

The Instrumentality of the Virtues: Are Virtues Merely Means to Ends?

The Virtues: A Very Short Introduction,

Craig A. Boyd and Kevin Timpe

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The Virtues by Craig A. Boyd and Kevin Timpe is supposed to be a work about the virtues themselves. Virtue is not limited by language or by race, so one would expect the book to be properly multicultural. However, the entire book is Graeco-Abrahamic, except for a single chapter on Confucianism, which is sometimes erroneous and ultimately below standard. The book is also permeated by an utterly unjustified notion of the instrumentality of virtuosity, which the authors treat as though it were traditional.

Key words: virtues; instrumentality; cross-cultural comparison; duties; Confucianism

Philosophically, one might wonder of a book titled *The Virtues* why it is not titled *Virtue Ethics* instead. But virtuosity is not limited to morality, and the two are not equivalent: “There are also intellectual and productive virtues” (4). This is presumably why *The Virtues: A Very Short Introduction*, by Craig A. Boyd and Kevin Timpe, is so called, but there is only a single chapter in the book that considers intellectual virtue, and the others focus on virtue ethics, in spite of their claim that “we intend this book as a work about the virtues themselves, not about constructing various theoretical frameworks for the virtues (i.e. ‘virtue theory’)” (18).

For Boyd and Timpe, virtue is “an excellent way of being” (1) or, more precisely, “an excellent and stable quality of the soul that enables a person to act well regarding some kind of activity” (4). “Good habits” are said to persist over time, promote the maturity of its possessor, and will enable one to practise an activity with both ease and pleasure. A vice is said to be the opposite: “an improper orientation toward a good that a virtue aims at” (9), where what is “improper” is what is not conducive to the good. Moral rules are purportedly descriptions of what the morally excellent do, which are simultaneously prescriptions for the morally defective. And virtuous people are those that enjoy doing virtuous things and express disgust at vicious things. This seems circular to me—that virtue is what the virtuous do and the virtuous are those that have virtue—and false—that “as the chef finds the poorly made dish disgusting, so the virtuous person finds the immoral act repulsive”—for it is quite conceivable that even Michelin star chefs would enjoy the entirely processed fast-food of a takeaway “restaurant.” I am inclined to agree with their assessment that the virtuous are virtuous with ease, but it does not seem to me necessary that one does so with pleasure; morality is, generally speaking, not something renowned for being especially easy.

Virtues are “socially and culturally situated,” (5) which presumably situates Boyd and Timpe amongst moral relativists. However, they also have “common cross-cultural elements” (5), which would suggest that there is something objective about them, or at least universally transcultural, which is, practically

speaking, no different from being objective. Boyd and Timpe never properly assert their position on this issue, but it seems to me, perhaps because they are both frequent writers on Christian virtue ethics, that they think that there are objective virtues but that their expressions are relative—that, for example, prudence is an objective virtue, but how one exercises prudence might differ by their culture.

The moral virtues, according to Boyd and Timpe, are the Graeco-Christian four cardinal virtues of prudence (Greek: *phronēsis* φρόνησις, Latin: *prudentia*), justice (Greek: *dikaíosynē* δικαιοσύνη, Latin: *iustitia*), temperance (Greek: *sōphrosynē* σωφροσύνη, Latin: *temperantia*), and fortitude (Greek: *andreía* ἀνδρεία, Latin: *fortitudo*), which are called “cardinal” because the other virtues “hinge” (*cardo*) on them.

Prudence is the most important because all activity is under its purview, which is why Aristotle thought it the highest virtue, Plato said the ideal ruler should be a prudent philosopher king, and Aquinas thought that political prudence was the chief quality amongst good rulers. I am wont to object to this prioritization of prudence, even amongst philosophers. The romantic heroes that we read about in books, the princes and knights in shining armour, and the heroes in reality, warriors and leaders—these heroes are seldom prudent, but they are always just, always perseverant, always courageous, always strong, always respectable, and always honourable. Boyd and Timpe neglect to mention, furthermore, that Plato thought temperance the highest virtue—as the conviction shared by all the classes of Kallipolis (Καλλίπολις) about who should rule (*Republic* 430d–432a)—which is indicative of the greater oversight that the two virtues reduce into a single virtue of wisdom, or common sense, which applies to both the appetite and the intellect.

The fourth virtue of justice offers the most disagreement, and Boyd and Timpe divide it into three types: legal justice, distributive justice, and commutative justice. Legal justice is “a requirement of obedience to the law that aims at the common good of society,” distributive justice is when “the state—considered as the *res publica*—owes me protection and retribution if necessary,” and “commutative justice is what I owe another person considered as a person” (37). Note though that there is no mention of *social justice*, for sensible people realize that plundering a hardworking person’s wallet to “redistribute” to unworking people is not just at all—by which I mean that justice is an external relation between individuals, not an interrelation within a collective, and I am inclined to think that Boyd and Timpe agree with me here.

“Intellectual virtues are habits of the mind that facilitate the pursuit of truth, the avoidance of error, or other epistemic goods”—what the epistemic goods are, and why they are goods, they do not say—and “intellectual vices are habits of the mind that frustrate these goals” (40). It is possible to be intellectually virtuous but morally vicious. For Boyd and Timpe, intellectual virtues are curiosity, open-mindedness, courage, and charity. However, they do not offer a reason as to why this is the case. So, it remains unclear why these are intellectual virtues rather than those proposed by Aristotle: the three theoretical virtues of wisdom (*sophía* σοφία), knowledge (*epistēmē* ἐπιστήμη) and intuition (*noûs* νοῦς), the practical virtue of prudence (*phronēsis* φρόνησις), and the productive virtue of art (*tékhnē* τέχνη), as well as several subjacent intellectual virtues.

The theological virtues are faith (*fides*), hope (*spes*), and charity (*caritas*). Faith, which is supposedly different from naïveté, is “a kind of trust in another person where the other proves to be trustworthy” (80), which seems to me no different than trust sustained, and false—because we should say that one must be justified in whom they trust, but one does not need to justify their faith in the LORD, else there would be no believers that are not also theologians. Likewise, even in a non-theological context,

it seems quite demanding to expect others to prove their trustworthiness before we ever put faith in them; businesspeople are required to have faith in all kinds of people all the time—they trust that they will get the job done, even if it is their first time meeting them. Boyd and Timpe also assert that “faith is the kind of assent to the truths that we do not know with certainty” (81), which certainly has the appearance of a naïve disposition for believing what one is not quite justified in believing. Hope, which is allegedly different from wishful thinking, is an emotion when one hopes *for* things and a virtue when one hopes *in* God. As a virtue, it appears to me merely a desire, for it is nothing more than the reliance upon an invisible power, rather than one’s own efforts, to obtain. Hope is when one wishes to win the lottery; religious hope, as Boyd and Timpe describe it, is when one wishes to win the lottery without ever having bought a scratch card in the first place. Apparently, the fullness of theological virtue is in charity, for in charity “a person is united with God and with others” (79), but I, for one, cannot make sense out of a unification with God without first having faith in him, and it seems to me for good reason that we call Abraham the Father of Faith and consider this a superlative title. By analogy, the Good Samaritan may be considered the paradigm of charity by anybody of any faith, and it seems more apt to me to associate his charity with a moral virtue with certain Christian theological connotations—“thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18)—and to leave *the* theological virtue as faith, being what is central to theology in the first place.

Boyd and Timpe’s book is almost wholly Abrahamic, but it does include a section on Confucian virtues. However, this section is riddled with errors and misunderstandings. They say that Confucius 孔夫子 (551–479 BCE), Mencius 孟子 (385–303/302 BCE alt. 372–289 BCE) and Xunzi (c. 310–c. 235 BCE alt. c. 314–c. 217 BCE) all emphasize the way (*dao* 道) as the highest good and moral exemplars as those who followed the *dao*. Confucianism seeks to recapture the *dao* that was present in the ancient sage kings, hence Confucius says that “I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity” (*Analects* 7:1). They say that “the *dao* could be found in the Zhou dynasty (approximately the 18th to 12th centuries BCE). But by his time, Confucius thought, the *dao* had been lost” (64).

Not only was the Zhou 周 from c. 1046 to 256 BCE—the Shang 商朝 was from c. 1600 to c. 1046 BCE, and the Xia 夏 was from c. 2070 to c. 1600 BCE—but Confucius lived in the first half of the Eastern Zhou 東周 (770–256 BCE), making the Zhou “his time.” Likewise, the traditional date of Confucius’ birth is 551 BCE, which is given in the *Gongyang Commentary* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳) to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋). Boyd and Timpe date his birth to 555 BCE, without specifying the sources they have consulted in postulating this date.

Boyd and Timpe note in this section that “the point of this discussion isn’t to give a full Confucian, and thus Eastern, way of understanding virtue” (69). Rather, it “illustrates how broad the cultural impact of the virtues has been” and “demonstrates how different cultures shape the exact understanding of the virtues” (69). However, the section does neither of these properly. It does not offer a cross comparison of how the world interprets *the virtues*, or even of *virtue*—because it is neither close enough to the specific culture for the former, nor at all metaethical for the latter. If they engaged more deeply with the culture, then they could at least say that these are the virtues *for that culture*, and if they had been more philosophic about the matter then they would have at minimum some claim to objectivity. Likewise, it is quite imprecise to say “Confucian, and thus Eastern” when the two are by no means identical, and it is cruder yet to use Confucian virtues to demonstrate “how broad the cultural impact of the virtues has been,” as if they were a mere instantiation of some higher things,

which are *the* virtues—especially when the virtues heretofore mentioned as *the* virtues are Graeco-Christian. Despite its appearance, *The Virtues* is not a book on comparative philosophy as a book “about the virtues themselves” (18) but one on Abrahamic virtue ethics; their venture into comparative philosophy is ultimately disappointing in comparison to, for example, the single chapter on “Virtue” in Julian Baggini’s *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy*, which is a book on comparative philosophy.

As for vice, Boyd and Timpe choose to consider only the Christian capital vices or, as they are more commonly known, the seven deadly sins: pride (*superbia*), envy (*invidia*), avarice (*avaritia*), wrath (*ira*), sloth (*acedia*), gluttony (*gula*), and lust (*luxuria*). These can only be surmounted by the acquisition of the seven capital virtues: humility (*humilitas*), kindness (*humanitas*), charity (*caritas*), patience (*patientia*), diligence (*industria*), temperance (*temperantia*), and chastity (*castitas*). Many of the vices, however, closely resemble virtuous behaviour, according to Boyd and Timpe. They say that “wicked pride is what we see in people who are haughty, arrogant, vain, or condescending” (91), which is the desire to usurp God, theologically, and the desire for ascendancy over others, morally; but there is apparently such a thing as “proper pride.” Likewise, the vice of envy can be virtuous if it is, as the Lutheran theologian Krister Stendahl said, “holy envy,” wherein one desires the virtues of others and acts to become virtuous. Avarice, too, is not merely desire for wealth but desire for wealth in itself. Wrath is not merely anger; emotional anger is a visceral response to perceived threats, which is neither virtuous nor vicious; virtuous anger is when one is angered by injustice, and only vicious anger, when one is excessively angered and is consequently harmed by it, is wrath. Sloth is not inaction but actively incorrect action; it is a resistance to the demands of love. Gluttony is when one “lives to eat” rather than “eats to live.” And lust, they claim, can also be virtuous, for “this tradition considers sexual reproduction to be a good created by God” (106), which confuses the matters of sexual reproduction and lust; the Christian canon after Augustine is clear that lust is sinful, and that ideal, prelapsarian reproduction was not a lustful happening.

Boyd and Timpe give a cursory consideration to some challenges to the Abrahamic account of the virtues that they develop in the book, but this is far too short, and they are generally dismissive of the philosophic arguments. Only Nietzsche and Hume are mentioned as philosophers, and there is very inadequate consideration of psychological evidence counting against the virtues. Hume thought that only habits that led to obvious satisfaction could be counted as virtues, and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* creates his own values based upon strength and creativity, or the Will to Power.

The fundamental problem with *The Virtues* is that it treats virtue as instrumental but offers no account of the goods. Generally speaking, virtue theories—which Boyd and Timpe do not wholly avoid—either treat virtue as itself a good, and therefore the end of virtuosity is virtuosity itself, or they treat virtue as an instrument, and therefore provide some other good that is the end of virtuosity. We might say that Aristotelean virtue ethics are of the latter kind and that *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία) is the end of virtuosity, namely, the point of being virtuous at all. It is the latter approach adopted by Boyd and Timpe, too, who speak throughout of “a good that a virtue aims at” (9). However, they do not offer any goods, either moral, intellectual, or theological. This is a considerable oversight; it is ironic that, despite the book focussing on virtue ethics, it is in fact aptly titled *The Virtues*, because in neglecting the goods that are the ends of virtuosity, they entirely ignore the ethical dimension of virtue, and virtuosity is reduced to a matter of expediency. Rather than offering goods at the end of virtuosity, they occasionally posit duties as its motivation. For example, one ought to be just because of the “assumption that we truly do have obligations to others, and the reason we have these obligations is

that others have value independent of me and my interests” (35). Otherwise, they assume, such as when they say that one ought to be courageous because it enabled Malala Yousafzai to further women’s education. This assumes that women’s education is in fact a good thing. It is only because lots of us would agree that women’s education *is* good that this argument seems sound, but not only is this preaching to the choir but it treats morality as a social construct, and many are also prone to think that morality is objective, that genocide is wrong not because lots of us don’t like it but because there is something *intrinsically* wrong about it. If virtue is nothing but an instrument to some end, and vice is simply what defeats that end, then it follows that murder is a virtue for the murderous, charity a vice for the selfish, and, more problematically, any one virtue is simultaneously a vice for another person oppositely disposed. The book is pervaded by this deep relativism—that extends to an absolute ethical subjectivism—which is not shared by the majority of virtue theorists, and it is quite unfortunate that a pedagogical book should propound such an interpretation as if it were traditional.

Pedagogical books of this sort must confront the burden of explaining a topic in terms that are general and as neutrally stated as possible, a goal that is inherently difficult and one that is often belied by certain ideological commitments and prejudices that authors might have. However, *The Virtues* is not only pervaded by an unjustified notion of the instrumentality of virtuosity, but it does not present a good selection of factual information either. The entire book is Abrahamic, except for a cursory mention of Confucianism—which is inchoate, and the book would have been better as a result of its exclusion—and focusses on moral virtues, except for a single chapter on the intellectual virtues—which is also weak, declining to properly consider the field of virtue epistemology and instead offering a set of mental habits, which, as far as I can tell, have no more sound basis than the authors’ fancying them. Likewise, the book is brazenly Eurocentric; Islamic and Confucian virtues were treated like cultural virtues—without any genuine belief that they have some claim to objective virtuosity—meanwhile the title of “moral virtues” is reserved for the Graeco-Christian four cardinal virtues. Even then, the proper historicity of virtues—either in philosophy, as virtue theories, or in culture, as values—is not given, where the authors prefer to fill the book with popular examples, weak appeals to contemporary popular sentiment, and needless repetitive explanation, rather than details of the original philosophic arguments on behalf of such virtues. There is also negligible consideration of Nietzsche and Hume, who offered radically different accounts of the virtues—which, as the chapter on “Eastern” virtues and that on intellectual virtues, would have been better excluded or significantly elaborated upon.

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