African philosophy.

It is also worth noting that the term *African Philosophy* is equivalent to using the term *Western philosophy*; each encompasses innumerable philosophical perspectives shaded by a larger cultural milieu. Sensitive to this, I have tried to restrict my generalizations to those made by Africans doing philosophy. There is

good reason for this. Africa is in the midst of crisis of self-determination—the consequence of having been aggressively colonized for centuries. It is for those whose lives are tied to the African continent, whose futures are (literally) at stake, to generalize about the nature of that future and self-identity.

Foundations for Moral Thought in Africa

In most African cultures, the foundation of ethics is twofold: a respect for the individual appropriately balanced with the needs of the community. But this is a tenuous balance as Segun Gbadegesin (1991) notes:

From this it follows that there need not be any tension between individuality and community since it is possible for an individual to freely give up his/her own perceived interest for the survival of the community. But in giving up one's interests thus, one is also sure that the community will not disown one and that one's well being will be its concern.... The idea of individual rights, based on a conception of individuals as atoms, is therefore bound to be foreign to this system. For community is founded on notions of an intrinsic and enduring relationship among its members (pp. 66-67).

To understand the virtues, one first needs to grasp the interdependent relationship between the individual and the community, and the mutual demands engendered by this relationship. Gbadegesin uses the term *survival* quite deliberately; many African communities have extremely limited access to natural resources. The individual that fails to grasp her obligations to community risk expulsion. What, then, is the character of this bond between the person and her community? Traditionally, this connection has been understood as fundamentally rooted in religion—that is, that the basis for morality is inextricably tied to the deeply religious nature of African culture. Several notable African scholars have propagated this view, including Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, and J. O. Awolala. Unfortunately, this view also misses an

important point: “These authors fail to understand what makes religion important in African life, namely, the welfare of the individual and that of society” (Bewaji, 2004, p. 397). African people are not—in the pejorative sense—so deeply religious as to have no regard for human welfare outside of religious systems of thought. Indeed, religion serves as a means of discharging their responsibilities to maintain human welfare. Devotion and worship of deities is performed genuinely, but not for the sake of the deity. Rather religious worship is offered for the benefit of society. When a deity fails to serve (or bless) the interests of the society, people are free to sever that relationship (Bewaji, p. 399). In short, African people *value* human life for its own sake—not as the product of blind religiosity.

African Virtue

Bearing these contextualizing remarks in mind, we can now turn our attention to African notions of virtue. Kwame Gyekye (2011) notes, “Good character is the essence of the African moral system, the linchpin of the moral wheel” (section. 1). Indeed, he also claims that:

Many writers have made the observation that despite the indisputable cultural diversity that arises from Africa's ethnic pluralism, there are underlying affinities in many areas of the African life; this is surely true in the African religious and moral outlook. There are some features of the moral life and thought of various African societies that... are common or shared features (section. 2).

Following Gyekye's assertion that “good character” is the basis for moral reasoning in African society, I examine the two largest ethnic populations in Western Africa—the Yoruba and Akan people.

Bewaji notes that the Yoruba hold to a set of pervasive ethical norms that regulate the behavior of both persons and the gods. Those who live uprightly—whose character exhibit virtue with respect to themselves, tribal elders, and others in general are variously called *oniwa*

rere, oniwa tutu, and Omoluwabi (Bewaji, 2004, 399). These terms denote persons that are esteemed in their respective societies for their virtuous character. Bolatito Lanre-Abass (2008) highlights six core virtues in Yoruba society. These include integrity (*iwa*), justice (*iwa eto*), trust (*igbagbo*), accountability (*akoyawo*), sensitivity (*iyara ni imo*), and service (*ise iranse*) (p. 132). The importance of cultivating such virtues is caught up in the Yoruba proverb, “The adornment of a smile is white teeth; the adornment of a person is good character” (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 268). Such proverbs are illustrative: they succinctly encapsulate the rooted cultural wisdom about the importance of virtue. As noted above, Africa societies emphasize the individual’s responsibility to the community and vice versa; the Yoruba are no different. The good or virtuous community member values and speaks highly of her town. “Whoever says the town is not pleasant should pack his or her luggage and head for the bush” (Owomoyela, p. 314). Indeed, numerous proverbs recommend that loyal community members should be recognized and rewarded for their faithfulness to community.

The Akan people of Western Africa echo similar sentiments. “When virtue finds a town, the town thrives and abides.” The Akan link the success of a town to its character—or rather, the character of its people. This reiterates the social nature of African moral thought and central place of character. Indeed, individual happiness is only achieved when one is in right standing with his fellows: “The well-being of man depends on his fellow man” (Gyekye, 2011, section 8). Among the several virtues valued by the Akan are goodwill, sympathy, compassion, and altruism. But this raises another question: How are the virtues acquired or learned?

Education: Personhood and the Acquisition of Virtuous Character

Becoming virtuous is an ongoing process social education in which persons continually evolve. In fact, the relationship between character and education is the basis for understanding personhood in African thought. Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) explains:

The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the *it*-status of early child-hood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the *person*-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense—an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one (p. 176).

According to Menkiti we begin our life-journey with *it*-status—that is, without a secure identity. Over time, however, through responsible participation in the life of the community we obtain *person*-status. D. A. Masolo (2004) argues that personhood is actually “attained through an educational process that intensifies at every stage in one’s growth and development” (p. 491). He offers the example of message carrying. Children in many African communities are tasked with carrying message from one person to another. While seemingly innocuous, such task are designed to train children “in the virtue of obedience and serve to others while also bring them to the knowledge of close and distant relatives, an obvious attempt to fit children into the larger social system...” (Masolo, p. 492). As children mature into adolescence and then to adulthood, their social obligations increase (as does their status as persons). Ideally, their character develops in similar proportion. Of course, both good and bad character traits may emerge. One Akan proverb states that “one is not born with a bad head, but one takes it on from the earth” (Gyekye, 2011, section 3). In short, persons are not born with intrinsic character traits and habits, but obtain them through time, training, and experience.

Some Points of Contact and Divergence

It goes without saying that the intellectual traditions discussed are radically different in many ways: their religions, cultural customs and traditions, even their moral practices and laws. Certain Asian cultures, for example, believe it is perfectly ordinary and unproblematic to give monetary gifts to potential clients in order to gain their business. In the United States such practices are illegal. Likewise, the sacrifice of animals is an act of worship for many cultures, but a cause for horror in many European cultures. This highlights the fact that, although two cultures may value similar virtues, the manner in which these virtues shape customs and practices leaves a lot of room for difference. Let us consider some of these similarities and differences.

The Confucian notion of *Ren*—the sum total of virtues leading to compassion—is a crucial component of Confucian ethics. Both Buddhist and African traditions also have placed great emphasis on an empathetic stance toward others. Indeed, the stability of African communities hinges on a concern for the wellbeing of other members of the community. Although Aristotle was primarily concerned with individual happiness, he also believed that those who were virtuous would display attitudes of friendliness, generosity, and justice.

Buddhism's emphasis on enlightenment is founded on controlling and modifying one's cognitive life. A similar thrust is evident in Confucianism's emphasis on the importance of education. Recall that Confucius (2010) believed a love of knowledge central to the acquisition of virtue. In fact, he believed that one would become vicious without knowledge (bk 14, chap. 42). This partially explains why both traditions emphasize diligence and hard work with respect to learning. Aristotle also stressed the importance of the cognitive life, believing that our most basic function is reason. Those who reason well embody the virtues. They also experience happiness and Aristotle (2004) tells us "happiness, therefore, will be some form of contemplation" (p. 198).

With respect to the virtues of character, Aristotle argued that they are obtained through habituation and practice. This insight is echoed in African moral thought. Children are given multi-layered tasks that develop character, and initiate them into the larger community. The latter is intended to cultivate a concern for the wellbeing of the community at large. This is a form of habituation, or learning by practice and repetition, and a feature that African societies share with the other traditions discussed. The rigorous memory training undergone by Buddhist monks, for example, teaches diligence, conscientiousness and carefulness (recall, they must inflect perfectly). Furthermore, Confucians, Buddhists, and Aristotelians share a regard for rules and/or precepts. These do not replace the cultivation of virtue. Rather, they provide a framework that enables persons to mature into virtue.

A devotion to community is a central feature of many African societies. Indeed, one's personhood hinges on maturing into a responsible (virtuous) adult. For the Yoruba this involves cultivating integrity, justice, trustworthiness, accountability, sensitivity, and service. These community-directed virtues are echoed in each of the traditions considered. This is evident in Confucian idea of *ren*—of becoming "near to humanity" (Confucius, 2010, bk 1, chap. 14). The person who has *ren* has a deep concern for other members of the community. Buddhists also practice community-directed virtues. For example, the custom of giving is an ancient practice intended to bring the negative craving for personal possessions under control, but it is also practiced for the sake of the wellbeing and unity of the community (Olson, 2005, p. 104). Finally, in a passage on the virtue of friendship, Aristotle (2004) states clearly that a concern for community is tied to a person's honor: "The person who contributes nothing to the community is not honored, since what is common is given to the person who benefits the community, and honor is something common" (p. 163).

Clearly positive accounts of virtue are present in each of the traditions considered. In this respect, the concept of virtue putatively

transcends cultural “borders” and religious traditions. But this does not diminish the fact that cultures also differ in terms of the virtues. Martin and Seligman (2004) conducted a survey of 15,000 persons from numerous distinct cultural contexts, and undertook a large-scale historical survey of ancient traditions to determine how virtues function in multiple contexts. They found that, despite these variations, six core virtues were present in every cultural context:

When data collection was complete, analysis involved condensing each list by locating thematically similar virtues and classifying them under an obviously emerging core virtue. By that term, we mean an abstract ideal encompassing a number of other, more specific virtues that reliably converge to the recognizable higher-order category (p. 35).

These higher-order categories included: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Twenty-four additional and more specific virtues were then categorized under each of these headings. Here there was a greater degree of variety between cultures. It is also important to note that these higher-order virtues did not share a one-to-one relationship across cultures.

While much more research should be done on the topic discussed in this paper, I one particularly powerful observation should be made about cross-cultural communication. Virtue—or more precisely—virtuous communication might aid in ameliorating cultural misapprehensions, misunderstandings, and in extreme cases—xenophobia. David Carr (2003) has pointed out that the strength of virtue theories is that the language it employs cuts across cultural divides:

To be sure, we can see that people from different parts of the world have very different—even contradictorily opposed—moral beliefs, but we are nevertheless able to recognize certain cross-cultural criteria of moral attitude

and conduct. The Moslem [sic] shopkeeper down the road has different beliefs from me, but I am well able to appreciate his honesty, integrity, courage and industry; on the other hand, I may have no trouble recognizing the racist bigots who persecute him—albeit in the name of my own culture—for the liars and cowards that they are. It is also clearly important that some such cross-cultural criteria of moral value are recognizable if there is to be the possibility of holding some cultures to moral account precisely for their injustice, mendacity, intemperateness or cruelty. From this viewpoint, it seems a mistake to index virtues to rival moral traditions in the manner of some recent neo-idealist moral and social theories—for the language of virtue is arguably the cross-cultural ethical currency of humankind (p. 231).

The evidence presented thus far suggests that Carr is correct; talk of courage, honesty, and justice are not foreign concepts to those of diverse backgrounds. Carr does not mention, however, that the cross-cultural “language of virtue” is predicated on a *disposition* and *willingness* to communicate. I suggest, then, that certain character traits are crucial if cultural exchange and understanding is to be achieved. An individual and society should be open-minded and epistemically humble. An open-minded person or society is receptive to other ideas and customs; it values and thus strives to understand others. In short, such persons (and cultures) begin with the presupposition that what we *know* and *understand* about other people groups is potentially wrong-headed, limited, or misguided.

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