

THE VIRTUE OF A HISTORIAN: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN HERMAN PAUL AND CHINESE THEORISTS OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the role of scholarly virtues in the Chinese theory of history and compares it with the recent approach proposed by Herman Paul. The first three parts reconstruct what might be called a “Chinese virtue epistemology of history,” starting from Confucian views on sincerity in writing history and then turns to concepts of an “unbiased mind” and the “responsibility of a historian.” The latter ideas were developed by Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), who introduced the concept of “the virtue of a historian (*shide*),” treating it as a sympathetic understanding toward the narrated characters. Interpretations of *shide* changed along with modern Chinese theorists of history, some of whom elaborated on it in the positivist manner. Thereafter, the article outlines Paul’s view on the function of epistemic virtues in the formation of “historical persona.” In the summary, I will draw upon the main similarities and differences between Paul’s position and the traditional Chinese view in order to point out the main directions for further research on this topic.

Keywords: virtue of a historian, epistemic virtue, Chinese historiography, Confucianism, Herman Paul, Zhang Xuecheng

One of the most important trends in the contemporary theory of history may be described as an “ethical turn.” According to this new approach, “historians must acknowledge the moral choices they make as they construct the past as a representational narrative.”² In this way, it is possible to bridge the gap between our relation to the past and the accounts of professional historians.³ However, the truth, accuracy, and so on of a narrative might also be treated as a certain value, thereby historical knowledge is guaranteed by means of epistemic virtues.⁴ As early as 2004, Ewa Domańska had stated that “the theory of history needs some change of focus, so let us try to think for a while about intellectual virtues and

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2. Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 95.

3. See *The Ethics of History*, ed. David Carr, Thomas R. Flynn, and Rudolf Makkreel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004); Jonathan Gorman, “Ethics and the Writing of Historiography,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, ed. A. Tucker (Oxford and Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 253-261. See also the “Historians and Ethics” theme issue of *History and Theory* 43, no. 4 (2004).

4. Herman Paul, “Performing History: How Historical Scholarship Is Shaped by Epistemic Virtues,” *History and Theory* 50, no. 1 (2011), 1-19.

vices instead of text, narrative, tropes and let us try to define historical knowledge in terms of virtues.”⁵

However, all those attempts are still limited to modern Western historiography. My article will expand the geographical and temporal boundaries of this debate by providing case studies of some conceptualizations of the role of intellectual virtues in history-writing in the Chinese theory of history. Numerous studies have shown the vital role of *moral* virtues in Chinese historical thinking and the “exemplary” function of classical Chinese historiography,⁶ but none of them has focused on the long tradition of Chinese discussions on what we today call *epistemic* virtues.⁷

Trying to fill this lacuna, this article also attempts to compare the main point of what might be called a “Chinese virtue epistemology of history” with the recent Western approach proposed by Herman Paul. For this reason, I will be more focused on the theoretical implications and philosophical essentials of particular Chinese conceptions than on their historical background. I shall also limit myself to the ideas directly expressed in the theory of history, since an analysis of the application of those ideas in historiographical practice goes beyond the scope of this article.

I. EPISTEMIC VIRTUES IN CLASSICAL CHINESE HISTORICAL THINKING

Long before the term “the virtue of a historian” was explicitly used for the first time, reflection on the role of virtues in the historian’s craft had been an important part of Chinese philosophy and theory of history. It is symbolically testified to by the act of attributing the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), the “earliest systematic record of the past in the Chinese tradition,”⁸ to the person of Confucius (Kongzi, 551–479 BCE). According to this tradition, Confucius was said to have conveyed his judgment of history in the form of a historical narrative—a “deep meaning hidden behind subtle words” (*weiyán dàyi*). This was done first by means of a selection of events and then by their assessment.⁹ Leaving aside the issue of whether this was only a legend and even whether Confucius actually

5. Ewa Domańska, “Sincerity and the Discourse of the Past.” Paper presented at the International Conference on the History and Theory of Historical Studies: “Historical Studies: Disciplines and Discourses,” Central European University, Budapest, October 21–24, 2004. Revised version published in Ewa Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne: Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce* (Unconventional Histories: Reflections on the Past in the New Humanities) (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2006).

6. Nonetheless, the exemplary (that is, didactic) function of premodern Chinese historiography is not, as Jörn Rüsen shows, a distinctive feature of Chinese historiography, for it is also to be found in the West; see Jörn Rüsen, “Crossing Cultural Borders: How to Understand Historical Thinking in China and the West,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 2 (2007), 189–193.

7. Even in the volume *Moral and Intellectual Virtues in Western and Chinese Philosophy: The Turn toward Virtue*, ed. C. Mi, M. Slote, and E. Sosa (New York: Routledge, 2016), only two out of fifteen chapters concern Chinese thought, with one of them discussing proper epistemic virtues, but not in relation to the field of history.

8. Wai-ye Li, “Pre-Qin Annals,” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*. Volume 1: *Beginnings to AD 600*, ed. A. Feldherr and G. Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 415.

9. On-cho Ng and Q. Edward Wang, *Mirroring the Past: The Writing and Use of History in Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 25.

wrote the *Chunqiu*,¹⁰ the traditional Chinese vision of the beginning of historiography was that the moral standards of a historian, in this case of Confucius, are expressed in the historical narrative itself; however, these moral standards came from outside history: they were more the moral code or *Weltanschauung* of the historian than the standards of *being* a historian.

A concept resembling the moral standards of the historian treated as an epistemic virtue could be found, however, in the *Analects (Lunyu)*, a work consisting of sayings attributed to Confucius. Confucius admits there that he cannot discuss the customs of the Xia and Shang dynasties, because in the states where the descendants of these dynasties still lived there was a lack of sufficient records.¹¹ Generally, Confucius praised historians who left blanks (*qewen*), intentional lacunae, in historical records.¹² As explained by the first Chinese dictionary, *Explanation of Script and Elucidation of Characters (Shuowen jiezi)*, “the blanks do not mean that [historians] did not understand or did not care. Rather, they were careful not to impute their own guesses, thereby rendering the text incorrect, so that due to clever talk and sophistry the scholars of the whole world would be misled.”¹³ The epistemic virtue of “carefulness” (accompanied by such virtues as “accuracy” and “perspicacity”) is contrasted here with the vice of “sophistry.” An essential element of the concept of the blanks is responsibility toward the community of scholars (*ru*). A historian who left blanks was similar to other scholars in a twofold manner: first, as one who was “waiting for the one who knows,”¹⁴ and in the case of blanks that could not be filled in, as guarding the heritage of the past for one’s own contemporaries.¹⁵ Hence, such a historian was responsible toward both past and future scholars, and therefore the community of scholars should be interpreted as a distinct transhistorical group, which consists not only of the scholars’ contemporaries. This required, in addition, such virtues as “accountability,” “patience,” and “alertness.”

10. The first piece of information on Confucius’s authorship comes only from a Confucian philosopher, Mencius (Mengzi, 372-289 BCE); see *Mengzi* 3B.14, and was later repeated by the historian Sima Qian, *Shiji* 47.3. None of the non-Confucian pre-Han sources considered Confucius to be the author of the *Chunqiu*; see Cai Liang, “Who Said, ‘Confucius Composed the Chunqiu’?—The Genealogy of the ‘Chunqiu’ Canon in the Pre-Han and Han Periods,” *Frontiers of History in China* 5, no. 3 (2010), 363-385. As for the moral message of the *Chunqiu*, it was expressed only in its commentaries and not in the text proper. Thus Wang Anshi (1021–1086) denied that it had any moral meaning, calling it “a fragmentary court gazette” (Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012], 612).

11. *Lunyu* 3.9. In *Shisanjing zhushu* (Commentaries and Explanations to the Thirteen Classics), vol. 10, ed. Li Xueqin (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1999), 33.

12. *Lunyu* 15.26 (see *Shisanjing* 1999, vol. 10), 215.

13. *Shuowen jiezi* 1.12. *Shuowen jiezi*, ed. Chai Jianhong and Li Zhaoxiang (Beijing: Jiuzhou Chubanshe, 2001), 878.

14. “In good ancient histories, all doubtful characters were omitted, waiting for the one who knows,” wrote Bao Xian in his commentary on *Lunyu* 15.26 (see *Shisanjing* 1999, vol. 10), 215.

15. This idea was first expressed by Lu Ji (261–303) in his essay *On Literature (Wen fu)*, see *Lu Ji ji* [Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1982], 2), although already Cai Yong (132–192) had praised the secrets of the *qewen* and called forth scholars to investigate their meaning (*Cai Zhonglang ji* 8.1.1; *Cai Zhonglang ji*, ed. Haiyuan congshu [1890], 66). A probable reason for this peculiar interest in *qewen* during the Han dynasty was the sense of discontinuity between texts preceding the Qin burning of books and the newly founded Confucianism.

The virtue underlying the practice of leaving blanks was often called “sincerity.” It has to be stressed, however, that Western sincerity and its Chinese counterpart, the virtue of *cheng*, are significantly different in their philosophical meaning, which can be observed in the example of the way *cheng* is defined by Mencius. First, in order to be sincere, one has to know what is good; one cannot do bad sincerely. As Mencius writes, even if one sincerely takes what only seems to be as it ought to be, such behavior, as long as it is supposed to be sincere, cannot contrast with morality (*fei qi Dao*).¹⁶ Then, since Mencius believes that human nature is originally good, sincerity comes from understanding this goodness. “Being true to oneself” essentially differs here from the romantic, individualistic ideal, for it is a harmoniousness with universal human nature. As a result, *cheng* is manifested only in relations with other people, so no one could be sincere only to oneself. In Mencius’s words, “never has there been one possessed of complete sincerity, who did not move others.”¹⁷ In the case of the blanks, a historian should even be sincere in the face of past and subsequent generations. Finally, all these postulates translate into the epistemic domain, where *cheng* means “honesty” and “consistency” in one’s research stemming from the responsibility toward other scholars. But as Yanming An observes, whereas in the West sincerity was a secondary value that was dependent on factual or religious truth, *cheng* is rather the source of truth.¹⁸

It should thus not be surprising that the first historians of China, Sima Qian and Ban Gu, are traditionally said to have had “the talent of a good historian” (*liang-shi zhi cai*), for *liang* means “good” in the moral sense (also, Mencius used the character *liang* when writing about a “good heart-mind,” *liang xin*). The *Annals of the Former Han dynasty* (*Qian Han ji*) read that “all people claimed Sima Qian to have the talent of a good historian, admiring how well he narrated the order of the events, that he discussed without adorning, simply yet not vulgarly, his language was straight and events verified, he did not miss the good and did not hide the wrong, thus his chronicle is called a veritable record.”¹⁹ This adds to our list such virtues as “simplicity,” “straightforwardness,” and “impartiality.”

The idea of the historian’s virtue was theoretically explicated and not used only when the historical narrative qua narrative became the subject of interest of the Chinese thinkers, that is, in the most important work of literary criticism in China: *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong*) by Liu Xie (c. 465–522), and precisely in chapter sixteen on historical writings. Although Liu Xie’s primary concern was to analyze literary genres and tools (including metaphors, hyperbole, and so on), he also insisted on the need for possessing

16. *Mengzi* 9.2 (in *Shisanjing* 1999, vol. 11), 248-249.

17. *Mengzi* 7.12 (in *Shisanjing* 1999, vol. 11), 200.

18. Yanming An, “Western ‘Sincerity’ and Confucian ‘Cheng,’” *Asian Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2004), 155-169. There are of course some exceptions. As Domańska believes, sincerity is a condition for the truth: on the basis of false sources, unwary historians could sincerely believe that they are recording true events (and this does not count as a lie), but if their statements are false and they are not sincere in bequeathing them, this means that they are lying. Whereas the first case is merely a mistake, the latter is a vice, the opposite of virtue. See Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne* (Unconventional Histories), 66.

19. Xun Yue, *Qian Han ji* 14.14. In *Sibu congkan* (The Collected Publications from the Four Categories), 30 juan, ed. Zhang Yuanji (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1919), 428.

virtues when writing good histories. First, there are four basic requirements of good history-writing: to include sources collected by many authors, to stand the test of time, to show evidence of the recorded events, and to demonstrate their reasons. But “the farther back the past is, the more chances there will be that the reports are unreliable . . . As a matter of fact, when in doubt, do not record, because it is essential to have reliable historical records (*xinshi*).” The directive “when in doubt, do not record” (*que*, “leave blank”) is based on the theoretical assumption that the source’s reliability is inversely proportional to the time that has elapsed. The word *xin*, as used in the phrase “reliable history,” is another—after *cheng*—typically Confucian virtue of trust and good faithfulness. The use of precisely this term in the phrase, which is still used in modern Chinese, stems not only from one’s awareness of the close connection between the historical record and the good faith of the historian, but also from the belief that a reliable history is a history that people trust, not the reverse. No one can trust a history that describes the remote past in detail or can depict contemporaries influenced by self-interest, argues Liu Xie. “To be able to give a rational account of a matter and stick rigidly to what is true, one has to have an unbiased mind (*suxin*).” *Suxin* literally means “simple (pure) heart,” and, as a term, is probably the closest to the notion of the virtue of a historian. Liu Xie links this idea with another concept of the “responsibility of a historian” (*shi zhi weiren*), writing that the historian bears responsibility toward all people of the world in shouldering the burden of making moral judgments. Yet again, Liu Xie does not settle for this simple remark but in the same passage gives “deeper” reasons for this statement. In order to be a good historian (*liangshi*), with respect to handling a mass of material, devoting oneself to what is reliable, grasping the proper sequence and the choice of concepts to be employed in dealing with the facts, each historian has to grasp the general principle (*dagang*). Without such a principle, the chronology of everything would be too long, recording all events happening at the same time would be impossible, and the events would become too accumulated in a mass to obtain a synoptic view.²⁰ In other words, grasping the general principle, as supported by the historian’s honest mind, is a necessary condition for writing history, or, in Hayden White’s words, in the “transformation of chronicle into story.” This means that for Liu Xie the very shape of a historical narrative and its relation to the past are secondary to and stem from such epistemic virtues as “fairness,” “exhaustiveness,” “honesty,” “circumspection,” and “careful choice” (which is different from “selectivity”).

Liu Xie’s deliberations were followed up by Liu Zhiji (661–721), who authored *Comprehensiveness of Historiography* (*Shitong*)—the first treatise on historical criticism in world history. On the one hand, Liu Zhiji did not find a place for “virtue” among the three conditions (*san zhang*) of history-writing, that is the: talent (*cai*) of a historian, knowledge (*xue*) of a historian, and the historian’s consciousness (*shi*).²¹ On the other hand, whereas historical knowledge consists of scholarly methods, consciousness concerns a historian’s system of values (literally, of “what

20. Liu Xie, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, transl. Vincent Yu-chung Shih (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1983), 181, 181–183, 179.

21. Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu* (Old Book of the Tang) (Taipei: Dingwen Shuju, 1979), 3172.

is good and bad” *shan-e*).²² Hence, Liu Zhiji claimed that only insofar as a historian is detached and devoted to truth is a “true record” (*shilu*) of events possible. A historian’s integrity is unfortunately very often corrupted by political interest, as observed by Liu Zhiji on the example of the Historical Bureau.²³ This led Liu Zhiji to the conclusion that “each [historian] is restricted by his times and cannot fully express himself” (*ge juyu shi, er bude zijin hu*).²⁴ Thereby epistemic virtues became partially historicized.

A revival of the debate on the virtue of a historian occurred because of the Ming Dynasty historians, who also used certain new terms instead of the well-established *suxin*, for example, the “intention” (*xinshu*) of a historian (Ye Sheng, 1420–1470) or the “public mind” (*gongxin*) of a historian (Hu Yinglin, 1551–1602).²⁵ The public mind is expressed, as argued by Wang Shizhen (1526–1590), in “praising what is good and condemning what is evil, no less than in acknowledging what is true and refuting what is false.”²⁶ The term “public” is not an empty word here, since as Gu Xiancheng (1550–1612) explains, “if all the virtuous persons of a state lecture and study, then the goods of a state will all be received and become my goods, and this spirit will permeate the whole state.”²⁷ Hence, the idea of the public responsibility of a historian reinterpreted the previous discourse. At the same time, the Ming dynasty historians had an undeniable impact on future intellectuals, such as Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801),²⁸ who was arguably the greatest premodern theorist of history in China.

II. ZHANG XUECHENG’S IDEA OF THE VIRTUE OF A HISTORIAN (*SHIDE*)

Zhang Xuecheng believed that the particular virtues required for good history-writing have to be rooted in what he called the “virtue of a historian” (*shide*). As a result, Zhang held that the three conditions of historiography are insufficient

22. See Zhou Jiarong, *Zhongguo lidai shixue mingzhu kuaidu* (An Outline of the Famous Works in the Chinese History of Historiography) (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2016), 91.

23. Liu Zhiji, *Shitong* (Comprehensiveness of Historiography) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2014), 281, 341-342, 524, 534, 633-634.

24. *Ibid.*, 428.

25. Ye Sheng, *Shui Dong riji* (Shui Dong’s Diary) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 236-237. Hu Yinglin, “Shao Shishan fang bicong” (A Collection of Writings from the House of Shao Shishan) in *Siku quanshu. Zibu jingyao: zhong* (Complete Library in Four Sections. Essentials of the Masters: Middle Part), ed. Jin Peilin (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1998), 1475.

26. Hok-lam Chan, *The Historiography of the Chin Dynasty: Three Studies* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1970), 12-21.

27. Gu Xiancheng, *Donglin shuyuan zhi* (Records from the Donglin Academy) (Beijing: Beijing Tushuguan, 1881), II, 58. Yong Huang argues that Confucian justice cannot be reduced to being just to other people but also embraces making other people just: only if the whole community is just can one be truly just; see Yong Huang, “Justice as a Virtue, Justice according to Virtues, and/or Justice of Virtues: A Confucian Amendment to Michael Sandel’s Idea of Justice,” in *Encountering China: Michael Sandel and Chinese Philosophy*, ed. M. Sandel and P. D’Ambrosio (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 29-68.

28. For more details on the link between the Ming dynasty historians and Zhang Xuecheng, see Achim Mittag, “What Makes a Good Historian: Zhang Xuecheng’s Postulate of ‘Moral Integrity’ (*Shide*) Revisited,” in *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism and Ideology: Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*, ed. H. Schmidt-Glintzer, A. Mittag, and J. Rüsen (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 365-404.

and have to be fortified with a fourth factor, namely *shide*. What is more, Zhang linked talent, knowledge, and consciousness, the features with which a good historian is equipped, with their objects: literary style (*wen*), events (*shi*), and meaning (*yi*). But in his view, the last factor in particular cannot be deprived of a normative dimension: “to possess the consciousness of a historian one has to understand the virtue of a historian. What is this virtue? This is the way the mind of an author works (*xinshu*). One who writes a scandalous history makes oneself a scandalizer.” Zhang admits that the first task of the historian is to record events and to do so by writing well, but without virtue the historian will merely be a “servant of the events” (*wei shi yi ye*), while relying only on the style will finally go against righteousness. What is more, Zhang believes that historians cannot reach out to readers merely by means of literary style: they need to transmit their feelings, which cannot be done without *shide*. These feelings are part of human nature, that is, of the natural constitution (*qi*) of every historian as a human, which is said to come from Heaven. The same Heaven is, according to Zhang, the ultimate source of the meaning of history.²⁹ In this way Zhang Xuecheng tries to relate virtue to all the referents of the three conditions of history-writing: the events, style, and meaning. Events cannot be recorded reliably, style will not be unadorned and proper, and meaning will not be conveyed if the virtue of the historian is not developed. On the one hand, Zhang interprets the historian’s virtue almost in terms of naturalism: “the affliction generated from the rising and falling of the *yin* and *yang* rides along the *qi* and blood and enters into the heart-mind’s understanding.”³⁰ On the other hand, he still stresses that this natural disposition should be cultivated through education, otherwise it will remain at the stage of a seed, far from moral perfection (in this respect he follows the ethics of Mencius). The fact that virtue is natural makes the learning and acquiring of *shide* possible.

But what does it mean, in practical terms, to possess the virtue of a historian? As Zhang argues, *shide* manifests itself in a twofold way: as respect (*jing*) and as sympathy (*shu*) toward the ancients—those whose stories are being narrated. Respect means that historians did their best to determine what is genuine.³¹ Sympathy here means that the historian is able “to place oneself [sympathetically] in the place of the ancients.” And “even if one understands the age in which they lived, if one does not understand their individual perspectives, one still cannot hastily proceed to discuss their writings.”³² Sympathy results not only from one-sided sensitivity but as compassion that has an influence on a historian who sympathetically deals with the past. As Zhang wrote in a letter to Sun Xingyan in 1797, “Those who suffer the misfortune of being ‘someone from the past’ are unable to examine how things will change over the course of time and what events or principles will come to be. They cannot offer explanation and commentary for each of their words and deeds . . . In light of this, we should remember

29. Zhang Xuecheng, *Wenshi tongyi* (Comprehensive Meaning of Literature and History) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2014), I, 310, 314, 315-317.

30. Philip Ivanhoe, *On Ethics and History: Essays and Letters of Zhang Xuecheng* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 79.

31. David Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese philosophy*, ed. B. Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996), 71.

32. Zhang, *Wenshi tongyi*, 391, 394. Cf. Ivanhoe, *On Ethics and History*, 83-84.

that, a hundred years from now, we too will be ‘someone from the past.’ Put yourself in the place of posterity and consider how we will fare.”³³ Hence, Zhang believed that historians *can* get inside the head of the ancients because of the human nature they all share and *should* indeed do so in order to write good and mature histories. This point of his theory strongly resembles the approaches of Dilthey and Collingwood, but as Ivanhoe justifiably points out, “Collingwood’s views about re-enactment do not describe a special way to achieve historical understanding, as do Wilhelm Dilthey’s account of empathetic understanding or Zhang Xuecheng’s views about the role of ‘sympathetic understanding.’ He did not believe we have empathetic access into other people’s hearts and minds,” nonetheless “this difference should not obscure the fact that all three agree it is quite possible to understand the actions of people from the past in much the same way as the agents of these actions did.”³⁴

Also, it must be noticed that for the purpose of the article I have omitted Zhang’s speculative philosophy of history, but just like the basic three conditions, the virtue of a historian as the fourth criterion also has its objective referent, the Dao of history. The Dao, understood as “a potential that gradually writes itself out in history,”³⁵ which manifests itself in subsequent epochs of philology, art, and philosophy, constitutes a basis for sympathetic concern with people of the past. For this reason, and since a historian’s understanding of the past is not itself historicized in the thought of Zhang Xuecheng, the comparisons between his philosophy and modern hermeneutics are at least limited.³⁶ Although the belief that values determine cognition is quite hermeneutical, the same cannot be said of replacing the “fusion of horizons” with an unmediated “sympathetic understanding” of the minds of people from the past and a naturalist interpretation of virtue, which shows that Zhang’s account is rather distinctive and cannot be easily labeled as either historicism or historical idealism, which are two typically Western categories.

III. *SHIDE* IN THE MODERN CHINESE THEORY OF HISTORY

Along with the encounter with the Western theory of history, the Chinese concept of “the virtue of a historian” has undergone a major transformation. The most famous proponent of the new approach was the Chinese reformer and avowed critic of Confucianism, Liang Qichao (1873–1929). Liang stated that *shide* is nothing other than “loyalty” toward the facts, which is a “purely objectivist approach to the narrated historical events, without the slightest subjective opinion.” At the

33. Philip Ivanhoe, “Lessons From the Past: Zhang Xuecheng and the Ethical Dimensions of History” *Dao* 8 (2009), 195.

34. Philip Ivanhoe, “Historical Understanding in China and the West: Zhang, Collingwood and Mink,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 8, no. 1 (2014), 86.

35. David Nivison, *The Life and Thought of Chang Hs eh-ch’eng (1738–1801)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 141.

36. Cf. Chan-Liang Wu, “Historicity, Tradition, Praxis, and Tao: A Comparison of the World Views of Zhang Xuecheng and Modern Philosophical Hermeneutics,” in *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*, ed. Ching I-Tu (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 238-239.

same time, Liang admits that this is easy to say but difficult to fulfill, since subjective opinions always, even unconsciously, influence the narration; hence the virtue of a historian should be based on some “tendency of mind” and be gradually cultivated. Unfortunately, there are three “diseases” that make this process more difficult. The first is exaggeration (*kuada*) of all that is close to one’s (especially the historian’s) system of values. Liang illustrates this by using an example of the deification of Confucius. The second disease is called imputation (*fuhui*), or false analogy, and is closely connected to the issue of political propaganda but, generally speaking, it consists of the various ways one can impute one’s own beliefs to the narrated facts. Liang claims that anachronism, which is an act of projecting modern beliefs into the past, is also a mistake of this type. The third sort of historian’s disease is arbitrariness (*wudian*), which is directly caused by the length of the historical sources. An arbitrary historian selects the material according to a subjective point of view.³⁷ Therefore, Liang treats *shide* as a purely epistemic (if not “research”) virtue and considers every act of relation to the normative order as bias, mistake, and inadequacy. As a result, he does not reflect upon the way the virtue of a historian is rooted in the larger system of beliefs: rather everything that does not respect *shide* is dependent on moral values, whereas *shide* itself constitutes an ideal goal of historical practice.

In addition, the great Chinese historian Qian Mu (also known as Ch’ien Mu, 1895–1990) wrote that Zhang Xuecheng’s *shide* when expressed in “modern words” means nothing but to record events objectively.³⁸ Chen Yinke (1890–1969) represented a more sophisticated approach. On the one hand, he stated that an “empathetic understanding” (*tongqing zhi liaojie*) of historical agents should be based on valid historical knowledge, thus turning the traditional Chinese concept of the virtue of a historian upside down. This is why he claimed that if understanding is to be truly empathetic, the historian must rely on personal experiences similar to the subject matter of the research, avoiding at the same time the fallacy of anachronism.³⁹ On the other hand, Chen Yinke believed that accurate historical knowledge reconstructs ideas in the Platonic sense of the word,⁴⁰ as a result the proper object of empathetic understanding is neither actions nor individual beliefs but a historically embodied “national spirit” (*minzu jingshen*).⁴¹ In this way, his hermeneutics drew near to Zhang Xuecheng’s idea of the “Dao of history” and, to some extent, to objective idealism in history. Of course, Zhang Xuecheng did not interpret the Dao in such a political manner, thus Chen Yinke’s ideas might have been influenced by Zhang Taiyan (also known as Zhang Binglin, 1868–1936), who himself criticized

37. Liang Qichao, *Zhongguo lishi yanjiufa* (Research Method of Chinese History) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1998), 157, 157-159.

38. See Yu Guoli, *Qian Mu shixue sixiang yanjiu* (Investigations into Qian Mu’s Theory of Historiography) (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 2004), 231.

39. Axel Schneider, “Between Dao and History: Two Chinese Historians in Search of a Modern Identity for China,” *History and Theory* 35 no. 4 (1996), 63.

40. Chen Yinke, “Wang Guantang xiansheng wanci bing xu” (Poem with Foreword Commemorating Wang Guantang) in *Hanliutang ji, Yinke xiansheng shicun* (Extant Poems from Mr. Yinke, Collection from the Hall of the Winter Willow) (Taipei: Liren Shuju, 1980), appendix 2, 6.

41. Schneider, “Between Dao and History,” 64.

Zhang Xuecheng's understanding of the virtue of a historian.⁴² Zhang Taiyan reinterpreted the role of Confucius in editing the *Spring and Autumn Annals* by arguing that Confucius "wanted to keep a reliable history that could preserve national characteristics while providing historical lessons."⁴³

Some other Chinese historians in the 1920s and 1930s were even more willing to recover the traditional meaning of *shide*. Liu Shanli (1899–1935) wrote that there are four main difficulties hindering one from realizing the virtue of a historian, namely the susceptibility of the historian's character to being deceived, the uncertainty of research abilities, the historical memory of the historian's nation, and her or his own scope of life experience. As Liu stressed, "national ideas" have to be transcended for a more universal approach. For a historian who finds writing national or world history difficult it would be helpful to separate personal beliefs from the narrative by putting them in the auto-commentary.⁴⁴ Liu Yizheng (1880–1956) argued that history-writing was even a moral issue per se, because the ultimate purpose of history is to contribute to the moral development of people. He believed that ethics should be put above national ideas, because in the final result, setting aside doubts in favor of political narration will be harmful to the state.⁴⁵ Another historian of that time, Li Zegang (1891–1977), believed that the search for good is a social task that a historian is responsible for.⁴⁶ For this reason the education of historians, with a focus on cultivating the virtue of sincerity—*cheng*—is a necessary condition for having reliable histories.⁴⁷ In fact, history education is the main field in which the notion of *shide* is discussed even today.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the more theorists talk about the social function of the virtue of a historian, the less is known about the virtue itself. It is clear that all three historians gave priority to ethics over politics, thus opposing the approach of both Zhang Taiyan and Chen Yinke. On the other hand, the "moral purpose" of history and the "search for good" in history are extremely unclear phrases. It seems that disagreement with Liang Qichao's quasi-Western approach resulted in blurring any lines between moral and epistemic virtues, as well as between ethics and history. Some of those points may be elucidated by comparing it with the recent approach proposed by Herman Paul.

42. Zhang Songhua, "Zhang Taiyan yu Zhang Xuecheng," *Fudan xuebao* 3 (2005), 33.

43. Young-tsu Wong, "In Defense of History: Zhang Binglin's Interpretation of the Zuo Commentary," in *Interpretation and Intellectual Change: Chinese Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*, ed. Ching-I Tu (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 230-231. Nevertheless, it has to be stressed that for Zhang Taiyan, nationalism was only a temporary stage on the way to realizing the consciousness of humankind; see Viren Murthy, *The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan: The Resistance of Consciousness* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 131.

44. Liu Shanli, "Shifa tonglun—Woguo shifa zhengli" (Comprehensive Discussion of Historical Method—A Complete Principle of Chinese Historical Method) *Shidi xuebao* 2, no. 6 (1923), 4-17.

45. Liu Yizheng, *Guoshi yaoyi* (Essentials of National History) (Shanghai: Huadong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2000), 129, 154

46. Li Zegang, "Zenyang dushi, lunshi yu zhushi" (How to Read, Discuss, and Compose Histories) *Xuefeng* 4 (1934), 315.

47. Li Zegang, *Shixue tonglun* (Comprehensive Discussion of Historiography) (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1935), 185-187.

48. See Cheng Jianli and Chang Liping, "Shijia xiuyanglun zhi 'shide'" (The Virtue of a Historian in the Theory of Historians' Education) *Cangsang* 3 (2008), 149-152.

IV. HERMAN PAUL ON EPISTEMIC VIRTUES IN HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

The most comprehensive and coherent account of the role of epistemic virtues in historical scholarship has recently been proposed by Herman Paul. Paul tries to find a new agenda for the philosophy of history, which is, in his opinion, focused merely on historical knowledge understood as a product. Instead, he suggests focusing on the production process, that is on scholarly performances. Those performances are, in turn, ideally regulated by epistemic virtues.⁴⁹ “Ideally” since “describing the good historian in terms of virtues amounts to invoking ideals that even the most talented and dedicated scholar can only realize to some degree.”⁵⁰ Epistemic virtues refer not so much to what historians actually do, but to how they are supposed to do it, that is, to all the dispositions and character traits considered essential for being a good or professional historian.⁵¹ However, “ideal” does not mean “universal.” Virtues change just like knowledge and understanding, to which they are conducive.⁵² As such, they result from social negotiations among the members of a particular community. Accordingly, different types of historical research require a different set of epistemic virtues and a cultivation of different character traits.⁵³ Nonetheless, Paul credits himself with a “weak historicism,” for he believes that (1) the good of “historical understanding” is constitutive for historical scholarship and should be thus prioritized above other goods, and that (2) *phronesis*, understood as grasping the demands of a historical situation, is a universal meta-virtue. Again, “the precedence of historical understanding over other intellectual goods is not absolute; it merely serves as a demarcation criterion between approaches to the past that are scholarly acceptable and those that are not.”⁵⁴

Paul’s historicism and constructivism are deepened by his concept of “scholarly persona,” that is, an ideal model, determined by a set (and a hierarchy) of certain epistemic virtues, of what it takes to be a good historian. In other words, scholarly personae are “embodied constellations of commitments.” The feature of “commitment” implies that personae are not private ideals, but publicly recognized models. On the one hand, they seem to exist “in the collective imagination”; on the other hand, they exist only as long as individual scholars respect them. In this way, scholarly personae form professional role identities (“mold

49. Paul, “Performing History,” 2-4.

50. Herman Paul, “What Defines a Professional Historian? A Historicizing Model,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 11, no. 2 (2017), 243.

51. Camille Creyghton, Pieter Huistra, Sarah Keymeulen, and Herman Paul, “Virtue Language in Historical Scholarship: The Cases of Georg Waitz, Gabriel Monod, and Henri Pirenne,” *History of European Ideas* 42 no. 7 (2016), 925.

52. Herman Paul, “Virtue Ethics and/or Virtue Epistemology: A Response to Anton Froeyman,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6, no. 3 (2012), 444.

53. Paul, “Performing History,” 5.

54. Herman Paul, “Weak Historicism: On Hierarchies of Intellectual Virtues and Goods,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6, no. 3 (2016), 374, 379, 386.

the self”).⁵⁵ Therefore, historians are entangled in different “I-positions,” a complicated network of instances and multiple relations with the past—not only epistemic, but also moral and aesthetic.⁵⁶

The multidimensionality of scholarly personae, in turn, runs the risk of blurring the border between domains of the epistemic and the moral. Fortunately, Paul cautiously avoids this type of mistake: his approach is situated just between traditional virtue epistemology and virtue ethics. In contrast to foundationalist virtue epistemologists who seek to justify knowledge by means of referring to epistemic virtues (be they cognitive abilities, as per virtue reliabilism, or character traits, for virtue responsibilists), Paul wants to justify what historians do when seeking knowledge. In consequence, such virtues as “objectivity” are to be understood not as features of statements or whole beliefs, but as features of agents. Paul consistently refuses to hold that some epistemic virtues employed in historical scholarship have an intrinsic value. Just as there are conflicts between different epistemic virtues *inside* the field of history, so there are many virtues shared by history with other *outside* disciplines of the sciences and the humanities. There is no such thing as distinctive historical knowledge.⁵⁷ Second, justification means here a worthwhile contribution to understanding the past, with the proviso that what counts as worthwhile depends on the “historiographical situation”: the genre of writing, research question, and the current state of art.⁵⁸ Epistemic virtues are therefore highly contextualized. As a result, Paul equips epistemic virtues with features that might be called “continuity” and “collocability.” Continuity implies that epistemic virtues are gradable and cannot be described in binary terms; a virtue could also become a vice when practiced excessively. Collocability means that epistemic virtues tend to group together: some virtues stem from others, just as some exclude one another.⁵⁹ As Paul concludes, “epistemic virtues never occur in the singular. The acquisition of epistemic virtues always requires a multiplicity or, rather, a constellation of virtues.”⁶⁰

But then again, the question arises: does not this strategy lead to some kind of holistic approach, a view that there exists rather a “web of virtues” (to rephrase Quine’s celebrated phrase) than separate epistemic virtues and goods? If so, even if Paul’s standpoint differs from that of foundationalist virtue epistemologists, is he not still subject to blurring the lines between virtue epistemology and virtue ethics? In fact, Paul openly admits that epistemic virtues are often inseparable from political and religious virtues, sometimes being moral, epistemic,

55. Herman Paul, “What is a Scholarly Persona? Ten Theses on Virtues, Skills, and Desires,” *History and Theory* 53, no. 3 (2014), 353-355, 364.

56. Herman Paul, “What Could It Mean for Historians to Maintain a Dialogue with the Past?,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 8, no. 3 (2014), 456.

57. Paul, “Performing History,” 12, 16-17. In this sense Paul is a methodological naturalist, at least under Roth’s formulation; see Paul Roth, “Naturalism without Fears,” in *Philosophy of Anthropology and Sociology: Handbook of the Philosophy of Science Series*, ed. S. Turner and M. Risjord (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007), 683-708.

58. Paul, “Weak Historicism,” 373-375.

59. *Ibid.*, 377. Paul, “What Defines a Professional Historian?,” 241-242.

60. Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 152.

and political virtues at once.⁶¹ Also, scholarly personae are both descriptive and prescriptive, since the act of choosing them has a normative nature.⁶² These declarations cannot, however, be read out of context, for they refer not so much to Paul's own position as to the writing of the nineteenth-century historians he describes. As Paul aptly observes, epistemic virtues are not to be mistaken for moral ones, for they realize different kinds of goods. It does not mean that history cannot realize moral goods, but "in (historical) scholarship, the epistemic relation is the most important one."⁶³ Nobody would confound knowledge with happiness, so how could virtues that lead to those different goods be mixed up with each other? That is why Paul warns us that "a virtue ethical approach to virtues in historical scholarship runs the risk of ignoring the roles that virtues play in securing epistemic goods."⁶⁴

V. A HISTORIAN'S VIRTUE BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST

Herman Paul's view on the role of epistemic virtues in historical scholarship and its application in concrete case studies neatly meets Chinese discussions on the "virtue of a historian" and its particular manifestations. Paul also believes that the theory of "scholarly personae" could challenge Eurocentrism and confront Western scholarship with alternative "constellations of commitments" from other parts of world, for instance in the case of "the sage role that Sima Qian had to adopt."⁶⁵ On the other hand, Paul seems to have missed the presence of a long-standing tradition of historical reflection upon *epistemic* virtues in China, stating that Sima Qian's historiography served merely *moral* goals, that is, its "most important aim was to show by historical means the rightfulness of the Confucian Dao."⁶⁶ This opinion, however, is inconsistent with the text of the *Shiji*.⁶⁷

61. Christian Engberts and Herman Paul, "Scholarly Vices: Boundary Work on Nineteenth-Century Orientalism," in *Epistemic Virtues in the Sciences and the Humanities*, ed. J. van Dongen and H. Paul (Cham: Springer, 2017), 80; Creighton *et al.*, "Virtue Language," 925.

62. Herman Paul, "Self-Images of the Historical Profession: Idealized Practices and Myths of Origin," *Storia della Storiografia* 59-60 (2011), 160.

63. Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, 142; Paul, "What is a Scholarly Persona?," 361.

64. Paul, "Virtue Ethics and/or Virtue Epistemology," 443.

65. Paul, "What is a Scholarly Persona?," 353, 370. Sima Qian openly pointed out that a half-millennium had passed since Confucius's death to his times, recognizing himself as a sage initiating a new cycle; see Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Records of the Historian) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959), 3295-3296.

66. Paul, "Weak Historicism," 382. Referring to the interpretation of Stephen Durrant, Paul even writes that "there is a tendency in the *Shiji* toward 'theodicy,' or explication of why the way of heaven is never unjust."

67. A causal explanation, devoid of references to the will of Heaven, is put in the mouth of Chen She, who was responsible for the collapse of the Qin dynasty. Another hero of this time, Xiang Yu, says that a lost battle was not his fault, but was rather a decree of Heaven, which is explicitly criticized by Sima Qian in his commentary. In turn, the tragic fate of Boyi and Shuqi, who were distinguished by morality, lead Sima Qian to openly doubt Heaven's reaction to the virtuous behavior of people, and even the existence of Tian. See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 339, 1950, 2124-2125. This is also at odds with the way Sima Qian himself explained the aim of his work: "I spread a web over neglected and lost records of the past, examined [past] deeds and events, analyzing the reasons for success and failure, growth and decline. In 130 chapters, I tried to exhaust everything that lies *within the boundaries* of Heaven and the people, penetrate historical changes and create an original theory." In Ban Gu, *Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1999), 2068.

This does not mean, though, that Paul is completely wrong about Chinese historians. Indeed, Chinese chronicles served moral goals, but apart from them they also aimed at realizing the epistemic ones. The hierarchy, tension, and relation between the moral and the epistemic is at the center of the Chinese theory of history. Of course, due to at least terminological reasons, there exists a great overlap between epistemic and moral virtues of “sincerity,” “trust,” or “impartiality,” to name just a few, but this is not something Paul would disagree with.⁶⁸ Similarly, as stressed by modern Chinese theorists of history (Li Zegang in particular), from the viewpoint of personal cultivation, it is almost impossible to draw clear-cut lines between “moral” and “epistemic” virtues. This idea was also expressed by Paul: “my argument is that scholarly personae affect historians not merely in their professional role identities . . . but mold them more fundamentally by cultivating certain dispositions (attitudes, character traits, abilities) that can never be detached from their possessor.”⁶⁹ Therefore, the difference between Paul and (some of) the Chinese theorists of history lies precisely in the hierarchy of virtues. For Paul there is no greater good to be realized in historical research than historical understanding. Zhang Xuecheng and probably Liu Xie are likely to agree with that, just like many other representatives of Chinese historical criticism.⁷⁰ This notwithstanding, other influential theorists, including Liu Zhiji, claimed that the primary goal of history is to provide moral lessons, on the understanding that only a “true record” could fulfill this function.⁷¹ By means of this approach they tried to guard against distending circumstances to moral views, albeit at the same time clearly prioritizing moral goods above epistemic ones.

It also has to be stressed that what Paul has in mind when speaking of “historical understanding” can in no way be identified with, for instance, what Zhang Xuecheng understood by this term. Whereas Paul very often refers to the notion (and metaphor) of “self-distanciation,”⁷² Zhang Xuecheng was more attracted by “sympathetic understanding,” ready to replace the hero of his historical narration. The contrast between those two approaches could also be seen on the basis of the modern Chinese theory of history, in the difference between thinkers who ended with objective idealism and nationalism (Chen Yinke and Zhang Taiyan) and those who reinterpreted *shide* in positivist terms (Liang Qichao and Qian

68. “Virtues could have different layers of meaning, an adjective like ‘epistemic’ or ‘moral’ can be helpful in specifying what sort of aim the virtue in question was supposed to serve in this or that particular context. Therefore, we reject a *strong* reading of the adjective in ‘epistemic virtues’—a reading according to which virtues were exclusively aimed at epistemic goods. Instead, we opt for a *weak* reading that allows for multiple, overlapping and/or contrasting aims, including epistemic ones.” In Creighton *et al.*, “Virtue Language in Historical Scholarship,” 933-934.

69. Paul, “What is a Scholarly Persona?,” 355.

70. See Edwin Pulleyblank, “Chinese Historical Criticism: Liu Chih-Chi and Ssu-ma Kuang,” in *Historians of China and Japan*, ed. W. Beasley and E. Pulleyblank (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 132-166.

71. Liu Zhiji, *Shitong*, 129-131, 271. See Hsu Kwan-San, “The Chinese Critical Tradition,” *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 2 (Jun. 1983), 436.

72. “Self-distanciation is not a Romantic desire to ‘extinguish’ oneself, but a virtuous attempt to put one’s own ideas and intuitions about the working of the world between brackets in the study of people who might have understood the world in different terms.” Herman Paul, “Distance and Self-Distanciation: Intellectual Virtue and Historical Method around 1900,” *History and Theory* 50, no. 4 (2011), 104.

Mu). This confirms that even the notion of objectivity is equivocal and has its own history.⁷³

This point is connected with the fact that most of the Chinese theorists of history, with Liu Xie on top, believed that a reliable history is created by a reliable and sincere person, not vice versa. Many contemporary virtue epistemologists, Ernest Sosa included, would agree with this, but this is precisely the sort of “foundationalist” view that Paul strives to overcome. However, this does not mean that the Chinese approach was entirely foundationalist. From the debate on the blanks in historical records onwards, *shide* was treated as the responsibility of the historian toward the community of scholars. What is more, for Ming dynasty historians it was a global community of scholars.⁷⁴ Confucius, Sima Qian, and Ban Gu were put forward as models of good, “professional/real” historians who must be followed by subsequent generations. Under this interpretation, Paul and Chinese theorists have quite a lot in common, with the proviso that for Paul community is significantly historicized and contextualized. The fact that, in the eyes of Chinese theorists of history, the community of scholars was to some extent transhistorical had an undeniable influence on the ahistorical character of *shide* itself.

Last but not least, from Zhang Xuecheng onwards, particular epistemic virtues were considered in China to be rooted in some “deeper” inner quality called *shide*. This also implied that the virtue of a historian is distinctive for the field of historical studies and different from, for instance “the virtue of a *littérateur*” (*wende*). Paul neither presupposes any “substance” of all epistemic virtues, nor believes that there are some distinctively historical epistemic virtues. However, despite the quasi-psychological language of the “heart,” “mind,” “intention,” and even some of the naturalist phrases of Zhang Xuecheng, the virtue of a historian was always considered as an ideal model that cannot be fully realized through the practice of history-writing. As a result, Chinese intellectuals stressed the role of cultivation and, further, the education of historians. And, not surprisingly, Paul also writes that virtues in history-writing are regulative ideas performed through professional education.

The comparison between the views of Chinese theorists of history and Herman Paul proves to be as complicated as it is fruitful. Allowing for the affinity of both approaches, it would be quite desirable to search for various epistemic virtues as exemplified in the different “scholarly personae” of Chinese historians. In other words, Paul’s theory might be satisfactorily applied to Chinese historiography on the methodological level. In turn, such an analysis of Chinese historiography could show us hitherto unknown epistemic virtues, new meanings of virtues that have already been known, distinctive hierarchies of virtues, and specific models of being a good historian. Paul’s standpoint might also help Chinese theorists with clarifying the demarcation line between moral and epistemic virtues in historical scholarship by means of pointing out its distinctive epistemic goods.

73. This thesis is often repeated by Paul, with a special reference to Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

74. “If all the virtuous persons of the world lecture and study, then the goods of the world will all be received and become my goods, and this spirit will permeate the whole world.” Gu Xiancheng, *Donglin shuyuan zhi*, 58.

As tailored to modern historiography, Paul's theory could inspire a response of contemporary Chinese theorists of history that would focus on an analysis of modern Chinese historical writing, avoiding the Scylla of positivism (Liang Qichao, Qian Mu) and the Charybdis of moralism (Liu Yizheng, Li Zegang). All the differences notwithstanding, it is clear that virtue epistemology could be a promising departure point for general, intercultural theory of history. In the face of the ethical turn, such an approach would even tighten the connections between history and such disciplines as ethics, pedagogy, and cultural studies. As Chinese theorists remind us, in the practice of history-writing and history education, epistemic virtues are either inseparable from or rooted in values, which places historians back where they belong—in the middle of a global moral community.

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