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Shannon Vallor, Technology and the Virtues, A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting (book review)

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Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues, A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0190905286, \$42.95, Hbk

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In *Technology and the Virtues*, Shannon Vallor develops an approach to the ethics of technology by comparing Aristotelian, Confucian, and Buddhist theories of moral virtue. She argues that this is necessary because “technologies invite or *afford* specific patterns of thought, behavior, and valuing; they open up new possibilities for human action and foreclose or obscure others.” (p. 2) She uses the neologism, *technomoral*, to refer to the consequences of technology on the potential for morally fulfilled lives. Understandings of this are urgently needed today since the emerging NBIC (nano, bio, information, and cognitive) technologies hold the potential to unleash existential crises and radically transformative social changes. They present complex moral dilemmas that quickly exhaust the resources of standard policy debates and contribute to an increasingly “disordered geopolitics and widening fractures in the public commons.” (p. 5) Deontological and utilitarian ethics, which view moral reasoning in terms of discursive calculations within a field of moral possibilities, are overwhelmed by the scale and scope of the challenges posed by these technologies. The standard approaches in public policy debates lack resources for responding to the state of persistent change, characteristic of technology today. She believes that virtue ethics theories are more capacious because they are focused on flexible means to achieve moral goals rather than ridged moral principles. But, the goals (*tele*) of virtue ethics have traditionally been controversial since they require some commitment to a comprehensive description of human nature, and these are highly contestable. To avoid this dilemma, Vallor looks to a comparative analysis of diverse traditions of virtue—Aristotelianism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. She accepts MacIntyre’s theory that virtues are understood and taught through particular practices and narratives of a tradition. Applying this theory, to Confucians, Buddhists, and Aristotelians, she finds that among them there are common goals of moral self-cultivation, moral attention, practical judgement, and extension of moral

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concern. She suggests these commonalities might provide the bases for an emerging global moral tradition, which she calls technomoral wisdom. (p. 154). She believes a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” exists among the traditions of moral reasoning that she is examining. She writes:

This family resemblance can be articulated as a framework for the practice of moral self-cultivation, with seven core elements: moral habituation, relational understanding, reflective self-examination, intentional self-direction of moral development, moral attention, prudential judgement, and the appropriate extension of moral concern. (p. 118).

For Wittgenstein, family resemblance refers to words that get their meanings from having similar functions within a language game. He rejects the more traditional understanding of words getting their meaning by corresponding to some object in the world. Vallor appears to argue, then, that Aristotelian, Buddhist and Confucian virtues have similar functions, but she does not describe the common technomoral language game of in which this judgment can be made. Nonetheless, she applies this conceptualization of technomoral virtue to four types of emerging technologies: social media, surveillance, robot weapons, and human enhancement.

For Vallor’s project to succeed, it must respond to two interrelated criticisms commonly brought against virtue ethics: first, the positivists’ naturalistic fallacy, and second the modern rejection of comprehensive teleological conceptions of the good. The naturalistic fallacy of deriving “ought” from “is” was initiated by David Hume as a separation of fact and value and found its apex with logical positivists like Rudolf Carnap. It challenges Vallor to develop a clear axiology that responds, avoids or resolves the claim. Second, the rejection of comprehensive teleological conceptions of the moral good was advanced by, for example, Max Weber, who viewed the displacement of teleological claims to be fundamental to the rationalization of society. Vallor is challenged, here, to explain how virtues can be universal and robust without relying on pre-modern, metaphysically teleological conceptions of the good. Each of these criticisms are emphasized in the emerging globalized, network society that the information technology is bringing about.

Vallor’s project would benefit if she directly took on these challenges. She comes closest to a response to the naturalistic fallacy by adopting Alastair MacIntyre’s conception of virtue as a moral practice in which the good (indexed to the practice) is disclosed. For MacIntyre, this approach resolves the naturalistic fallacy by asserting that moral goods are known through socio-linguistic practices in which the experience of moral meaning is understood in the context of a community engaged in a common project with a common goal. Vallor applies MacIntyre’s understanding of a practice to develop a formal conception of virtue that is nonteleological. But MacIntyre intended a practice to refer to a closed group, and so it is not clear that a comparative analysis across virtue traditions can result in a common practice on MacIntyre’s description. A more detailed analysis of the comparative axiology is needed; one which explains why the concepts of the

moral good sought by these moral traditions can result in a common moral practice as MacIntyre describes it. Without meeting this challenge, the project is vulnerable to the positivists' claim that it is drawing normative claims from facts about what different peoples have believed about virtue.

Similarly, Vallor's project would benefit by directly engaging the question of teleology. Since the socio-economic structure of contemporary technological production is dominated by neoliberal ideals that tend to reject teleological perspectives, Vallor's project would benefit from a close analysis of teleology. Failing to do this, it might do no more than lend a patina of legitimacy to the values of neoliberalism. As it stands, the theory of virtue ethics she proposes seeks to avoid a comprehensive teleology through a comparative analysis. She looks among the ancient traditions for universal virtues that might be values in an emerging global technomoral practice. But, this approach also suggests that all cultures are of equal moral value, that moral values are merely cultural artifacts, and that moral meaning is simply an anthropological finding.

Vallor's work would be more persuasive if she could counter these claims by demonstrating that the moral traditions she engages are commensurate language games, that the moral purposes they pursue can be rationally defended as a single coherent axiology, and that they hold sufficient intellectual and emotional resources for resisting the pervasive celebration of unbridled desire that are characteristic of late-modern consumer capitalism. Even if these challenges are met, the complete conceptualization of technomoral must be persuasive enough to allow the pursuit of virtue to take priority over the panoply of desires that drive contemporary techno-consumerism. Perhaps even more now than in Anscombe's time, there is a growing need for virtue ethics to better understand moral psychology, since so much of the technology is used to detect, cultivate and manage a panoply of endless desire. Aristotelian ethics, Buddhism, and Confucian thought share being concerned with desire, and that may suggest grounds for rendering these traditions commensurate through the empirical science of psychology.

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