Review of Stalnaker: Overcoming Our Evil

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Aaron Stalnaker’s *Overcoming Our Evil* makes compelling reading for several different audiences. To begin with, it offers a good deal to scholars of Xunzi and of Augustine, thanks both to the many careful evaluations of others’ interpretations and, more importantly, to the new light that Stalnaker is able to shed on each thinker, because of the ways that comparative study reveals previously “overlooked details or themes” [1]. In particular, Stalnaker employs a device he calls the “bridge concept” in order to focus his comparison and reveal previously obscured significance in his authors. He defines bridge concepts as “general ideas, such as ‘virtue’ and ‘human nature,’ which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide comparative inquiry yet are open to still greater specification in particular cases” [17]. They are not generalized “thin concepts” because they are developed inductively, with the goal of making specific comparisons fruitful. Neither are they hypotheses about transcultural universals. Rather, they derive from a patient triangulation of three factors: a scholar’s antecedent interests deriving from contemporary contexts (e.g., the questions of “virtue ethics”); issues that are obviously salient in one half of a comparison, which lead one to look for ideas doing corresponding work in the other (e.g., the prominence of will/voluntas in Augustine leads Stalnaker to ask about “will” in Xunzi); and scrupulous attention to each individual thinker’s distinctive vocabulary and concerns. A putative bridge concept must avoid being given too much specific content, so that it does not “move beyond guiding inquiry to determining it” [ibid.]. The book revolves around four bridge concepts — human nature, spiritual exercise, person, and will — and for each of these, Stalnaker provides a nuanced discussion, balancing the three factors just listed, explaining how he arrived at the specific formulations he uses.
Bridge concepts enable Stalnaker to put his subjects into dialogue with one another, and underlie his announced goal of critically engaging with their respective views [146, 300]. He is not interested in wholesale evaluation of “rival traditions,” but instead draws insightfully on his authors so that they can interrogate one another. This process, of which I will offer an example or two later, will surely be stimulating to philosophers interested in the larger themes indicated by the book’s bridge concepts. Anyone concerned with moral psychology, moral education, or virtue ethics will find a great deal in Overcoming Our Evil. Lest I be misunderstood, let me make clear that Stalnaker does not pry ideas like “habit” or “desire” loose from their conceptual frameworks and offer them up as independent items, to be consumed willy-nilly by contemporary theorists. To the contrary, he insists on the importance of his subjects’ metaphysical views for understanding their ethics, and gently criticizes Yearley’s pioneering Mencius and Aquinas (SUNY, 1990) for endeavoring to separate “practical theory” from “secondary theory” [295]. Still, his methodology allows him to suggest that there is a weakness in, say, Xunzi’s confidence in our ability to reach a state of transparent self-understanding. Even if we are skeptical of Augustine’s explanation of why our motives can remain opaque even to ourselves, the dialectic can nonetheless push us toward progress in our own philosophical theorizing.

Two of Stalnaker’s bridge concepts require additional comment. First, I want to applaud the care and rigor with which he investigates the topics grouped together by the bridge concept “will.” In fact he finds nothing very much like our contemporary idea of will (insofar as there is a single common-sense notion) in either Augustine or Xunzi. As someone who has argued in this journal against understanding zhi 志 as “will” (see “Sagely Ease and Moral Perception,” Dao V:1), I found Stalnaker’s discussion, which emphasizes the importance of developing long-term
“reflective commitment” [282], to be incisive. I am not sure that rendering zhi as “intent” is ideal, but this is a minor terminological issue. Second, I find the category of “spiritual exercise” to be of considerable importance to our contemporary efforts to engage in philosophical dialogue across traditions. It is all too common to read the contemporary practice of “philosophy” in the West backward into earlier thinkers like Augustine or Plato, and thus to understand “philosophy” as concerned almost exclusively with reasoned reflection rather than with practical self- (or community-) improvement. For many in China and in the West, this means that early Chinese thinkers should not be saddled with the label “philosopher,” because of the importance they gave to such practical matters. (For some, this putative Chinese difference is something to celebrate; for others, to regret.) By highlighting the research on ancient Western spiritual exercises that has been done by Pierre Hadot and others, Stalnaker thus helps us to see that “philosophy” once was a broader category in the West, whatever we make of the current situation, which makes it easier to find ways for students of Chinese and Western traditions to learn from one another. In addition, by bringing Chinese thinkers explicitly into our theorizing about “spiritual exercises,” Stalnaker is able to offer some immediate correctives to Hadot’s more narrowly based claims [278, 298].

The bulk of Overcoming Our Evil comes in two sections, each with three chapters. Chapters three through five concentrate on moral psychology, as Stalnaker moves from Xunzi’s views of human nature and person, to Augustine’s corresponding views, to a critical and dialogical engagement. On this basis, he then explores spiritual exercises and the will in chapters six through eight: for Xunzi, the main topics are study, ritual, and music; for Augustine, reading, eating (physical and symbolic), and prayer. Attention is also paid to each thinker’s understanding of the various stages of ethical/spiritual development, and this trio of chapters ends with another
explicitly comparative chapter. It is impossible in a short review like this to give due attention to all the issues these rich chapters raise; as a substitute, I turn now to one of the key similarities Stalnaker sees between the two thinkers, after which I will explore some of their most important differences.

Stalnaker argues that both Xunzi and Augustine exemplify an approach to ethics that he calls “chastened intellectualism.” Both approaches are intellectualist “because they think text-based learning and intellectual reflection on this learning are prerequisites for living well as human beings” [275]. According to both thinkers, humans come into existence ignorant of the most important truths, and because these truths are complex and difficult to learn, serious study and thoughtful deliberation are crucial. Indeed, mastery of ethical theory is “indispensable to living rightly,” and both authors believe that such mastery requires teachers, extended practice, and (especially for Augustine) some form of “transhuman aid” [276]. However, the intellectualism of both is “chastened” in several ways, which leads Stalnaker to say that the two theories are “more sophisticated and promising than the kind of modern ethics that concentrates only on theories of the right or the good, leaving the question of how to actually appropriate and live such theories to the side as a nonissue” [Ibid]. The chastening has several aspects. First, both Xunzi and Augustine put forward highly critical accounts of human nature, which emphasize that good human agency is an achievement, needing “significant outside assistance” to achieve. In various ways both thinkers have emphasized the need for a supportive community, teachers, and so on. Second, Stalnaker nicely explains that the tendency of each thinker to combine “cognitive” and “affective” dimensions of human action shows why intellectual activity, on its own, cannot be sufficient. (For sinologists used to telling others about the distinctive combination of cognitive and affective in the xin 心, it will be refreshing to learn about the
similar combination in Augustine’s *mens.* As Stalnaker puts it, this combination helps to ground the necessity of spiritual exercises, since “the interplay of settled conviction and emotional responsiveness, and thus of habitual inclinations to action, can only be changed by reforming all these elements in tandem” [278].

One final element of chastened intellectualism is that “commitment to an only partially understood path of personal formation is required for full understanding to ever become possible” [279]. In other words, without what Stalnaker calls “voluntary submission to an authoritative teaching,” there will be no underlying justification to one’s project of reform. He notes that the conscious assent involved distinguishes it from coercive “thought reform,” but there are elements of “conditioning” involved. Thus, Stalnaker concludes, the two thinkers “both insist on the need for faith in the efficacy of a chosen religious path.” While I agree with the general direction of Stalnaker’s reasoning here, I believe he goes too far in reading a need for “faith” into Xunzi. (See also [131] for another mention of “faith” in Xunzi.) For Augustine, to be sure, a strong version of faith is needed; as Stalnaker tells us elsewhere, no matter how things appear, we are always to have confidence that God’s plan is being worked out [228]. On Stalnaker’s own telling, though, Xunzi has a different view. For instance, “For Xunzi, we need to be exposed to the excellences of the Confucian Way, which will attract many people sufficiently for them to commit to the more onerous program of cultivation he advocates, which in turn can slowly strengthen their commitment to the Way until it is indestructible” [257]. We receive empirical feedback that helps to motivate us to deepen our commitment. The ultimate perfection of the Way does outrun our evidence, but nothing like “faith” in Augustine’s sense is needed.

Stalnaker explores some important differences between his two subjects on topics that range from habits (whether in general positive or negative), to desires (whether their satisfaction
inevitably leads to growth and demand for more), to a general difference in approach that he describes, following the lead of Jack Kline, as “outside-in” (Xunzi) versus “inside-out” (Augustine) approaches to personal transformation. In each case Stalnaker not only identifies differences, but also explores the strengths and weaknesses of each view. In order to illustrate Stalnaker’s approach in a bit more detail, let me focus on one particular difference, namely the perpetual necessity of anxiety for Augustine, as versus the more sanguine, assured stance that can be adopted by a Xunzian who is well along the path of moral development. This has several dimensions, implicating their disparate understandings of memory and the relative ease with which seemingly positive desires can be perverted. Stalnaker shows that once “obsession” has been overcome, Xunzi sees the relevant difficulties as completely dissolved, while for Augustine, “the momentum of past sins continues to trouble us even after we have repudiated them and tried for years to eradicate their aftereffects” [134]. Stalnaker’s analysis of the pros and cons of the respective views is quite subtle, and notes that Augustine’s ability to delve deeply into our resistance to moral goodness “comes at a high price,” namely losing the ability to endorse “habit” as a tool of reformation, and is also premised on the “religious hope for a revolutionary end to [our] vulnerability” [135, 132]. Neither thinker’s view emerges unscathed, in other words: the clear, if implicit, suggestion is that we ought to seek a view that makes adequate account for lingering, perhaps unconscious sources of difficulty, without necessarily going as far as Augustine.

Let me now turn to two topics that contemporary students of virtue ethics are sure to find extremely interesting, though neither is a main focus of Stalnaker’s discussion. This is perfectly consistent with his goal of stimulating contemporary thinkers by enabling the retrieval of historical approaches to virtue ethics that are not widely studied today [3, 19]. First, consider the
challenge that “situationism” poses to virtue ethics, as pressed by John Doris and others (see Doris’s *Lack of Character* [Cambridge, 2002]). The basic idea is that, at least on one interpretation, experimental results in social psychology suggest that there may be no such thing as a robust “character” made up of robust traits (like compassion or courage) that manifest themselves across a wide variety of situations. Instead, individual reactions seem to be strongly affected by various configurations of the situation itself, including seemingly irrelevant or trivial aspects. Doris and others argue, therefore, that both individual moral improvement and broad institutional design should aim at putting people in situations in which they will act well, rather than shaping global character traits [Doris, 91, 120].

A recent essay by Eric Hutton considers evidence that Xunzi may be a situationalist, but concludes that despite “occasionally displaying situationalist leanings,” Xunzi is deeply committed to the existence and importance of the kind of robust character that Doris attacks (Eric Hutton, “Character, Situtaitonism, and Early Confucian Thought,” *Philosophical Studies* 127 [2006], 49). Stalnaker’s discussion of Xunzi, however, implies a deeper way in which Xunzi might appreciate the insight of situationism. First, all sides to the debate agree that experimental evidence shows *at most* that robust, cross-situation character traits are rare: it cannot show that they do not exist. Second, Stalnaker explains that the goals and effects of spiritual exercises are very different, depending on one’s stage of moral development. For the large majority of us, beginners on the moral path, we rely on rituals and music to “manipulate reality” so that certain emotions are generated and others guarded against [177]; with regard to one particular type of ritual/music performance, Stalnaker writes that “This shared exertion, *as long as it continues*, incarnates the beauty, goodness, and harmony of the Way” [184, emphasis added]. More generally, Stalnaker sees that Xunzi’s “ethical challenge is to create a form of life that can satisfy
everyone’s desires in a beautiful, harmonious, and just way” [283]. In each case, we can give these claims a situationist gloss, seeing Xunzi as aiming at creating situations that enable flawed people to live well together. At the same time, Xunzi is clearly also interested in inner personal transformation, which means he believes in the possibility of robust character. Stalnaker makes this explicit (though without reference to situationism): “For the sage, this harmony of inner and outer is sustained through all variations in circumstance” [177]. I would argue that Xunzi sees no tension between his twin goals because he believes that the spiritual exercises he recommends work on two levels, short-term and long-term. Much of his language is ambiguous between these two perspectives, but sometimes he is clearly focused on one or the other. Contemporary philosophers would do well to consider whether Xunzi provides a model that enables us to have the cake of situationism, and eat it too — namely, to continue to take seriously the transformative goals of virtue ethics.

Another, related, way in which contemporary philosophers should find Xunzi stimulating is the connection between what Stalnaker labels his “outside-in” model of personal formation and Xunzi’s conception of right action. Stalnaker emphasizes the difference between Augustine’s “rightly directed will” conception of right action and Xunzi’s view, according to which “right action must be manifest in correct outward form, although to be perfect such action must be matched by appropriate emotions and desires” [265]. Xunzi’s view can be fruitfully compared to certain contemporary Western efforts that aim to articulate how a virtue-based ethic can nonetheless provide the kind of “action guiding” role that societies seem to need, if their inhabitants — largely devoid of advanced moral education — are to live peaceably together. For example, in Virtue Ethics (Oxford, 2003), Christine Swanton articulates the idea of the “target of a virtue,” on the basis of which Swanton argues that we should distinguish between “acting from
a state of virtue,” which stresses one’s internal state but may fail to hit the virtue’s target, and a “virtuous act,” which hits the target but may fail to express fine inner states. Whereas for Xunzi, the connection between form and inner state is indirect (for learners, at least), in that the form conduces to the long-term development of the state, for Swanton the tie is more intimate and particularistic: the “target” of the virtue is determined by the type of moral responsiveness that is called for in that context. One could argue that Xunzi’s view therefore has an important advantage, in that his norms of (thin) right action — ritual observance, musical performance, and so on — can be more readily institutionalized, which may be important to the success of a virtue-based view today.

I have focused somewhat more on Xunzi than on Augustine in this review because of both my own interests and this journal’s readership, but I agree with Stalnaker that we learn a great deal about both thinkers by seeing each in the relief provided by the other. In addition, I feel that I have only scratched the surface of the stimulating richness waiting here for contemporary philosophers. Stalnaker is right that virtue ethics has been driven by retrievals of historical views, and that current work can only be enhanced by broadening the range of views on which we draw. No doubt Stalnaker is also right to emphasize that our philosophical work needs to take very seriously the “antisocial” side of humans, which receives so much attention in both Xunzi and Augustine. As Stalnaker’s “piecemeal evaluation” and my own engagement here with the book’s figures are meant to indicate, furthermore, historical retrieval is only one part of a broader process of philosophical construction and criticism, best conducted in a spirit of openness to the relevance of philosophical traditions from around the globe.

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