How Should One Live?
How Should One Live?

Comparing ethics in ancient China and Greco-Roman antiquity

Edited by
R.A.H. King and Dennis Schilling

De Gruyter
Acknowledgements

The papers published here were among those discussed in the Münchner Kompetenzzentrum Ethik, Philosophy Department, Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich and the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung Munich on October 1st–3rd, 2007. The symposium was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung and the Trebuth-Stiftung zur Nachwuchsförderung in der Philosophie. Theres Lehn and Kathrin Messing took minutes of the discussions.

This volume has been printed with financial support from the Trebuth-Stiftung zur Nachwuchsförderung in der Philosophie. Rebecca Ehrenwirth made the General Index and the Chinese Index Locorum, David Meißner the Greco-Roman Index Locorum.

The editors would also like to thank Wilhelm Vossenkuhl, Hans van Ess and Heinrich Meier for their support in organising the event, Gertrud Gruenkorn at DeGruyter for her work bringing the book to press.

R.A.H. King, Dennis Schilling
August, 2010, Glasgow, Taoyuan
Contents

Part I  Methods

1 Rudimentary remarks on comparing ancient Chinese and Greco-Roman ethics ................................................................. 3
  R.A.H. King

2 Comparative ethics: some methodological considerations .......... 18
  G.E.R. Lloyd

Part II  Ethical theory

3 Two kinds of moral relativism ......................................................... 25
  Gerhard Ernst

Part III  China

4 Harmony as a contested metaphor and conceptions of rightness (yi) in early Confucian ethics ..................................................... 37
  Alan K. L. Chan

5 Why Mozi is included in the Daoist Canon – or, why there is more to Mohism than utilitarian ethics ........................................ 63
  Paul R. Goldin

6 Coming to terms with dé 德: the deconstruction of ‘virtue’ and an exercise in scientific morality .................................................. 92
  Robert H. Gassmann

7 Virtue ethics in ancient China: light shed and shadows cast ................................................................. 126
  Lee H. Yearley
Part IV Greece and Rome

8 Parrhesy and irony: Plato’s Socrates and the Epicurean tradition

Michael Erler

9 The knowledge about human well-being in Plato’s Laches

Jörg Hardy

10 Aristotle: Ethics without morality?

Johannes Hübner

11 Aristotle on friendship as the paradigmatic form of relationship

Jan Szaif

Part V Comparisons

12 The Greeks and Chinese on the emotions and the problem of cross-cultural universals and cultural relativism

G.E.R. Lloyd

13 Complexity and simplicity in Aristotle and early Daoist thought

David B. Wong

14 The ethics of prediction

Lisa Raphals

15 Being and unity in the metaphysics and ethics of Aristotle and Liezi

May Sim

General index

Index of names

Index locorum - Chinese authors

Index locorum - Greek and Roman authors
Part I

Methods
1

Rudimentary remarks on comparing ancient Chinese and Greco-Roman ethics

R.A.H. King

Is it not a pleasure when friends come from afar?
Confucius, The Analects (Lūnıyù) I 1

On your travels you can see all humans are familiar and friend to one another.
Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics VIII 1 1155a21-22

We now inhabit a world in which ethical enquiry without a comparative dimension is obviously defective.
Alasdair MacIntyre 2004: 203

1. Introduction

Let us begin with an account of the purpose of the symposium Ethics in Ancient China and Greco-Roman Antiquity:

Comparative philosophy brings together philosophical traditions that have developed in relative isolation from one another and that are defined quite broadly along cultural and regional lines – Chinese versus Western, for example.¹

This is David Wong’s formulation: Philosophy is picked out by reference to traditions and their development. “Bringing together” of such traditions leaves open what the upshot is going to be. For the question remains whether one is going to find a common language subsuming both traditions, or find that, as a matter of fact, one tradition delivers the conceptual framework to discuss the other; or the traditions may, after all, remain stubbornly incompatible. Now, of course, not only is great diversity to be found within each tradition, different positions may, but need not, contradict one another: Plato and Aristotle cannot both be right about the good, nor can Mencius and Confucius both be right about benevolence (rén). Traditions are not monolithic, as Geoffrey Lloyd has emphasised,² any more than the

¹ David B. Wong, 2005.
² For example, Lloyd 2005: Ch. 1 The Pluralism of Philosophical Traditions.
identities of those living in them; nor are they exclusive. One consequence of this observation is that cultural relativism cannot be taken in a simple manner. Even supposing that, at some level, ethics are relative to culture, this by no means ensures the unity or coherence of each conception of ethics.

The following remarks do not constitute a positive, independent contribution to this volume. Rather, I wish to serve up a pottage of problems, some of which I think can be solved and others which may well turn out to be intractable, referring to contributions as appropriate. What are the challenges facing our project? Much of what I have to say concerns virtue. For it is not an exaggeration to say a new epoch in modern western ethics dawned, or dawned again, when people turned back to the concept of virtue. What was true for the wider picture of ethical thought is also true for the comparative project: new ways of connecting discussions within Chinese ethics to current work became, apparently, available. For neither deontology nor utilitarianism has obvious affinities with ancient Chinese thought (on Mo Zi’s concept of lǐ use, profit, not being simply “utility”, see Goldin); nor, for that matter, with Greco-Roman antiquity.

On inviting contributions to this symposium, our original idea was to pursue five topics – the good, virtue, universality, friendship and politics. And our programme has received very full treatment: the good (in the guise of norms: Wong, Sim) and virtue enjoy extensive attention in the papers: virtue is visible in many titles (Yearley, Hardy) as are connections with friendship (Szaif) and politics (Gassmann). Universality (Hübner) and its competitor, relativism (Ernst), are strongly represented among the contributions. Moral psychology and moral education, both necessary to the conception of virtue, are dealt with generously (Lloyd, Gassmann).

In the West, our problems in confronting ancient ethics do not begin when we turn to China, by any means. One variant of relativism is to ask whether the norms of antiquity, particularly Greek antiquity, are subsumable under what we understand by morality. A negative answer was given half a century ago by Elizabeth Anscombe:

If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about ‘moral’ such and such, he must be very imperceptive if he does not constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don’t come together in a proper bite. We cannot then look to Aristotle for any elucidation of the modern way of talking about ‘moral’ goodness, obligation etc.\(^4\)

\(^3\) Names that appear thus in the main text refer to the scholar’s contribution to the present volume.

\(^4\) Anscombe 1958, reprinted 1997, here p. 27.
One conclusion might be: we have our institutions, including those of the norms of behaviour (in great variety) as did antiquity, and there is no call to mix the two. Such an answer, if given in advance of any investigation, carries no weight; and the mass of workers in the field of so-called “ancient philosophy”, that is, Greco-Roman philosophy, would suggest that there is great interest at the very least in understanding this tradition. Now, our problems are here not merely those of conflating modern and ancient western ethics; we are concerned with the desirability of comparing the two traditions. Here, we shall not face the general question whether philosophy existed in China, only the much more restricted question about ethics. Now, we do not mean this question in the sense that the ancient Chinese had customs (mores) by which they regulated their social affairs, distributed wealth, honour, liberty, offices, punishments and power, but whether there is a branch of reflection or discussion concerned with ethics. Some years ago (1989), the late Angus Graham entitled a book Disputers of the Tao; this title points to the dialectical nature (in an Aristotelian sense) of normative reflections in China. And in this project we are very much engaged in dialectic: representatives of several disciplines are collected within these covers – Hellenists, Sinologists and Philosophers. So besides the interesting historical question of how to find a suitable way of discussing those texts which would appear to be ethical in intent, and are considered so by the venerable exegetical traditions they gave rise to, there is also a question of whether these texts can “speak to us.” Just as the ethics of the Greeks still play a not inconsiderable role in modern discussions (Elizabeth Anscombe notwithstanding), we may wonder whether this might also become true of Chinese ethics.

In contemporary work, the branches of philosophical ethics are metaethics, normative ethics, applied ethics. To what extent can these distinctions be useful in a discussion of ancient ethics? For ethics is not obviously divided in this way either in Greece or China. At which level should or can comparison between ethics be conducted? Greek ethics do not distinguish these questions in so many words, but it is clear that these areas are covered; for example the views that Plato has about the tyrant’s life, in contrast to his view that nothing is good without the presence of the Idea of the Good. One advantage of using the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics is that one may be able to accommodate relativism on the level of normative ethics within a universalist account of metaethical features of ethics (meaning, epistemology, ontology relating to ethical language) (Ernst).

---

5 Cf. Williams 1985: Ch. 10 Morality, the Peculiar Institution.
6 See e.g. Roetz 1992.
7 Republic 505AB, 571A-580A.
2. Two Possible Approaches

2.1. The Socratic question

The Socratic question asks: what kind of life should one lead? (Plato, *Republic* 352D, 344D-C): The question concerns all goods whatever that may affect the quality of a life. Bernard Williams⁸ has used this question to great effect in his critique of modern moral conceptions. It is by no means clear *a priori* which goods are decisive for the quality of a life, unless you think it trivially true these are moral ones; so the possibility of asking this question is a gain in rationality.

In fact, this question is one that Kwong-loi Shun uses when introducing his discussion of Mencius:

> In discussing the ethical thinking of Mencius and other early Chinese thinkers, I make a number of assumptions. One is that such thinking existed in China. By “ethical thinking” I mean thinking concerned with how one should live.⁹

Of course, the interesting thing is what *should* or *ought* means in each case; and the kind of considerations that are brought to bear to decide the question; and also the particular concept of “life” is crucial to understanding the question. For the Greeks, a *bios* is a way of life, which Aristotle, for example, distinguishes into political, hedonistic and theoretical *bioi* (*Nicomachean Ethics* I 5). But different kinds of animals also have their particular *bioi*; and, conversely, humans are, famously also *zôa* with their *zôê*, animals with a life. In a Chinese context, the concept of life is also controversial: in the tradition *shēng* is interpreted as biologically determined through sex and food (Yang Zhu, Gao Zi) or as determined through traditional norms (“rites”, *lǐ*) (Mencius, Xun Zi). A second concept, *mìng*, may refer to the life-task set some one or else their life-span also determined by Heaven, but also more generally to carry out the task entrusted to one. Compare Confucius’ potted autobiography (*Lún yǔ* II 4):

> The Master said: At fifteen my will was directed at learning. At thirty I stood firm. At forty I had no doubts. At fifty I knew the command (*mìng*) of Heaven. At sixty my ears were obedient. At seventy I followed my heart’s desire without overstepping the mark.

We appear to have here a conception of a biography spent learning what one ought to want “without overstepping the mark”. This kind of life

---

⁸ Williams 1985: Chapter 1 Socrates’ Question.
⁹ Shun 1997: 1. Cf. also Wong 2005: “Ethical commensurability involves the comparison of these traditions (i) on the matters of how people ought to live their lives, (ii) whether both traditions have moralities and if so how similar and dissimilar they are.”
is perhaps meant as a norm, for judging the way one ought to live. The meaning of “ought” is, in the West, one of the core questions of ethics, even if it is not at all clear that in antiquity the meaning of “ought” is identical with the moral “ought” known to modern philosophy (Hübner). For what lays the obligation on one may be (one’s own) well-being (Aristotle), an activity according to reason; or else universal reason or nature (Stoics); and for Plato, at least for his Philosopher Kings, it is determined by the good.

One might compare Xun Zi:

He sets out the ten thousand things and sets up the balance in the midst of them. For this reason the multitude of differences do not manage to obstruct and so disorder (luàn) the relations (lùn) [of the things to one another]. What is the balance? I say: the way. Hence it is not allowable (bù kě) for the heart not to know the way (zhī dào): if the heart does not know the way, then it thinks the way is not allowable, and thinks that what is not the way is allowable. (Jiěbī piān Harvard Yenching XXI 29, Knoblock 21.5a, b)

The subject here is the ruler, or possibly his advisors. That means that the way not only serves as a general standard for leading one’s life but also as standard for political norms. Here the way (dào) serves as the standard for what is allowable (kě) in governing, and more generally leading one’s life, and what is not. Because of this, it is “not allowable not to know the way”. One might say: we are under an obligation to know the standard. For only then can we distinguish between what is allowable and what is not. But the precise valency of allowable (kě) in this text remains unclear: what kind of norm is the way here? What kind of obligation are we under to know it? If one were to pursue this question further in those thinkers who attach themselves to Confucius, then one would have to discuss the fundamental need for avoiding political chaos (luàn). Here, for example, is Xun Zi on the good:

What every one has always agreed was good is an orderly pattern and peaceful government. (Xìng’è piān, Harvard Yenching XXIII 37, Knoblock 23.3a).

Xun Zi’s remark may serve as a representative taste of “Confucian” views about the evils of social unrest. But it is clear that we are mainly talking about good rule; two further aspects are tradition and respect for one’s own person (cf. Lúnyǔ VII 1, IV 14).

2.2. The sources of normativity

Asking about what “ought” means is, as the above considerations show, connected to showing the grounds of obligation, the source of normativity, to use Christine Korsgaard’s useful phrase, which answers the normative question:
When you want to know what a philosopher’s theory of normativity is, you must place yourself in the position of an agent on whom morality is making a difficult claim. You then ask the philosopher: must I really do this? Why must I do it? And his answer is his answer to the normative question.¹⁰

She gives us a fairly modest list of four possibilities, drawn from early modern ethics. The fourth, her preferred candidate, following Kant, is the reflexive nature of consciousness as the basis for the will’s ability to legislate for itself, that is, for its autonomy. I don’t think this can be found in antiquity in China or Greece; but the other three candidates may well be. A very schematic, and perhaps provocative list, with no attempt at serious specification of the various concepts might run as follows:

a) Realism (Reality or truth serves as the basis for ethical knowledge.)
   i) Nature (Aristotle, Mencius, Stoics)
   ii) Dao (Lao Zi, Xun Zi)
   iii) Heaven (Mo Zi, Zhuang Zi, Mencius)
   iv) The good (Plato; = God; cf. legitimate authority)

b) Legitimate authority (Confucius, Mencius, Stoics)
   – ruler; fate; god(s), the good human

c) Reflexive Endorsement
   – reflection (sī) in Mencius: good knowledge, good capacity (liáng zhì, liáng néng); emotions, desires: pleasure as the canon of the good for Epicurus.

As the appearance of Mencius under all three headings makes apparent, it would appear either difficult to classify some positions, or else it might indeed turn out that these possibilities do not really exclude one another; or reveal that such positions are internally incoherent.

In this form, the question of what the source of normativity is, does not occur explicitly either in ancient China or Greece. I know of no text in which available options in either culture are discussed. But, as a matter of fact, it is subject of intensive debate, (e.g. Nicomachean Ethics I 4). Of course, claiming that ancient ethics is interested in this question is to claim that there is an interest in the grounding of ethics: “why must I do this? why must I be like this?” are questions that receive answers in many different ways. This assertion which may seem banal enough is actually in the context of comparative ethics of singular importance. For it implies that there is an interest in reasoning, at least implicitly. This goes without saying for

¹⁰ Korsgaard 1996: 16.
Rudimentary remarks on comparing ancient Chinese and Greco-Roman ethics

the Greeks, but does not entirely in the case of our Chinese texts (mainly: Lúnyǔ, Mǒzǐ, Mencius, Zhūāngzǐ, Xúnzǐ, Lǎozǐ, Hánfēïzǐ, Lǚshì Chūnqū). In other, words, we are justified in attributing to these texts an interest in what we call metaethics.

Korsgaard approaches the normative question from the way it was answered in the 17th and 18th centuries in the West, and she does not imply the answers given are the only one’s available. And when we extend the historical frame to include the Greeks and the Chinese, this is just as well; although in fact her four suggestions are flexible enough to encompass some of the answers on offer elsewhere. Presumably no one would claim to have deduced a priori the only possible sources of normativity. Aristotelian dialectic starts from what the many or the wise or both groups think (Nicomachean Ethics VII 1 1145b2-7, Metaphysics B 1 999a24-36), with the purpose of saving the phenomena; in this question at least we would do well to follow him.

3. Virtue ethics

The revival of virtue ethics seems to offer an important bridge between China and Greece. Lists of virtues abound in Greek and Chinese ethics. Whether or not one thinks that virtue is a useful addition to the modern ethical arsenal, for comparisons such as those under discussion here, virtue is bound to be an important topic, since it is essentially connected to Greek conceptions of well-being (eu zên, eudaimonia) (Yearley).

Why virtue? It is very probable that few if any contemporary readers have used the word “virtue” or its translation in anger, that is: without scare quotes, in a situation untouched by professional philosophy. But this need not mean that we do not need the thing, even if we do not use the word.

Nonetheless, words are where we must start, even if they are the second best way of sailing. The on-line Thesaurus Linguae Sericae, introduced by Christoph Harbsmeier at the symposium, will provide an invaluable resource for mapping Western normative terms onto Chinese ones. A brief remark about terms will have to suffice here. We are familiar with aretē and its meaning of excellence. Its meaning is then generalised from that in functional situations (tools, artisans), and situations in which (traditional) social roles (soldier, wife) are performed well, to meaning virtues belonging to humans or rational agents. As such, they perform their functions well, if with aretē.

11 Cf. e.g. Annas 1993: 5.
12 http://www.tls.uni-hd.de/
Less familiar, perhaps, is the Chinese conceptual arsenal. So here are some “virtue” terms in Chinese:

- **dé**: power or authority, which is present through way of life or ancestry, and which places others under an obligation (Gassmann). Not merely a disposition (a species of quality, rather than a relation), more a kind of power exercised on subjects by rulers, and conversely. Not identical with character, although it may be connected to character.

- **rén**: “benevolence”, “humaneness”, a mode of conducting rites, especially the quality of the jūn zǐ, the “gentleman”, i.e. the ruler or his advisors.

- **yì**: “justice, righteousness”, especially the relation between ruler and subject or minister.

- **zhì**: “knowledge”, especially of people, but also of the way (dào) i.e. the order and regulations of heaven and of the spirits and of rites (lǐ).

Some comparative remarks:

- Note justice in Aristotle as the whole of virtue insofar as it concerns others (*Nicomachean Ethics* V 1 1129b27ff). This suggests connections with dé, rén and yì.

- How does virtue relate to forms of knowledge? Zhì appears to be just one virtue among the others. For the Greeks, forms of knowledge are fundamental to virtue. Is virtue constituted by knowledge (Plato sometimes), or is it guided by knowledge, which itself constitutes a kind of virtue (Aristotle)?

- These Chinese concepts are “political”; and for Aristotle and Plato at least, ethics is merely a branch of politics. This similarity may, however, mask a different weighting of interest in individual and community.¹⁴

It is to be noted that none of these terms is a general term such as “virtue”; Aristotle’s view of justice, a particular virtue which may also be general, may be a useful comparison. One might take virtue as a genus with different species falling under it; but that would be rash. The unity of virtue remains problematic in both cultures. It is moot in Greece, for example, if possession of one virtue implies necessarily the possession of the others (Hardy). What about China? In *Lúnyǔ* XIV 23 Confucius suggests that self-denial (shù) may combine all he has to say on leading one’s life. Another question concerns completeness: Is this list of virtues open-ended or in principle subject to closure? Here we may contrast e.g. the four “cardinal” virtues from Plato’s

---

¹⁴ See Schmitt 2003: Section VII on the relation between individual and state in Greek culture.
Rudimentary remarks on comparing ancient Chinese and Greco-Roman ethics

Republic (courage, justice, temperance, wisdom) with the lengthy Aristotelian lists. In the Lúnû̀ù we have different lists,\(^\text{15}\) whereas Mencius would appear to be committed to four (benevolence, justice, knowledge and rites).\(^\text{16}\)

So one is justified in asking whether it is really so attractive for comparative philosophy to use the concept of virtue: there is no Chinese concept comparable to Greek *aretê*. The word *dé*, often translated by *virtue*, largely for historical reasons (translated as *virtus*, which means *power* as well as *virtue*) is by no means obviously suited to serving as the general concept which encompasses all the virtues which one may name. One may well wonder whether a conceptual framework might be developed to find common ground for both *aretê* and *dé*, rather than the simple transposition of *dé* into talk of *aretê*. But the proof of that pudding would very much be in the eating.

For, of course, individual Chinese virtues which are named are very different indeed from Greek ones – *zhì*, knowledge, may sound like *phronësis* or *sophia*, yōng may sound like *andreia* (courage), but there the purely verbal similarity ends. Clearly, some virtues are closely bound to their historical and social context, for instance, filial piety (*xiào*), and indeed Greek conceptions of courage (in Aristotle, strictly a battle-ground affair; contrast Plato’s *Laches* 194E–199E. See Hardy). Justice occupies a central position in Greek accounts of virtue. Not only is it the subject of Plato’s *Republic*, which is often seen to be about the justification of *morality* itself. In a similar vein, if incomparably finer grained than the earlier discussion, Aristotle’s analysis in *Nicomachean Ethics* V distinguishes between general and particular justice. General justice is claimed to be the whole of virtue insofar as others are concerned. Particular justice in turn is intimately connected with the functions of state – distribution of divisible goods (wealth, honour i.e. office, and freedom), as well as punishment and the regulation of contracts.

Here we may see important comparisons with *rén*, humaneness or benevolence, as a disposition (it is called a support *yì* in *Lúnû̀ù* VII 6), even if it is a traditionally aristocratic virtue (cf. *Lúnû̀ù* XII 1), unrealisable in all its perfection, but using the wise (*shèng Lúnû̀ù* VI 30) as orientation. For Confucius *rén* is the central concept of ethics, connected with character, well-being and others, and above all the quality of rulership or advice to the ruler. The concept would seem to be the great innovation due to Confucius, going beyond the mere performance of traditional rites to a consideration

---

\(^\text{15}\) One stunning list (from the early Han dynasty) is given by Harbsmeier 1998: 60–62 – a glossary of ethical terms by Jia Yi (200–168 BCE); fifty terms, especially terms for virtues, are defined.

\(^\text{16}\) On the differing lists of virtue in Aristotle and Mencius, see Van Norden 2004.
of the agent himself. This step is decisive in allowing comparison with ethics based on character, rather than traditional norms.

Not only is there (arguably) no general term in Chinese corresponding to the English “virtue”, furthermore a very important question for Greek thinkers, namely the ontological status of virtue, would not appear to be asked. Virtues are more than capacities for Aristotle in that they are only present along with a history of realisation. Thus Aristotle defines virtue as a kind of disposition:

a disposition that arrives at decisions, and that depends on the mean relative to us, determined by a correct formula (orthos logos), in the way a wise man would determine it. *Nicomachean Ethics* II 6 1106b36.

In this definition, another pivotal point comes to the fore: apparently, the wise man serves as an indicator of just what the determining, correct formula is; the good man serves as criterion, in Lee Yearley’s phrase. Virtue ethics, to be an interesting ethical position, has to posit the primacy of virtue – for naturally both utilitarians and duty ethicists think that virtues are important, insofar as dispositions of persons conflict with or contribute to fulfilling duties or maximising utility. But they are derivative in these systems; they may be derivative to the kinds of action, or the motivation for actions. Yet the question of why virtue is to be taken as central to ethics, prior to other sources of normativity cannot be ducked. It has to be argued that virtue is the crucial concept. Yet the very need for this argument undermines the very hopes of virtue ethics. This can be seen by use of a variant of Prichard’s famous argument about the obligation to be moral.17 For if the reason for this obligation is moral, then we are moving in a circle; morality is grounded in morality. If the reason for the obligation to be moral is non-moral, well then it cannot ground morality. So too with virtue. The reason virtue is important cannot be virtue; and if something else grounds the importance of virtue, then that something else is the real reason, not virtue. In this way, we are again forced, as comparative ethicists, to face the normative question.

This fact is surely one of the reasons that virtue ethicists are so keen on Aristotle and not Plato; it might appear that Plato clearly does not believe that virtues are the source of normativity: that honour belongs of course, to use the common if mysterious phrase, to “the Good”. In contrast, Aristotle may be thought to accord human life an independence which implies that human virtue constitutes and determines human good. His arguments do

---

17 Prichard 1912, reprinted in his 1949. He, of course, draws intuitionist conclusions from this argument.
Rudimentary remarks on comparing ancient Chinese and Greco-Roman ethics

not use natural sources of value above and beyond human nature or, and rather differently, apart from human life-forms. It is worth noting, however, that Aristotle does not try to justify ethics either in the style of the Republic (it is in my own interest to be just), or in a modern way (e.g. that the very concept of rationality requires all rational beings to be moral).

Does it then make sense to say that virtue grounds norms for Aristotle, if he himself makes no effort to prove this very strong link? In fact, of course, if one wishes to argue that Aristotle has a universalist ethic, in the way Martha Nussbaum\(^\text{18}\) does, then one will base the argument on human nature or human function. (This argument plays a central role in Hübner’s paper.) This serves as Aristotle’s way into the conception of virtue. He thinks a good life, one in which the peculiar function of humans is realised, is an activity of the soul with reason, in accordance with virtue (Nicomachean Ethics I 6 1098a7, 16). Even so it is debatable if Aristotle can escape Prichard’s argument.

4. Moral psychology

Elisabeth Anscombe claimed\(^\text{19}\) that there was no point in doing moral philosophy since the then state of the philosophy of psychology did not allow it. Whether or not there is such a close connection between ethics and psychology is perhaps a moot point (at least some things may be said even in the absence of a satisfactory moral psychology), but it remains one of the most important topics certainly for readers of ancient ethics. One point for comparative ethics concerns the absence of a contrast between a rational and a non-rational part, made by Plato (e.g. in Republic X 602C-603B, and contrast IV 435B-441C) and taken up by Aristotle in Nicomachean Ethics (I 13). For there is no exact correspondence between this psychology and what the Chinese have to offer (Lloyd, Gassmann, Chan).

There are great distinctions between the various models on offer in the West, when rational and non rational parts of the soul are distinguished. For Aristotle reason is set off against desire and the vegetative part, for Plato reason is opposed to temper (thumos) and desire. Given the leading function of reason, the question is urgent what one is to do about this in China. The central question here concerns the heart (xīn), or heart-mind as it is sometimes translated: it has a controlling function, and cognitive function like reason, but is also subject to emotions (Lloyd); and for Mencius humans as such have various “hearts” or senses (Gassmann).

---

18  Nussbaum 1993.
19  Anscombe 1958.
5. Universality

According to one tradition in the west, one characteristic of ethics is their universality. This is a fundamental area for comparative ethics. One approach is then to ask what the grounds for universality are. This question is clearly connected to the source of normativity: if the norms are the norms for everyone, that fact is grounded in the reasons for these being the norms. But before this question can be approached we are confronted with what “universality” means. For it by no means always refers to unconditional duty, as one might expect from a Kantian standpoint.

There are many contrasts and distinctions that are relevant when considering the universality of ethics. While it may be taken as a triviality that every group of humans that continues to exist for any time at will have ways of distributing goods and making decisions, sanction some forms of behaviour and strongly favour others (a concrete morality or Sittlichkeit) it is far from obvious that there is some one kind of morality actually binding for all or that should be binding for all (cf. Ernst).

So what kinds of universality are we faced with? I think that the facets in which universality is relevant are very multifarious. A brisk look at a list of a few aspects of universality in both cultures will make this clear. We have a vague, and rather tantalising recommendation from Lao Zi not to “dismiss anyone”, on the part of the holy man (Ch. 27). Aristotle thinks that all humans have the same “function” (Nicomachean Ethics I 6). Plato thinks that any individual is a locus for the love towards the kalon (good / beautiful); the good is the same for all. Mo Zi pleads for doing good to all, without regard for the familial relationships, jiān ài, often translated “universal love”, better rendered as “care without gradations”. And, finally, Mencius has at least two crucial forms of universality: everyone possesses the four shoots (sì duān), that is, very roughly, the capacities to develop ethical behaviour (IIA6.7, for the heart xīn, II A6.4 cf. also VIA7.8), and he is also well known for his plea to spread rulership out to all in the empire, or, it may be translated: the world (tiān xià) (VII A15.3). Xun Zi also thought that anyone in the street can become a Yu, that is, one of the legendary Kings of antiquity, renowned for his self-sacrificing rulership, if only the man in the street were ready to (XXIII.5 Knoblock, Harvard-Yenching XXIII 60). From this rapid sketch, it can be seen that the ethical phenomena one may call universalist are by no means, even within one culture, always the same.

Virtue ethicists have often tended to move towards particularist views of ethics, in part because of the difficulty of specifying universal rules, of saying what it means to follow rules and of proving the universality of rules. Because of the connection between rationality and rules, there is a tendency here to see the limits to systematic philosophising. Virtue ethics, it
is implied, is a loose way of talking compared to utilitarian or deontological strictness. This tendency is surprising in that at least in Aristotle, ethics is systematic and philosophical (Hübner), even if he does emphasise the need to slacken the claims of strictness when doing ethics (Nicomachean Ethics I 3 1094b12-1095a2). He also restricts ethics to those things which are in our power, us being in this case a polis or any sub-group of a polis. At any rate, because we are deliberating what to do, and in philosophical ethics reflecting on the process of decision making, we are restricted to our own concerns. In a similar vein, perhaps, Christine Korsgaard writes of ethical agents “acting in the first person”.20

Connected to the question raised above (p. 6), whether one can draw up a finalised list of virtues is the problem of virtues which are relative to roles; this conception is one we meet with in both cultures. For “Confucians”, the question concerns above all the virtue of the ruler and his advisers, and is conceived of as analogous to relations in a family. This process was then extended, so that one has later a classification or catalogue of female virtues illustrated by historical examples.21 Of course, if this is the conception, then the claims of universality of these ethics are greatly reduced; and may of course then be exploited by those who think that ethical conceptions are only ever relative to a culture and a tradition.

One aspect of virtue ethics deserves to be emphasised because of the profound effect it has on the conception of moral philosophy generally: there are no universal rules or moral laws to be used in determining actions, rather the value of actions depends on character. This is important because it runs counter to modern rationalistic ethics of all kinds. Independently of the character of agents, there is no sense in asking about the moral quality of actions. But one may well ask whether it really corresponds to what Aristotle would have said. On the one hand, he is aware of the lack of universal laws: ethics has to do with things that change and in the world of change there are no invariable generalisations.22 This is for example one reason for his championship of equity (epieikeia) as a principle resource of justice (Nicomachean Ethics V 10). But on the other hand, he thinks that justice also consists in obeying the law. Law in general plays a cardinal role in his ethical system. For of course his ethics is written for statesmen in spe: they have to reflect on how to run states in such a way that people turn out good and can do science and philosophy. That is to say, good laws produce good people. Thus there is an intimate connection between law and

20 Korsgaard 1996: 16.
22 This restriction on virtue ethics would not hold, for example, for Plato.
goodness, not, to repeat myself, strict universal law, but still general laws. And Elizabeth Anscombe’s original strictures against law-based ethics were predicated on the claim that such ethics only make sense in the context of a God who hands down commandments. But Aristotle’s ethics is not God given, and has plenty of room for law, and even for the idea that there is such a thing as law that is such above and beyond states passing laws (*Nicomachean Ethics* V 7). And of course, he gives a well known list of things that are quite simply not allowed, without any obvious connection with his doctrine of the mean (II 6 1107a7–12). Thus although one may think that Aristotle’s virtue ethics are not based on universal formulae, there remains room for generality, at a fundamental level.

The fact that virtue ethics is not committed to strict universals of human conduct has led some of its proponents to see here limits of systematic philosophising. But even here there is room for disagreement – for example Martha Nussbaum claims to find virtues of universal value, where Alasdair MacIntyre makes no such claims. This debate is of course particularly interesting for comparative philosophy when it deals with traditions that have nothing to do with one another, as suggested by David Wong’s account of the discipline from which we started. At first blush, claims to universality would have to be supported by a lot of spadework uncovering the same conception of virtue, or even the same virtues in two traditions. So here again a conceptual framework would have to be constructed, if there is no simple compatibility between virtue and the virtues in the traditions compared.

**References**


2
Comparative ethics
Some methodological considerations

G.E.R. Lloyd

Let me start with a bird’s eye perspective, zoom in to a slightly closer view and then zoom out again. I shall be dealing with the particular case of the emotions in my own chapter.

So we must start with the question, how is comparison possible? Is the other intelligible? If so, how, on what basis? The dilemma is: we cannot use our conceptual schemata (our categories) without distorting theirs. Yet it seems that we have to. The first problem is that of intertranslatability, possibly even the incommensurability, of belief systems. Then there is the problem of the basis on which value judgements can be made, and such judgements are inevitable, first because they are implicit in any conceptual schema, our own included, and secondly because values are the subject that we are discussing.

We are concerned with values, then, and the concepts used to express them, but they have to be contextualised, i.e. set against the background of a study of the whole society/culture in question, its economics, politics and religion. So how can it make sense to compare Confucius and Aristotle, for example, given that the societies they lived in were so different? We cannot ignore or bracket out that Aristotle lived in a slave-based society: nor that the target Confucius set himself was a ruler worthy to receive his advice. Nor is it the case that the ancient societies we are dealing with were static and totally homogeneous. There is a temptation to talk about ‘ancient Greece’, ‘ancient China’, globally, but that should be resisted. That would be to ignore the changes that were taking place at different times over the centuries, those leading up to the unification, let alone later, in China, and again between classical and Hellenistic Greece. And of course if we want to bring back lessons from antiquity for us today, our society, our world, is massively different from either of theirs.

Are the difficulties such as to block all progress? If we set ourselves modest aims, of getting just a bit more insight into individual writers or texts, maybe progress is possible and surely comparison is a useful tool. Even
those who work on a single ancient culture or set of traditions, endeavour
to throw light on Confucius, Mozi, Mengzi and the rest, by comparing
them with one another. Thus Gassmann’s piece does an excellent job of
charting the shifts in the debate on *de*, and similar shifts occurred between
Plato, Aristotle and their Hellenistic successors. That is the usual way of
doing ancient philosophy. It is obvious that much of Aristotle is a response
to Plato and cannot be understood without understanding him. Similarly
with Xunzi’s reactions to Mengzi among many others. Comparing across
cultures is more difficult, but it too can help, if we are careful, because we
can gain a new perspective not just on one philosopher, but on a whole series,
by contrasting their ‘solutions’ with those proposed by thinkers working in
a very different culture. Sometimes the difference lies in the ‘solutions’, but
often in the problems on which the ancient thinkers focussed.

The very fact that their situations are so different, the societies are so dif-
derent, becomes an advantage, because we can see that in different circum-
stances different ‘solutions’ become possible. That is the abstract, theoretical
goal. But are there lessons we can learn on substantive philosophical ques-
tions, how to live, for instance, in our very different situation? What difference
does it make that human rights are such a central question nowadays? Some
comparative studies read as if their hope or aim is to resolve philosophical
issues on the basis of an inquiry into the past. But we have to ask what it
is to resolve an ethical issue. Does that mean merely to clarify it? Or is a
resolution possible only if we can provide a set of recommendations for life?

Here the fundamental issue that looms is: are there cross-cultural
universals in ethics? Or are values essentially and ineluctably relative to
the society/culture/even group concerned? Evidently we are faced here
too with a dilemma, for on what basis can claims to ethical universals be
made? Yet to insist on relativism seems to run into the opposite difficulty of
incommensurability.

It is very easy at this point to get bogged down in dichotomies. Is human
nature the same always and everywhere? That’s the way a naturalistic
approach to ethics might pose the question. On the supposition that
human nature is (up to some point) the same everywhere, and on the larger
supposition that nature provides the basis of values, then could we arrive
at some universal basic values (and hope that those who have inveighed
against moving from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’ have got it wrong)? On that
basis some critics might then set about seeing where individual thinkers
approximated to those basic values and where they went off course. Or

1 A point made by P.J. Ivanhoe in his contribution to the original Colloquium.
2 Thus, in his contribution to the original Colloquium, Eric Hutton used Confucius on
ritual to pinpoint a difficulty for Plato.
one might try to mount a similar argument from society. Are human social relations — of whatever sort — predicated on certain basic principles of social interaction, however different those relations appear to be regulated in practice?

The trouble is that the first approach runs into muddle and confusion on what ‘human nature’ comprises, and the second faces both empirical and philosophical difficulties. By ‘human nature’ what do we mean? We don’t get very far on the basis of shared physical characteristics. But as soon as we add mental ones and consider the whole range of our cognitive, conative and affective capacities, we have to factor in the influence of culture, language, upbringing, and so encounter more differences than commonalities. But if we try to base a universal ethics on social arguments, the prime empirical difficulty comes simply from the observation that in practice they differ radically from one another, as even a modicum of anthropology shows. It is not that there is a problem with the prohibition on murder: the problem relates to widely differing views on what counts as murder. The same difficulty arises also with the rule that was once held up as the best candidate for a universal principle, the prohibition on incest. But what counts as incest? More fundamentally, the philosophical difficulty is that of the criterion we should invoke to get to those principles.

We are back to a sharper form of the dilemma I started with: how can we evaluate without ethnocentricity? But though both the substantive issues and the methodological issues are extremely difficult, it is not that we should give up in despair. The very difficulty of understanding other conceptual frameworks, belief systems, values, can be turned to advantage. I put it that we cannot or should not use ‘our’ conceptual schemata, and yet we have to. The trick is to unpack what ‘our’ conceptual schemata amount to. The dilemma is only insurmountable if ‘our’ conceptual system is rigid. But of course it is not, or rather it does not need to be. We each acquired notions of values as we became incorporated into the society we grew up in (and there are no doubt important differences between different individuals in any group: ‘our’ conceptual schemata are not only not rigid, they are not uniform). But that process of learning about values is not just a matter of childhood experience. We can continue to expand our horizons, our understanding, as adults: nor do we need to study philosophy at University to do so.

One way, perhaps even the best way, to do this is to study the other, where ancient China and ancient Greece, in all their variety, provide outstandingly challenging examples, where the comparison and contrast between different views for which we have evidence can serve to open up stunningly provocative questions. Why did Confucius, Laozi, Mengzi, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and the rest come up with the recommendations
they did? How did they construe their own role as advisers? Whom were they trying to persuade and on the basis of what kinds of consideration? How did they react to the traditions they inherited and the views of their own contemporaries? Granted that it is extremely difficult to reconstruct what the man or woman in the street of any given Chinese kingdom, or Greek city-state, did sign up to, we certainly have to think hard about what they did and have always to see the work of the elite individuals whose texts we study against that background.

These and other questions are in the background, sometimes in the foreground indeed, of the series of explorations in this volume. The delight of studying antiquity, one antiquity on its own, and better still two across time and space, is that it provides such a marvellous opportunity to expose the limitations, the parochialism, of our own preoccupations, in ethics as in other fields of investigation. But we can never afford to underestimate the difficulty of the enterprise.
Part II

Ethical theory
Two kinds of moral relativism

Gerhard Ernst

1. Introduction

Moral relativism is a hotly contested position. In this paper I don’t want to take sides in this debate. I rather want to prepare the ground for doing so by discussing a preliminary question concerning the relation between metaethical and normative moral relativism. First of all I want to make explicit what metaethical and normative relativists respectively claim. I think, it is not that easy to put down precisely what the position of a normative relativist amounts to. Often the only claims that are considered as pertinent are either truistic (and therefore not worth discussing) or clearly false (and therefore not worth discussing either). Elsewhere, I argue against metaethical relativism (Ernst (2006b)). On the other hand, I would like to endorse much of what a normative relativist, as I see him, claims (Ernst (2009b)). (For instance, much of what David Wong says in his book (2006) falls under the heading “normative relativism” as I conceive of it; so does what T. Scanlon calls “benign relativism” (cf. Scanlon 2000, p. 333); and I am quite sympathetic to both of these positions.) Therefore, although I want to argue neither against metaethical relativism nor for normative relativism in this paper, I want to show that it is possible to be a metaethical non-relativist while endorsing normative relativism. I am going to defend the even stronger claim, viz. that metaethical and normative relativism are (almost) independent of each other. So, while my ultimate aim is only to make metaethical objectivism compatible with normative relativism I also think that other combinations are possible; a pretty strong form of metaethical relativism with normative absolutism, for example.

2. What is metaethical and normative relativism?

Let’s begin with the question that is easier to answer: What is metaethical relativism? The metaethical relativist provides answers to the four main
metaethical questions. These are: Firstly, are there moral truths or facts, and if so what is their nature? (This concerns the metaphysical dimension of metaethics.) Secondly, what is the nature of moral beliefs? (This concerns the dimension of philosophy of mind and the theory of action.) Thirdly, is there moral knowledge, and if so what is its nature? (This is the epistemological dimension of metaethics.) Fourthly and finally, how can we analyse the meaning of moral sentences? (That is what philosophers of language ask.) The most straightforward form of metaethical relativism – I am not going to discuss more sophisticated forms like, for example, the truth relativism Max Kölbel defends (cf. Kölbel (2004)) – can be characterised by a semantic thesis. From this semantic thesis it is easy to derive answers to the four metaethical questions (cf. Ernst (2006b)). A typical metaethical relativist could endorse the following thesis:

The sentence “Lying is wrong” has the same (context dependent) semantic content as the sentence “According to the moral code of my culture lying is wrong”.

The semantic content of the second sentence is context dependent for obvious reasons: It contains the indexical expression “my”. Therefore, its semantic content is speaker-relative (cf. Streiffer (2003), pp. 3–6). Accordingly, this kind of relativism is called “indexical relativism”. In my example moral claims are relative to the moral code of the speaker’s culture. Different forms of relativism ensue if we consider the moral code of the speaker’s tribe, social class etc. as relevant. To keep things simple, let us stick to cultural metaethical relativism.

From the relativist’s semantic thesis the well-known doctrine follows that two speakers, one uttering the semantic negation of a sentence the other is putting forward, do not necessarily contradict each other. Given that John says “Lying is wrong” and Jane says “It is not the case that lying is wrong” they are only contradicting each other if “Lying is wrong” has the same semantic content when uttered by John and by Jane. But according to the indexical relativist this is not necessarily so. John and Jane do not contradict each other if lying is wrong according to the moral code of John’s culture but not according to the moral code of Jane’s. Rather they are both right. (A truth relativist would say at this point that they do disagree but faultlessly so.) There only seems to be a contraction although in fact there is none. Most relativists welcome this result. It enables them to explain descriptive cultural relativism – the claim that there is a plurality of moral codes – without being forced to assume that most cultures are wrong on most moral matters. Many consider moral relativism attractive because of this feature; and rightly so, in my opinion.

Answers to our four metaethical questions directly follow from indexical relativism:
(1) Given his semantic analysis of moral sentences the relativist need not assume the existence of “queer” moral facts. As far as moral claims can be true or false, their truth or falsity can be explained by common and garden empirical facts. Whether or not some action is allowed by some moral code – be it the moral code of a culture, tribe, social class, time or whatever – is a totally empirical matter, not at all different from other ethnological, sociological, historical etc. matters. Moral sentences are used, according to the indexical relativists, to describe these empirical facts. There simply are no specific “moral” facts.

(2) Moral beliefs, therefore, are just like other empirical beliefs. There is nothing queer about them either. They can’t motivate by themselves, although – given appropriate desires – they might be relevant for motivation.

(3) Finally, there is a quick answer to the question about moral knowledge: We come to know moral facts in the very same way we come to know other ethnological, sociological, historical etc. facts. (Although, we don’t need ethnology and sociology etc. in order to know the moral codes of our own culture, social class etc. – at least in normal cases –, because we come to know these codes through education and socialisation. We do need these sciences, though, in order to learn something about the moral codes of alien cultures etc.) The question of what is morally right or wrong “in itself”, i.e. independently of any cultural moral code, is simply unanswerable according to the metaethical relativist – it can be answered neither by using our “intuition” nor in any other way. And the reason why is not mysterious at all. The question what is morally right or wrong “in itself” is as unanswerable as the question whether Big Benn is “in itself” on the right side of the river Thames or on its left – independently of the chosen perspective. It is on the right side if you look from the north, it is on the left side if you look from the south, “in itself” it is neither here nor there. According to the metaethical relativist there is just no saying of what is “in itself” morally right or wrong for the very same reason. We can say what is right or wrong according to a given moral code. But to search for the right moral code is like to search for the right perspective from which to look at Big Benn. Both enterprises are simply pointless. (There might be something like the aesthetically right perspective to look at Big Benn, but that’s not what is at issue here, of course.)

In metaethical terminology we can say that the metaethical relativist advocates a form of naturalism. Naturalists assume the existence of moral facts but they deny that these facts are fundamentally different from “plain” empirical facts. Accordingly, they claim that moral beliefs are just ordinary
beliefs (and not intrinsically motivating states) and moral knowledge is just a
form of empirical knowledge. The difference between metaethical relativism
and other forms of naturalism is that relativists have a specific explanation
for the vast variety of apparently (!) inconsistent moral views we actually
find: There are many different moral codes because there are many cultures,
many social groups, many historical epochs and so on in which these codes
could evolve. As soon as we notice that there are as many different contexts
in which a moral sentence can be uttered, we come to see that all those
different moral views are not really inconsistent. In fact, they can all be
true. No widespread ignorance has to be assumed. The relativist can – while
other naturalists cannot – explain the vast variety of moral beliefs we find –
at least according to the descriptive relativist – in a very appealing way, i.e.
by pointing to the context-sensitivity of moral sentences. This is one of the
main advantages of moral relativism.

The semantic analysis provided by the metaethical relativist, and with it
his other metaethical theses are, I think, pretty much untenable (cf. Ernst
(2006b)). As I try to show elsewhere (cf. Ernst (2008a)) ethics is a discipline
which is as objective as the natural sciences (although I do not advocate
naturalism). And however one analyses the nature of science: nobody
seems to think that all scientific sentences should be analysed as indexical
sentences. Therefore, I defend metaethical objectivism. But, as a metaethical
objectivist you can no longer claim that two persons can both be right even
if one of them utters the semantic negation of the sentence the first one
asserted. If, for example, one claims that lying is wrong come what may,
and the other claims that lying at least sometimes is not wrong, only one of
them can be right. We are back with the not very plausible view that most
people are wrong with regard to most moral matters. More than that: Most
cultures must be totally wrong with respect to even very fundamental moral
questions. Doesn’t that sound pretty much like “the white man’s burden”?
Maybe, but in fact the metaethical objectivist is not in any way committed
to such a view. The reason is, that the metaethical objectivist is committed to
hardly any normative view at all, or so I shall argue. It does not follow from
metaethical objectivism whether the white man or the not so white man
(or the white or not-white woman) is right in moral matters. Especially we
can do justice to the vast variety of moral views by combining metaethical
objectivism with normative relativism.

So, let’s take a brief look at what a normative relativist claims. Just like
any other normative ethicist the normative relativist tells us what to do, i.e.
which kind of action is right or wrong. And, of course, he wants to answer
the question what to do for every situation in which it might arise. At least in
this respect he makes a universal claim. As a normative relativist one adheres
to the principle that the context of an action determines whether that action
Two kinds of moral relativism

is right or wrong. It is difficult, though, to say precisely which aspects of the context are relevant here. That there are aspects of the context which make an action right or wrong is quite uncontroversial, and not a relativistic thesis at all. Obviously, it is, for example, only right to guide an old man across the street if the old man wants to cross the street, at least ceteris paribus. What he wants to do is a crucial part of the context in this case. The thesis, on the other hand, that every aspect of the context is relevant for the rightness or otherwise of an action, is not a relativistic thesis either. That is rather what a particularist might say. So, the normative relativist claims that aspects of the context the universalist takes to be irrelevant make an action right or wrong.

It is quite tempting at this point only to consider forms of normative relativism which are obviously untenable. An extreme cultural relativist, for example, might claim, that it is always right to do what is right according to the moral code of the culture one lives in. A universalist would surely deny such a claim, but any sensible normative relativist should do likewise. Of course, it is not always right to do what is right according to the moral code of the culture one lives in. Is there anybody at all who would claim such a thing? I can’t go into the question what a plausible form of normative relativism would look like in this paper (cf. Ernst (2009b)). I can only repeat that I am quite sympathetic with the position T. Scanlon’s calls “benign relativism” (cf. Scanlon 2000, p. 333) and to D. Wong’s relativism (Wong (2006)) – as far as the latter is not a metaethical relativism; most of it, in my opinion, is not. What I want to argue for now is that it is not inconsistent to advance even a very strong form of normative relativism – like the extreme cultural relativism just mentioned – while claiming that metaethical relativism is false (and metaethical objectivism true). In fact, I am going to defend an even slightly stronger claim, namely that the metaethical and the normative level are (almost) completely independent of each other. (So, if you want to be a metaethical relativist and a normative absolutist or a metaethical objectivist and a normative absolutist etc., be my guest.)

3. The independence of normative and metaethical relativism

On the face of it, there is a very strong and straightforward argument for the independence of the normative and the metaethical level: Normative relativism is an ethical/moral position. Any moral position contains at bottom claims about which actions are right or wrong. The right thing to do is what one should do (at least the all things considered right thing is what one should do). So, any ethical position tells us what we ought to do. The independence of metaethics from ethics then follows from Hume’s observation (cf. Hume (1990), p. 469) that no Ought follows from an Is. Metaethical claims are Is-claims; ethical claims are Ought-claims. Therefore
you can’t derive an ethical conclusion from only metaethical premises. You can’t derive a metaethical conclusion from only ethical premises either since no Not-Ought follows from a Not-Is. From the fact, that John does *not* do his homework it does not follow that it is not the case that he ought to do his homework, just as it does not follow from the fact that he beats up Harry instead that he ought to beat up Harry. Via contraposition, therefore, no Is follows from an Ought either. Therefore, ethical theories have no metaethical consequences. Hence we can say that the metaethical and the normative level are independent of each other in general. In particular, metaethical objectivism and normative relativism can’t be incompatible. Qed. Let’s call this the “first independence-argument”.

The first independence-argument is vulnerable at many points (although I like to think that there is a kernel of truth in it). In the context of our present consideration the most important weakness is this: Some metaethicists, i.e. naturalists, deny that ethical claims are ought-claims (in themselves). Ethics tells us what is right and wrong (from an ethical point of view). But according to the naturalist it does not (necessarily) tell us what we ought to do or what it would be rational to do. Amoralists, that is, persons who are perfectly rational, well aware of ethical aspects of a situation and still not motivated to act accordingly, are conceivable according to the naturalist. (Only if we take a fundamental interest in ethical concerns, we should do the ethically right thing. Most of us, of course, do take such an interest in ethical concerns according to the naturalist, which gives ethics its point.) So, there is no conceptual link between what is right and what one rationally ought to do. Therefore, to talk about “normative ethics” and “normative relativism” might have been one-sided in the first place. Given naturalistic premises, an ethical theory is *not eo ipso* a normative theory, i.e. a theory which tells us what to do. We should talk about “ethics” and “ethical relativism” (as contrasted with “metaethics” and “metaethical relativism”) instead of “normative ethics” and “normative relativism” to begin with. In order to avoid confusion I am not going to change my terminology now but I intend it to be understood as neutral with respect to the naturalism-nonnaturalism debate.

If the naturalist is right, it is not so easy to show that metaethical positions are independent from ethical positions, because according to the naturalist both the fundamental claims of an ethical theory and of a metaethical theory are Is-claims. Our straightforward argument for the independence of both levels is blocked. It might not be possible to derive an Ought from an Is. But if “normative” claims are not necessarily Ought-claims we can’t assume that “normative” claims are independent from the Is-claims of the metaethicist.

To be sure, I don’t think that the naturalist is right. In fact it is precisely because I believe that there is a conceptual link between what is right and
what ought to be done, that I reject naturalism. (I argue this point in detail in my (2006a).) But in the context of our present consideration this is no help at all, because I don’t want to show that naturalism in general or metaethical relativism in particular is untenable but that the latter is independent from normative relativism. As we have seen, metaethical relativism is a form of naturalism. So I can hardly assume that naturalism (and metaethical relativism with it) is false in an argument which purports to show that metaethical relativism is independent from normative relativism. If metaethical relativism has to be false in order to be independent from normative relativism, it is not independent after all. My main claim implies that metaethical relativism is compatible with (almost) any normative position. So, I need a new independence-argument.

The main assumption I am going to make in what follows is that linguistic incompetence is something altogether different from moral blindness. I want to clarify this claim with an analogy: If someone says that bachelors are sometimes married we come to think that this person is (partially) linguistically incompetent. We don’t think that the person is wrong about the habits of bachelors. We rather assume that the person does not know what the word “bachelor” means. Accordingly, we don’t cite empirical evidence in order to convince the person of her mistake, but we refer her to a dictionary. The mistake made by someone who claims that bachelors are sometimes married is categorically different from the mistake made by someone who claims, for example, that bachelors are drunk every other night. In the very same way we distinguish sharply between cases of moral error and cases of error about moral terms. In the former cases we speak of “moral blindness” (or, at least, of “moral ignorance”), in the latter we merely speak of “linguistic inability”. This distinction becomes important when we ask ourselves whether metaethical relativism has normative consequences (and whether normative relativism has metaethical consequences).

As we have seen, basically the metaethical relativist holds a semantic thesis, i.e. a thesis about the meaning of the term “it is right/wrong to Φ”. Therefore, anybody who does not agree is, according to the metaethical relativist, linguistically incompetent – albeit not blatantly so. He, who does not agree, does not know what the sentence “it is right/wrong to Φ” really means. As we all know very well, not every linguistic connection is as obvious as that between being a bachelor and being unmarried. Therefore, not every case of linguistic incompetence is obvious either. But if the metaethical relativist is right about the meaning of the sentence “it is right/wrong to Φ” his opponent is linguistically incompetent – obviously or not.

The normative relativist, by contrast, claims something about what it is right/wrong to do. His opponent, therefore, is not linguistically incompetent
(at least, we have no reason to assume that he is) but, according to the normative relativist, he is rather trapped in moral blindness. But these are two completely different accusations. The linguistically incompetent person is unaware of some conceptual connection (or at least is insufficiently aware of it). The morally blind person, by contrast, is ignorant of some moral fact. And moral truths are not conceptual truths. Indeed, just as Ought-statements and Is-statements are (quite) independent of each other so are conceptual and non-conceptual truths. Of course, conceptual truths follow from non-conceptual truths since, qua being necessarily true, they follow from everything.² But they are compatible with almost every non-conceptual truth, and in this sense are independent of them. The metaethical relativist basically holds a thesis which purports to be a conceptual truth while the normative relativist basically holds a non-conceptual, namely a moral thesis. Both positions are, therefore, almost totally independent of each other. Almost any normative theory is compatible with almost any metaethical theory, just like almost any empirical theory is compatible with almost any conceptual thesis. Qed. Let’s call this the “second independence-argument”.

I will presently come to the “almost-qualification” in this argument. But let me first answer the question why many philosophers believe that there is a close connection between metaethical and normative relativism. I think truth conditional semantics is to blame for this misconception. According to truth conditional semantics, roughly, you know the meaning of a sentence if and only if you know its truth conditions. If one formulates the metaethical relativist’s semantic thesis with reference to truth conditions one easily gets the idea that it has immediate normative consequences. The semantic thesis then look like this:

The sentence “Lying is wrong” is true if and only if the sentence “According to the moral code of my culture lying is wrong” is true.

We only need to use the disquotation scheme now in order to obtain a thesis which looks very normative indeed:

Lying is wrong if and only if according to the moral code of my culture lying is wrong.

What has gone amiss in this derivation is that according to the metaethical relativist this connection holds with conceptual necessity. According to the normative relativist, by contrast, the connection is a moral, not a conceptual connection. According to the normative relativist, someone denying it is morally ignorant, but not linguistically incompetent. Of course, the

² Thanks to Erasmus Mayr for reminding me of this.
Two kinds of moral relativism

A normative relativist might claim that moral truths are necessary truths. But then metaphysical or ethical necessity but not conceptual necessity is at issue.

There is a minimal connection between the metaethical and the normative level, though, because conceptually necessary truths are, after all, truths. So, if one claims that lying is wrong just in case lying is wrong according to the moral code of one’s culture with conceptual necessity one, at least, can’t claim that it is not the case that lying it wrong just in case lying is wrong according to the moral code of one’s culture. Therefore, this normative claim is ruled out by metaethical relativism – but hardly anything else. One can, for example, still claim that it is always right to do what brings the greatest good to the greatest number (if one believes that this is what the moral code of one’s culture demands). On the other hand, it is, of course, possible to maintain that “lying is wrong” has no indexical meaning even if one thinks that lying is wrong just in case it is wrong according to the moral code of the agent’s culture (which would be an extreme cultural normative relativism). So, as I promised to show, normative ethics and metaethics are almost independent of each other in general. In particular one can be even an extreme normative relativist while being a metaethical objectivist and vice versa. The normative relativist need not believe that the sentence “Lying is wrong” means “lying is wrong according to the moral code of my culture” (although he can do so); and the metaethical relativist may claim that it is always right to do what brings the greatest good to the greatest number, although he also believes that thereby he only says what is right according to the code of his own culture.

My second as well as my first independence-argument rests, of course, on metaethical assumptions. But there is a fundamental difference between the two arguments. The premise of the first argument is that there is an unbridgeable gap between Is and Ought. We cannot reasonably make that assumption in the present context, because the metaethical relativist qua naturalist explicitly denies that assumption. The premise of the second argument is that there is a gap between conceptual and moral truths (or, you could say, that moral truths are not conceptual truths). That premise the metaethical relativist (and almost anybody else) explicitly accepts. Naturalists think that moral truths are, at bottom, empirical truths, and therefore not conceptual truths. So, while the metaethical premise of the first argument is moot, the metaethical premise of the second argument is hardly controversial at all. (Of course, there are people who think that moral truths are conceptual truths, but they are a minority.)

I believe that the combination of metaethical objectivism and a reasonable form of normative relativism is a quite plausible position to adopt. I haven’t argued for this position here but I have made a step in this direction by
showing that metaethics and normative ethics are, at least, sufficiently independent of each other for this position to be prima facie consistent.³

References

Ernst, Gerhard: Die Objektivität der Moral, Paderborn: Mentis, 2008a.

³ I have presented various versions of this paper on different occasions. For helpful comments I would like to thank the audiences of these talks. Special thanks go to Erich Ammereller, Erasmus Mayr and Karin Ernst for valuable suggestions.
Part III

China
Harmony as a contested metaphor and conceptions of rightness (yi) in early Confucian ethics

Alan K. L. Chan

The ideal of harmony is often singled out as central to Chinese philosophy and distinctive of the East Asian value system as a whole. In recent years, indeed, some governments in Asia have looked to the virtue of harmony in building social cohesion and national identity. However, it is difficult to pinpoint the meaning of harmony in Chinese thought, for it remains very much a diffused concept, embedded in not one but a host of concepts such as “unity of heaven and human beings” (tianren heyi 天人合一), “great unity” (datong 大同), “great peace” (taiping 太平), and the “doctrine of the mean” (zhongyong 中庸). In this discussion, I focus on the concept of he 和, which is arguably the most basic among concepts that convey a sense of harmony in Chinese philosophy. In particular, I explore the concept of he as a contested metaphor, between harmony in music and the artful blending of different ingredients in cooking. A different logic, it seems to me, guides their construal of harmony. On this basis, I examine also the concept of “rightness” (yi 義) in early Confucian ethics, focusing on some of the Guodian 郭店 bamboo texts and especially the Mencius, in which he, significantly, I believe, receives little attention.1

1. Musical and culinary harmony

The early meaning of he seems well established.2 The Shuowen jiezi 說文解字, a Han dynasty lexicon dating to around 100 C.E., explains that he

---

1 This study was originally prepared for the conference on “Ethics in Ancient China and Greco-Roman Antiquity” held in Munich, October 2007. I am grateful to Richard King and Dennis Schilling for their leadership in this project. I also thank Roger Ames and Chenyang Li for their comments on an earlier draft, and Bendick Ong for tracking down some of the references.

2 Guo Qi 郭齊, “Zhongguo lishi shang zhexue fanchou ‘he’ de xingcheng” 中國歷史上哲學範疇「和」的形成, Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan 中國文哲研究集刊 16 (March 2000): 451–486, discusses in some detail the etymology of he and enumerates the various usages
means sounds “responding to each other” (*xiang ying* 相應). ³ Perhaps one could envisage the call of a human being or animal eliciting a response from another. Examples of this usage of the word in early Chinese texts are readily available. The *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Changes), for instance, makes use of the metaphor of a crane calling from a shaded or hidden place and its offspring responding to it (*鶴鳴在陰，其子和之*).⁴ There is an implicit assumption that the answer is not hostile or discordant, thus yielding what one may call a harmonious response. In the *Lunyu* 論語 (The Analects of Confucius), to take but one other example, we read that Confucius would invariably ask a song to be repeated if it was sung well and he would then join in or sing in accompaniment (*he zhi* 和之).⁵ In modern Chinese, of course, as a verb *he* in the sense of singing in harmony is pronounced in the fourth tone (*hè*), and also as *huò* in the sense of mixing or blending different things together.

Perhaps *he* first appeared as a verb and was pronounced *huò*, but regardless of its etymology and ancient pronunciation, the word was also used as a noun from antiquity. For example, the *Lunyu* (1.12) famously observes, “Of the [many] uses of the rites, [bringing about] harmony [or ‘harmonization’, in Chenyang Li’s rendition] is the most valuable” (*禮之用，和為貴*).⁶ The *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Master Zuo’s Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals) at one point advises that the people can be made to serve the interest of the state only if they in carrying out their affairs yield

---

³ *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, with commentary by Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), p. 57. In contexts where a close relationship binds the two parties together, as Roger Ames pointed out to me, “resonance” may give a better sense of the nature of the “response” (*ying*) involved.


(rang shi) to their superiors, take “delight in harmony” (le he 樂和), love their parents and kin (ai qin), and show appropriate “grief in mourning” (ai sang) for them. Not uncommonly, he may function both verbally and nonverbally in the same sentence. Consider for example, the following passage from the *Liji* (Records of Rites): “[The rites] harmonize the elders and the young (和長幼) ... when the elders and the young are in harmony (長幼和), then the meaning of the rites will have been established.”

In its non-verbal usage, as is well known, he is often associated with musical harmony. One of the earliest examples of this usage is found in the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry), which speaks of “all instruments performing in harmony” (樂既和奏). According to the *Zuo zhuan*, a person who fails to hear or appreciate “the harmony of the five sounds” is indeed “deaf” (耳不聽五聲之和為聾, Duke Xi 嬋, yr. 24). There is, in this regard, much room for comparison with the ancient Greek conception of harmony, which has received careful treatment from Chenyang Li.

It is easy to see how musical harmony can be extended metaphorically to the sociopolitical arena. For example, at one point the *Zuo zhuan* likens political peace among states to “harmony in music” (如樂之和, Duke Xiang 襄, yr. 11). According to the “Records of Music” (“Yueji” 樂記) in the *Liji*, the music of an ordered world is characterized by calm and pleasantness, whereas that of a disordered world cannot but give voice to resentment.

---

7 Duke Zhuang 莊公, Year 27: “夫民讓事, 樂和, 愛親, 哀喪, 而後可用也”; in *Chunjue jingshujuan jijie* 春秋經傳集解, *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 edition (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 3.25a. All subsequent quotations from the *Zuo zhuan* are taken from this edition and will be cited in the text. James Legge translates, “When the people are brought to be courteous in all their affairs, to delight in harmony, to love their relatives, and to grieve on the loss of them, then they can be employed to fight.” The context here concerns war; so “fight” is not an unreasonable extrapolation, even though the text speaks of “use” (yong). James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 5, *The Ch’un T’i’e wih the Tso Chuen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 112. Rang shi probably implies yielding to one’s superiors, as opposed to being courteous generally, in the light of the stated objective. Specifically, given the parallelism between the first two clauses, he should imply obedience or complying with the commands of one’s superiors. As we shall see, compliance is central to the meaning of be understood from a musical perspective.


10 Li, “The Ideal of Harmony in Ancient Chinese and Greek Philosophy.” This and the study by Yu Kam Por, also cited in note 2, above, appeared after the main research on this essay had been completed. While there is some overlap in the coverage of primary sources, my concern, as I will try to demonstrate, is to explore the differences between two competing views of harmony in early Confucian philosophy, as opposed to locating one essential meaning of it. Early Confucianism is not a monolithic school; it drew its vibrancy from debate and disagreement, not only against contending parties but also within its ranks, although obviously certain family resemblances among its followers are to be expected.
and anger. In the former, government is harmonious, whereas in the latter, government is invariably deviant or perverse (治世之音以樂，其政和，亂世之音怨以怒，其政乖)\(^\text{11}\). I will not cite more examples here. The important point for discussion is that the reference to music establishes certain parameters for the interpretation of harmony.

*He* is contrasted with “perversion” or “deviancy” (*guai* 偏) in the “Yueji.” Put positively, harmony based on a musical metaphor suggests conformity with certain norms. Because of this conformity, *he* also carries the sense of what is softly submissive (*rou* 柔) and compliant (*shun* 順). The *Zuozhuan* (Duke Zhao 昭, yr. 26), for example, describes the ideal relationship between husband and wife as one that is governed by *he* on the part of the husband and gentle submissiveness or agreeableness on that of the wife (夫和妻柔). It also associates harmony with *rang* 讓, to yield or give way, as we have seen in a passage cited earlier (Duke Zhuang, yr. 27). The *Xunzi* 荀子, with reference to self-cultivation, defines *shun* in terms of harmonizing or going along with the wishes of other people using moral means and in the interest of what is good (以善和人謂之順)\(^\text{12}\). It also explains, in discussing the proper conduct of officials, that “to follow orders and [in so doing] bring benefit to one’s lord is what is called compliance” (從命而利君謂)

---

\(^{11}\) In *Liji zhengyi* 礼記正義, 37.1b.

\(^{12}\) *Xunzi*, ch. 2, “Xiu shen” 修身; in *Xunzi zhuzi suoyin* 荀子逐字索引, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1996), p. 5; cf. John Knoblock trans., *Xunzi*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 153: “To agree with others for the sake of what is good is called concord.” According to the *Shuowen* (p. 418), the primary verbal meaning of *shun* is to follow, comply or accord with the inherent patterns of an object or state of affairs. In this sense, it defines *shun* as *li* 理, patterns or principles, or as a verb, to put things in order or effect a predetermined order; in sculpting a piece of jade, for example, the master craftsman follows its lines or patterns to achieve optimal results. The *Guxun huizuan* 故訓匯纂, edited by Zong Fubang 宗福邦, Chen Shinao 陳世鐃, and Xiao Haibo 蕭海波 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2003), p. 2491, gives a good number of early glosses on *shun* as *xun* 循 (follow, abide by), *cong* 從 (obey, follow), and *bu ni* 不逆 (not going against). *Shun* is generally contrasted with *ni* (disobey, act against); see, for example, *Mencius* 4A.7. The bamboo text “Bao Xun” 保訓, the first published piece from the collection acquired by Qinghua University in 2008, which purports to be the instruction of King Wen of Zhou to his son, the later King Wu, also contains the phrase “xian shun bu ni” 咸順不逆, it has been suggested; see the two articles on this find in *Wenwu* 2009.6, and Liao Mingchun 廖名春, “Bao Xun jian ‘yinyang zhi wu’ shi shuo” 《保訓》簡“陰陽之物”試說, http://www.confucius2000.com/admin/list.asp?id=4048. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont discuss the concept of *shun* in their recent work, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), pp. 86–87, emphasizing its connection with the word *chuan* 川, a stream or river, and thus the sense of flowing along a proper course. The concept of *shun* is closely tied to that of *xiao*, 孝 filial piety; it is also commonly paired with *ying* (response), suggesting that the desired harmonious response presupposes agreement or yielding to the “lead” party. I will come back to this last point shortly.
Harmony as a contested metaphor

Harmony is the absence of strife (bu he 不和), and this absence can only be brought about if contention gives way to concord. Indeed, as the Zuo zhuan succinctly puts it, without such giving way, there would be no harmony (不讓則不和, Duke Ding 定, yr. 5). This situates he in a particular concept cluster. For the same reason, he is often used with jing 敬 (respect) in classical writings when it is understood as musical harmony.14

There are conceivably different reasons for following another subject in a harmonious response. Parent and child may respond to each other out of love. Confucius followed the lead of the master singer presumably in recognition of the superiority of the performance, both in its aesthetic quality and moral efficacy. Nevertheless, on this understanding, harmony presupposes an unequal relationship between two parties, A and B, with A leading B and B complementing A. B’s contribution can be substantial, even indispensable; but it remains the case that the two parties do not stand in an equal relationship.

On a larger scale involving multiple parties, harmony as a musical metaphor presupposes a certain scale, a hierarchy. For harmony to prevail, the polyphony of sounds needs to be regulated. This requires an impartial judge, which is necessary to harmonize the parties concerned. The concept of lü 律 (statute, regulation), for example, applies to both music and law, and the rites occupy a pivotal place in the Confucian ethical establishment, on account of its regulatory power (if not constitutive force, as some Confucians may argue). Li (rites) and music, as is well known, are inseparable in early Confucian ethics.

However, harmony in this sense still requires that the different sounds fit together, and that the inferior will submit to the superior. These are “structural” conditions, so to speak, independent of how “superiority” may be defined, that are necessary to the realization of harmony in the sense of concord and non-contention.

In traditional tonal music at least, some sounds or notes simply would not fit and therefore cannot be accommodated. A hostile cry in response to a warm and caring note, the threatening roar of multiple parties fighting over
a prize – these do not fall under the semantic field of *he* in this construal. In the language of Confucian ethics, they disturb the heart or mind (*xin* 心) and will inevitably lead to strife. The heart both thinks and feels in this conception, and its role in the ethical life will be discussed later. Here, the point that needs to be emphasized is that even with a robust regulatory framework, a small discordant note will have a jarring effect and disrupt the delicate balance of the whole.

Confucian harmony in this understanding is characterized by sage and benevolent leadership “above” and grateful and joyous compliance “below.” This is the overall score that Confucian ethics aims to orchestrate. Ideally, the rites may succeed beyond external regulation to bring about an internal transformation (in Xunzi’s view) or they may represent the fruition of one’s innate moral dispositions and sensibilities (in Mencius’ view). Nevertheless, intractable dissonance must still be addressed. Thus, the music of the state of Zheng 鄭, for example, according to Confucius, cannot be reformed and must be abandoned (*Lunyu* 15.11; cf. 17.18). The usage of *he* in the *Lunyu* will be set out more systematically later. At this point, it may be noted also that for Confucius, a culturally and ethically accomplished gentleman does not plan in concert with those who follow a different path (*Lunyu* 15.40). Harmony is certainly to be cherished, but it is not possible unless such errant notes have been properly dispensed with. Diachronically, it is possible that what was deemed jarring at one time might become pleasing to the ear in a different age. Nevertheless, synchronically, the logic of harmony in a musical sense entails that dissonance must be treated as a clear and present danger requiring resolute intervention.

There is a second sense in which the concept of *he* has been understood in Chinese philosophy. *He* is not only understood in terms of musical harmony but also as the pinnacle of fine cooking. As a culinary metaphor, *he* connotes principally a broth that is well cooked and seasoned – the phrase *he geng* 和羹 appears, for example, in the *Shijing*. The metaphor implies balance, as the following passage from the *Zuo zhuan* (Duke Zhao, yr. 20) indicates:

> 和如羹焉. 水火醯醢鹽梅以烹魚肉, 燉之以薪, 宰夫和之, 齊之以味, 濟其不及, 以洩其過.

Harmony is like a [thick, substantial] soup. The chef cooks the fish and meat with water, fire, vinegar, salt, and sauces made of meat and plums. He carefully tends the fire and blends the ingredients together to ensure a balanced taste; he puts in what is lacking so as to discharge what is in excess.

Unlike the idea that harmony arises from a sympathetic response of one sound or note to another, or the regulation of different but complementing

---

15 *Shijing*, Mao#302, “Lie zu” 烈祖, which Legge, p. 634, translates as “well-tempered soups.”
sounds, the analogy here suggests that harmony results from a careful blending of not only divergent but also possibly conflicting elements. Sweetness and bitterness may seem opposed to each other, but in a well-balanced gastronomic mixture, natural or man-made, they can yield an exquisite taste. Many inhabitants of Southeast Asia would argue, for example, that the fruit durian fits precisely this description. Ice cream and fire seem inharmonious, but they can combine to form a wonderful dessert. Here, there is no single constant formula that would regulate the elements into a preconceived desirable end. The key to harmony is not compliance or yielding to a higher authority; rather, it has to do with understanding the properties of the different elements and how they play their unique roles in creating and sustaining a rich and balanced whole.

In music, as we have seen, harmony is characterized by rou 柔, which suggests gentleness and compliance, but in a culinary metaphor harmony is marked by an equilibrium that is neither overpoweringly harsh nor meekly submissive (不剛不柔). This is the height of harmony (和之至), according to the Zuozhuan (Duke Zhao, yr. 20, citing Shijing, Mao#304, “Shang Song 商頌, Chang fa 長發”). Under this model, the realization of harmony thus lies not in bringing someone or something into submission or in line with an acknowledged ideal, but rather in making full use of the strength of each individual element in reaching an optimal outcome. The Zuozhuan also states in this same passage that harmony in politics consists in employing both fierce rebuke and sympathetic accommodation to attain the desired balance (寬以濟猛, 猛以濟寬, 政是以和), as opposed to, as I take it, establishing compassion, forgiveness or any other value as the single overarching ideal and making all others come under its fold.

2. Harmony as a contested metaphor

These two senses of he, it seems to me, operate on a different logic, and they lead to different conceptions of harmony. Harmony always involves multiplicity and diversity. Indeed, it is about managing diversity. One possibility would be to set up a powerful ideal such as benevolence (ren 仁) or rightness or duty (yi 義) to guide and transform the multitude and to establish norms of conduct that would enforce that ideal, so that in the end there will be a particular kind of culture in which everyone contributes to and shares in the fruits of universal kindness, peace and prosperity.

A Confucian gentleman has the responsibility of spreading this culture to all under heaven; not by force, no doubt, or active proselytizing, but through education and acculturation. Nevertheless, while the Confucian project need not entail missionary zeal, it does envisage transforming alien culture and bringing it under the Confucian ethical domain. As the Lunyu (16.1)
remarks, a Confucian government must cultivate a culture of virtue to attract even those from distant lands who are not submissive (遠人不服，則修文德以來之). Thus, diversity is admissible only insofar as there is compliance. Musical harmony, or more precisely the particular construal of musical harmony as represented by the texts cited above, exemplifies this ideal.

A second possible interpretation of harmony rests on a dynamic employment of diversity in such a way that each individual element will contribute to the flourishing of the larger whole. At the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels, within an individual or society, there may be elements that do not appear to contribute to its well being; but instead of radically reforming them or eradicating them altogether from the system, it may be possible to work, adjust and mix (tiao 調) them with other elements to achieve harmony.

In this scenario, it is the process of attaining balance that is of critical importance, as distinguished from the end state, which may turn out to be novel or unexpected. In fact, it is often unclear what that ideal “taste” will be like, except that all the ingredients will have their place and the taste will be just right. Indeed, the Lüshi chunqiu 呂氏春秋 raises the art of “mixing and blending” in cooking (調和之事) to a sublime art – the way in which the different flavors are mixed together and in what order, and the process that takes place in the cooking pot, as the text intimates, are subtle and cannot be fully described (必以甘酸苦辛鹹，先後多少，其齊甚微，皆有自起。鼎中之變，精妙微纖，口弗能言，志不能喻) . Significantly, new ingredients are not

16 Cf. Lunyu 9.14, which in D. C. Lau's translation reads, “The Master wanted to settle amongst the Nine Barbarian Tribes of the east. Someone said, ‘But could you put up with their uncouth ways?’ The Master said, ‘Once a gentleman settles amongst them, what uncouthness will there be?’” Traditional commentators from Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166) to Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) all take this to mean that the gentleman will “transform” (hua 化) them. Ma Rong’s view is found in the Lunyu jijie 論語集解 compiled by He Yan (d. 249); see Huang Kan 袁勘 (488–543), Lunyu jijie yishu 論語集解義疏, Shisanjing zhushu edition (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1963), p. 91. Zhu Xi basically repeats Ma’s explanation in his commentary; see Zhu Xi, Lunyu jizhu 論語集注, in Sishu jizhu 四書集注, Sibu beiyao edition (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1973). See also Lunyu, 3.5, which seems to disparage the Yi and Di tribes – again, in Lau’s translation: “The Master said, ‘Barbarian tribes with their rulers are inferior to Chinese states without them’” – though there is disagreement in interpretation among traditional commentators on this passage.

17 As the Xiaojing (usually translated as Classic of Filial Piety), ch. 12, observes, “There is nothing more effective than music (yue) for changing the ways and customs of the people” (移風易俗，莫善於樂); as translated in Rosemont and Ames, The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence, p. 112. See also “Yueji,” Liji zhengyi 呂氏春秋, 3.8a–9a.

18 I would resist evoking the idea of a “melting pot” in explaining this sense of harmony, for two reasons. First, the idea of a “melting point” is itself open to different interpretation, and second, in common understanding it is generally seen to yield a single, predetermined outcome.

19 Lüshi chunqiu, “Ben wei” 本味, Sibu beiyao edition (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 14.5a. The Lüshi chunqiu also makes use of the metaphor of musical harmony in many
a potential liability that should be “transformed” or made to comply with established norms; rather, in the light of the logic of culinary harmony they hold out the enticing promise of bringing new flavors to the ever-cooking totality.

There is overlap between these two metaphors of harmony. I do not mean to imply that musical harmony is static or focuses exclusively on an end state that is dogmatically conceived, whereas harmony in cooking is dynamic and focuses exclusively on the process. Metaphors are seldom rigid, and precisely for that reason they often prove fertile for understanding and intellectual innovation.

An interpreter may also try to subsume one metaphor under the other. For example, the Zuozhuan (Duke Zhao, yr. 20) suggests that “sounds are also like tastes” (聲亦如味), after it has described harmony in terms of cooking (quoted above). What the Zuozhuan does is to try to harmonize the two interpretations of harmony current in early Chinese philosophy. This may even be regarded as the “standard” view in later Chinese thought. For example, during the third century, Xiahou Xuan 夏侯玄 (209–254) conflates the two metaphors in a discussion on reforming the system of official appointment:

Now, the beauty of a well harmonized broth lies in [its successful] blending [of] the different ingredients. The strength of [a well harmonized state made up of] the [ruling class] above and the [people] below lies in their ability to enrich each other. When there is compliance and obedience, peace is assured. This is [like] the qin-zither and the se-zither [making beautiful music] in unison.20

夫和羹之美，在於合異。上下之益，在能相濟。順從乃安，此琴瑟一聲也。

instances. This is not surprising, given the eclectic nature of the work. For a translation, see John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, trans., The Annals of Lü Buwei (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 309.

Nevertheless, the two metaphors remain distinct, in my view. Harmony in a musical sense presupposes a distinction between “superior” and “inferior” – he is crucial to making the people “below” follow a particular set of values determined from “above”, even though ethically the latter should act with humility as if they themselves were “inferior” and treat the former with respect as if they were “superior”; but in a culinary metaphor, at most we may distinguish a main ingredient from other ingredients, without closing the possibility that some of the “guests” may outshine the “host.” In a symphony, the sound of a string instrument will remain distinct, but in a well-cooked soup, the individual ingredients blend perfectly together to form a harmonious flavor, even if there is a main ingredient (say, chicken). Further, in traditional music, not any combination of notes or tones will yield a chord. Discord must submit to concord if there is to be harmony. Improvisation may have a place in music making, but it is not exempt from the norms of harmony in this context. In contrast, sharply divergent tastes can in principle combine to yield novel flavors that are pleasing to the palate, leaving aside for the moment whether taste is inborn or shaped by culture, or both. Conceivably, there could have been different interpretations of music or cooking; nevertheless, judging from the evidence presented above, a case can be made that not one but two courses of interpretation contested the meaning of he in early Chinese philosophy.

The Lunyu makes use of the word he eight times in five passages.21 Significantly, it figures twice in Lunyu 13.23, in which Confucius distinguishes harmony from sameness or unison (和而不同).22 The underlying metaphor seems to be one of music, although commentators have come to understand it in different ways. According to Zhu Xi, here harmony means the absence of a devious and malicious heart (和者無乖戾之心). This harks back to the contrast between he and perversion in the “Yueji” and would make sense only if one views harmony in the light of the metaphor of music. Indeed, although a full exposition cannot be undertaken here, Zhu Xi consistently

---

21 Three of these are associated with the assertion that harmony or the function of harmonizing is what is most valuable in the practice of the rites, which is attributed to You Ruo 有若, one of Confucius’ disciples, and has been cited earlier. Another occurrence is found in Book 19, in which the disciple Zi Gong 子貢 praises Confucius to the effect that should he be in a position to govern the people, they would doubtless respond to his initiatives in concert (19.25, 動之斯和). As mentioned previously, he is used as a verb in Lunyu 7.32. A sixth instance appears in Book 16, where Confucius emphasizes that when harmony prevails, there will not be any concern about a state’s not having enough people (16.1, 和無寡).

interprets the concept of he in his commentary to the *Lunyu* in this way. However, He Yan’s commentary reads, “The heart of the gentleman is harmonious, though they hold different views; thus the text says, ‘not the same’. Ethically deficient men have the same tastes and likes, but they strive for their own benefit; thus the text says, ‘not in harmony’” (君子心和, 然其所見各異, 故曰不同. 小人所嗜好者同, 然各爭其利, 故曰不和也). This seems to reflect an understanding that proceeds from treating harmony as a culinary metaphor.

The *Zuozhuan* (Duke Zhao, yr. 20) also distinguishes harmony from sameness sharply at one point. Judging from the context, it seems to be working primarily with a culinary metaphor. Sameness, it says, is like using water to bring out the flavor of water (若以水濟水), which obviously cannot give rise to any “harmonious” taste. The *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States) defines he as “using one thing to pacify another” (以他平他謂之和). Although as in the *Zuozhuan*, there is mention of music in the *Guoyu* dialogue, the sense in which harmony is interpreted here fits the gastronomic model. At least, it would seem odd to see one musical instrument “pacifying” another in creating harmony.

The *Zhongyong* 中庸, which is traditionally ascribed to Zi Si 子思, Confucius’ grandson and putative lineage teacher of Mencius, of course, speaks of harmony in terms of basic human emotions reaching their proper measure (喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中, 發而皆中節謂之和). The idea of measure suggests a musical metaphor; for example, the *Zuozhuan* (Duke Xiang, yr. 29) makes the point that “the harmony of the five sounds” (五聲和) reflects

---

23 For example, commenting on *Lunyu* 17.11, with reference to the rites and music, Zhu Xi cites Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) to the effect that the key to ritual propriety is order, whereas the key to music is harmony. The influence of ritual and music is pervasive, and these two words alone contain a wealth of insight into the principles that govern the universe. Master Cheng goes on to make an analogy: the rites and music are like two chairs. If one of them is not straight, then there will not be proper order. Without order, there will be perversion or deviancy. With deviancy, there will not be any harmony (程子曰: 禮只是一箇序, 樂只是一箇和. 只此兩字, 含蓄多少義理. 天下無一物無禮樂, 且如置此兩椅, 一不正, 便是無序, 無序便乖, 乖便不和). 24 *Lunyu jijie yishu*, p. 137. Huang Kan’s sub-commentary elaborates: he means that the heart is not contentious. The gentlemen (君和) are said to be “not the same” because they have set their hearts on different careers, though their minds remain one in ethical terms. Mean and petty men are one in terms of their morally reprehensible behavior; thus, the text says that they are “the same.” They like contention and strife; thus the text says that they are “not he” (和謂心不爭也. 不同謂立志各異也. 君子之人千萬. 千萬其心和如一, 而所習習之志業不同也. 小人為恩如一, 故云同也. 好鬬爭, 故云不和也). 25 This passage has been translated in Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, p. 254, and in the studies by Chenyang Li and Yu Kam Por cited above. 26 *Guoyu*, 16, “Zheng yu” 鄭語 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1987), p. 186; cf. Chenyang Li (2006), p. 584.
the existence of proper measures and order (節有度, 守有序). As Zhu Xi understands the Zhongyong, similar to his interpretation of the Lunyu, if the emotions all find expression in proper measure, it would mean that they have attained the rightness of human nature. Because they are not deviant or perverse, they are therefore said to be in harmony (發皆中節, 情之正也. 無所乖戾, 故謂之和).

In a food metaphor, salt and pepper, for example, can combine to create a wonderful dish, but it is not because they contribute only a measure of their properties, holding the full expression of their flavor in check. One may add more salt to create a different balance, but this is very different from saying that saltiness as such, like anger, should not exceed a certain degree, lest it becomes deviant. The music of the state of Zheng, in contrast, is condemned because it is deemed “excessive” (yin 淫) (Lunyu 15.11). According to Ji Kang at least, it was in fact wonderful music, though it was so moving that the audience would inevitably be led to indulge in the pleasure it gives.

In the Mencius, the word he appears only three times. This is surprising and I think requires an explanation. Two of these appear in a passage in which Mencius rates human factors – specifically, the unity and morale of one’s troops and people (renhe 人和) – as even more important than the weather (tianshi 天時) and the terrain (dili 地利) in military campaigns (2B.1). It seems likely that Mencius was adopting a set expression commonly used by strategists in this instance. Elsewhere, Mencius describes Liuxia Hui 柳下惠 as a “sage of harmony” (5B.1, 圣之和者), although he also criticizes him (2A.9). It is difficult to say whether Mencius was thinking of musical or culinary harmony. When describing Confucius as the sage who gathers all goodness within himself (ji da cheng 集大成), Mencius uses a musical metaphor (5B.1). He also affirms that the business of the junzi-gentleman is

27 Zhu Xi, Sishu jizhu, Zhongyong zhangju 中庸章句, ch. 1, p. 2b.
28 Robert Henricks, Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-Century China, p. 105. See also Kenneth J. DeWoskin, A Song for One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1982), pp. 92–94.
29 See Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, Mengzi yizhu 孟子譯注 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p. 87, n.1; all quotations from the Mencius are from this edition. Perhaps “tianshi” involves more than weather, but the point remains that the Mencius was referencing a military expression in this instance. In the Shanghai Museum bamboo manuscript corpus, there is a text that has been given the title, “Cao Mo zhi chen” 曹沫之陳, in which references are made to he in a military context. I am grateful to P. Ernest Caldwell IV for drawing my attention to this. For a systematic introduction to this text, see Caldwell’s unpublished paper, “Defining Leadership and Promoting Action in the Warring States: A First Look at the Recently Discovered Military Manuscript Cao Mo’s Battle Formations.” For the Chinese original, see Ma Chengyuan 马承源, ed., Shanghai Bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhusu 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, vol. 4 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), pp. 239–285. In a military context, it is easy to see how conformity and obedience would play a central role in the construal of “harmony.”
only about benevolence and therefore there is no reason why they must act
in the same way under specific circumstances (6B.6). Is it possible that the
Mencius downplays the importance of he for a reason?

The Confucian Guodian material also does not seem to favor he.30 In the
Liu de 六德 (Six Virtues), he appears once as a verb (和大臣).31 In the Zun
de yi 尊德義 (Honoring Virtue and Rightness) and the Xing zi ming chu 性
自命出 (Nature Issues from Life), the word appears three times, all in
the sense of being settled, secure, and at ease (安).32 However, the concept
of he does feature centrally in the Wuxing 五行, which raises interesting
possibilities because in the light of Xunzi’s criticism, the Wuxing is often
traced to what scholars have come to identify as the “Zi Si-Mencius” school
of Confucian philosophy.33

Leaving the Wuxing for the moment, Zi Si’s version of Confucian
philosophy has been transmitted mainly through the Zhongyong.34 New
information now emerges from the Guodian fragment “Lu Mugong wen
Zi Si” 魯穆公問子思 (Dialogue between Duke Mu of Lu and Zi Si). There,
Zi Si is portrayed as an unyielding advocate of Confucian moral values.

30 The discovery of the bamboo texts of Guodian, near Jingmen city, Hubei province, in
1993 furnishes important new insight into the development of early Chinese philosophy.
Many of these are Confucian in nature and are likely to have preceded the Mencius. The
Guodian texts have been published as Guodian Chu mu zhujian 郭店楚墓竹簡, edited by
the Jingmen City Museum (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998). All quotations from the
Guodian corpus are from this work.
31 Guodian Chu mu zhujian, p.187.
32 Guodian Chu mu zhujian, pp. 174 and 181.
33 According to the Xunzi, Zi Si and Mencius put forward a false doctrine called “wuxing.” See
Xunzi, ch. 6, “Fei shier zi” 非十二子; Xunzi zhu zui suoyin, p. 22. This has puzzled scholars
for a long time, for wuxing is generally understood as “five agents/processes/phases” in
the context of early Chinese cosmology, and there is little evidence in the Zhongyong or
the Mencius of any interest in yin-yang theories. The discovery of the Mawangdui silk
manuscripts in 1973 finally provided an answer. Appended to the Laozi “A” manuscript is
a text that the editors have titled Wuxing. Here, wuxing refers not to metal, wood, water,
fire, and earth, which stands at the heart of the yinyang wuxing cosmological theory, but
rather to the five cardinal Confucian virtues of ren 仁 (benevolence), yi 義 (rightness), li
禮 (ritual propriety), zhi 智 (wisdom), and sheng 聖 (sageness). The same five virtues are
highlighted in the Mencius; see especially 7B.24. The Guodian find includes a shorter
version of the Wuxing. The main difference between the two versions of the Wuxing is
that the Mawangdui text contains an additional explanatory or commentary section. On
the Zi Si-Mencius school, see Pang Pu 龐樸, Zhubo Wuxing pian jiaozhu ji yanjiu 竹帛五
行篇校注及研究 (Taipei: Wanjuanlou tushu, 2000), and Liang Tao 梁濤, Guodian zhujian
yu Si-Meng xuepai 郭店竹簡與思孟學派 (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin daxue chubanshe,
2008). On the Wuxing, see especially the masterful study by Mark Csikszentmihalyi,
Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China (Leiden: Brill, 2004), in which
Wuxing is translated as “Five Kinds of Action.”
34 For a discussion of the authorship of the Zhongyong, see Roger Ames and David L. Hall,
Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong
When the Duke asked him what makes a loyal or conscientious minister, Zi Si replied, “A minister who always points out the flaws in his lord may be called a loyal minister.”35 The Duke was greatly displeased, as the text also tells us, which is a common rhetorical device in early Chinese writings highlighting the bluntness of the critique. Mencius, of course, also enjoys the image of being unrelenting and thoroughly uncompromising in his defense of ethical excellence. Repeatedly in the Mencius, we find him criticizing princes and lords for their alleged moral shortcomings. Perhaps Mencius was keen to distinguish his brand of Confucian teaching from others that might not have taken as seriously what to him was the full force of Confucian ethical theory. If the concept of he in a musical sense entails submission to higher authorities in virtue of their social position, there is every reason why Mencius might not want to emphasize it. Nevertheless, I think there may be a deeper reason, which is critical to Mencius’ reinterpretation of rightness (yi).

3. Harmony, benefit, and rightness

My suspicion is that Mencius did not emphasize the concept of he because of the close connection generally perceived by his contemporaries linking he with “benefit” or “profit” (li) and rightness. But let me be clear. This does not mean that Mencius was not interested in “harmony” as such. Other concepts in the Mencius could well be pursuing harmony as an ethical and sociopolitical ideal. However, the conspicuous disregard of he, which was widely used in Warring States writings, seems to suggest that Mencius was wary of a particular interpretation of harmony that privileges profit.

That harmony should bring profit is understandable; but yi is equally important to social peace and prosperity. How are these three related? As the Yijing famously puts it, benefit is the result of the harmonious flourishing of yi (利者義之和).36 The Zuozhuan (Duke Zhao, yr. 10) also states explicitly that “yi is the root of benefit” (義者，利之本也). To give a little more context, the Zuozhuan (Duke Cheng 成, yr. 2) explains, “The rites are devised to perform yi; yi is that which generates benefit; benefit is used to pacify the people – this is the great measure of government” (禮以行義，義以生利，利以平民，政之大節也).

This would imply that yi was understood primarily as duty, especially the roles and responsibilities pertaining to the ruling class. As the Zuozhuan (Duke Huan 桓, yr. 2) also tells us, “names” or titles determine yi-duties, which in turn give rise to the rites (名以制義，義以出禮). Without going

35 Guodian Chu mu zhujian, p. 141.
36 Yijing, Hexagram #1, “Qian” 乾, “Wen yan” 文言. Also in Zuozhuan, Duke Xiang, yr. 9.
into any philological detail, it is generally recognized that prior to Mencius, yì conveys rightness in the sense of what is fitting or appropriate.37 In this context, right or appropriate conduct is concretely demarcated by the rites, or from the opposite perspective, yì as duty may be seen as that which informs ritual behavior, as the two Zuozhuan passages cited above indicate. To the ruler, it is obviously important that public interest is served; thus, the yì pertaining to the ruler would include not only treating the people well, with humility and respect, but also the administration of justice and the use of force, if necessary. The Wuxing distinguishes “hardness” (gàng 剛) as the “formula,” method or orientation of yì (義之方) from “softness” (rou 柔), which characterizes benevolence (ren).38 For office holders and subjects, yì would entail submission and respect.39 In this latter sense, the Oxford English Dictionary definition of “duty” seems applicable: “The action and conduct due to a superior; homage, submission; due respect, reverence; an expression of submission, deference, or respect.”

As duties associated with social roles or stations, yì may be said to be “external” (wài 外) to oneself. A person is born into certain roles in society, with particular obligations and responsibilities; this is his destiny or dharma, as it were. Thus, the Zhuangzi suggests a close connection between “destiny” (ming 命) and yì – the love of a child for his or her parents is a matter of destiny; the service that one owes to one’s lord is a matter of yì, from which there is no escape.40 The Zuozhuan also pairs the yì of a mother with the

37  The view of Pang Pu remains influential in this regard. According to Pang, the earliest meaning of yì, written as yí 宜, was connected with the “killing” (sha 殺) of a sacrificial offering. Because of the perceived appropriateness of that act, the word yí 宜 then came to acquire its now standard meaning of rightness, in the sense of what is fitting or appropriate. See Pang Pu, Rujia bianzhengfa yanjiu 儒家辯證法研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984); cf. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, trans., The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation, pp. 53–55. D. C. Lau translates yì as duty in the Mencius. In the Guodian texts, the word 義 is sometimes written as 宜。

38  Guodian Chu mu zhujuan, p. 151. In the Wuxing, yì is particularly associated with the dispensation of justice. Recall that harmony in a musical sense privileges “softness” (rou), whereas from the perspective of cooking or blending different tastes, it is the “right” balance of gàng and rou that is decisive.

39  In this sense, the Xunzi, ch.9, “Wang zhi” 王制 states, “The ability to serve one’s superiors [fully discharging one’s yì-duties and in accordance with the rites] is what we call compliance” (能事上謂之順). See Xunzi zhuzi suoyin, p. 39; cf. Knoblock, Xunzi, vol. 2, p. 104. The Xing zi ming chu suggests that yì is the formula of respect (義, 敬之方), though the context is not entirely clear. See Guodian Chu mu zhujuan, p. 180. The bamboo texts collected by the Shanghai Museum include a work that is substantially the same as the Xing zi ming chu and has been given the title, Xingqing lun 性情論. See Ma Chengyuan, ed., Shanghai Bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu, vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), pp. 215–301. See p. 267 for a discussion of this passage.

love of her child (母義子愛; Duke Wen 文, yr. 6), and the yi of a father with the love of a mother (父義母慈; Duke Wen, yr. 18). Parallel constructions in classical Chinese indicate either complementarity or contrast. Unlike likes and dislikes, or pleasure and anger, which are opposites, these examples depict complementary attributes. In these instances, yi basically conveys a broad sense of duty, the conduct that is due, that one is obligated to perform, in virtue of one’s place in society.

In the Guodian corpus, the sense of yi as duty can also be detected. The Cheng zhi wen zhi 成之聞之, for example, treats in parallel the yi between ruler and minister (君臣之義) and the love between father and son (父子之親). Similar expressions are found in the Liu de 六德. Significantly, the Liu de states explicitly that whereas ren (benevolence) is “internal,” yi is “external” (仁內也，義外也). The series of Guodian fragments identified as Yucong yi 語叢一 (Collected Sayings, First Series) makes the point that “whereas ren is born of human beings, yi is born of dao. Whereas the one stems from within [i.e., ren], the other stems from without” (仁生於人，義生於道。或生於內，或生於外). Besides the Guodian texts, the Guanzi 管子 also holds that “whereas ren issues from within, yi is formed from without” (仁從中出，義由外作). The Mozi, of course, is often credited with the same view as well.

There is thus reason to believe that this was a well established if not the dominant position in early China, to which some Confucians also
subscribed. Mozi, after all, was trained in the Confucian school, according to the *Huainanzi* 淮南子. In the *Mencius*, Gaozi 告子 is given the honor of representing this position, to which Mencius vehemently opposes. I will not rehearse the debate between Mencius and Gaozi here. Of greater interest to the present discussion is that the *Wuxing* also testifies to an alternative view, which traces the operation of *yi* to the human heart (*xin*), understood as the locus of all cognitive and affective functions.

The *Wuxing* first makes a distinction between (a) *de* 德, which is defined as virtuous character or more precisely the embodiment of the five cardinal virtues within a person, and (b) moral conduct (*xing* 行), which is their outward expression in actual behavior. The only exception is “saginess,” which is special and should be regarded as stemming from virtuous character, even if it is seen only in externally observable conduct. When the five virtues flourish in harmony (*he*) within oneself, virtuous character is realized (*德之行五, 和謂之德*). Leaving out sageness as a special category, when benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom function harmoniously in conduct, the way of goodness (*shan* 善) is realized. Whereas virtuous character pertains to heaven, as the *Wuxing* concludes, goodness represents the way of human beings.

This renders the sage an extraordinary being. The priority of virtuous character or moral substance over external conduct is also clear. The *Wuxing* further explains that joy follows from the harmony of the five virtues, and with joy the presence of virtuous character is assured (*和則樂, 樂則有德*). Given the close connection between music (*yue* 樂) and “joy” (*le* 樂) in early Confucian philosophy, the text may be taking harmony as a musical metaphor. When benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety and wisdom act in harmony, the *Wuxing* continues, there will be “sameness” or conformity, and with conformity, there will be goodness (*和則同, 同則善*).

This seems to contradict Confucius’ dictum, mentioned earlier, that the gentleman cherishes harmony but not sameness, especially in the sense of agreeing with whatever one’s superior may say. But the *Wuxing* here is principally concerned with the workings of the human heart. When the cardinal Confucian virtues flourish in harmony within oneself, like a perfect sage ruler, the heart effortlessly lords over the senses. In this ideal

47 *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, p. 149. See also Pang Pu, *Zhubo Wuxing pian jiaozhu ji yanjiu*, p. 29.
48 *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, p. 149.
49 *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, p. 150; repeated on p. 151.
scenario, as the *Wuxing* optimistically asserts, “The ears, eyes, nose, mouth, hands and feet – these six are the servant of the heart” (耳目鼻口手足六者, 心之役也). Indeed, when the heart issues a command, none would dare to act otherwise (心曰唯, 莫敢不唯). The logic of submission and conformity may point to musical harmony, and this is certainly how the explanation in the longer Mawangdui version of the *Wuxing* has taken it: “harmony may be likened to the harmony of the five sounds” (和者有猶 [五]聲之和也). But, the focus on the heart also provides a point of departure for a new interpretation of rightness.

4. Rightness and the workings of the heart

Up to this point, the evidence at our disposal suggests that rightness is generally understood in early Chinese sources as the fulfillment in an appropriate manner sanctioned by rituals and tradition of duties that inform prescribed roles. In this sense, *yi* may be seen to be “external” or stemming from the roles and obligations that define a person’s place in life. This is essentially an instrumentalist reading of *yi* that sets its sights on reaping maximum benefit for the state and its people. There is a further sense in which harmony is critical to the optimal functioning of sociopolitical roles, and thus the flourishing of rightness and production of benefit. Harmony construed in a musical sense as involving conformity and compliance is particularly attractive to this interpretation.

As is well known, Mencius takes strong exception to the proposition that *yi* is “external,” in the sense defined above. In its place, he traces *yi* to a person’s innate “heart of shame and dislike” (*xiuwu zhi xin* 羞惡之心), one of the “four germs” (*siduan* 四端) of morality that constitute the ethical core of one’s inborn nature (*xing* 性). What are the problems that Mencius is trying to solve? What is wrong with the thesis that *yi* is external?

From Mencius’ perspective, one key problem concerns motivation. If *yi* is external, duty may easily become a burden, a debt that one may not wish to repay. Now, to those who see *yi* as duty, this need not be a serious issue, because *yi* in that sense is directly linked to benefit, which should serve more than adequately as a source of motivation. On this view, when the roles and responsibilities of each and every title or function are harmoniously fulfilled, society will be in order and consequently, all under heaven will enjoy the fruits of their collective labor.

In contrast, Mencius is well known for his opposition to associating *yi* with profit (e.g., see *Mencius* 1A.1). Basing *yi* on profit is unreliable. Problems

---

50 Guodian Chu mu zhujuan, p. 151.
51 Mawangdui Han wu boshu 馬王堆漢墓帛書 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1980), p. 22.
obviously arise when those in positions of power exploit the people and take more than they should. Complicating this further is the view that harmony demands obedience and compliance. As a "radical," uncompromising Confucian, Mencius was committed to defending the interests of the people, and working yi to profit the ruling class alone would not be acceptable to him. Yet, once benefit is removed from yi, what is the motivation for doing what is fitting and right? To Mencius, this is where a clear understanding of the heart becomes necessary. Fundamentally, a person does not perform yi because of the benefit it brings but because he or she likes it.

The Wuxing already hints that the heart is not only capable of distinguishing right from wrong, but is in fact also predisposed to liking ren and yi. It states, “A person who is delighted upon hearing the dao is someone who likes benevolence; a person who becomes fearful upon hearing the dao is someone who likes yi” (聞道而悅者，好仁者也。聞道而畏者，好義者也). The dao may refer to Confucian discourse, and the junzi should be “fearful” or in awe of, among other things, the teaching of the sages, which entails deep respect (Lunyu 16.8); but what makes a person “like” or “dislike” something?

Liking or being drawn to something (hao 好) and disliking or being averse to something (wu 恶) inform human nature and are basic functions of the heart. As the Xing zi ming chu succinctly puts it, “Liking and disliking are [a matter of] nature” (性也). Indeed, they seem to have been regarded as the most basic of all affective functions. Thus, in early Chinese taxonomies of emotions, hao and wu usually head the list – according to the Xunzi, for example, “The liking and disliking, pleasure and anger, and sorrow and joy of human nature are what we call emotions” (性之好惡喜怒哀樂謂之情). Furthermore, there is a sense in which differentiated emotions such as pleasure and anger are derived from them. One of the Guodian texts, the Yucong er 語叢二 (Collected Sayings, Second Series), for example, observes that aversion arises from one’s inborn nature and that anger is born of one’s disliking something (惡生於性，怒生於惡). The Zuozhuan (Duke Zhao, yr. 25) also notes that “pleasure is born of one’s liking, and anger is born of one’s disliking [certain things]” (喜生於好，怒生於惡).

52 Guodian Chu mu zhujian, p. 151.
53 Guodian Chu mu zhujian, p. 179.
55 Guodian Chu mu zhujian, p. 204. The Yucong er, however, also contains a slip that argues that a person’s “likes are born of what is pleasing” to him or her (hao sheng yu yue 好生於喜); see ibid. Different interpretations of major issues are to be expected, especially at a time when Confucian scholars were still trying to establish themselves in the intellectual and political world. Sharing a similar philosophical vocabulary, they nonetheless put forward their own unique positions, especially in the way different concepts might be connected. The kind of hermeneutical vibrancy that fueled early Chinese philosophical discourse can hardly be overemphasized.
There is nothing profound about this – the gratification of desire brings pleasure – but it points to certain baseline assumptions that guide early Chinese ethics.

As functions of the heart, desire and emotions are understood materially as movements of qi 氣, the vital life-force, energy, or “pneuma” that constitutes and sustains life. At the most basic biological level, quite simply, as the Zhuangzi puts it, “the coming to be of a human being is a union of qi” (人之生，氣之聚); if qi scatters, the result is death.\(^{56}\) Not only does qi make up the physical body – bones, organs, muscles and blood, for example – but as the Zuozhuan (Duke Zhao, yr. 25) indicates, the emotions are all born of the “six qi” (民有好惡喜怒哀樂，生於六氣). Similarly, the Guanzi connects “liking and disliking, pleasure and anger, and sorrow and joy” with the “transformation of the six qi” (六氣之變).\(^{57}\) The precise enumeration of qi is not important; what needs to be recognized is that there was common understanding among Chinese thinkers of the Warring States period that biological, cognitive and affective processes are essentially functions of qi. In fact, the Xing zi ming chu defines human nature explicitly as “the qi of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy” (喜怒哀悲之氣).

The idea that qi-energies constitute human life and direct behavior has the force of a “scientific” theory. It underpins all philosophical investigations. “Nature” is a basic term that seeks to explain life, generally understood to have been endowed by “heaven” in early China. The notion of “destiny” also figures frequently in this context. As a general claim, few would disagree with Gaozi that “what is inborn is what we call nature” (生之謂性).\(^{59}\) Disagreement arises when scholars seek to delineate what a person is born with, or the contents of xing.

Inborn nature may be understood as a kind of qi-constituted “substance” (zhì 質),\(^{60}\) but this, too, is non-specific and open to interpretation. The term cai 才, which combines “capacity” with the sense of substance or material, is

\(^{56}\) Zhuangzi, ch. 22, “Zhi beiyou” 知北遊; Zhuangzi jishi, p. 733; cf. Watson, Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, p. 235. The Guanzi is just as clear; it cites an old saying, “If things have qi, they live; if they don’t have qi, they die” (有氣則生，無氣則死). See Guanzi, ch. 12, “Shuyan” 樞言; Guanzi zhuzi suoyin, p. 33; cf. Rickett, Guanzi, p. 216. Only a brief analysis of the early Chinese views of xin (heart-mind) and xing (nature) will be offered here. See my contribution, “Do Sages Have Emotions?” in Confucian Ethics in Retrospect and Prospect, edited by Vincent Shen and Kwong-loi Shun (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), pp. 113–135, for a fuller discussion.

\(^{57}\) Guanzi, ch. 26; Guanzi zhuzi suoyin, p. 74.

\(^{58}\) Guodian Chu mu zhujian, p. 179.

\(^{59}\) Mencius 6A.3, in Mengzi yizhu, p. 254.

\(^{60}\) The Zhuangzi, for example, states that “nature is the substance of life” (性者生之質也). See Zhuangzi, ch. 23, “Gengsang Chu” 庚桑楚; in Zhuangzi jishi, p. 810.
Harmony as a contested metaphor

also often used, to bring out more clearly the perceived properties of *xing*. Lifespan, for example, may be seen to be determined by a person’s physical capacity, which forms a part of his or her endowed nature. Indeed, according to the noted Han commentator Zheng Xuan (127–200), the influence of *qi* is pervasive: “By ‘nature’ (*xing*), it is meant that human beings come to be on account of the blood and *qi* they have received. [Consequently] people are capable or dumb, and have [lives marked by] fortune or misfortune” (性謂人受血氣以生，有賢愚吉凶).

Philosophically, the more pertinent point is that nature governs the workings of the heart. Intelligence is important, but so is a person’s affective capacity. The *Xunzi* describes the substance of inborn nature as *qing* (情者性之質也). *Qing* signifies generally what is essential to or genuinely so of a thing and specifically, the emotions. Thus, as cited earlier, the *Xunzi* defines *qing* in terms of the “liking and disliking, pleasure and anger, and sorrow and joy of *xing*.” The heart is constituted by *qi*, both substantively and functionally. It has the capacity to generate emotion, thought, and action, which are all movements of *qi*. When the heart comes into contact with things, its constituent *qi* is aroused – this is the basic meaning of “desire” (yu 欲) – in accordance with which it sets its aim and moves in a certain

---


62 As cited in *Hou Han shu* 28A (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), p. 960, n.1. Of course, not everyone subscribed to this view. Some would argue that learning and effort remain decisive in determining personal identity and accomplishment. Nevertheless, this should suffice to show that the concept of *qi* informs reflection on *xing*-nature and the cognitive and affective functions of the heart.

63 *Xunzi*, ch. 22; *Xunzi zhuzi suoyin*, p. 111.


65 Anger (nu 怒), for example, leaving aside its cognitive dimension, is generated by concentrated *qi* “rising up without coming down,” according to the *Zhuangzi*, ch.19, “Dasheng” 达生; in *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 650. More generally, as a particular movement of *qi*, the meaning of *nu* need not be restricted to anger. The great *peng* bird in *Zhuangzi* ch. 1, for example, “puffs out its chest” (*nu*; as translated in A. C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters* [London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981], p. 43) and flies off, not with anger but by concentrating and directing its *qi*-energies. Cf. the usage of *qi* in *Laozi*, ch. 55.
direction. This is called the heart’s *zhī* 志, “aspiration,’’ in its root sense of “breathing upon” and by extension seeking to reach something (or “will,’’ as some translators prefer), resulting in one’s liking or disliking certain things. In this process, the heart may easily become disturbed and confused.

The *Xīng zì míng chu‘* sums up the problem of the heart in this way:

> Although all human beings have (the same) inborn nature, the heart does not have a fixed direction, which is formed after it has come into contact with things, set in motion after it finds the conditions pleasing ...  

凡人雖有性, 心亡奠志. 待物而後作. 待悅而後行....

It seems to me that Mencius also subscribed to this basic intellectual framework. In other words, the movement of *qi* in the heart also forms the starting point of Mencius’ approach to the ethical life.

The heart is seen to be an ethical battle ground in the *Mencius*. It is aroused by diverse influences and more often than not fails to move in an ethical direction. This seems to be what Mencius is driving at when he discusses the problem of the stirrings of the heart (*dōng xīn* 动心) and its antidote, “a heart that is not moved” (*bù dōng xīn* 不動心), i.e., unwavering in its ethical commitment (*Mencius* 2A.2).67

*Dōng xīn* is a basic human condition; any action will have some impact on *qi*, which would in turn set the heart moving in a certain direction. Mencius here (2A.2) uses the mundane example of “hurrying and stumbling” to make the point, which should not be made more complicated than it actually is – our heart simply beats faster and we breathe harder as we hurry and stumble. In this context, Mencius discusses different forms of courage as an ethical remedy to *dōng xīn*. It seems evident that Mencius is talking about some form of cultivation of *qi* in enabling the heart to remain unmoved and firm in its ethical aspiration.

In this same passage, Mencius in fact credits Gaozi for having reached a state of *bù dōng xīn*. Gaozi’s position is that the heart can command the movement of *qi* and set it on the right direction on the strength of the ethical values acquired from learning and practice, including, no doubt, the various *yì*-duties that are specific to social roles and functions. This is also what the *Xīng zī míng chu‘* recommends. Precisely because the heart does not have a “fixed *zhī*” and is driven by external influences that it finds pleasing, it can only be “fixed after it has gone through repeated practice” (待習而後成).68

---

66 *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, p. 179. A helpful analysis of the *Xīng zī míng chu‘* is Liang Tao, *Guodian zhujian yu Si-Meng xuepai*, ch. 3.


68 *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, p. 179.
The text explains further the kind of practice required: “Within the four seas, nature is one. That human beings apply their heart differently is due to the effect [or lack] of [ethical] instruction” (四海之内，其性一也，其用心各异，教使然也)\(^{69}\) This is why Gaozi says, “If you do not get it from words [i.e., instruction], do not seek it in the heart; if you do not get it from the heart, do not seek it in qi.”\(^{70}\) If one is unable to obtain a sense of purpose and direction from what one has learned, one’s heart will be driven by the fickle dictates of qi, which translate into unprincipled liking and disliking, and will never be able to realize the ethical life.

To Mencius, “Gaozi never knew yi, because he took it as external to oneself.”\(^{71}\) Gaozi’s position is inadmissible because it holds rightness hostage to profit and fails to recognize the reality of inborn ethical predispositions. From the perspective of a world animated by qi, there is no denying that the heart invariably channels its energy to liking or disliking what it comes into contact with, which then gives rise to pleasure, anger, and other emotions. However, crucially one of the things that the heart naturally likes is rightness: “The way in which order and rightness please my heart is like the way meat is pleasing to my palate” (6A.7), says Mencius. In this sense, the germs or sprouts of benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety and wisdom can be said to be “rooted” (根) in the heart (7A.21; cf. 6A.6). Indeed, this is ultimately what distinguishes human beings from animals (Mencius 6A.8, see also 4B.19).

Phenomenologically, liking rightness is not different from, say, liking fame – both can move the heart and set it on a certain course. This is the nature of the heart, which is also to say that the heart requires ethical nurturing. Precisely because the heart does not have a fixed direction, many philosophers, including some Confucians judging from the Guodian material, came to see external measures as necessary to setting controls and marking out the boundaries of ethical behavior. Rightness requires learning, and one should learn because rightness brings benefit. To Mencius, this argument is flawed because it in effect renders benefit the only motivation for the ethical life, which is unreliable and may yield unethical outcomes. Indeed, in Mencius’ estimation, the views of human nature current in his day all centered on artificial effort in ensuring goodness, which is rooted in the profit motive (以利為本, 4B.26). The answer to the problem of the heart’s not having a fixed direction does not rest on controls gained from the outside, but in cultivating a kind of qi within the heart that is pervasive and powerful like a great flood – what Mencius calls haoran zhi qi 浩然之氣 –

\(^{69}\) Ibid.

\(^{70}\) Mencius 2A.2, Mengzi yizhu, pp. 61–62.

\(^{71}\) Mengzi yizhu, p. 62.
such that the heart is in total command of its bodily subordinates in aspiring
towards benevolence and rightness.

That Mencius subscribed to the then prevalent qi theory, to me, is clear.
After all, the Mencius agrees that a person’s character can be judged from
his words and eyes, both of which reflect one’s qi constitution (4A.15,
cf. 7A.21). Moreover, Mencius recognizes that one’s surroundings can also
affect one’s qi. The concept of a vast and flood-like qi is set in this context.

Self-cultivation remains critical, and learning must not be neglected, for the
natural inclination towards goodness may be overwhelmed by the other
interests of the heart (e.g., see Mencius 6A.10). In other words, the inherent
“taste” for rightness and ethical instruction need not be mutually exclusive;
in fact, it may be argued that Mencius held an integral view of virtue as both
having a bodily basis and requiring effort and learning to bring it to fruition.
Nevertheless, it is important to refute any argument that grounds harmony
in profit and reduces rightness to the performance of duty in accordance
with socially and politically defined standards and values.

Like his contemporaries, Mencius saw the world as being constituted by
qi. Certain entailments follow from this basic premise, with the heart forming
the focus of ethical theory. Fundamentally, there is only one nature, one heart,
and one qi. It is not as if a special “moral mind” or mystical qi intervenes
in the struggle for rightness and overcomes all negative qi influences. The
same premise, however, within certain parameters, can support different
conclusions. The Guodian Wuxing already signals the beginning of an
“inward” turn in locating the source of ethical excellence, in the face of a
philosophical majority that values the training of the heart through rituals
and learning. Mencius brought this line of thinking to a logical conclusion.

The Yucong yi declares, “When there is life and consciousness, then liking
and disliking come into being” (有生有知而後好惡生). The Mawangdui
version of the Wuxing, which I take to be after Mencius, in its commentary
section, explicitly defines the heart as that which takes delight in benevolence
and rightness (心也者，悅仁義者也). Indeed, the text spells out that whereas
plants have life but not the capacity of “liking and disliking” and animals
have that capacity but not “ritual and duty” (liyi 禮義), human beings are

72 Mencius 7A.36. See also Kwong-loi Shun’s discussion in Mencius and Early Chinese
Thought, pp. 158–163.
73 For this reason, I retain the interpretation of haoran as “flood-like,” which is suggestive
of the unobstructed flow of qi and works better with the description of qi as “filling up”
(chong 充) the body in Mencius 2A.2, though as Mark Csikszentmihalyi points out, a
case can be made that the phrase should be read as qi that is “radiantly bright.” See his
74 Guodian Chu mu zhujuan, p. 193.
75 Mawangdui Han wu bosun, p. 23.
Harmony as a contested metaphor

unique in that they are endowed with a nature that “likes benevolence and
yi” (bao renyi 好仁義). The emphasis on natural inclination is distinctive of
this line of thinking, and is absent, for example, in the famous passage in the
Xunzi, which distinguishes human beings from inanimate objects that are
constituted by qi; plants that are alive but do not have consciousness or the
capacity to know (zhi 知); and animals that are capable of knowing but not yi.
Human beings, Xunzi says, are the most valuable in the universe because
they have qi, life, consciousness, and also yi (人有氣有生有知亦且有義). But
unlike the Mencian position this does not imply that human beings
are naturally drawn to rightness. The Mawangdui Wuxing also employs
as technical philosophical terms “the qi of benevolence” (renqi 仁氣),
“yi qi” (義氣), and even “the qi of the rites” (li qi 礼氣). Students of Mencius
tend to emphasize the discerning noetic capacity of the mind in negotiating
the ethical landscape. The suggestion here is that Mencius holds a more
holistic understanding of the heart and that all capacities and functions are
constituted by qi. From this perspective, it becomes clear why for Mencius
yi cannot possibly be external to one’s inborn nature. On this basis, Mencius
was then able to develop his version of the Confucian dao.

To Zi Si, the performance of yi requires a Confucian gentleman to
distant himself from emolument and titles (為義遠祿爵). Mencius follows
that tradition and provides the necessary justification. There is a certain
harmony to the being of the Mencian ethical hero – the heart with its
flood-like qi that accepts nothing short of ethical excellence is in a state
of harmony, perhaps in a musical sense, with all likes and dislikes yielding
to the four germs of goodness. However, at the sociopolitical level, non-
compliance and confrontation would be in order if the pursuit of harmony
involves compromising one’s basic ethical impulses. If he is understood
in a way that grounds yi in calculations of benefit, it has no place in the
Mencian ethical equation, in Mencius’ rendition of the Confucian junzi as
the ethically uncompromising “great man” (da zhangfu 大丈夫). After all,
according to the Liji, “the great broth [used for major ritual sacrificial] is not
harmonious” (大羹不和).

From a study of he as a contested metaphor, which is my main concern,
conceptions of yi in early Confucian ethics perhaps also emerge a little

76  Ibid.
77  Xunzi, ch. 9, “Wang zhi” 王制; Xunzi zhuzi suoyin, p. 39.
78  Mawangdui Han mu boshu, p. 39. In a separate Mawangdui fragment called “De sheng”
德聖 (Virtue and Sageness), the phrase “qi of sageness” (sheng qi 聖氣) is also used.
79  Guodian Chu mu zhujian, p. 141.
80  Mencius 3B.2; cf. 7B.34.
81  See Liji, “Jiao te sheng” and “Yueji,” in Liji zhengyi, 26.20a and 37.2b, respectively. This
is because what is important and truly valuable is the substance.
clearer. Yi brings benefit especially if it is understood as role-specific duties infused with a spirit of compliance. This is an attractive proposition, but it risks muting the ethical voice or taste that distinguishes human nature. Against this concern, some Confucians culminating in Mencius offered an alternative view of yi, and probably for this reason, the concept of he received scant mention in the Mencius. The same issue was to resurface in subsequent interpretations of Confucian ethics. According to He Yan, we may recall, culturally and ethically deficient men have the same tastes and likes, and they are motivated by profit.

It is true that harmony occupies a privileged place in Confucian philosophy and Chinese culture at large, but it should not be assumed that it has been uniformly understood. Even among Confucian scholars, it attracted different interpretation. It is thus important that we try to probe the lead metaphors and concerns that guide them. The exercise should not only yield a fuller view of the contested nature of the Chinese philosophical landscape, but also enable a clearer discussion of the value of harmony in contemporary philosophical discussion.
One of the many curiosities of Mohist philosophy is that its written corpus, known as the *Mozi* 墨子, might not have come down to us had it not been included in the massive *Daoist Canon* (Daozang 道藏).¹ All modern editions of the *Mozi* are derived from or related to this text.² There are many consequences of this oddity. For example, the relative ignorance with which pre-Qing literati derided Mohist philosophy – generally speaking of it as though “impartial love” (*jian’ai* 兼愛) were its sole significant tenet – may be explained by the fact that they did not have access to a reliable edition. Only after the publication, in 1447, of the *Daoist Canon*, which Qing scholars quickly recognized as a source of rare ancient scriptures,³ was the *Mozi* likely to have been available to most readers; before this, they would probably have had to rely on the various snippets preserved in collectanea such as *Imperial Readings of the Taiping Reign* (Taiping yulan 太平御覽).

¹ Alfred Forke (1867–1944) may have been the first in the West to point this out. See his Mê Ti des Sozialethikers und seiner Schüler philosophische Werke, Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen, Beibund zum Jahrgang 23/25 (Berlin, 1922), 5–11; as well as his Geschichte der alten chinesischen Philosophie, Universität Hamburg: Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiet der Auslandskunde 25; Reihe B., Völkerkunde, Kulturgeschichte und Sprachen 14 (Hamburg: Friederichsen, 1927; rpt., Hamburg: Cram, de Gruyter, 1964), 372.


³ Cf. Kristofer Schipper, “General Introduction,” in Schipper and Verellen, I, 40: “in Qing times [the *Daoist Canon*] was constantly pilfered because it contained so many rare ancient texts.” (Schipper does not explain whether he means “pilfered” literally or figuratively – presumably the latter, since he notes that the *Daoist Canon* was not scarce in the early Qing.)
Considering the unlikely source of the edition that has now become standard, a student of Mohism can hardly afford not to address the question of why the Mozi was included in the Daoist Canon in the first place. (Why it was not preserved anywhere else is an easier question to answer: already waning by the end of the Warring States, Mohism quickly became extinct after the founding of the Chinese empire, and thus it is only to be expected that, without any institutional support, no one transmitted its documents.) Whatever definition of “Daoist” one wishes to apply, Mo Di  cannot be said to qualify. He was, naturally, not a religious Daoist, in that he lived centuries before the epoch-making revelation to Zhang Daoling 張道陵 in A.D. 142. Nor did his philosophy, as it has been recorded, adopt the concept of the dao as the transcendent cosmological principle responsible for the birth and order of all things. Stephen W. Durrant observed three decades ago that Mozi was canonized, long after his death, as a kind of Daoist demigod: certain early medieval sources depict him as a master alchemist and an immortal invested with revelations from even higher beings. But there has been little progress since Durrant, and even his valuable insight demonstrates only that Mozi’s veneration by Daoists had broader roots than previously supposed; it does not explain why Daoists venerated him.  

---

4 Cf. Sun Zhuocai 孫卓彩, Moxue gaiyao 墨学概要 (Ji’nan: Qi-Lu, 2007), 121f.
5 Although concordances reveal several dozen uses of the term dao in the extant Mozi, these usually take the form of “the dao of So-and-so,” i.e. So-and-so’s mode of moral living, as in “My forebears were those who transmitted the Way of Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, and Wu” 吾上祖述堯、舜、禹、湯、文、武之道者也; text in Wu Yujiang 吳毓江, Mozi jiaozhu 墨子校注, ed. Sun Qizhi 孫啟治, Xinbian Zhuzi jicheng (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1993), 6.25.263 (“Jiezang xia” 节葬下). (This happens to be an important passage because it represents an acknowledgement by Mohists that they recognize the same sages as the Confucians, despite their opposition to Confucianism on almost all philosophical points.) Chad Hansen, A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 106, sums up Mohist usage well: “Dao could be bad, crooked, wasteful or, like Confucius’ dao, simply wrong. Mozi wanted a new and more beneficent dao” to guide that training process.”
Why Mozi is included in the Daoist Canon

In the absence of any explicit statement by the compilers of the Daoist Canon, it is impossible to determine today precisely why the Mozi was included in that collection; nevertheless, the following study aims to show why Mohist beliefs would have been regarded as antecedents of the religious Daoist faith. Like the major early Daoist traditions, Mohism offers principles of conduct sanctioned by Heaven, delivered to humanity by a sage teacher, and enforced by awesome spirits. The texts that most closely resemble the Mozi are those of the early Celestial Masters (Tianshi dao 天師道), such as the Xiang’er Commentary to the Laozi (Laozi Xiang’er zhu 老子想爾注). These correspondences are not often recognized because of the stubborn consensus that Mohism is a kind of utilitarianism – a hermeneutic prism affording a good understanding of one aspect of Mohism, and little understanding of any other.

The similarity of certain Mohist arguments to those of Western utilitarianism is undeniable, and they are worth re-examining here. Some of
the most familiar material appears in the “Impartial Love” chapters (Nos. 14–16):

子墨子言曰：仁人之事者，必務求興天下之利，除天下之害。然當今之時，天下之害孰為大？曰：若大國之攻小國也、大家之亂小家也、強之劫弱、眾之暴寡、詐之謀愚、貴之敖賤，此天下之害也。又與為人君者之不惠也、臣者之不忠也、父者之不慈也、子者之不孝也，此又天下之害也。又與今人之賤人，執其兵刃毒藥水火，以交相虧賊，此又天下之害也。姑嘗本原若眾害之所自生，此胡自生?此自愛人利人生與?即必曰非然也；必曰從惡人賊人生。分名乎天下，惡人而賊人者，兼與?別與?即必曰別也。然即之交別者，果生天下之大害者與?是故別非也。

10 Master Mozi said: The undertaking of a humane person is to try to promote whatever benefits the world and to eliminate whatever harms the world. This being the case, what are the greatest things that harm the world in today’s times? Isay: Such things as large states attacking small states, large lineages dislocating small lineages, the strong extorting the weak, the many maltreating the few, the cunning machinating against the foolish, the noble overbearing the base – these are things that harm the world. So too11 the ungenerosity of those who are lords of men, the disloyalty of ministers, the unkindness of fathers, the unfiliality of sons – these are also things that harm the world. So too the base people of today who injure and despoil others by means of weapons, blades, poison, drugs, water, or fire – these are also things that harm the world. If one were to investigate where these various harms arise from, where do these things arise from?12 Do these things arise from loving others and benefiting others? One would have to say that this is not the case; one would have to say that they arise

---

10 “Jian’ai xia” 兼愛下, Mozi jiaozhu 4.16.175. Generally, I shall cite freely from the shang, zhong, and xia versions of the core chapters, with the exception of “Jian’ai shang,” “Feigong shang” 非攻上, and “Jieyong shang” 節用上, since I am persuaded by A.C. Graham’s argument in Divisions in Early Mohism Reflected in the Core Chapters of Mo-tzu, Institute of East Asian Philosophies Occasional Paper and Monograph Series 1 (Singapore, 1985), 3–4, that these are later digests, not original chapters in their own right. For different views, see Carine Defoort, “The Growing Scope of jian 兼: Differences Between Chapters 14, 15 and 16 of the Mozi,” Oriens Extremus 45 (2005–06), 119–40; and Yoshinaga Shinjiro 吉永慎二郎, Sengoku shisōshi kenkyū: Juka to Bokuka no shisōshiteki kōshō 戦國思想史研究: 儒家と墨家の思想史的交涉 (Kyoto: Hoyū, 2004), 74–78.

11 Following the commentary of Wang Niansun 王念孫 (1744–1832), Mozi jiaozhu 4.16.175n.3.

12 This sentence is no less repetitive in the original Chinese.
from hating others and despoiling others. If one were to categorize things in the world by means of names, would those who hate others and despoil others [be considered] impartial or partial? One would have to say partial. Thus is it not the case that engaging [others] with partiality gives rise to the great harms in the world? For this reason, partiality is wrong.13

The argument, though verbose, bears scrutiny. It begins with the premise that the “humane person’s” task is to advance whatever brings good to the world and oppose whatever brings harm. Then the text asks what the most important causes of harm are, and, after listing several uncontroversial examples, infers that they are all born of “hating and despoiling people” – that is, the desire to enrich oneself at others’ expense, which, paradoxically, only leads to impoverishment. The conclusion to the paragraph is characteristic of Mohist thinking: because the attitude of “partiality” (bie 別) engenders such inclinations, partiality is wrong. “For this reason, partiality is wrong.” What is right, in other words, is anything conducive to general profit; what is wrong is anything conducive to general harm.

It is not surprising that, on the basis of such passages, Mohism has been so frequently identified with utilitarianism, both in spirit and in argumentation. Compare these paragraphs from Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832):

By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual. . . .

A man may be said to be a partizan of the principle of utility, when the approbation or disapprobation he annexes to any action, or to any measure, is determined by and proportioned to the tendency which he conceives it to have to augment or to diminish the happiness of the community: or in other words, to its conformity or unconformity to the laws or dictates of utility.

Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. One may say also, that it is right it should be done; at least that it is not wrong it should be done: that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. When thus interpreted, the words ought, and right and wrong and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise, they have none.14

13  All translations in this paper are my own. Compare the translations in Burton Watson, Mozi: Basic Writings, Translations from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 41; and Yi-pao Mei, The Ethical and Political Works of Motse, Probsthain’s Oriental Series 19 (London, 1929), 87.

The manner of reasoning is so similar that one might even ask whether Bentham was, knowingly or unknowingly, inspired by Mohism (the influence of Chinese sources on eighteenth-century European philosophy being generally underappreciated); but such an inquiry would be beyond the scope of this study.  

Most of the famous Mohist doctrines are readily reducible to the notion of doing what is most profitable for human beings as a moral community. Impartial love is enjoined out of the conviction that if everyone were to treat others as well as they treat themselves (and, by extension, treat strangers as well as they treat family members), strife – which harms all – could be avoided. Similarly, offensive warfare is condemned on the grounds that it is nothing more than theft on a grand scale, which hardly brings about the greatest good for the greatest number of people (“Feigong” 非攻, Chapters 17–19). The Mohists’ commitment to dissuading rulers from campaigns of conquest was so deep that, as even non-Mohist sources acknowledge, they became experts in defensive warfare, to whom besieged states could appeal for aid; it is no coincidence that some of the most detailed ancient material pertaining to siege-craft is found in a long section of the Mozi (Chapters 52–71, with substantial lacunae) which was not translated into English until 2006. The Mohist doctrines of moderating expenditure (“Jieyong” 节用, Chapters 20–22), moderating funeral expenses (“Jiezang” 节葬, Chapters 23–25), and even opposing lavish musical performances (“Feiyue” 非樂, Chapters 32–34) all follow naturally from the assumption that wastefulness...
is harmful to the overall economy; a lord with enough of a surplus for such frippery would do better to succor the poor instead.¹⁸

Even the meritocratic ideal of promoting the worthy in government (“Shangxian” 尚賢, Chapters 8–10) is defended along utilitarian lines: just as a ruler takes care to employ a competent tailor when he desires a coat, or a competent slaughter-master when he desires beef or mutton, so too must he select only competent administrators, even if they happen to be ugly or low-born.¹⁹ The “worthy” are described in unabashedly fiscal terms; a worthy administrator is one who knows how to benefit the state and its people through his assiduousness at collecting taxes and managing finances:

When a worthy man governs the state, he arrives at court early and retires late; he hears lawsuits and puts the government in order. Thus the state and its families are orderly and the penal institutes are correct. When a worthy man heads the bureaucracy, he goes to bed late at night and arises early in the morning; he collects taxes on the profit from passes, cities, mountains, forests, wetlands, and bridges, filling the official treasury. Thus the official treasury is full and capital is not dissipated. When a worthy man governs a district, he leaves [his residence] early and comes back only after dusk; he [sees to] the plowing and sowing, the planting of orchards, and the harvesting of beans and grain. Thus beans and grain are plentiful and the people have enough to eat.²²

The Mohist conception of “worthiness” includes, to be sure, a moral dimension that is less patently quantifiable; we are told, for example, that the worthy differ from the unworthy, who are unfilial toward their parents, sexually promiscuous, larcenous, and rebellious.²³ But the larger point is that the worthies’ administrative successes are laudable in their own right as a moral achievement. Whereas Confucius typically cast the worthy

¹⁸ Unlike a modern economist, Mohists evidently did not consider that money spent on luxuries might be recycled back into the general economy when musicians and undertakers found themselves in need of food and housing. The root problem was not the tendency of plutocrats to overspend, but the unequal distribution of wealth – which the Mohist theories of theodicy did not fully account for (more on this below).

¹⁹ Thus “Shangxian zhong,” Mozi jiaozhu 2.9.76f., and “Shangxian xia,” Mozi jiaozhu 2.10.96f.

²⁰ See the commentary at Mozi jiaozhu 2.9.80n.11.

²¹ “Shangxian zhong,” Mozi jiaozhu 2.9.75.

²² Compare the translations in Watson, 24; and Mei, Ethical and Political Works of Motse, 37.

²³ “Shangxian zhong,” Mozi jiaozhu 2.9.76.
or the noble man (junzi 君子) as one who responds appropriately to the unique moral demands of each situation,\textsuperscript{24} Mohists simplified: a worthy is someone who profits the state and its people – no more and no less. These worthies, moreover, are to be richly compensated and provisioned, for only then will their judgments be respected by the populace.\textsuperscript{25} Wealth and finery are thus not intrinsically contemptible; the bitter criticisms in the “Moderating Expenditure” and “Opposing Music” chapters are aimed only at the shameful misuse of such resources.

***

Other chapters, however, complicate the picture. Consider “The Will of Heaven” ( "Tianzhi" 天志):

然則天亦何欲何惡? 天欲義而惡不義。然則率天下之百姓以從事於義，則我乃為天之所欲也。我為天之所欲，天亦為我所欲。然則我何欲何惡？我欲福祿，而惡禍祟。若我不為天之斯欲，而為天之所不欲，然則我率天下之百姓以從事於禍祟中也。\textsuperscript{26}

然則何以知天之欲義而惡不義？曰：天下有義則生，無義則死，有義則富，無義則貧，有義則治，無義則亂。然則天欲其生而惡其死，欲其富而惡其貧，欲其治而惡其亂，此我所以知天欲義而惡不義也。\textsuperscript{27}

This being the case, what indeed does Heaven desire and what does it hate? Heaven desires righteousness and hates unrighteousness. Thus if we were to lead the Hundred Surnames to pursue their affairs in righteousness, we would be doing what Heaven desires. If we do what Heaven desires, Heaven will surely do what we desire. This being the case, what do we desire and what do we hate? We desire fortune and lucre, and hate disasters and infestation. If we were not to do what Heaven desires, but were instead to do what Heaven does not desire, we would be leading the Hundred Surnames to pursue their affairs in the midst of disasters and infestation.

This being the case, how do we know that Heaven desires righteousness and hates unrighteousness? I say: Whoever possesses righteousness in the world lives; whoever lacks righteousness dies. Whoever possesses righteousness is wealthy; whoever lacks righteousness is poor. Whoever possesses righteousness is orderly; whoever lacks righteousness is disorderly. Thus Heaven desires life and hates death, desires wealth and hates poverty, desires order and hates disorder. This is how we know that Heaven desires righteousness and hates unrighteousness.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} See Paul R. Goldin, “The Theme of the Primacy of the Situation in Classical Chinese Philosophy and Rhetoric,” \textit{Asia Major} (third series) 18.2 (2005), 1ff.
\textsuperscript{25} “Shangxian shang,” \textit{Mozi jiaozhu} 2.8.66 and 67; “Shangxian zhong,” \textit{Mozi jiaozhu} 2.9.75.
\textsuperscript{26} For the text here, see Wu Yujian’s note, \textit{Mozi jiaozhu} 7.26.299n.17.
\textsuperscript{27} “Tianzhi shang,” \textit{Mozi jiaozhu} 7.26.293f.
\textsuperscript{28} Compare the translation in Watson, 82; and Mei, \textit{Ethical and Political Works of Motse}, 136.
Why Mozi is included in the Daoist Canon

This is a crucial passage for several reasons. First, it lays out a theodicy that, as other excerpts will confirm, is to be taken absolutely literally. If you are righteous, Heaven will see to it that you flourish; by the same token, if you are unrighteous, Heaven will see to it that you fail. The unwillingness to admit that bad things sometimes happen to good people (and the converse) is one of the hallmarks of Mohist philosophy. Taken together with the equally peculiar Mohist conception of “righteousness” (yi), Mohist theodicy will not only prove incompatible with the most familiar forms of utilitarianism, but will also point the way toward a more culturally plausible account of Mohist philosophy.

What is the “righteousness” that Heaven supposedly desires? There are thick and thin answers to this question in the Mozi. The thin answer is that “righteousness” is simply whatever Heaven desires. Anyone who wishes to investigate the origin of righteousness will look for it among the eminent and wise, and Heaven being the most eminent and wise agent in the universe, the origin of righteousness must lie with Heaven. But this is manifestly tautological: if we are told that Heaven desires righteousness and hates unrighteousness, it does not advance our analysis to be informed that “righteousness” refers to whatever Heaven desires. So the text usefully adds a thicker answer, one that immediately connects the discussion of Heaven to the utilitarian moral theories surveyed above: Heaven desires whatever benefits all the people in the world. The text even repeats the same phrases that we have seen attributed to the “humane man” (renren) in “Impartial Love”:

既以天之意以為不可不慎已，然則天之將何欲何憎？子墨子曰：天之意，不欲大國之攻小國也，大家之亂小家也，強之暴寡，詐之謀愚，貴之傲賤，此天之所不欲也。不止此而已，欲人之有力相營，有道相教，有財相分也，又欲上之強聽治也，下之強從事也。上強聽治，則國家治矣，下強從事，則財用足矣。若國家治，財用足，則內有以潔為酒醴粢盛，以祭祀天鬼，外有以為環璧珠

29 Wei Zhengtong 韋政通, Zhongguo sixiangshi 中国思想史 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2003), I, 79, ignores this aspect of Mozi’s philosophy when he writes: “The will of Heaven is not an anthropomorphic deity of primitive religion…. The will of Heaven is simply an objective norm; it is the ‘enlightened standard’ measuring all the affairs of the world” 天志不是原始宗教的人格神……天志純是一外在的標準,是衡度天下事的“明法”。 The Mohist notion of Heaven is surely more problematic than this, but Wei does not discuss it further.

30 “Tianzhi zhong,” Mozi jiaozhu 墨子校注 7.27.302f.

玉，以聘撓 [= 交] 四鄰。諸侯之冤不興矣，邊境兵甲不作矣。內有以食飢息勞，持養其萬民，則君臣上下惠忠，父子兄弟慈孝。故惟毋明乎順天之意，奉而光施之天下，則刑政治，萬民和，國家富，財用足，百姓皆得煖衣飽食，便寍無憂。33

If one cannot fail to be cautious about acting in accordance with Heaven’s intentions, what does Heaven desire and what does it detest? Master Mozi says: Heaven’s intentions are as follows. It does not desire that large states attack small states, that large lineages dislocate small lineages, that the strong extort the weak, that the many maltreat the few, that the cunning machinate against the foolish, that the noble overbear the base. These are what Heaven does not desire. But it does not end with this. [Heaven] desires that those with energy work for others, that those with the Way teach others, that those with capital distribute it among others.

It also desires that superiors attend to government sedulously, and that inferiors pursue their affairs sedulously. If superiors attend to government sedulously, the state and its lineages will be orderly; if inferiors pursue their affairs sedulously, capital and resources will be sufficient. If the state and its lineages are orderly and capital and resources sufficient, then, within [the state], it will be possible to prepare clean offerings of wine and millet with which to sacrifice to Heaven and its ghosts, while beyond [the state] it will be possible to prepare jade disks and gems with which to carry on ceremonial relations with neighbors in all four directions. The resentment of the territorial lords will not be aroused; weapons and armor will not emerge along the frontier. If, within [the state], it is possible to feed the starving and rest the weary, to support and nurture the myriads of people, then there will be grace and loyalty between lord and minister and between superior and inferior, and kindness and filial piety between father and son and between elder brother and younger brother. Thus if only one is enlightened about following Heaven’s intentions, serving them and brilliantly spreading them throughout the world, then laws and government will be orderly, the myriad people will be in harmony, the state and its lineages will be wealthy, capital and resources will be sufficient, the Hundred Surnames will have warm clothes and plenty to eat. They will live in comfort and tranquility, without distress.34

In line with “Impartial Love,” we are encouraged here to labor tirelessly against the injustices of the world, and to bring about a society of perfect peace and harmony – for only that provides the greatest benefit to the people, whom Heaven loves generously.35 But this raises a dilemma similar

32 Following the commentary of Wu Yuijiang, Mozi jiaozhu 7.27.310n.20. Cf. also Zhou Fumei 周富美, Mozi jiajiezi jizheng 墨子假借字集證, 2nd edition, Wenshi congkan 6 (Taipei: Guoli Taiwan Daxue, 1965), 112.
33 “Tianzhi zhong,” Mozi jiaozhu 7.27.303f.
34 Compare the translations in Watson, 88f.; and Mei, Ethical and Political Works of Motse, 142f.
to the one known from the *Euthyphro*:\(^{36}\) Do we venerate Heaven because it wants us to bring about the greatest benefit for the people, a principle that we recognize independently as just; or do we bring about the greatest benefit for the people because that is what Heaven wants, and we venerate Heaven? The *Mozi* does not resolve this dilemma—indeed, it does not even formulate it—but there is little evidence in the text for the position that we venerate Heaven because it upholds a principle that we recognize independently as just. On the contrary, there are indications that the other horn of the dilemma, as disconcerting as it may be, seems more likely.\(^{37}\)

First, the text states explicitly that Heaven dictates what is right and wrong in the world:

我有天志，譬若輪人之有規、匠人之有矩。輪匠執其規矩以度天下之方圓，曰中者是也，不中者非也。\(^{38}\)

We have the will of Heaven just as the wheelwright has his compass and the carpenter his T-square. The wheelwright and carpenter wield their compass and T-square in order to measure what is square and what is round in the world. They say: Whatever conforms is right; whatever does not conform is wrong.\(^{39}\)

Although it is impossible to determine from this one simile whether Heaven is to be construed as a divine commander who lays down morality by *fiat*, other evidence bolsters this interpretation. For example, one cannot ignore the statement in “The Will of Heaven” that the ruler sacrifices to Heaven in order to announce to the public that Heaven’s power is supreme.\(^{40}\)

---

\(^{36}\) *Euthyphro* 10a: “Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?” Tr. Harold North Fowler (1859–1955), *Plato: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, Loeb Classical Library 36 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914).

\(^{37}\) This difficulty is rarely noticed in the scholarly literature. Cai Renhou, 66–67, does not frame the discussion in terms of the Euthyphro dilemma, but still finds that the notion of complying with Heaven’s dictates must stand anterior to the principle of impartial caring. Cf. also Qianfan Zhang, “Human Dignity in Classical Chinese Philosophy: Reinterpreting Mohism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34.2 (2007), 249f.: “A person wants to be good not for the sake of the good itself, but apparently for the hope to reap benefits from acting in accordance with the will of heaven.” (See also the references in n. 8, above.)


\(^{39}\) Compare the translations in Watson, 86; and Mei, *Ethical and Political Works of Motse*, 140.

\(^{40}\) Despite Fung, I, 103, who speaks of “Mo Tzu’s doctrine of the identity of the Son of Heaven with Heaven.” In fact, the *Mozi* takes pains to distinguish the two, and emphasizes that Heaven, *not* the Son of Heaven, functions as what Fung calls “the final arbiter of all teachings and ideas.” Cai Renhou, 21–22, is incisive on this point.
The men-of-service and gentlemen of the world surely know clearly that the Son of Heaven governs over the Three Dukes, the territorial lords, the men-of-service, and the common people. But the Hundred Surnames of the world have not yet attained a clear knowledge of the fact that Heaven governs over the Son of Heaven. Thus, in the past, the sage kings of the three dynasties, namely Yu [of Xia 夏], Tang [of Shang 商] and Kings Wen and Wu [of Zhou 周] wished to explain clearly to the Hundred Surnames of the world that Heaven governs over the Son of Heaven. Thus, without exception, they battened their oxen and sheep, reared their dogs and pigs, prepared clean offerings of millet and wine with which to sacrifice to the Deity Above and his ghosts and spirits, and to pray for fortune from Heaven. I have never heard of the world praying for fortune from the Son of Heaven; from this I know that Heaven governs over the Son of Heaven.42

This can only lead one to suspect that if Heaven, with its irresistible might, favored some principle other than impartial love, the Son of Heaven would have no choice but to follow it.

Consider next the “Conforming Upwards” (“Shangtong 尚同”) chapters,43 which begin with the premise that society cannot survive if everyone is free to abide by his or her personal sense of righteousness (yi). The result would be a war of all against all. What is needed instead is a universal standard of righteousness enforced by leaders in government. Heaven initiates this organization by selecting “the worthiest and most able person” (xianke zhe 賢可者)44 in the world, and anointing him as Son of Heaven. The Son of Heaven thereupon selects the three next-worthiest men, and appoints them as Three Dukes (sangong 三公), followed by the “territorial lords and rulers of states” (zhuhou guojun 諸侯國君), followed at last by the lowest rank in this hierarchy, the officials and local chiefs, known as “directors and elders” (zhengzhang 正長).

42 Compare the translations in Watson, 83; and Mei, Ethical and Political Works of Motse, 137.
43 Most translators render “Shangtong” as something like “Identifying with One’s Superior” (thus Watson, 35), but this would be “Tongshang,” not “Shangtong.” I construe shang (“upwards”) as an attribute modifying the verb tong (“to be the same as”).
At this point, we read:

正長既已具，天子發政於天下之百姓，言曰：「聞善而不善，皆以告其上。上之所是，必皆是之；所非，必皆非之。」

When the directors and elders had been installed, the Son of Heaven broadcast his government to the Hundred Surnames of the world, saying: “If you hear of good or of evil, you must report it to your superiors. What your superiors affirm, you must all affirm; what they deny, you must all deny.”

If you disagree with your superior’s ideas of righteousness, you are wrong, because he is your superior and he was chosen for a reason. The warning is repeated at every level of the hierarchy. The village elders tell their subordinates, “What the district elder affirms, you must all affirm; what the district elder denies, you must all deny.” The district elders, in turn, tell their subordinates, “What the lord of the state affirms, you must all affirm; what the lord of the state denies, you must all deny.” The lords of the states, in turn, tell their subordinates, “What the Son of Heaven affirms, you must all affirm; what the Son of Heaven denies, you must all deny.”

Ever mindful that people may mistakenly place the Son of Heaven at the top of the pyramid and thus forget that he too is only carrying out the august intentions of his superior, the authors conclude on this stern note:

天下之百姓皆上同於天子而不上同於天，則菑猶未去也。今若天飄風苦雨，湊湊而至者，此天之所以罰百姓之不上同於天者也。

If the Hundred Surnames of the world all conform upwards to the Son of Heaven, and not to Heaven, then catastrophes will be as though unceasing. When, in these days, Heaven causes the wind to blow sharply and the rain to fall bitterly, [when these portents] arrive all together, this is Heaven’s punishment of the Hundred Surnames for failing to conform upwards to Heaven.

While such passages may not completely resolve the Euthyphro-like dilemma facing the reader of the Mozi, it is striking that the “Conforming Upwards” chapters make no effort to justify on its own merits the standard

45 “Shangtong shang,” Mozi jiaozhu 3.11.109. The text goes on to demand that inferiors “restrain and remonstrate with” (guijian 規諫) superiors who commit transgressions, but it is evident from the context that this refers to superiors who have strayed from their own principles; despite the implications in Erica Brindley, “Human Agency and the Ideal of shang tong (Upward Conformity) in Early Mohist Writings,” Journal of Chinese Philosophy 34.3 (2007), 417–20, the claim is decidedly not that inferiors should use their own notions of righteousness to criticize their superiors. Herrlee G. Creel, Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-tung (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 58ff., expressed some American misgivings about this arrangement.

46 Compare the translations in Watson, 37; and Mei, Ethical and Political Works of Motse, 56.


48 Compare the translations in Watson, 39; and Mei, Ethical and Political Works of Motse, 58.
of righteousness undergirding this tight system. By choosing the particular Son of Heaven that it did, Heaven seems to have declared, once and for all, the standard of righteousness that is to be valid for the entire human race. If Heaven had privileged warlike skill, for example, over bringing benefit to the people, it would have selected some other champion as Son of Heaven and we would have received different moral principles to live by. But then it follows that we are required to bring benefit to the people because Heaven wills it. To be sure, Mohists probably did not imagine a power comparable to Heaven but with a different moral orientation (or an amoral one); from their point of view, obeying Heaven and practicing impartial love were two different ways of saying the same thing. Perhaps the clearest way to express the foundation of Mohist ethics, therefore, is to say that we must do what Heaven desires, lest we be punished, and it is a contingent fact that Heaven wants us to bring the greatest benefit to other people – rather as the theological utilitarians, such as William Paley (1743–1805), argued that we must strive to make people happy because this is God’s will.

***

Another salient feature of Mohism – already discernible in the passages reviewed so far – is something one might call its “intransigent optimism”: the sense that the universe never diverges from its just and beneficent pattern, because Heaven will always prevent undue phenomena from occurring. From a philosophical point of view, this is perhaps the most

49 Or, as in “Shangtong xia,” by approving of the people’s choice (see n.43, above).
51 Hu Zhongxiong 胡忠雄, “Mozi yiliguan xinlun” 墨子義禮觀新論, Zhongzhou xuekan 中州學刊 2003.2, 142, infers from the statement “Nothing is more noble than righteousness” 萬事莫貴於義也 (“Guiyi” 貴義, Mozi jiaozhu 12.47.685) that “righteousness,” i.e. carrying out Heaven’s will, may encompass more than just bringing benefit to the world – a view that would disqualify Mozi as a utilitarian once and for all. As intriguing as this reading is, however, I find no concrete evidence of these other postulated components of “righteousness” in the text of the Mozi.
53 I do not mean the same thing as Thomas A. Metzger’s “epistemological optimism,” for which see his “Some Ancient Roots of Ancient Chinese Thought: This-Worldliness, Epistemological Optimism, Doctrinality, and the Emergence of Reflexivity in the Eastern Chou,” Early China 11–12 (1985–87), e.g., 76–89.
Why Mozi is included in the Daoist Canon

serious weakness of Mohism; it might even lead some critics to contend that Mohism is not a philosophy at all, but a religion. In effect, the Mozi declares that its arguments cannot be refuted empirically; for if an objector were to present an apparent counterexample, the Mohist retort could only be that it is not really a counterexample after all.

The clearest example of this sort of inflexibility is the Mohist theodicy, cited above: “If we do what Heaven desires, Heaven will surely do what we desire.” This means that anyone who has contributed to Heaven’s project of worldwide peace and prosperity will be rewarded with “fortune and lucre” (福祿), which all human beings desire; anyone who attempts to thwart the same celestial plan will be punished with “disasters and infestation” (禍祟), which all human beings hate. Not even in the xia chapters – that is, the final chapters in each of the three-part sections laying down the ten basic Mohist doctrines – where the speaker considers various likely

---


Marxist-inspired Chinese scholarship tends to avoid the subject of religion entirely: for example, Xing Zhaliang 邢兆良, Mozi pingzhuan 墨子評傳, Zhongguo sixiangjia pingzhuan congshu (Nanjing: Nanjing Daxue, 1993), in an otherwise detailed study, makes do with a minuscule section on Heaven and ghosts (293–99). Ren Jiuyi 任繼愈, Zhongguo zhexueshi 中國哲學史, revised edition, Daxue zhexue congshu (Beijing: Renmin, 2003), 124–26, criticizes Mozi’s religious views as well-intentioned but socially counterproductive.

These are: (1) “Exalting Worthies” (“Shangxian,” Chapters 8–10); (2) “Conforming Upwards” (“Shangtong,” Chapters 11–13); (3) “Impartial Love” (“Jian’ai,” Chapters 14–16); (4) “Objecting to [Military] Aggression” (“Feigong,” Chapters 17–19); (5) “Moderating Expenditure” (“Jieyong,” Chapters, 20–22, of which only 20 and 21 survive); (6) “Moderating Funerals” (“Jiezang,” Chapters 23–25, of which only 25 survives); (7) “The Will of Heaven” (“Tianzhi,” Chapters 26–28); (8) “Clarifying Ghosts” (“Minggui” 明鬼, Chapters 29–31, of which only 31 survives); (9) “Objecting to Music” (“Feiyue,” Chapters 32–34, of which only 32 survives); and (10) “Objecting to Fatalism” (“Feiming” 非命, Chapters 35–37). The date and composition of these triplets have occasioned many scholarly inquiries: e.g., Erik W. Maeder, “Some Observations on
rebuttals in turn, is there any hint of doubt that Heaven acts fairly and unalteringly. Rather, the Mozi typically dilates on the famous examples of the sage kings Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, and Wen and Wu, whom Heaven established as Sons of Heaven, and the deposed tyrants Jie, Zhou, You, and Li, whose downfall Heaven likewise superintended.56

If one were to object to this theory by pointing to a good person who has had to endure disasters and infestation, there could be only three Mohist responses: (1) the person is not truly (or sufficiently) good; (2) the person has not truly endured “disasters and infestation”; (3) the suffering is only temporary, and Heaven will see to it that all injustices are redressed in the end. Ning Chen has discovered three such instances in the Mozi, and in each case the first argument carries the day: the person in question is found not to be virtuous enough to enjoy Heaven’s favor.57 But in general, the third response, as I shall explain more fully below, probably comes closest to the Mohists’ understanding of their own theory.

This “intransigent optimism” is also evident in the so-called “Three Standards” (sanfa 三法) or “Three Gnomons” (sanbiao 三表),58 the oldest surviving example of a Chinese attempt to work out a general theory of truth.59 In the context of an argument attempting to refute Confucianism on the (spurious) grounds that it advocates fatalism, the Mozi says:


This being the case, how does one judge their propositions? Master Mozi said: One must set up a gauge. Speaking without such a gauge would be like determining sunrise and sunset on the basis of a spinning potter’s wheel. One could never come to know clearly the difference between right and wrong, benefit and harm. Thus one must speak in accordance with the Three Gnomons. What is meant by the “Three Gnomons”? Master Mozi said: There is “verifying the root,” “verifying the origin,” and “verifying the utility.”62 How does one “verify the root”? One “verifies the root” in the affairs of the sage kings of old. How does one “verify the origin”? One “verifies the origin” by investigating the things that the Hundred Surnames hear and see. How does one “verify the utility”? Observe the benefit that [the proposition] would bring to the state, its people, the Hundred Surnames, and the populace if it were disseminated by being made into law. This is what is meant by speaking in accordance with the Three Gnomons.63

Thus, according to Mohism, a proposition is true if and only if it satisfies three criteria: (1) the sage kings practiced it in high antiquity; (2) ordinary people have practiced it in more recent times; and (3) it brings benefit to the world when it is made the law of the land. The text proceeds to subject the doctrine of fatalism – again, libelously attributed to Confucianism – to this threefold test, and finds that it fails on all three counts. The sage kings did not believe that all things were foreordained; ordinary people do not normally act on such a belief either; and, most importantly of all, fatalism is dangerous because it would lead to moral apathy if people put their faith in it. (If people believed that their lot in life is decreed immutably, they would not strive to improve themselves and attain the manifold fortunes that proper behavior, in this moral system, reliably elicits.)64 Thus fatalism is false.

455, opens his essay by asserting that the Three Standards are to be understood not as markers of the truth of propositions, but as standards for the justification of doctrine and conduct. Mohists themselves, however, did not distinguish systematically between “true” claims, “correct” doctrine, “right” conduct, and so on; all of these were subsumed under the same word, shì 是. Loy himself concedes: “the Mohists sometimes slide from what is apparently a concern with some factual claim to a concern with what is more naturally taken as a prescriptive claim” (459).

60 Following the commentary of Wang Niansun 王念孫 (1744–1832), Mozi jiaozhu 9.35.405n.10.
61 “Feiming shang,” Mozi jiaozhu 9.35.400f.
62 The wordy phrases “verifying the root,” “verifying the origin,” and “verifying the utility” are required in English to reflect the fact that ben 本, yuan 原, and yong 用 are verbs.
63 Compare the translations in Watson, 120f.; and Mei, Ethical and Political Works of Mozte, 182f.
64 E.g, “Feiming shang,” Mozi jiaozhu 9.35.402.
Obviously, this theory of truth is defective in many respects, but one of its most noticeable features is the indisposition to entertain the possibility that a proposition may satisfy some, but not all, of the three criteria. Whenever the *Mozi* brings the Three Gnomons to bear, the proposition under scrutiny invariably satisfies or fails all three tests at the same time. To some extent, this felicitous regularity is explained by fact that Mohists could not have conceived of sage kings who would have put false doctrines into practice. If the sage kings sanctioned a certain viewpoint, then, as far as Mohists were concerned, it must certainly have been both true and beneficial to society. Thus any proposition that passes Test 1 will necessarily pass Test 3 as well. But is it really credible that all beneficial notions must be true merely because they are beneficial? One could certainly appreciate the utility of having, say, a superhuman constabulary force monitoring all human action on earth, and indefatigably rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. For most modern minds, however, the utility of such a hypothetical power is hardly sufficient reason to suppose that it must in fact exist.\(^65\)

Mohists, by contrast, were apparently convinced that anything beneficial to the world must exist, or at least be a realistic goal worth striving for. Take that same superhuman constabulary force. Mohists earnestly believed in it.

65 Van Norden, 160, distinguishes between “definitions of truth” and “indicators of truth” (emphasis in original), and claims that the Three Gnomons are intended as the latter, not the former. Thus, in Van Norden’s view, simply observing that beneficial beliefs are not always true is not sufficient to invalidate the Three Gnomons generally. Nevertheless, a supposed “indicator of truth” is valuable only if it reliably indicates truth, and few modern readers are likely to agree that the Three Gnomons reliably indicate truth.


67 Following the commentary of Bi Yuan 畢沅 (1730–1797), *Mozi jiaozhu* 9.35.369n.166.

68 The phrase *ruo yiwei buran* 若以為不然 before *shiyi* 是以 is excrescent, according to Wang Niansun, and is omitted here.

69 Following the commentary of Wu Yujiang, *Mozi jiaozhu* 9.35.369n.170. Zhou Fumei, 125, reads this as *dui* 諨 (“to despise”) instead.

70 Most commentators hold that the twenty-one characters at this point in the text *(shiyi mo fang, you jian, ni hu qu shen zhi ming, xianming you yiren, wei shang zhu bu* 是以 莫放，幽閑，擬乎鬼神之明，顯明有一人，畏上誅罰) are excrescent, and consequently they are omitted here. I tentatively disagree with Wu Yujiang’s argument (*Mozi jiaozhu*,...
Why Mozi is included in the Daoist Canon

故鬼神之明，不可為幽閒廣澤、山林深谷，鬼神之明必知之。鬼神之罰，
不可為富貴眾強、勇力強武、堅甲利兵，鬼神之罰必勝之。71

For this reason, Master Mozi said: If the principle that ghosts and spirits can reward the virtuous and punish the villainous were spread among the state and its families, and among the myriad people, it would surely be a way to put the state and its families in order, and benefit the myriad people. Thus when clerks in charge of the official treasury are not taintless and incorrupt, when men and women are promiscuous in their activities, the ghosts and spirits see these things. When the people practice licentiousness, villainy, brigandage, disorder, robbery, or banditry, whether with weapons, blades, poison, drugs, water, or fire; when they prey on innocent people on the highways; when they take other people’s chariots, horses, clothing, or furs for their own benefit; there are ghosts and spirits who see these things. Therefore clerks in charge of the official treasury dare not be anything other than taintless and incorrupt: when they see goodness, they dare not fail to reward it; when they see villainy, they dare not fail to indict it. Practicing licentiousness, villainy, brigandage, disorder, robbery, or banditry, whether with weapons, knives, poison, drugs, water, or fire; preying on innocent people on the highways; taking other people’s chariots, horses, clothing, or furs for one’s own benefit – these will cease for the above reason, and the world will be orderly.

Thus the percipience of the ghosts and spirits cannot be counteracted [by hiding in] dark recesses, broad marshes, mountain forests or deep valleys; the percipience of the ghosts and spirits will certainly know [where you are]. The punishment of the ghosts and spirits cannot be counteracted by means of wealth, rank, manpower, force, bravery, strength, military might, stiff armor, or keen weapons; the punishment of the ghosts and spirits will certainly overcome them.72

Enduring cultural attitudes must have had some influence on the Mohist view of ghosts and spirits73 – the idea that terrible spirits can exert their will in the sublunary world is traceable all the way back to the oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang dynasty74 – but what is noteworthy, for our purposes, is that the belief in ghosts and spirits is defended here solely on

9.35.370n.176) to the contrary. His explanation of this passage, while provocative, is not fully convincing.
71  “Minggui xia,” Mozi jiaozhu 8.31.341f.
72  Compare the translations in Watson, 107f.; and Mei, Ethical and Political Works of Motse, 170. Because of its textual problems and unusual diction, this is one of the most difficult passages in the core chapters of the Mozi, though the general import is clear.
73  Cf. Graham, Disputers of the Tao, 47; and Fang Shouchu, 97.
the grounds that it is conducive to social justice. If people could be made to believe that their every action is viewed by the unimpeachable spirit police, they would be reluctant to practice evil. A naysayer today might observe that the widespread belief in ghosts and spirits could have the same desired social consequences even if ghosts and spirits do not exist – in other words, that demonstrating the social benefit of such a belief is not sufficient to establish its truth. But Mohists did not approach logic in this manner. If it is beneficial, it must be true.

The above is not the only argument for the existence of ghosts that the Mozi supplies. In accordance with the Three Gnomons, the chapter on ghosts goes on to recount numerous supposedly historical (and unverifiable) examples of their intervention in human affairs. The Mohist authors are confident that, by showing how the belief in ghosts and spirits satisfies all three of their criteria for truth, they have proved its veracity. But by this point, the barrage of appeals to the past comes almost as an afterthought. Readers familiar with the “intransigent optimism” of Mohist philosophy already know to expect detailed historical examples soon after the benefit of an idea is affirmed. Just as the doctrine of fatalism cannot be true because the world is better off when people do not believe in it, ghosts must exist because the world is better off when people do believe in them.

That these arguments were deemed inadequate even in ancient times can be inferred from a fascinating but fragmentary bamboo manuscript, The Percipience of the Ghosts and Spirits (Guisheng zhi ming 鬼神之明). The sage kings and arch-villains may have been appropriately requited by Heaven, but the virtuous Wu Zixu 伍子胥 died ignominiously, while the evil minister Yigong of Rong 榮夷公 lived to a ripe old age. Then we read:

---

75 Cf. Benjamin Wong and Hui-chieu Loy, “War and Ghosts in Mozi’s Political Philosophy,” Philosophy East and West 54.3 (2004), 350. However, I disagree with their presentist argument that the text does not really attempt to prove the existence of ghosts. It is evident that, by employing the Three Gnomons, the author or authors of “Minggui” are attempting to establish the truth about ghosts using their most esteemed epistemological techniques. Wong and Loy attempt to renovate the Mohist arguments about ghosts to suit modern philosophical tastes; but the only reason why they are reluctant to accept what Mozi actually says is that it seems irredeemably absurd today. Cf. Van Norden, 178f.

76 These are found in two clusters: “Minggui xia,” Mozi jiaozhu 8.31.337–39 (corresponding to yuan, the practice of ordinary people in history) and 340–43 (corresponding to ben, the practice of the sages).

77 The Guodian manuscript Failure and Success Depend on Time (Qiongda yi shi 窮達以時), from approximately the same period as The Percipience of the Ghosts and Spirits, also observes that one’s conduct is not an infallible indicator of one’s worldly success; one needs, in addition, the luck of being at the right place at the right time. It too uses the example of Wu Zixu. For the text, see Li Ling 李零, Guodian Chujian jiaodu ji 郭店楚簡校讀記, revised edition (Beijing: Beijing Daxue, 2002), 86.
Why Mozi is included in the Daoist Canon

83

If you investigate [the issue] with these examples, then the good are not always rewarded, and the wicked are not always punished. Accordingly, I conclude that the ghosts and spirits are not always perciipient, and there must be a reason for this. Is it that their powers are up to the task, but they do not act [as we expect]? I do not know. Or is it that their powers are not up to the task after all? I do not know this either.

The first scholar to annotate this manuscript was eager to see it as the remnant of a lost Mohist dialogue, but it is more plausibly understood as a criticism of Mohism, turning its own rhetoric against it. For if the Mohists had truly explained the nature of ghosts and spirits, one would not have to ask whether the problem is one of celestial inaction or incompetence.


80 See esp. Ding Sixin 丁四新, “Lun Chujian Guishen pian de guishen guan ji xuexai guishu” 論楚簡《鬼神》篇的鬼神觀及其學派歸屬, Ruijia wenhua yanjiu 儒家文化研究 1 (2007), 399–422. Xu Hua 徐華, “Shangbo jian Guishen zhi ming yi wei Dongzi yiwen” 上博簡《鬼神之明》疑為《道德子》佚文, Wenxian 文獻 2008.4, 105–9, suspects that it is a fragment from the lost text called Dongzi, attributed Dong Wuxin 東無心, who was an ancient Confucian known to have opposed Mohism. Wang Zhongjiang 王中江, “Guishen zhi ming yu Dong-Zhou de ‘duoyuan guishen guan’” 《鬼神之明》與東周的“多元的鬼神觀”, Zhongguo zhexue shi 中國哲學史 2008.4, 45–55, lucidly discusses the fragment within the context of contemporary theories of spirits and their role in theodicy, without deciding whether it belongs to the Mohist school.

81 “Gongmeng” 公孟, Mozi jiaozhu 12.48.707, records an episode in which Die Bi 跌鼻 (otherwise unknown, and whose name can be construed to mean “tripping over one’s nose”) visits Mozi when he is sick, and asks: “Teacher, you are a sage, so what is the reason why you are sick? Is it that there is some part of your teaching that is not good, teacher? Or is it that the ghosts and spirits are not perciipient and aware?” 今先生, 前人也, 何故有病? 意者, 先生之言有不善乎? 鬼神不明乎? The figure of Mozi circumvents this philosophical challenge by responding that because disease can have more than one cause – in other words, Die Bi is wrong to assume that Mozi’s illness came from ghosts. Xu Keqian 徐克謙, Xian-Qin sixiang wenhua lunzha 先秦思想文化論札, Suiyuan wenshi yanju congkan (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2007), 240ff., argues unpersuasively on the basis of this and other passages that Mozi harbored doubts about his theory of Heaven. Die Bi’s comment that Mozi is a sage – whether sarcastic or not – strikes me as a sign that this document may be relatively late.
There is one last feature of Mohism that needs to be discussed before we are ready to return to the question that opened this essay, namely why the Mozi is included in the Daoist Canon. It is a subtle point that is rarely appreciated in modern studies of Mohism. Mohists must believe that Mohism is part of the celestial plan. Mozi, his teachings, and the work of his followers must all have a role to play in Heaven’s dispensation of justice; otherwise the Mohist theodicy is left incomplete and unpersuasive. We recall that, throughout the core chapters, the text laments the selfish and destructive habits of men in power: “such things as large states attacking small states, large lineages dislocating small lineages, the strong extorting the weak, the many maltreating the few, the cunning machinating against the foolish, the noble overbearing the base.” But how are all these malefactors able to offend repeatedly without incurring Heaven’s wrath? If the strong regularly extort the weak, why does Heaven allow them to remain strong? The Mohist answer is that people who do bad things are cementing their own doom, which is sure to come eventually. One of the most impressive achievements of Mohist philosophy, after all, is that it shows how exploitation is unprofitable because it ultimately harms even the exploiter. When the strong extort the weak, whatever temporary goods they expropriate will, in the long term, be far outweighed by the damage that they heedlessly bring upon themselves. But that self-inflicted destruction has not necessarily arrived yet. The Mohists may tirelessly recite historical examples of felons who could not, in the end, avoid their just desserts, but if there were really no injustice in the world – that is, no cases where people were not immediately requited for their moral or immoral behavior – there would be no need for Mohist philosophy in the first place. Mohists must, therefore, have regarded themselves as Heaven’s instruments, their agenda of social justice as Heaven’s way of bringing about the sublime order in which all human beings are benefited to the utmost.

While there is no direct evidence of Mozi’s self-conception as Heaven’s emissary, there can be little doubt that he understood his work (and, of course, the work of anyone else who shared his ideals) as furthering Heaven’s will:

曰：義正者何若？曰：大不攻小也，強不侮弱也，眾不賊寡也，詐不欺愚也，貴不傲賤也，富不驕貧也，壯不奪老也。是以天下之庶國，莫以水火毒藥兵刃以相害也。若事，上利天，中利鬼，下利人，三利而無所不利，是謂天德。

82 The so-called “Mohist Analects” (i.e. Chapters 46–49) contain several comments on Mozi’s function as a teacher (e.g., “Luwen,” Mozi jiaozhu 13.49.736f.), but he is not said to have associated this with Heaven’s design for the world.
Why Mozi is included in the Daoist Canon

It is asked: What is righteous government? I say: The large do not attack the small; the strong do not abuse the weak; the cunning do not deceive the foolish; the noble are not arrogant toward the base; the wealthy are not haughty toward the poor; the hardy do not take from the elderly. Therefore the many states of the world do not harm one another with water, fire, poison, drugs, weapons, or blades. When affairs are like this, Heaven is benefited above, the ghosts are benefited in the middle, and people are benefited below. All three are benefited and no one is not benefited – this is what is known as the virtue of Heaven. Thus whoever devotes himself to this is sage, wise, humane, righteous, just, magnanimous, kind, and filial; he garners the good names in the world and attaches them to himself. What is the reason for this? He proceeds along the course of Heaven’s intention.

Inasmuch as Mozi teaches the large not to attack the small, the strong not to abuse the weak, and so on, he is surely “proceeding along the course of Heaven’s intention” (shun tian zhi yi 順天之意).

If Mohists themselves were wary of claiming a Heavenly mission for their master, Mozi’s later apotheosis as a Daoist immortal suggests that religious Daoists in the ensuing centuries were prepared to fill the gap. Here is an excerpt from the biography of Mozi in Biographies of the Spirit Immortals (Shenxian zhuan 神仙傳), a collection attributed to Ge Hong 葛洪 (A.D. 283–343):

墨子年八十有二, 乃嘆曰: 「世事已可知榮位非常保, 將委流俗, 以從赤松子游耳。」乃入周狄山, 精思道法, 想像神仙。於是數聞左右山間有誦書聲者。墨子臥後, 又有人來, 以衣覆足。墨子乃伺之, 忽見一人, 乃起問之曰: 「君豈非山岳之靈氣乎? 將度世之神仙乎? 愿且少留, 訓以道要。」

神人曰: 「知子有志好道, 故來相候, 子欲何求?」

墨子曰: 「願得長生, 與天地相畢耳。」

於是神人授以素書《朱英丸方》、《道靈教戒》、《五行變化》，凡二十五篇，告墨子曰: 「子有仙骨, 又聰明, 得此便成, 不復須師。」墨子拜受合作, 乃撰集其要, 以爲《五行記》。乃得地山, 隱居以避戰國, 至漢武帝時, 遺使者楊違, 束帛加璧, 以聘墨子, 墨子不出。視其顔色, 常如五十許人, 周游五嶽, 不止一處。

When Mozi was in his eighty-second year, he sighed and said: “From the

---

83 “Tianzhi xia,” Mozi jiaozhu 7.28.320f.
84 For this unconventional translation of zhong, see my “When zhong Does Not Mean ‘Loyalty,’” Dao 7.2 (2008), 165–74. In the context of the Mozi, zhong means “treating people right.”
85 Compare the translation in Mei, Ethical and Political Works of Motse, 155.
87 Li Fang 李昉 (925–996) et al., Taiping guangji 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1961), 5.32f.
affairs of the world it can be known that glory and status are not preserved for long. I shall renounce the vulgar rabble, and wander, following Master Redpine [a legendary immortal].” Thus he came to Mount Zhoudi, where he pondered the methods of the Way discriminatingly, imagining the spirit immortals. Then there were several times when he heard the sound of someone chanting texts in the mountains to the left and the right. After Mozi had slept [for a while], a man approached, with robes [so long that they] covered his feet. Mozi watched and suddenly saw the man, so he got up, and asked: “Sir, are you not the numinous qi of mountain peaks? Or a spirit immortal who has passed from this world? I would like you to stay a while, and instruct me in the essentials of the Way.”

The spirit man said: “I know that you have an ambition set on the Way; thus I have come to wait on you. What do you seek?”

Mozi said: “I would like long life, so that I may perish only when Heaven and Earth do!”

Thus the spirit man transmitted the silk texts Recipes for Pills of Vermillion Efflorescence, Instructions from the Numen of the Way, and The Transformations of the Five Phases to him – twenty-five bundles in all. He told Mozi: “You have the bones of an immortal; in addition, you are keen of hearing and sight. Having obtained these [texts], you will be successful; you will not need another teacher.” Mozi bowed and received [the texts] and did as they prescribed; having attained this experience, he set down their essentials in A Record of the Five Phases. He also obtained a mountain of earth, where he dwelt as a hermit in order to avoid the Warring States. At the time of Emperor Wu of Han [r. 140–87 B.C.], a herald named Yang Wei wrapped some silk and jade as an offering to Mozi, but Mozi would not come out. If one saw his visage, it was always like that of a man in his fifties. He wandered around among the Five Peaks, never staying in one place.

This hagiography contains many anachronistic elements, and I do not mean to imply that this is either a genuine Mohist philosophical text or a credible account of the school’s founding father. To list only a few of the incongruities: Mozi did not teach the doctrine of the Five Phases; he

88 A reference to physiognomy (xiang 相), the belief that people’s destinies are manifest in their physical bodies.
89 Compare the (shorter) translation in Campany, To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth, 329.
91 But Mohists were unquestionably familiar with it. See “Jing xia” and “Jingshuo xia” 經說下, Mozi jiaozhu 10B.41/43.537 (i.e. B 43), which refers to the principle that each one of the Five Phases can be overcome by a different one. Similarly, the opening section of “Yingdi ci” 迎敵祠, Mozi jiaozhu 15.68.694f., calls for sacrifices involving pennants, images of gods, and ceremonial vestments colored according to the Five-Phases paradigm;
regarded Heaven, not the Way, as the highest source of authority; and he
did not hanker after immortality – indeed, he ridiculed the idea. Moreover,
Mozi’s decision in this passage “to renounce the vulgar rabble” (wei liusu委
流俗) is profoundly at odds with his philosophy as expounded in the
Mozi; the only honorable course of action, in his view, would have been to
expend every last measure of energy trying to educate them and lead them
to righteousness. Finally, since Mozi receives these scriptures as a personal
reward, and not as an aid in his proselytizing efforts, it is doubtful that
the historical Mozi would even have accepted the gift. Thus the authors
of this biography, while they may have admired Mozi, were not Mohists
themselves in any philosophically meaningful sense.

Nevertheless, the tale, despite its problems, reveals the willingness of
religious Daoists to see in Mozi a forerunner of their own belief system. The
“spirit man” (shenren神人) declines to answer Mozi’s questions about his
origin, but we may infer that he is some kind of celestial emissary; otherwise
he could not have possessed the miraculous texts that he transmitted to Mozi,
let alone the authority to reveal them to a mortal. Only the purest human
beings were ever granted such a theophany. Why would Daoist authors
believe that, in the estimation of a “spirit man,” Mozi was someone “with an
ambition set on the Way” (you zhi hao dao有志好道)? Classical philosophers
are rarely accorded such praise in Daoist literature. Nor is this an isolated
instance: Daoist scriptures from various sects recognize Mozi as a revered
immortal. Perhaps the most striking of these is the Shangqing 上清
text Arrayed Annals of the Lord of the Dao, Latter Sage of Shangqing (Shangqing
housheng daojun lieji上清後聖道君列紀), where Mo Di is named by the Sage
Lord himself – the most elevated being to have any contact with humans—as
one of the twenty-four teachers sent down to instruct the chosen followers
of the Way. Not even Zhuangzi莊子 attained this honor.

if the enemy is arriving from the east, for example, the pennants, idols, and vestments are
all to be green. And “Qizhi”旗幟, Mozi jiaozhu 15.69.903, adapts the Five Phases to its
system of colors for flags requesting resources in battle (thus a flag requesting wood is to
be colored green). See also Mozi’s refutation of a fortuneteller who evidently employed
principles relating to the Five Phases in “Guiyi,” Mozi jiaozhu 12.47.689.
92 E.g., “Gengzhu”耕柱, Mozi jiaozhu 11.46.660, where Mozi objects to the principle of
preserving one’s life at all costs.
93 With the obvious exception of Laozi老子, whom religious Daoists re-interpreted as the
Dao Personified. Thus best account of that process is still Anna K. Seidel, La divinisation
de Lao tseu dans le taoïsme des Han, Publications de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient
71 (Paris, 1969); also idem, “Das neue Testament des Tao – Lao Tzu und die Entstehung
94 On the Sage Lord, see, e.g., Stephen R. Bokenkamp, Early Daoist Scriptures, Taoist
Classics 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 281f.
95 Shangqing housheng daojun lieji (HY 442), 7b. See Bokenkamp, 352n.
A review of the basic Mohist beliefs may help us comprehend why Mozi is treated with such adulation in the *Daoist Canon*. Mohists held that Heaven is the most powerful entity in the universe, and that it exerts its will in the human realm by rewarding those who further its plan and punishing those who obstruct it. Heaven desires a society in which all human beings work for one another’s benefit. Under these ideal conditions, there will be no injustice, poverty or starvation, but hierarchical ranks will remain necessary, inasmuch as people are not equally talented, and a perfectly benevolent ruler needs to make the best use of the best men. Finally, Heaven employs a legion of demonic functionaries who travel unseen throughout the world; they observe all conduct, good or bad, and reward or punish people accordingly.

Is this not remarkably similar to the utopia described in the *Xiang’er Commentary to the Laozi*?96

治國法道，聴任天下仁義之人，勿得強賞也。所以者，尊大其化，廣開道心，人為仁義。自當至誠，天自賞之；不至誠者，天自罰之。天察必審於人，皆知尊道畏天，仁義便至誠矣。97

When the state is ordered and the *dao* taken as the standard, when the humane and righteous people of the world are installed in office, there is neither coercion nor reward. This is because people will become humane and righteous when moral transformation is revered and the mind of the *dao* is opened broadly. Those who, of their own accord, possess the utmost sincerity will be rewarded by Heaven; those who do not possess the utmost sincerity will be punished by Heaven. Heaven’s scrutiny is surely more extensive than man’s. It knows all who revere the *dao* and fear Heaven. Humanity and righteousness will thus be of the utmost sincerity.98

As Stephen R. Bokenkamp has observed, “‘Heaven,’ in this case, is … a celestial bureaucracy modeled on the Dao.”99 Although there is only one explicit reference to this celestial bureaucracy in the *Xiang’er* itself (“They know that the spirit luminaries cannot be hectored, and thus fear not the law, but the Heavenly spirits” 知神明不可欺負，不畏法律也，乃畏天神),100 the idea would have been unmistakable to readers within the Celestial

97 Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang’er zhu jiaojian* 老子想爾注校箋 (Hong Kong: Tong Nam, 1956), 25.
98 Compare the translation in Bokenkamp, 108.
100 *Laozi Xiang’er zhu jiaojian*, 47.
Master tradition. Indeed, one of the main reasons for the success of the early Celestial Masters was that they claimed the ability to heal the sick by interceding with the celestial bureaucracy on their behalf. Only properly ordained priests, they asserted, had the standing to overrule the pestilential ghosts who were dispatched to torment the afflicted. That is to say, the Daoist religion could not have existed without the belief in the same kind of demonic constabulary force that the Mohists had urged centuries earlier. And the similarities extend to the conception of government and society. The Xiang’er imagines the same kind of inegalitarian utopia with a stratified administration, staffed by righteous civil servants, ensuring that no one among the populace is abused or exploited. (It is not very different from the predominant sense of government’s role in society in the People’s Republic of China today.)

Such observations need not rule out other possible reasons for the text’s inclusion in the Daoist Canon. For example, the Later Mohist fascination with the philosophy of language and the investigation of physical phenomena must have appealed to the compilers of the Daoist Canon as well. Moreover, there are many concepts in the Xiang’er Commentary that find no analogue in the Mozi, and it would be a mistake to depict religious Daoism as merely a later incarnation of Mohism. The Xiang’er was based on a radically new cosmology, elements of which included not only the dao itself, but the notion of a divinized Laozi, and the possibility of physical self-cultivation through the morally informed manipulation of qi. There is no hint of any of this in the Mozi.

Similarly, the early Daoist religion espoused an incomparably more complex theodicy than Mohism by acknowledging that although the spirits were expected to reward only the good and punish only the evil, sometimes things went wrong. Just as the workings of the imperial bureaucracy must have seemed nearly inscrutable to an ordinary peasant, the celestial bureaucracy was thought to snag occasionally on enigmatic technicalities as well. To take a prominent example: The Scripture of Great Peace (Taiping

---


103 I am grateful to Lisa Raphals for this insight. Cf. also Sun Zhuocai, 171.

104 Cf. Li Gang 李剛, Handai Daojiao zhexue 漢代道教哲學 (Chengdu: Ba-Shu, 1995), 231ff.
Paul R. Goldin

jing 太平經), a text with roots even older than the Celestial Masters,\(^\text{105}\) laid down a doctrine of “inherited burdens” (chengfu 承負), according to which people today could be punished for the sins of their ancestors.\(^\text{106}\) Thus the suffering of a perfectly blameless person could easily be explained as his or her “inherited burden” from a wicked ancestor, possibly even someone unknown, many generations in the past. Celestial justice was not necessarily swift, and members of the same clan, whether alive or dead, were evidently held responsible for one another’s conduct. Daoists could imagine a process by which innocent people might become unwittingly entangled in celestial legal proceedings, and face terrifying visitations as a result, even if they were not directly implicated in the affair.\(^\text{107}\) (Analogous experiences with the mundane bureaucracy in the early Empire must have animated this belief.)

Nor were the spirits always taken to be infallible. Sometimes they might catch the wrong person; sometimes they could even be duped and sent on their way empty-handed.\(^\text{108}\) Once again, the Mohists themselves do not seem to have envisioned anything of the kind. In their intransigently optimistic world, such irregularities could never come to pass.

Nevertheless, despite our lack of information about the reception of the Mozi in Han times, it is likely, in view of the above, that members of the early Daoist sects would have regarded Mozi as the classical philosopher


whose teachings were most like their own. Accordingly, they refashioned him as a Heavenly immortal, and duly consecrated what they had collected of his writings by incorporating it in their own scriptural canon. Although readers of the Mozi today need not be bound by the worldview of the Daoist masters, their response to Mohism is still valuable for providing a glimpse of how that philosophy was understood in late antiquity.

To conclude: the hermeneutic line that renders Mozi as “China’s utilitarian” is a terrible simplification. The original motivation may not necessarily have been malice or chauvinism: the early Western interpreters of Chinese civilization were confronted with an avalanche of sophisticated literature, and they may have found it convenient to begin digesting it all by seeking out cultural elements that seemed to have a straightforward Western analogue. But the deracination that is necessary to recast Mozi as an eccentric old Chinese utilitarian must be obvious today, and we are long since past the stage of intercultural contact when such distortions might be indulged for the sake of facilitating basic education. In our academic Golden Age, when most Western students of Chinese philosophy begin learning how to read the texts in the original language by the time they are 20, we can demand that they familiarize themselves with the culture of that philosophy and try to understand what Mohism would have meant to people for whom it was a real philosophical option, not a relic of the distant past. Coming to grips with Mohism means coming to grips with its ghosts.

---

6

Coming to terms with dé 德
The deconstruction of ‘virtue’ and an exercise in scientific morality

Robert H. Gassmann

1. Writing and words

Hubert Schleichert, a German historian of philosophy, voices the following, rather unusual opinion concerning the translatability of ancient Chinese philosophical texts:

Die Schwierigkeiten bei der Übersetzung chinesischer Philosophen werden von dem des Chinesischen Unkundigen meist an der falschen Stelle vermutet. Prinzipiell bietet weder die Zeichenschrift noch die Übersetzung des philosophischen Vokabulars aussergewöhnliche, d.h. mit anderen Sprachen nicht vergleichbare Probleme. Letzteres mag erstaunen; aber es ist eine Binsenwahrheit, dass lexikalische Übersetzungsprobleme in der Philosophie hauptsächlich auf Unklarheiten des Quellentextes beruhen. Alles, was klar gesagt ist, lässt sich auch klar übersetzen.2

If we were to basically accept this assessment, the widely divergent translations of the opening lines of the *Dào Dé Jīng* 道德經3, as an obvious example,

---

1 I gratefully acknowledge the insightful and helpful comments made by William G. Boltz, Wolfgang Behr, and Christian Steineck, who read and criticized a pre-publication version of this paper.

2 Schleichert, Hubert: *Klassische chinesische Philosophie. Eine Einführung*, p. 15. In paraphrase: “Difficulties in translating Chinese philosophers are generally expected in the wrong places. Surprisingly, neither the writing system nor the philosophical vocabulary present extraordinary problems, i.e. problems not also encountered when dealing with other languages. It is a truism that lexical translation problems in philosophy are mainly caused by obscurities in the original texts. Whatever has been set out clearly can also be clearly translated.”

3 Professor emeritus Günter Wohlfart has put together a sizable and revealing collection of translations of the opening sentences of the *Dào Dé Jīng* in his study *Der Philosophische Daoismus. Philosophische Untersuchungen zu Grundbegriffen und komparative Studien mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Laozi.* edition chora: Köln 2001 (Reihe für Asiatische und Komparative Philosophie, Bd. 5.)
Coming to terms with dé 德

would certainly force the following, rather disturbing conclusion upon us: Ancient Chinese philosophical thought must have been terribly imprecise, deeply ambiguous, and notoriously vague – and in those few instances where per chance different translators understand a passage or two without encountering any grave difficulties and even render it in a comparable way, the achieved clarity reveals contents of such a simple nature that persons familiar with Greek philosophy remain unimpressed. I am, however, quite convinced that the divergences described above are only in rare cases due to “obscurities of the original texts”. This, then, leaves us with the not very novel insight that other circumstances are responsible for the situation, namely sloppy philology, unsolved grammatical and lexicological problems, as well as elementary errors and confusions in methodical questions. And, in most definite contrast to Schleichert’s opinion, I must assert that the Chinese writing system does at times play a decisive role in the process of understanding, because of a rather distracting quality: it generally covers most traces of word classes by using one and the same character in all instances. In certain contexts this leads to utterances collocating a series of identical characters denoting several tokens of one word or of different but derivationally related words. This results in a certain amount of structural ambiguity, but translating a passage such as the following one from the Xún Zǐ should be more than a simple matter of trust:

E 1 信信信也,… 疑疑亦信也,… 貴賢仁也,… 賤不肖亦仁也,… 言而當知也,… 默而當亦知也…. 故: 知默猶信也.

Trusting the trustworthy is [exercising] the ability to trust; suspecting the suspect is also [exercising] the ability to trust. Esteeming the worthy

---

4 One of the effects of this sinological distress is a tendency to depict the subject as more exotic than it is and to harp on the “mysteries” of the texts and on the deepness of “oriental wisdom” – which certainly serves a market, but does not lead to scientifically safe and trustworthy results.

5 This, of course, is basically not a problem of writing systems. If, in a language, word classes lack distinctive phonetic forms, then even alphabetical writing systems would not represent them. As for Chinese, problems arise when related but different words with a distinct phonetic form (e. g. 王 wáng ‘king’/wàng ‘to king > to treat as king’) are not systematically differentiated in writing. (This is aggravated when the verb is nominalized, thus diminishing the disambiguating potential of syntactic positions.) As the bamboo manuscripts show, the early Chinese writing system was, in this respect, much richer, giving variant writings for words later written with the same characters. Cf. for a case study of this problem in Robert H. Gassmann: “Preliminary Thoughts on the Relationship between Lexicon and Writing in the Guodian Texts.” In: Asiatische Studien; LIX, 1 (2005); pp. 233–260.

6 My understanding of the third xìn 信 as noun with the meaning ‘ability to trust’ is based on the following passage from Xún Zǐ 9.16a, which shows that words denoting behavioural forms (such as trusting) could act as derivational source for homographic words denoting the ability to behave in such a way (note the néng 能 at the end of the passage): 水火有氣而無生;草木有生而無知;禽獸有知而無義;人有氣,有生,有知,亦且有義. 故最
is [exercising] the ability to be humane; so is disparaging the unworthy [exercising] the ability to be humane. Being pertinent when speaking is [exercising] the ability to understand; being pertinent when remaining silent is also [exercising] the ability to understand. Consequently, understanding when to remain silent is the equivalent to understanding when to speak.\(^7\)

This omnipresent phenomenon, i.e. the representation or writing of different words with the same character, I shall term \textit{homography}. That one and the same character may represent totally different words is also visible in the fact that in mediaeval Chinese we in many cases have different received pronunciations.\(^8\) There is literally more to Chinese characters than meets the eye. However, lacking the competence and the help of native speakers to penetrate the enigmatic surface of the specimens of the writing system as we currently know it, we not only have to devise methodically sound ways and means to analyse and understand the manifold and growing number of interesting specimens of this language, but we also have to get a better idea of the richness and the structure of the lexicon. This would allow us to define the range of possible words which a certain root could develop into and therefore define the range of words a single character could represent. The ways to achieve this are unspectacular, but long-standing and well tested, namely (a) to examine the rules governing derivation in Ancient Chinese and to chart individual words with respect to their position

\(^7\) Gassmann 2005:238. Cf. also Xún Zǐ 6.9; Knoblock, 1988 1:225. The translation here supersedes all my earlier attempts.

in derivational processes,\(^9\) (b) to lay open the syntacto-semantic framework of words, especially verbs, and (c) to assemble the inherent elements of the meaning of a word by analysing indicative contexts in which they have been used in the source texts.

2. Sinological blind alleys

Before turning to the task of describing the words represented by the character \(\text{dé}\) 德 according to the methods laid out above, it may help to glance at the major blind alleys of Chinese lexicography in order to prove the superiority of the former methods, on the one hand, and to disqualify the latter, on the other. Translator's introductions to their translations often touch upon such semantic problems, and they turn out to be a rich source of traditional lexicological erudition. Richard Wilhelm, the prolific and influential translator of many important ancient Chinese texts, renders the opening lines of the \(\text{Đạo Đế Jing}\) in the following way:

\[
\text{E 2} \quad \text{道可道,非常道;名可名,非常名.}
\]

\[
dào kě dào fēi cháng dào; míng kě míng fēi cháng míng.
\]

Der Sinn, der sich aussprechen lässt, ist nicht der ewige Sinn. Der Name, der sich nennen lässt, ist nicht der ewige Name.\(^10\)

In the introduction, he accounts for his translation of \(dào\) 道 as follows:

“[Die Übertragung] geschah im Anschluss an die Stelle in Faust I, wo Faust vom Osterspaziergang zurückkehrt, sich an die Übersetzung des Neuen Testaments macht und die Anfangswörter des Johannesevangeliums u. a. mit: 'Im Anfang war der «Sinn»' wiederzugeben versucht. Es scheint das die Übersetzung zu sein, die dem chinesischen ‘Dau’ in seinen verschiedenen Bedeutungen am meisten gerecht wird.”\(^11\)

Even if Wilhelm were intuitively correct in his rendering of (one of the words pronounced) \(dào\), we are not one single step nearer to a scientifically argued understanding of the meaning(s). Moreover, this “method” in no way limits or defines the considerable range of equivalents that can be, and in fact have


\(^{10}\) Lǎo Zì 1, Wilhelm, Richard: Lao-Tse, Tao Te King, Düsseldorf, Köln: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1972 (Lizenzausgabe für Buchklub Ex Libris Zürich); p. 41.

\(^{11}\) Wilhelm 1972:24–25. In paraphrase: “[The translation of \(dào\)] is inspired by the passage in Faust I [by Goethe], when Faust returns from his Easter walk, sets about translating the New Testament, and tests various renderings for the beginning of the Gospel according to John, among them: ‘In the beginning was the «mind».’ This seems to be the translation that would most comprehensively cover the various meanings of the Chinese ‘Dau’.” It is evident that the translation ‘mind’ adds a further level of complexity to the translational problems.
been, postulated. A more recent, highly intriguing example (1990) for this special “method” for the definition of the meaning of words and concepts, is presented in the account by Victor H. Mair, describing how he diligently went about searching for an adequate rendering of dé 德. In order to enable the reader to appreciate his arguments (and those to be presented later in this paper), we shall list the main equivalents furnished by two (character-based) dictionaries:

德  (charismatische) Kraft, Charisma, Tugend; Güte; Fähigkeit, Qualität; zu schätzen wissen, dankbar anerkennen; gewogen sein, lieben

德 919 k-l. [...] virtue, virtuous (Shī); quality, nature (Tso); character, disposition (Shu) [...] Mair describes the process leading to his rendering of dé as follows:

Once I assumed the task of creating an entirely fresh translation of the Tao Te Ching, I became preoccupied with endless details, such as how to convey the meaning of the second word in the title. I spent two full months trying to arrive at a satisfactory translation of te. Walking through the woods, riding on the train, buying groceries, chopping wood – the elusive notion of te was always on my mind. The final choice of “integrity” is based on a thorough etymological study of the word, together with a careful consideration of each of its forty-four occurrences in the text. In certain instances perhaps another word such as “self,” “character,” “personality,” “virtue,” “charisma,” or “power” might have been more befitting. But “integrity” is the only word that seems plausible throughout. By “integrity,” I mean the totality of an individual including his or her moral stance, whether good or bad.

The “thorough etymological study” just mentioned is summarized as follows:

Te was pronounced approximately dugh during the early Chou period (about 1100 to 600 B.C.). The meanings its conveys in texts from that era are “character,” “[good or bad] intentions,” “quality,” “disposition,” “personality,” “personhood,” “personal strength,” and “worth.” There is a very close correlation between these meanings and words deriving from Proto-Indo-European dhugh (to be fit, of use, proper; acceptable; achieve). And there is a whole series of words derived from the related Teutonic verbal root dugan. These are Old High

12 Cf. note 3, above.
German *tugan*, Middle High German *tugen*, and modern German *taugen*, all of which mean “to be good, fit, of use.” There is another cognate group of words relating to modern English “doughty” (meaning worthy, valiant, stouthearted) that also contribute to our understanding of *te*. They are Middle English *doughti*, *dohti*, or *dühti* (valiant), which goes back to late Old English *dohtig* and earlier Old English *dyhtig* (also “valiant”).

As it is used in the *Tao Te Ching*, *te* signifies the personal qualities or strengths of the individual, one’s personhood. *Te* is determined by the sum total of one’s actions, good an bad. Therefore it is possible to speak of “cultivating one’s *te*.” Like *karma*, *te* is the moral weight of a person, which may be either positive or negative. In short, *te* is what you are.16

This purported study and its presuppositions create numerous problems. Mair declares that “whether seeking the right English word for *te* or coping with unusual Chinese graphs that were not to be found in any dictionary, [his] paramount guide has been historical linguistics” (p. xiv), but he fails to explain why certain *Indo-European* etymologies are particularly predisposed to shed light on the meaning of *dé*, and, if this should arguably turn out to be the case, *how* they do so. The asserted link between the presumed ancient Chinese pronunciation *dugh* and the Proto-Indo-European *dhugh* is highly speculative. The interesting examples from Old and Middle High German as well as Old, Middle and modern English notwithstanding, the signification of *dé* in the *Dào Dé Jīng* remains as uncertain as before. Moreover, not a single excerpt from the *Dào Dé Jīng* with a sufficient context is presented (which, I agree, is no easy undertaking), and the necessary syntactic analyses are completely neglected. Finally, no arguments are presented why one ought to reasonably assume that, wherever it appears, the character 德 represents the same word (‘‘integrity’ is the only word that seems plausible throughout’’). This precondition makes no sense, and it alone is sufficient to discard the whole method and to qualify the travails of Mair as, in effect, “untauglich”, i.e. of no good use.17

A second, specifically sinological (and traditionally Chinese) method of analyzing meanings must be commented on, as it unfortunately consolidates basic misunderstandings about the relationship between words and writing.

---

16  Mair 1990:134–135. For fairness sake, it has to be noted that Mair is uncritically following the lead of Tsung-tung Chang, as, for example, voiced in the *Sino-Platonic Papers*, Nr. 7 (January 1988).

17   Readers may question the wisdom of, or necessity for, exposing these blatant shortcomings and thereby giving them (and their source) more prominence than they deserve. The reason why I nevertheless choose to do so is that these passages and the “method” presented therein not only can serve as a case study and condensed version of what not to do when dealing with lexicological questions, but also as a protest and warning against the myopia of publishers who help to disseminate and consolidate such nonsense.
This method builds on the epigraphical analysis of archaic characters, thus developing a kind of etymology of the writing of the characters involved. It focusses on a highly seductive property of Chinese characters, i.e. the alleged pictographic origin. However, the recurrent claim that it leads to immediate and obvious semantic information is not only hard to substantiate, but presumably also impossible to prove. A revealing example for this kind of approach is published in an article by Ellen Marie Chen, who presents the following analysis of dé:

The character te 德 is composed of three elements: an element meaning to go, to move or to act; a second element meaning heart or mind; and a third element meaning the eye or to look. This last element has not been interpreted uniformly. According to Kuo Mo-jo […] this third element means chih 直 (straight, not curved or crooked), thus te means a correct or honest state of mind. […] te according to Kuo Mo-jo connotes (honest) man’s overcoming (unpredictable) heaven. This interpretation may be descriptive of the emergent rationalism in the late Chou period, but it goes directly against the teaching of the Tao Te Ching. According to the Tao Te Ching, nature is peaceful and harmonious. […] Even when we accept the third element in the character te in the more literal sense as the eye or looking, we are still faced with difficulties. Te in the Tao Te Ching stands for the original perfection of nature, when nature ist yet closed within itself and unconscious of distinctions. The eye, on the other hand, stands for the opening of consciousness. […] In my opinion, not enough attention has been paid to the significance of the first element, meaning movement, in the over-all interpretation of the character te (sic! RHG). If we subordinate the third and second elements, seeing and heart respectively, to the first element, movement, the meaning of te becomes immediately clear. Te is the state when the eye is turned inward to the kernel of things, thus it discovers and follows the inner rhythm of things. […] Te is Tao’s Manifestation as Nature.18

The assertion that Chinese characters can, and are to be, decomposed into their elements like a rebus or picture-puzzle is, unfortunately, often reinforced by the many highly popular pseudo-etymological explanations. A critic of this “method” passes judgement in unmistakable terms:

The interpretation of characters through their graphic form is often hampered by the absence of objective criteria: what can ensure that we will perceive the real meaning of a pictogram? Therefore this method, except in some simple cases, can have only limited significance.19

---


19 Kryukov, Mikhail Vasil’evich, “Symbols of Power and Communication in Pre-Confucian China (On the Anthropology of “de”): Preliminary Assumptions”. Bulletin of the School
Moreover, Chen in her character-based etymological study tries to define the meaning of an unknown, or insufficiently known, word by relating it to another difficult word, which is itself imperfectly understood (e.g. dào). Finally, it becomes apparent that the extant, received meanings of a word, which have been consolidated by certain traditions and especially by their comments on certain passages, present influential prejudicial notions that are hard to ignore and that severely hamper the unbiased search for the historic meaning and for a historically contextualized, synchronic interpretation of texts.20

In summary, we come to the conclusion that the methods presented in this section do not merit being qualified as state-of-the-art methods for investigating into the meaning of words. They are neither based on sound theoretical assumptions nor on evidence verifiable within the framework of inter-subjective procedures.

3. Reconstructing the meaning of words represented by 徳

Let us now turn to the task of reconstructing the meaning of central words represented by the character 徳. The problems of method in the field of syntax are comparatively small, as there are many suitable models among theories based on structuralist thought. Compared to these, the task in the field of semantics is considerably more daunting. As a rule, it is not too complicated a procedure to fix the class of a word or to describe the relationship between various derivational forms. But to grasp the core meaning of a word that is the root word of a derivational sequence, is a much more demanding job – and we often have to perceive and admit that the core meanings of important words are imperfectly understood and that their treatment in dictionaries is inadequate. There is clearly no need to call to mind the repercussions of this situation with regards to the understanding and study of major texts in the field of sinology, as well as to the malinformed and potentially harmful conclusions drawn by colleagues in other disciplines when they only have access to (bad) translations.

---

20 It is important to stress that these remarks are in no way directed against the relevance of received meanings in the study of texts. However, these (later) meanings, if at all, are to be explained by referring back to more original stages in the history of the text and its words, and not the other way round, i.e. the reconstruction of historical meanings should not be principally based on later developments.
The heuristic method adopted here and to be presented now is based on the following two assumptions: (a) It is not possible to describe, understand, or define words divested of their context. (b) If these contexts are sufficiently unambiguous, those features of our minds and of our own competence as native speakers which are manifest in many natural languages and probably exist as universals can without doubt help us to ascertain the appropriate meaning(s).²¹

The following analysis and reflections draw on evidence extracted from the entire body of passages containing the character 德 in the Hán Fēi Zǐ 韓非子. However, and for obvious reasons, only a small illustrative selection shall be presented. I shall begin with a few passages which, in parts, are paraphrased to highlight the essential elements and in which for the moment the central word remains transcribed. This procedure serves to illustrate that sufficient context and our own native linguistic and situational knowlege and experience are necessary and fairly dependable elements when (re)constructing meanings. The first episode:

E 3  Jìn attacked the principality of Xíng. The Huán-patriarch of Qí thought of rescuing it. The minor of the Bào-lineage said: “It is too early to do so. Qí cannot gain from it so long Jìn has not exhausted itself. What’s more: merit [gained] by supporting [a principality merely] in danger does not equal the amount of dé [to be gained] by saving [a] doomed [principality] (且夫持危之功，不如存亡之德大). Sire! Wait with going to the rescue. [...]” The Huán-patriarch postponed helping Xíng. ²²

In this excerpt, the word dé is undeniably used in the context of power politics. That Qí as lord of the covenants and hegemonic power could be morally or ethically obliged to swiftly give relief to the principality of Xíng and to its inhabitants is not a matter for consideration in the advice offered by the minor of the Bào-lineage (and Squire Fēi of the Hán-lineage 韓非 does not seem to be troubled by it).

²¹ Summarizing previous interpretations, Vassili Kryukov stresses the necessity for context-sensitive analysis. He notes: “The insufficiency of all these interpretations is inevitable since they are confined to graphical and lexical analysis of a word taken out of context. However, de exists not in a void but in an entire linguo-cultural space. De is not an isolated term but a cultural symbol inseparable from other similar symbols.” Op.cit. p. 325.

Coming to terms with dé 德

The second episode:

E 4 In Wèi, there was an elderly rú-scholar who considered the Lord of Jǐ-yáng to be incompetent. One of the lord’s retainers had a personal grudge against the scholar. Taking advantage of this, he assaulted the old scholar and killed him, thus making it (= this deed) into a dé for the Lord of Jǐ-yáng (因攻老儒殺之,以德於濟陽君). He said: “Because he considered you, Sire, to be incompetent, your servant therefore killed him for you.” Accordingly, the Lord of Jǐ-yáng did not investigate the case and even rewarded him.24

In this excerpt, the word dé is used in the context of a hideous assassination, which with regard to the facts is clearly to be judged as criminal and despicable, but which, on the contrary, leads to a reward.

The third episode:

E 5 The younger brother of the king of Chǔ was in Qin, but Qin refused to let him go home. A courtier of Chǔ suggested asking Jin to act as intermediary. Provided with a valuable present the courtier travelled to Jin, where he called on Minor-Xiàng and submitted Chǔ’s request. Minor-Xiàng accepted the present, showed it to the Ping-patriarch of Jin and said: “This will permit us to build a wall at Hú-qiū. As long as Qin and Chǔ are quarrelling, the former will not dare to protest against our building the wall. Should Qin protest, we shall say: ‘Let the younger brother go home on our behalf, and we shall refrain from building the wall.’ If Qin lets him out of the country, this would allow us to thereby dé Chǔ; if he is not let out, then this would be taking hate to the end (彼如出之,可以德荊;彼不出,是卒惡也).” The patriarch started building a wall at Hú-qiū and informed the patriarch of Qin: ‘Let the younger brother go home on our behalf, and we shall refrain from building the wall.’ Qin thereupon let him leave the country. The king of Chǔ was greatly pleased and presented Jin with one hundred yì-units of pure metall.25

In this excerpt, the word dé is again clearly used in the context of power politics. From these three episodes with their sufficiently explicit contexts we can now construe the following preliminary approximation to the meanings

---
23 德 evidently writes a verb. Taking it as a V2 ‘X dé-5 Y’, the presence of yú 於 would call for a passive interpretation, i.e. the retainer (Y) was dé-d by the Lord (X). This clearly does not fit the context. Taking dé as a causative derivation (V3) ‘X makes Y into a dé for Z’ (or: ‘X dé-s Y for Z’), we not only explain the presence of the marker yú 以 (=Y) but also show that yú marks the indirect object (=Z). If the yú were missing here (cf. E 5), we would have an instance of the normal V2: ‘(the retainer) by this (yú) dé-d the Lord of Ji-yáng.’
of the words written with the character 德. The passages from the Hán Fēi Zǐ are quite unambiguous in one respect: in none of the contexts can the ways of acting and behaving be positively termed ‘virtuous’. And in two of the passages the character 德 does not represent the usual noun. The fact that in two passages 德 represents a bivalent verb (i.e. with nouns in the subject and the object position) indicates that we are not dealing with a stative verb, but rather with *dynamic* or *relational* verbs – which again is hardly in favour of the received understanding in terms of ‘virtuousness’ or ‘virtue’.

In the following key passage, which I therefore give in full translation, Squire Fēi of the Hán-lineage pairs dé with another fundamental term in his thinking, namely with xíng, which as a noun generally denotes ‘punishment’, as a verb ‘to punish’. In the following passage, however, we also have prominent instances of these same characters writing nouns denoting the ability or power to punish or to dé:

E 6 明主之所導制其臣者二柄而已矣。二柄者刑德也。何謂刑德? 曰: 殺戮之謂刑, 慶賞之謂德。為人臣者畏誅而歸其利矣。故: 人主自用其刑德, 則群臣畏其威而歸其利矣。[...今人主 [... 聽其臣而行其賞罰, 則一國之人皆畏其臣而易其君矣。此人主失刑德之患也。[...]

The means whereby the insightful chief leads and controls his ministers are two ‘handles’ only. The two handles are the power to punish and to dé (二柄者刑德也). What do ‘the power to punish’ and ‘the power to dé’ mean? (何謂刑德) I say: To kill somebody or to have him executed is the meaning of ‘to punish’, and to make somebody happy or to reward him is the meaning of ‘dé’ (慶賞之謂德). Whoever acts as minister for an important person fears execution or penalties and regards felicitations or rewards as beneficial. Consequently, if the chief of important persons himself implements his power to punish and to dé (故人主自用其刑德), the body of ministers will fear his authority and apply themselves to his advantage. [...] If now [the chief] [...] effects rewards and penalties only

26 The absence of such defining contexts renders it virtually impossible to base such first-hand semantic investigations solely or mainly on the Dào Dé Jīng.

27 For a description of this category of nouns, cf. Gassmann 2005:238–239, 242 and note 6 above. In certain sentences, the common understanding of these words, in my opinion, does not do justice to the thrust of the text. My main objection is that the ministers do not arrogate actual punishments or obligations (which, within certain limits, they are empowered to mete out by dint of their mandates) but rather the supreme power to act in these respects or to delegate such actions (as the text says, they do not want to take the cue but to give the cue). The variation in the translational equivalents is thus not, and cannot be, only based on more or less simple grammatical considerations but mirrors the complexity of the text and the arguments presented.
Coming to terms with dé 德

after taking the cue from his ministers, then all the important persons of this one country will fear its ministers and exchange its lord, retain its ministers and remove its lord. These are the calamities that [befall a country] when the chief of important persons loses the power to punish or to dé (此人主失刑德之患也). [...] To be the chief of important persons is to be the one who controls the ministers with the power to punish and the power to dé (人主者以刑德制臣者也). If now the lord over important persons relinquishes his powers to punish or to dé and lets the ministers exercise them, the lord would, to the contrary, be controlled by the ministers (今君人者釋其刑德而使臣用之，則君反制於臣矣). Consequently, Cháng from the Tián-lineage above asked for ranks and emoluments and had them conferred upon the body of ministers; below, he increased the size of the dǒu- and the hú-measures and distributed [relief] to the Hundred Clans. This was how the Jiǎn-patriarch lost the power to dé and how Cháng from the Tián-lineage made use of it (此簡公失德而田常用之也). [...] Cháng from the Tián-lineage only made use of the power to dé, and the Jiǎn-patriarch was assassinated (田常徒用德而簡公弑). 28

The fact that the two nouns xíng 刑 and dé 德 are asyndetically coordinated (二柄者刑德也) indicates that they belong to the same superordinate category of ‘handles’, i.e. to the category of power or power instruments. 29 According to the explanation given in this passage, the word written with the character 德 – in analogy to the interpretation of xíng 刑 – denotes ‘the power to make somebody happy or to reward him’. 30 Such power is not an

28 Hán Fēi Zì 7.1. Cf. Liao 1939 1:46–48. From this example on, I shall no longer paraphrase the original and therefore furnish the full Chinese text. It is interesting to note that Squire Xún also creates this connection in a passage in 16.2: 故賞不用而民勸，罰不用而威行. 夫是之謂道德之威 ‘Thus, although rewards are not used, the Mín are stimulated to action and although punishments are not used, power is exerted. Now, [action] of this type is called ‘the authority of leading and obligating’. ’ Cf. Knoblock 1990 II:239.

29 The pairing of nouns in different types of syntactic constructions (of which coordination is only a typical example) is highly relevant to the study of the meaning of nouns. The search for the categorial supernym (here: ‘handle’) is essential and leads to a deeper understanding of the text. If, for instance, we maintain that in the common pair dào dé 道德 the word dé, as shown here, denotes a type of ‘power’, then the word dào would necessarily belong to the same category. This would be the ‘power to lead’. Cf. the pairing in Hán Fēi Zì 25.7: 能立道於往古而垂德於萬世者之謂明主 ‘Any person capable of establishing his power to lead in bygone antiquity and of letting his power of dé descend to 10,000 generations, is to be named ‘insightful chief’. ’ (Cf. Liao 1939 1:265: “Who can trace his Tao to remote antiquity and leave his Teh to the myriad subsequent ages, is called ‘an enlightened sovereign’.”) The pairing of xíng and dé thus evidently weakens the assumption that dé denotes a universal moral concept (‘virtue’) put to political use because it seems difficult to interpret ‘punishment’ as an element of a superordinate ethical category.

30 Liao translates the term with ‘commendation’ (p. I:46), thus furnishing a correct and more general term for the two actions, but missing the actual meaning of the word dé – and also of xíng.
inalienable property of a person; it is therefore transferable, and can – as is
demonstrated in the passage quoted above – certainly be encroached upon
or arrogated. The commonly received understanding of dé, i.e. ‘virtue’, is
hardly relatable to this process of alienation (how would one person – not in
an instrumentalizing sense – use another person’s ‘virtue’ as his own virtue?).
Passage E 5 confirms the relationship between dé and power politics based
on the reading of the three episodes above (E 2 to E 4). By juxtaposing dé
to xíng ‘the power to punish’, the author of the Hán Fēi Zī quite definitely
ranges it among the fundamental instruments of rulership.31 In a passage in
Chapter 21, which is dedicated to commenting on the Dào Dé jīng, we find
the following substantiation of this claim:

E 7 賞罰者邦之利器也. 在君, 則制臣; 在臣, 則勝君. 君見賞, 臣則損之以為德. 君見罰, 臣則益之以為威. 人君見賞而人臣用其勢. 人君見罰, 人臣乘其威. 故曰: “邦之利器, 不可以示人.”
The ‘power to reward’ and the ‘power to penalize’ are the keen implements
of the country. If they are vested in the lord, he controls the ministers; if they
are vested in the ministers, they conquer the lord. If the lord reveals [his
intent to] reward, ministers will then diminish it and turn it into power to dé
(君見賞, 臣則損之以為德); if the lord reveals [his intent to] punish, 
ministers will increase it and turn it into authority. As soon as the lord
over important persons reveals [his intent to] reward, important persons
and ministers will make use of his position of power; as soon as the lord
over important persons reveals [his intent to] punish, important persons
and ministers will ride on his authority. Therefore it is said (by Squire Lǎo):
“As for the keen implements of the country, [the ruler] may not
show them to anybody.”32

The explicit mention of the “keen implements” of the ruler as well as the
clear definition of dé as ‘the power to make somebody happy or to reward
him’ are evidence enough for the fact that the meaning of dé is not identical
with the ‘power to reward’. This is confirmed by the statement above: “If
the lord reveals [his intent to] reward, ministers will then diminish it and
turn it into power to dé”. What do ministers then turn this power into?
At the beginning of Chapter 20 and in a programmatic way, Squire Fēi of
the Hán-lineage establishes an important relationship (and offers a timely
opportunity to introduce a possible equivalent for dé):

31 The two terms dé to xíng are already juxtaposed in early legalist writings, e. g. in Chapter
5 of the Shāng Jūn Shū 商君書: 刑生力, 力生彊, 彊生威, 威生德, 德生於刑. ‘The power to
punish begets physical power, physical power begets the power to compel, the power to
compel begets the power to overawe, the power to overawe begets the power to obligate.
The power to obligate is [in the end] brought forth by the power to punish.’ Cf. J. J. L.
The act of obligating is something [with an] internal [effect]; the act of appropriating is something [with an] external [effect]. [The saying] ‘if the one above obligates [others] and is [himself] not obligated [by others]’ signifies that he is spiritually not tainted by external things. If somebody is spiritually not tainted by external things, the person remains whole. The [statement] ‘the person remains whole’ signifies ‘to obligate [others]’.

The act of obligating is the appropriation of [other] persons. In general, obligations are assembled by making [undesired] acts [of others] disappear, are completed by making the desires [of others] disappear, are pacified by not letting [others] think, and are stabilised by not letting [others] make use [of them].

If [the one above] lets [others] do something or desire something, the power of obligation has no lodging; if the power of obligation has no lodging, [the one above] is not whole. If [the one above] lets [others] make use of it or think about it, he is not stabilised. If [the one above] is not stabilised, he will lack achievements. If he lacks achievements, they will be begot by [his] being under obligation. If [the one above] obligates [others], he lets the power to obligate disappear [in others]; if he does not obligate [others], he lets the power to obligate [him] come into existence. Therefore it is said: “If the one above obligates [others] and is [himself] not obligated [by others], he by this brings the power to obligate into his possession.”

The statement is worth repeating: “The act of obligating is the appropriation of other persons.” The meaning of words written with the character 德
is in every case relatable to a root verb meaning ‘to obligate’, and this is fundamentally confirmed by the way Squire Fēi of the Hán-lineage relates it to the homophonous (paronomastically used) word dé 得 ‘get; acquire’ above and in the following examples. They are excerpted from an episode said to have happened during the premiership of Squire Kǒng 孔子 in Wèi. A follower of his, Squire-Gāo 子皋, was judge, and in this function had to pass a severe sentence on a person, which meant cutting of his feet. When Squire Kǒng and his followers, due to slander, had to escape from Wèi, the footless man, who had become keeper of one of the city gates, saved the life of his judge. Squire-Gāo asked him:

E 9  我何以得此於子.
How did I oblige you, Sir, [to do] this?38

The gate-keeper explained that during the trial he had noted the facial reactions of his judge and that he had thereby realized how the judge had agonized over the sentence and tried to make it more lenient. Thus:

E 10  此臣之所以悦而德公也.
This was the reason why I feel treated kindly by you and have become obligated to you, my Lord.39

To sum up, the linguistic evidence and the contents of the episodes as well as the argumentative passages quoted above clearly confirm the adequacy of the methods implemented here. The root meaning of dé and the various words written with the character 德 can be characterized as follows:

1. The root meaning of dé is ‘to obligate’. It is a central term in the Hán Fēi Zī – in fact, as we shall see in the next section, in many late Zhānguó texts. It is intimately related to power politics, to fundamental actions of the ruler, and to the way ancient Chinese society worked (and to a certain extent still works). It denotes one of the main effects of the power to reward, i.e. indebting somebody and compelling him to repay certain favours received. This kind of indebtedness can be established

38 Hán Fēi Zī 33.7. Cf. Liao 1959 II:67. Literally: ‘Why do I get/deserve this from you, Sir?’ Based on the Zhūzǐ jichéng 諸子集成 version (V:218), we have in E 8 dé 得, in E 9 we find dé 德, which corresponds to the relationship established between the two in E 7. I hesitate to resort to an explanation as graphic variants but due to the (paronomastic) semantic bond between them, such examples seem to be not uncommon.
39 Hán Fēi Zī 33.7. Cf. Liao 1959 II:67. The german translational equivalent offered by U. Unger, namely ‘gewogen sein’ or ‘lieben’ (see p. 96 above), would seem adequate here but it does not carry the full force of ‘obligate’.
Coming to terms with *dé* 德
either by specific acts of rewarding (benefactor and beneficiary) or by certain biological or social constellations (father and son, teacher and pupil). Together with the power to punish it constitutes one of the two most important implements of the ruler or of persons with similar rights.

The usage of words written with the character 德 can be described as follows:  

40 *dé* is the establishment of a dependency between two parties, the obligee and the obligor. It is important to note that *dé* is not born out of a moral or ethical principle uniquely residing in the obligee (which would be characteristic of a virtue). The obligee is free to act, and he can choose how to act – i.e. he himself is in no way obligated to take either the first or this or that step.  

41 The anecdotes suggest that *dé* often results from opportunities and constellations that present themselves; the more methodical passages in the Hán Fēi Zǐ show that it can also be put to systematic and instrumental use, especially in the context of ruling or as a diplomatic stratagem. *dé* does not refer to circumscribed duties such as those to be discharged within the framework of contracted or “natural” services in dyadic relationships (e.g. ruler and minister or father and son, which would be designated with the term shì 事). It often refers to obligations going beyond the duties dictated by a specific social role and exceeding the correlated, commonly accepted norms and therefore also qualifies as supernym for all kinds of social and cultural obligations (like, e.g., rén 仁 or yì 義, cf. the chapter on the Liù Dé 六德 below). *dé* may be termed active and independent, shì reflexive and interdependent. The former is not necessarily preconceived, defined or predictable, the latter is. The act of obligating is not restricted to persons in superior hierarchical positions; it functions equally well as a means for those below to obligate those above. It can render a position of structural weakness (e.g. of the minister versus his ruler) into a position of strength. Cleverly employed, it can elicit desired types of response or behaviour. The ends are basically practical and not necessarily judged in a moral or ethical framework. The creation or imposition of an obligation is not necessarily a moral act, but it creates a socially accepted debt. A major difference between the “Confucian” and the “Legalist” instrumentalization of *dé* is certainly the type of government or rulership to be achieved, i.e. the ends – especially the acceptance of government by the Mín:

---

40 The description of the pragmatic and semantic conditions of usage follows the ideas and methods proposed by Ernst Leisi, *Der Wortinhalt. Seine Struktur im Deutschen und Englischen*. Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1967.

41 This marks *dé* as supernym for all kinds of social and cultural obligations.
To appropriate the empire, there is a guideline: if he appropriates its Mín, he will have appropriated the empire. To appropriate its Mín, there is a guideline: if he appropriates their hearts, he will have appropriated the Mín. […] The way the Mín home in on a humane [ruler] is equivalent to the way water [naturally] runs to lowlying parts or to the way wild animals head for open spaces. […] Now if there were one fond of humaneness among the rulers in the empire, then all the feudal lords would be already driving the Mín to him. Even if they would want to let true kingship disappear, they would in the end not be permitted to succeed.42

The failure to honour an obligation may, but does not necessarily, give rise to various consequences (application of force, loss of confidence, disapproval, deterioration of mutual relationships, etc.), the failure to fulfil duties usually incurs punishment. The force that drives the (ancient) Chinese (and members of other East Asian cultures) to honour obligations (and to fulfil duties) is the feeling of shame, and the strongest sanction possible is to bring shame on another person. The following statement by Squire Mèng (apart from being a beautiful example of a homographic riddle, cf. E 1) is pertinent proof of the attention paid to this basic emotion:

E 12 孟子曰: 「人不可以無恥。無恥之恥，無恥矣。」孟子曰: 「恥之於人大矣。為機變之巧者無所用恥焉。不恥不若人，何若人有？」

Squire Mèng said: “Men may under no circumstances be allowed to let the ability to feel shame disappear. If one causes the ability to feel shame of those who feel shame to disappear, then shame will indeed have been made to disappear.”43 Squire Mèng said: “Among men, the status of the feeling of shame is something important indeed. Whoever practices craftiness that excites him to be fickle annihilates something in himself


43 Mèng Zǐ 7A.6. Cf. Lau 1984, II:265: “Mencius said, ‘A man must not be without shame, for the shame of being without shame is shamelessness indeed.’” This translation is not only syntactically defective but also fails to do justice to the complexity of the notion of ‘shame’, as can be seen in good English dictionaries, e. g. Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (10th edition, 1997): “shame 1a: a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming or impropriety b: the susceptibility to such an emotion 2: a condition of humiliating disgrace or disrepute 3a: something that brings censure or reproach b: a cause of feeling shame.” In German, the difference between ‘Schande’ and ‘Scham’ is to be heeded.
Coming to terms with dé 德

for which the feeling of shame is used. If one is not ashamed of not coming near to behaving like a true man, what kind of an impetus will he ever have to come near to behaving like a true man?”

The vicinity of ‘obligation’ and ‘shame’ is clearly indicated by Confucius in the Lùn Yǔ:

E 13 子曰: 道之以政, 齊之以刑, 民免而無恥. 道之以德, 齊之以禮, 有恥且格.
Squire [Kǒng] said: “If [a ruler] leads the Mín by governmental correctives and if he creates a balance to them by punishments, they will duck and lack the feeling of shame. If he leads them by obligations and if he creates a balance to them by ritual behaviour, this will then create the feeling of shame and moreover standard behaviour [in them].”

The fact that obligations, in the last resort, necessitate a feeling of shame clearly shows that political realism (of the “amoral” type Squire Hán Fēi proposes) is bound to lead to conflicts if it only relies on the force of obligations. Even this system presupposes the functioning of a minimum of moral feelings and cannot afford to completely negate their worth.

2. The reconstructed meaning of dé fits in well with the general line of argument in the Hán Fēi Zì. Time and again, the Squire Fēi of the Hán-lineage makes it clear that he does not trust emotionally (e.g. ài 愛 ‘love’) or morally (e.g. rén 仁 ‘humaneness’) based values, especially as to their regulatory or disciplinary capacities. This alone could be reason enough to suspect that for him dé in the sense of ‘virtue’ (invalidated here) would belong to this very group of words denoting individual or personalized attitudes which generally lead, or can lead, to socially intractable types of behaviour.

3. The examples discussed above furnish the following overview of words written with the character 德:

(a) A medio-passive verb with two argument positions: x feels indebted to y; x feels under an obligation to y; x becomes obligated to y (cf. E 10: ‘This was the reason why I feel treated kindly by you and have become obligated to you, my Lord (此臣之所以悅而德公也)’. The occurrence of yuè 悅 as a parallel to dé 德 with the shared object

---

44 Mèng Zǐ 7A.7. Cf. D.C. Lau, Mencius, II:265: “Mencius said, ‘Great is the use of shame to man. He who indulges in craftiness has no use for shame. If a man is not ashamed of being inferior to other men, how will he ever become their equal?’

gōng 公 denoting the reason or source for the emotion expressed (kind feeling, feeling of obligation) shows that dé 德 belongs to the group of emotive verbs. 

(b) A causative verb with three argument positions: x by way of y obligates z; x by way of y causes z to be indebted (cf. E 4: ‘Taking advantage of this, he assaulted the old scholar and killed him, thus making it (= this deed) into a dé for the Lord of Ji-yáng 因攻老儒殺之,以德於濟陽君’. The marker yú 於 of the indirect object is not always present, such as in E 5: ‘If Qin lets him out of the country, this would allow us to thereby impose an obligation on Chú (彼如出之,可以德荊)’. In more literal wordings, the meaning could be rendered as x makes y into an obligation for z or x imposes y as obligation on z.

(c) A derived noun: the power or right to obligate, the act of obligating (derived from verb b; cf. E 6: ‘The two handles are the power to punish and the power to oblige 二柄者刑德也’). Expressions like Zhōu dé 周德 ‘the Zhōu-dynasty’s power to obligate’ belong to this line of interpretation, for this is the political reason why the power of the Zhōu diminished – not their “virtue”.

(d) A derived noun: the state of being obligated or indebted; obligation (derived from verb a).

4. The xiéshēng-series GSR 919 set up in Bernhard Karlgren’s Grammata serica with the root meanings ‘to plant’, ‘to erect’ and ‘to establish’ are basically compatible with the meanings of the word written with 德. This is conclusively confirmed by the following example, where, in a play on the synonymy of other members of the series such as zhí 稲 (919e) or zhī 稲 (919b), this root meaning is clearly evoked:

E 14 孔子曰: “善為吏者樹德; 不能為吏者樹怨.[...]”

Squire Kǒng said: “Whoever excels in acting as an official implants obligations (樹德); whoever is not capable of acting as an official implants resentment.”

5. With these results I am not asserting that the same words and meaning are to be found in all extant ancient texts. This has to await a more comprehensive study. What I shall, and do, assert is that these results


Coming to terms with dé 德

are valid for most late Zhànguó texts. Three of them, including central passages of the Dào Dé Jīng, we shall now scan for corresponding proofs.49

4. dé in other Late Zhànguó texts

4.1. The Zhàn Guó Cè 戰國策

The Zhàn Guó Cè is concerned with the use of intrigue as a strategy of power politics. The anecdotes represent incidents from the histories of various states of the Zhànguó-period and are in most cases self-explanatory, i.e. they furnish enough content and context to be able to safely construe the meaning of the main words.50 The text is therefore not only clearly not “virtue-based” but without doubt also an ideal testing ground with a view to consolidating the results of the analysis of the Hán Fēi Zì, especially examples E 2 to E 4. A character-scan based on the Hong Kong Concordance comes up with the suprising number of over 80 occurrences (compared to 117 – including the numerous Lǎo Zǐ-quotations – in the Hán Fēi Zì).51 In

49 Many outstanding sinologists have (more or less unsuccessfully) “wrestled” with the meaning of words written with the character 德. First and foremost, Vassili Kryukov ought to be mentioned (op.cit., see note 19 above). Although he is explicitly aware of the various methodological pitfalls and therefore quite penetrating in his criticism of the corresponding shortcomings of other attempts, the “linguo-cultural” context (see note 21 above) of his material from the Shǎng and Zhōu periods (mostly short inscriptions on bronzes and on oracle bones) seems to have constricted his view to a basically religious interpretation and thus to have prevented him from pondering the broader socio-political implications. His attempt to interpret dé in relation to the concept of mana is therefore not convincing, and despite the perorations on the “symbolic context”, it is revealing that he fails to come up with an adequate translational equivalent (pp. 329–333). Other attempts that have found a certain amount of attention (e. g. Arthur Waley, The Analects of Confucius, London: George Allan& Unwin, 1938; Peter A. Boodberg, “The Semasiology of Some Primary Confucian Concepts.” Philosophy East and West, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Jan., 1953), pp. 317–332; Donald Munro, The Concept of Man in Early China, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969; David Nivison, “Royal ‘Virtue’ in Shang Oracle Inscriptions,” Early China, vol. 4, 1978–1979, pp. 52–55) suffer from one, the other, or several, of the graver shortcomings mentioned by Kryukov, and the proposed translations ranging from ‘magical power’ (mana) to ‘energy’, ‘character’, and ‘moral perfection’ (‘indarrectitude’ in Boodberg’s creation) and often qualified with an epithetical “something like” are not really endowed with the power of the “right word” leading to an enlightened understanding of important source texts.


51 A Concordance to the Zhànguó Cè 戰國策逐字索引. Hong Kong, Commercial Press: 1992 (The ICS Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series of the Institute of Chinese Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong). The numbering of the passages, which differs from that adopted by J. I. Crump, as well as the Chinese version, follow the concordance.
the following restricted but fair selection, I basically follow the translation of James I. Crump (especially where the rendering of the central word is concerned) but change the transcription to Pinyin and adapt the naming conventions (cf. note 22). The first episode:

E 15 東周與西周戰，韓救西周。為東周謂韓王曰：“西周者故天子之國也。多名器重寶，案兵而勿出，可以德東周。西周之寶可盡矣。”

East and West Zhōu were at war. Hán was about to rescue West Zhōu when someone spoke to the king of Hán on behalf of East Zhōu: “West Zhōu is the country of the Son of Heaven and it is rich in famous treasures. Hold back your troops and do not send them forth – you will put East Zhōu in your debt (可以德東周) and be able to empty the treasures of West Zhōu.”

In this excerpt, the word dé is rendered by Crump as ‘to put somebody in debt’ – and this clearly in a political sense with no ethical undertones or restraints. In defence of the context-based methodological approach set forth here, it is perhaps appropriate to note that Crump establishes the meaning of dé in this and the following examples without any explanatory footnote or lexicographical comment, and against accepted lexicographical knowledge, but by simply and conclusively inferring it from the context.

The second episode:

E 16 東周與西周爭，西周欲和於楚、韓。齊明謂東周君曰：“臣恐西周之與楚、韓寶令之為己求地於東周也。不如謂楚、韓曰：‘西周之欲入寶，持二端。今東周之兵不急西周，西周之寶不入楚、韓。楚、韓欲得寶，且趣我攻西周。’西周寶出，是我為楚、韓取寶以德之也。西周弱矣”

When East and West Zhōu were at war, West Zhōu hoped to ally herself to Chǔ and Hán. Míng from the Qí-lineage said to the ruler of East Zhōu: “I am afraid that West Zhōu will use her wealth to bribe Chǔ and Hán to help her get land from East Zhōu. It would be best to say the following to Chǔ and Hán: ‘Here are two conditions governing West Zhōu’s desire to give you treasure. At the moment East Zhōu’s troops are not threatening West Zhōu so no West Zhōu treasure enters Chǔ and Hán. If you wish to get your treasure you should encourage us to attack West Zhōu.’ Then if West Zhōu does give them of her wealth we shall have got it for them. They will feel obliged to us (是我為楚、韓取寶以德之也) and West Zhōu will be weakened in the process.”

In this excerpt, the word dé is rendered by Crump as ‘to feel obliged to somebody’; the context is political and involves bribes and the threat of attacks.

The third episode:

E 17 魏惠王起境內眾，將太子申而攻齊，客謂公子理之傳曰：“何不令公子泣王太后，止太子之行? 事成，則樹德；不成，則為王矣。[...]”

The Huì-King of Wèi mustered his people and put the heir apparent, Shēn, at their head to attack Qi. A retainer said to the tutor of the prince Lǐ: “Why do you not instruct the prince to go weeping to the king and queen pleading with them to stop the heir and this expedition. If the heir succeeds, the prince will be favoured by him (樹德); if he fails the prince will become king. […]”

In this excerpt, the word dé is rendered by Crump as ‘to favour somebody’. The expression shù dé 樹德 is also used in E 10 above. Instead of ‘to be favoured’, which is fairly close to the root meaning reconstructed above but also implies other senses, I would therefore more closely render it as ‘to implant an obligation’.

The fourth episode:

E 18 宋人因遂舉兵入趙境，而圍一城焉。梁王甚說，曰：“宋人助我攻矣。”趙王亦說，曰：“宋人止於此矣。”故兵退難解，德施於梁而無怨於趙。[...] Sòng forces were raised and crossed the Zhào boundary to surround a town there. The king of Liáng was happy and said: “The Sòng forces are aiding my attack.” The king of Zhào was also happy and said: “The Sòng forces will stop there.” So troops were retired, the difficulty solved, obligation was placed upon Liáng (德施於梁), Zhào’s anger was avoided. […]55

In this excerpt, the word dé is rendered by Crump as ‘to place an obligation on somebody’.

The fifth and last passage:

E 19 故文王果收功於呂尚，卒擅天下而身立為帝王。即使文王疏呂望而弗與深言。是周無天子之德，而文、武無與成其王也。

Thereafter the Wén-King gained great merit by employing Shàng from the Lǚ-lineage and in the end acquired all under heaven and became emperor. Now if the Wén-King had kept aloof from Wàng from the Lǚ-lineage and exchanged no profound words with him, the Zhōu-lineage would never have had the power to produce a Son of Heaven, nor would the Wén-King or the Wǔ-King have become kings.56

In this excerpt, the word dé is rendered by Crump as ‘power’. The word written with the character 德 is clearly the head noun of a genitive

construction, but the expression 天子之德, according to my grammatical experience, should rather be translated as ‘the power to obligate of a Son of Heaven’. This understanding hinges on the statement preceding this excerpt, namely that having delivered excellent advice to the Wén-king, Shàng from the Lû-lineage “was straightway made Grand Tutor and rode back in his [i.e. the Wén-king’s] chariot”. This appointment and the honours offered remind us of the definition found in the Hán Fēi Zǐ (E 5): 殺戮之謂刑, 慶賞之謂德. 為人臣者畏誅罰而利慶賞. ‘To kill somebody or to have him executed is the meaning of ‘to punish’, and to make somebody happy or to reward him [my emphasis] is the meaning of ‘to obligate’. Whoever acts as minister for an important person fears execution or penalties and regards felicitations or rewards as beneficial.’ By generously and appropriately rewarding Shàng from the Lû-lineage for his excellent advice, the Wén-king secures his future services, i.e. he places an obligation on him – and thus obviously proves his power to obligate. To catch these implications, the entire passage should therefore be rendered as follows:

Therefore the Wén-King reaped merit from Shàng from the Lû-lineage and in the end acquired the empire and became the ancestor king of a lineage. Now supposing the Wén-King had kept aloof from Wàng from the Lû-lineage and had refused to exchanged profound words with him, this would have been [a sign that] the Zhōu-lineage lacked the power to obligate of a Son of Heaven, and that neither the Wén-King nor the Wǔ-King would have had anyone whom to achieve their kingship with.

From these five passages and their interpretation, the root meaning of the words written with the character 德 can be considered as fundamentally consolidated. This is in most cases supported by J. I. Crump’s original translations, which are clearly root words or synonyms within the semantic field of obligation: ‘to put somebody in debt’ (E 11); ‘to feel obliged to somebody’ (E 12); ‘to favour somebody’ (E 13); and ‘to place an obligation on somebody’ (E 14). Only in E 15 is there a difference (power vs. the power to obligate), owing to the strength of the derivational arguments put forth here. The two texts, the Hán Fēi Zǐ and the Zhàn Guó Cè, in no place support an understanding of the root meaning of words written with the character 德 issuing from the field of ‘virtuousness’.

4.2. The Lào Zì 老子

In the Hán Fēi Zǐ and in the received Dào Dé Jīng, as shall be shown in the following, we have ample illustration of the dictum ‘noblesse oblige’, albeit not with the same reflexive vectorial direction as in Europe (nobility creating an obligation for the noble), but mostly the other way round (the noble creating obligations). That the two thinkers, Squire Fēi of the Hán-lineage
Coming to terms with dé 德

and Squire Lǎo 老子, were in ancient China also considered as intimately related, can be based not only on the fact that the former commented on the text of the latter (Chapters 20 and 21), but also on the fact that the two of them are dealt with by Simâ Qián 司馬遷 in the same biographical chapter of the Shǐ Jì 史記 (Chapter 63: 老子韓非子).

Before entering into a more detailed discussion of the words written with the character 德 in the Dào Dé Jīng, it is certainly necessary to decide upon the category of texts that we, in principle, should assign it to. The Hán Fēi Zǐ clearly belongs to the field of “political thinking” – but does the Dào Dé Jīng also bear the characteristic marks of this category? A brief look at the expression in the title, i.e. dào dé 道德, not only offers an opportunity to put a derivational rule into practice but also leads, I believe, to a justifiable categorization of the text. The following passage from the Xún Zǐ will serve this purpose:

Learning – where should one begin and where should one end? [I] say: As far as the [numerical] sequence [of learning] is concerned, one should start with the recitation of the canonical texts57 and conclude with the reading of the [texts on] ritual.58 As far as the purpose [of learning] is concerned, it is at first to make [somebody into] a servant59 and in the end to make [him] a sage. If uprightness is accumulated and exertions are carried on for a long time, then one is admitted. Learning is something that does not finish before life’s end has been reached. Consequently, the [individual] sequence of learning comes to an end. But as for its [general] purpose, it is something that must never, even for an instant, be set aside. To undertake it is to behave like a human

---

57 It is to be assumed that Squire Xún only counts the four texts mentioned here as belonging to the canon: Shū 書 (or Shàng Shū 尚書), Shī 詩, Yuè 樂 (no longer extant) und Chūn Qiū 春秋. The Yì (Book of Changes) is not included. For an introduction into these canonical texts, cf. Michael Nylan, The Five “Confucian” Classics. New Haven und London: Yale University Press, 2001.

58 The term lǐ 礼 presumably refers to several texts that dealt with questions of correct ritual behaviour – among them surely also the compendium later known under the name Yì Lǐ 儀禮. Squire Xún seems to take these texts as a unit belonging to the canonical texts and to clearly grant them a special position. Vgl. Nylan 2001:168 (The Three Rites Canons).

59 The word shì 士 has two (related) meanings: (a) It denotes the lowest social stratum, later known as scholars etc.; (b) it denotes a person who serves in a function in various types of public or private administration, i. e. a (public) servant. In the latter case it is alternatively written 仕 and refers to all strata of society with a function in administration below the ruler (feudal lord or king).
being; to neglect it is to behave like a wild beast. Consequently, what [is to be learned from] the Documents are the records of governing and serving, [from] the Odes the [places] where the voices that hit the mark stop, [and from] the [texts on] ritual the great duties of being an exemplary model and the basic rules [for creating] categories. Accordingly, as soon as [the process of] learning reaches the [texts on] ritual, it comes to its end. Now, [learning] of this type is called ‘the ridge-pole of leading and obligating’ (道德).

In this passage, we find a plethora of highly revealing verbal signals indicating beyond serious doubt that the contents have to do with activities related to ruling and administrating. The list of keywords is impressive: xué 學 primarily denotes learning for civil or administrative service and should not to be interpreted as denoting studies in the sense of the humanistic ideal; shì 士 refers to those serving either in public or private service; shèng rén 聖人 is (still) a clear reference to kingship and rulership; etc. The expression dào dé 道德, finally, is an asyndetically coordinated pair of nouns, which means that they both must belong to the same category, or, with other words, that they are subordinate terms of the same superordinate term. This is demonstrated in E 5: ‘To kill somebody or to have him executed is the meaning of ‘to punish’, and to make somebody happy or to reward him is the meaning of ‘to obligate’ (殺戮之謂刑, 慶賞之謂德).’ The verbs ‘to kill’ and ‘to execute’ are subordinate terms of ‘to punish’, the verbs ‘to make happy’ and ‘to reward’ are subordinate terms of ‘to obligate’. And the two terms

60 The function of the pronoun zhě 者 in the expression Shū zhě 書者 (as in those following, e.g. Shī zhě 詩者 or lǐ zhě 禮者) is that of the substitute for the head noun in a genitive construction. The most likely underlying reference noun appears to be ‘learning’ or something connected with it (cf. the summarizing sentence: ‘Accordingly, as soon as [the process of] learning reaches the [texts on] ritual, it comes to its end.’), and based on the categorial nature of the noun phrase in the predicate most probably the contents, i.e. what one learns from the texts mentioned.


63 The expression zhōng (4th tone) shēng 中聲 should, in my opinion, be understood in relationship to an important function of the Odes. These were put to use in diplomatic encounters and served to convey coded questions and answers. Whoever has learnt how to use them in this way, hits the right tone or gives proper voice to an issue.

64 Xún Zī I.8. Cf. John Knoblock, 1988 I:139–140. Note that in the following sentence the Chūn Qiū 春秋 is also mentioned, which underscores the use of these texts as learning materials within the governmental sphere.

65 Cf. Lì Jì I.8, where many of the activities related to a certain age bracket are connected with public service. I believe that the “humanistic” extension of this term (to denote something like “Bildung”) does not yet apply in the period when these texts were authored.

66 The fact that the Xún Zī uses the term dào dé 道德 in 13 instances and in the meanings established here shows that it clearly belongs to the group of Late Zhànguó texts displaying a similarity in terminology.
Coming to terms with dé 德

‘power to punish’ and ‘power to obligate’ are subordinate terms of ‘handle’ (二柄者刑德也). Therefore, if dé 德, in a certain context, is established as the verbal noun ‘obligating’ (derived from the verb ‘to obligate’), then dào 道 must also be interpreted as a verbal noun, i.e. a noun denoting ‘leading’, which would derive from the verb ‘to lead’ (cf. also note 29 above). If dé 德 is established as the noun ‘the power to obligate’, then the partner noun dào 道 should also be taken as denoting ‘the power to lead’. Abiding by this syntacto-semantic rule (which also extends to constructions parallelizing words in the same function and category of meaning), it appears difficult to follow the traditional interpretation of dào 道 as ‘way’ and dé 德 as ‘virtue’ as the two of them can hardly be subsumed under any sensible superordinate term.

Having thus sufficiently established that a text bearing the title Dào Dé Jīng 道德經 may be counted among a group of texts concerned with the rules of true rulership, we can also posit that the Dào Dé Jīng alias Lǎo Zǐ and the Hán Fēi Zǐ most probably belong to the same line of thought (the commentaries in the Hán Fēi Zǐ being proof of this) and that the character 德 should write words with the meanings reconstructed here. In the received Lǎo Zǐ, the character 德 figures in the following sixteen chapters: 10, 21, 23, 28, 38, 41, 49, 51, 54, 59, 60, 63, 65, 68, and 79. Excerpts from six of these chapters are explicitly commented on in the Hán Fēi Zǐ, namely from chapters 38, 41, 54, 59, 60, and 63, and in three of these the expression wú wéi 無為 also appears, namely in 10, 38, and 63.

Analysing the words written with the character 德 and verifying their respective meanings in the Dào Dé Jīng is a difficult task – for various reasons. On the one hand, there are, in the mean time, several diverging versions of a number of chapters, on the other hand, the given context, if any, is mostly too short and without sufficient salient features, so that their may be a considerable margin regarding the certainty of results. As for the following two chapters, these restrictions, however, are only of minimal impact:

If the one above obligates [others] and is [himself] not obligated [by others], he by this brings the power to obligate into his possession. If the one below is obligated and does not regard his obligations as

67 Cf. the corresponding corpora found in the excavations at Mǎwángduī 馬王堆 and Guòdiàn 郭店.
improper, he by this lets [his] power to obligate disappear. If the one above obligates [others], he extinguishes actions [not legitimized by obligations], but [also] extinguishes non-acting [upon obligations]. If the one below is obligated, he acts upon it, but [also] lets non-acting [upon unlegitimized obligations] exist. If the one above is humane, he, by practicing it, causes the make-believe to disappear. If the one above is righteous, he, by practicing it, causes the make-believe to exist. If the one above behaves in a ritually correct way, and if when practicing it nobody responds, he throws up his arms and refrains from doing it. Consequently, as soon as the one above fails in leading, he will let it be followed by obligating. As soon as he fails in obligating, he will let it be followed by being humane. As soon as he fails in being humane, he will let it be followed by being righteous. And as soon as he fails in being righteous, he will let it be followed by behaving in a ritually correct way. Now, one who behaves in a ritually correct way – the leader in the diluting and disordering of loyal and trustworthy behaviour; one who knows in advance – the starting point in the embellishing and stupidifying of leadership. Because of this, the great man resides in the powerful spots [of leading] and does not stay in its weak spots, he resides in its core and does not stay in its embellishments. Consequently, he stays clear of the latter and chooses the former.68

As for these two passages from the Lǎo Zǐ, one could justifiably object that the fact that they were commented on by Squire Fēi of the Hán-lineage would of course guarantee that the meanings coincided and that we were
Coming to terms with dé 德

simply moving in a vicious circle. Therefore, such passages might not serve as real proof. In order to counter this incrimination it is therefore important to show that in passages not commented on the reconstructed meanings are well-founded, rational, and at least not improbable or excluded. In my opinion, the following chapters satisfy these demands:

E 23 道, 生之; 德, 畜之; 物, 形之; 勢, 成之. 是以萬物莫不尊道而貴德. 道之尊, 德之貴. 夫莫之命而常自然. 故: 道, 生之; 德, 畜之; 長之育之; 亭之毒之; 養之覆之. 生而不有, 為而不恃, 長而不宰. 是謂玄德.
When someone leads, he gives life to something; when he obligates, he domesticates it; when he treats it as a creature, he gives it a form; when he influences it, he brings it to completion. Because of this, not one of the myriad creatures does not revere leadership and respect obligating. Whoever leads is revered, whoever obligates is respected. Now, without anyone decreeing it, this becomes customary and happens by itself. As a consequence, when someone leads, he gives life to something; when he obligates, he nourishes it; he lets it grow and nurtures it; he regulates it and directs it; he sustains it and shelters it. He begets something, but does not take possession of it; he acts for its benefit, but does not make it dependent; he acts the elder, but does not preside over it. This is called ‘the dark power to obligate’.70

E 24 古之善為道者非以明民, 將以愚之. 民之難治以其智多. 故: 以智治國之賊, 不以智治國之福. 知此兩者亦稽式. 常知稽式, 是謂玄德. 玄德深矣、遠矣! 與物反矣. 然, 後乃至大順.
Whoever excelled in practicing leadership in antiquity took it to be a mistake to thereby enlighten the Mín but rather used it to render them torpid. The Mín are difficult to rule because their ingeniousness is so considerable. Consequently, to rule a principality by ingeniousness will make the principality proceed to mutilation, not to rule a principality by ingeniousness will make the principality proceed to good fortune. Whoever understands these two associations will also accord with the [proper] pattern. To consistently know how to accord with the [proper] pattern, this is called ‘the dark power to obligate’. The dark power to obligate is profound and far-reaching! It allows reciprocation by the creatures. As soon as this is done, it leads to great complaisance.71

E 25 為無為, 事無事, 味無味. 大小多少, 報怨以德. 圖難於其易, 為大於其細. 天下難事必作於易, 天下大事必作於細. 是以聖人終不為大, 故能成其大. 夫輕諾必寡信. 多易必多難. 是以聖人猶難之, 故終無難矣.
[The ruler] should pursue the extinction of actions [not legitimized by obligations], he should be concerned with the dissolution of services [not legitimized by obligations], and he should relish the extinction of tastes.

He should [by obligating] make the small big, make the few many, and repay resentment. He should plan the difficult when it is at an easy stage, and he should pursue the great when it is at a insignificant scale. Difficult services of the empire must arise from easy ones, important services of the empire must arise from insignificant ones. Because of this, the sage Rén in the end does not ‘do’ the great and therefore he is able to achieve his great things. Now, if he makes light of promises, he will certainly fall short on confidence. If he multiplies what is easy, he will certainly multiply difficulties. Because of this, the sage Rén still finds it difficult and therefore he in the end will have let difficulties disappear.\(^72\)

When [somebody] harmonizes great resentments, he will undoubtedly cause a rest of resentment to exist. How can this be considered as making good? Because of this, the sage Rén holds the left-hand tallies, but he does not demand payment from others. Whoever has the power to obligate, inherits tallies; whoever lacks the power to obligate, inherits tithes. Leadership according to the principles of heaven lets the near relatives disappear and constantly grants excellence to others.\(^73\)

If the sage Rén were without a constant mind, he would take the mind of the Hundred Clans as [his] mind. If, in the case of somebody who is considered excellent [by them], I consider him excellent, and if, in the case of somebody who is not considered excellent [by them], I nevertheless consider him excellent, I cause excellence to be an obligation. If, in the case of somebody who is considered reliable [by them], I consider him reliable, and if, in the case of somebody who is not considered reliable [by them], I nevertheless consider him reliable, I cause reliableness to be an obligation. If the sage Rén were to rely on the empire, he would run the empire shrivelling with fear and let his mind become muddy. The Hundred Clans are all affected by their ears and eyes. The sage Rén treats them all as children.\(^74\)

Translating these chapters in their entirety and with all the hitches they present is, in my opinion, absolutely essential to prove that the meaning established here really works in the larger context (I sincerely apologize to those who are already convinced and may be becoming slightly bored). Having tested all passages, i.e. not only those presented here or commented


Coming to terms with dé 德

on in the Hán Fēi Zǐ, I should like to draw the reader’s attention to certain elements that do not figure in the Hán Fēi Zǐ, but which are prominent in the Lǎo Zǐ and might seem difficult to fit into the new semantic framework. This is the case with certain metaphors, such as the valley or ravine, the female, and the infant child. How are they related to the new meaning of dé? Do they illuminate the picture or do they make it less intelligible? Let us look at the following chapters:

E 28 知其雄, 守其雌, 為天下谿. 為天下谿, 常德不離, 復歸於嬰兒. 知其白, 守其黑, 為天下式. 為天下式, 常德不忒, 復歸於無極. 知其榮, 守其辱, 為天下谷. 為天下谷, 常德乃足, 復歸於樸. 樸散, 則為器. 聖人用之, 則為官長. 故: 大制不割.

If one understands the male side of something and retains the female side of it, one turns into a ravine for the empire. If one turns into a ravine for the empire, one perpetualizes obligations, does not part from them, and returns again to the state of an infant child. If one understands the white part of something and retains the black part of it, one turns into a gauge for the empire. If one turns into a gauge for the empire, one perpetualizes obligations, is not inconsistent, and returns again to the limitless. If one understands the honourable part of something and retains the shameful part of it, one then turns into a valley for the empire. If one turns into a valley for the empire, one perpetualizes obligations, regards them then as sufficient, and returns again to the uncarved block. When the uncarved block is shattered, it turns into vessels. When the sage Rén makes use of them, he turns into the head of the officials. Therefore, the great cutting does not sever.75


If somebody holds the fill of the power to obligate, he is comparable to a new-born babe: poisonous insects will not sting it, ferocious animals will not pounce on it, predatory birds will not swoop down on it. Its bones are weak and its sinews supple, but its grip is firm. It does not understand the union of the male and the female, but its penis is erect. This is [because its] semen is at its peak. It howls all day but does not become hoarse. This is [because its] tuning is at its peak. To know about tuning is called ‘being constant’. To know about being constant is called ‘being insightful’. To increase the capacity for procreation is called ‘being auspicious’. When the heart directs the qi-energies, this is called ‘being strong’. When a creature is in its thirties and takes one in its seventies as its model, then this is called ‘not being guided’. Not to be guided brings about an early end.76

How do these metaphors help mold the new meaning of dé, what do the valley or ravine, the female, and the infant child contribute or amplify? If we interpret dé ‘to obligate’ basically as a justified expectation or even a contracted right (cf. Lǎo Zì 79, E 17!) to the effect that the obliged person will render a service or fulfil a duty, then we have, in mathematical terms, the description of a vector, i.e. a directed movement or a force issuing from one point. Duties or services are undertaken by an obligor to the benefit of the obligee; from the point of view of the obligee, he exerts a pull on the obligor and thereby attracts the fulfilment of such duties or services. Now, a valley or a ravine – or lowlying places in general – naturally attract water, i.e. they exert a natural, topographically given power of attraction or establish a corresponding power of obligation between the lower (obligee) and the higher (obligor). That the female representatives of certain species in the sphere of living creatures wield a similar power that is hard to oppose – and usually not voluntarily resisted – needs not be detailed. Infant children and babies, finally, are also in the position to exert such a power of obligation. What is more, in this case it is pure power with high potential and well nigh inescapable demands, as they are totally dependent on extensive services such as the providing of food, clothing, protection, etc. To sum up: in all three cases we are dealing with “agents” that are in a position to exert an irresistible power on other players in the game. This power is completely natural, so to speak, and works of its own authority, without the “agent” having to undertake any specific action. And it is precisely this kind of power that a good ruler should be able to wield. These metaphors are therefore at the very core of the meaning of dé and do serve as a highly illustrative amplifications.

We can thus conclude that (a) the words written with the character 德 and the root meaning of dé as reconstructed by analysing passages from the Hán Fēi Zǐ can be clearly identified in the Dào Dé Jīng or Lǎo Zì as well, that (b) the relationship between these two texts, as suggested by the commentaries in the Hán Fēi Zǐ, can be considered as confirmed or even strengthened, and that (c) the two words contained in the title of the Dào Dé Jīng, i.e. dào und dé, identify large parts of this text as veritable political thinking or as a manual for rulers. I would therefore propose to translate the title as The Canonical Text of Leading and Obligating.77

4.3. The Liù Dé 六德

In the Guodian corpus we find a text which has been given the title Liù Dé 六德 (generally translated as Six Virtues, but – for reasons I shall shortly

Coming to terms with dé 德

123

present – more appropriately to be rendered as The Six Powers of Obligation). I am not going to attempt a full translation, but the excerpts should demonstrate that the root meaning of dé also applies in this case. The transcribed and reconstructed text as published by the Jingménshi Bówùguàn editors in their 1998 publication begins with the following question:

E 30 何謂六德? 聖智也; 仁義也; 忠信也.
What does the term 'six powers of obligation' mean? The 'six powers of obligations’ are [the ability] to act like a sage or like a wise person, [the ability] to act like a member of a certain kinship group or like a member of a certain social rank, are [the ability] to act in a loyal or trustworthy way.”78

If we were to interpret dé in the conventional sense of ‘virtue’, we would be forced to construe the listed “virtues” as members of a category. This would be difficult in the case of shèng 聖 and zhì 智, the former normally being understood as ‘sage’, the latter as ‘knowledge, wisdom’. The common denominator for all six terms seems to be a type of behaviour. This assumption is confirmed by the following statements which relate these terms to specific social functions:

E 31 義者君德也; [...] 忠者臣德也; [...] 智者夫德也; [...] 信者婦德也; [...] 聖者父德也; [...] 仁者子德也.
[The ability] to act like a member of a certain social rank is the lord's power to obligate; [...] [the ability] to act in a loyal way is the minister’s power to obligate; [...] [the ability] to act like a wise person is the husband's power to obligate; [...] [the ability] to act in a trustworthy way is the wife's power to obligate; [...] [the ability] to act like a sage is the father's power to obligate; [...] [the ability] to act act like a member of a certain kinship group is the son's power to obligate.79

The six behavioural patterns are grouped into three well-known dyads: lord (jūn 君) and minister (chén 臣), husband (fū 夫) and wife (fù 婦), father (fù 父) and son (zǐ 子). These three dyads are also related to specific complementary behavioural norms in other texts, the most influential list being that of the (Five) Patterns of Social Behaviour wǔ lùn 五倫 or rén lùn 人倫 as proposed in the Mèng Zǐ:

E 32 父子有親, 君臣有義, 夫婦有別, 長幼有序, 朋友有信.
Father and son should let the closeness of relatives exist; lord and

78 郭店楚墓竹簡 Guōdiàn Chǔ mù zhújiǎn (Bamboo Slips from the Chǔ Tombs at Guōdiàn).
Edited by (cf. Jingménshi Bówùguàn) 荊門市博物館, Běijīng: Wénwù, 1998; 六德, p. 69 (slip 1); p. 187 (line 1). It suffices to categorize the terms 聖, 智, 仁, 忠 and 信 as “abilities”; my understanding of them will probably be dealt with in a future study.
79 六德, p. 70 (slips 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23); p. 187 (lines 12, 14, 15, 16, 16/17), p. 188 (line 1).
Robert H. Gassmann

minister should let the behaviour becoming their social rank exist;
husband and wife should let the distinction [of responsibilities] exist;
elder and younger people should let the observance of correct precedence exist;
senior and junior friends should let trustworthy behaviour exist.80

That the Liù Dé text is focusing on specific behavioural patterns is confirmed by a further statement, which has a familiar ring to it:

E 33 故: 夫夫, 妻婦, 父父, 子子, 君君, 臣臣. 六者各行其職 [...] 也.
Therefore: the husband acts as a husband [should], the wife as a wife, the father as a father, the son as a son, the lord as a lord, and the minister as a minister. Each of the six [types] practices its [specific] duties.81

Having sufficiently established that the Liù Dé text is discussing behavioural patterns, the question still remains, how behaviour can be understood as an obligation or even a power to obligate. The link can be established as follows: The assumption of, or the entrustment with, a specific social role calls for the person to act in the way prescribed by the role (e.g. fù fù 父父 ‘a father acts as a father should’).82 Such a role (e.g. fù 父 ‘father’) is based on, and dependent on, a specific dyadic relationship, i.e. it presupposes a partner role (e.g. a son zǐ 子). The fulfillment of one’s role constitutes an obligation for the partner role, i.e. if the father acts as a proper father, the dyadic partner, the son, shall, and must, feel indebted to act as a proper son. Behaviour of a socially sanctioned type does therefore not simply elicit a reaction (which could be anything from arbitrary to adequate), it imposes an obligation to react with the socially sanctioned type of behaviour as characteristic for the partner role in the dyad. Behaviour of a certain type thus undoubtedly exerts a specific power, namely that of eliciting a circumscribed complementary type of behaviour.

The translation of dé by ‘power of obligation’ (E 26) is explicitly supported by the Liù Dé text. There is a sequence of three statements which all end on the key term néng 能 ‘ability’. For example, the first statement:

E 34 作禮樂, 制刑法, 敎此民[?]使之有向也, 非聖智者莫之能也.
It is the creating of ritual and music, the regulating of punishments and laws, and the teaching of these to the Mín [?], causing them to have a direction, that is something nobody were able [to do], if he were not someone with [the ability] to act like a sage or like a wise person.83

81 六德, slips 23–24, p. 70; p. 188 (line 1). The locus classicus that immediately comes to mind is, of course, Lùn Yǔ 12.11.
82 This type of derivation (noun denoting person > verb denoting characteristic behaviour) also explains the first two types in E 26 above: shèng shèng 聖聖 ‘the sage acts as a sage should’ and zhì zhì 智智 ‘the wise acts as a wise should’.
83 六德, slips 2–3, p. 69; p. 187 (lines 2–3).
5. Conclusion

Semantics and lexicography are Cinderellas of sinology – not only regarding the way they are actually dealt with, but also regarding their potential. What I am trying to say here is nothing new or revolutionary, but I believe it to be an obligation on Sinologists to take great(er) care when translating basic terms. It is not that there are no pertinent studies of words and terms, that there are no useful dictionaries, but there are, to my knowledge and leaving the burgeoning field of phonology aside, no systematic and large-scale attempts at analysing the basic rules and structures of the ancient Chinese lexicon, especially as far as derivation and semantic fields are concerned. Knowledge of these rules and of accepted methods we can base ourselves on are, in my opinion, of paramount importance when working on our prime task and fundamental problem, namely coming to terms with the texts and their terminology. Doing this type of sinological homework well is clearly also a precondition for fruitful interaction with other fields of knowledge – as in this case, with philosophy and ethics.

Establishing ‘obligation’ as the root meaning of dé not only has the virtue of producing lexicographical benefits. It shows us that already in ancient times there was an elaborate system of social obligations. This type of regulatory system with its most conspicuous modern Chinese counterpart, the guānxi 关系-system, remains dominant through virtually all historical epochs (despite the strong criticism often levelled at it), thus constituting not only one of the major invariables in Chinese cultural and social history but also one of the significant differences when compared to modern European value systems based on the rule of law. And this, finally, unravels the mystery of famous lines such as the following one:

E 35 大學之道在明明德，在親民，在止於至善.
Leadership of [the type] ‘Great Learning’ bases on making clear the obligations of the bright ones, on treating the Mín as near of kin, and on being checked by such who have reached excellence. 84

84 《禮記》43 (《大學》). The expression míng 明 ‘the bright ones’ refers to the ancestors of the zhāolimu 昭穆 system (the ‘illustrious’ and the ‘splendid’). The obligations (dé 德) referred to are both those imposed by Heaven by way of the mandate as well as those imposed by the rulers on others. Due to the structural parallelism with the expressions míng 明 ‘the bright ones’ and mín 民 ‘the Mín’, I interpret zhì shàn 至善 as also referring to a group of persons (i.e. the ‘reachers of excellence’ such as able ministers). Cf. James Legge, Lü Chi. Book of Rites. New York: University Books, 1967; p. II:411 (XXXIX): ‘What the Great Learning teaches, is to illustrate illustrious virtue; to love the people; and to rest in the highest excellence.’ This translation is neither “illustrative”, nor does it illuminate or come to terms with dé.
Virtue ethics in ancient China
Light shed and shadows cast

Lee H. Yearley

1. Preface

Much to some people’s astonishment, interest in virtue ethics grew dramatically among Western philosophers as the twentieth century entered its last decades. That renewed interest, in turn, led other scholars to apply virtue ethics to distant cultures including ancient China. Both these enterprises in time generated, unsurprisingly, criticisms and even serious debates. This story – the story of virtue ethics’ emergence, its application elsewhere, and the critical responses to it – is a fascinating one, and some aspects of it have been well told or analyzed.¹

Other aspects, however, have either received less satisfying treatments or been basically ignored. Included in this last group are several features particularly relevant to China, which illuminate much about both early Chinese ethics and virtue ethics more generally, and in so doing complicate the story. Or so I hope to persuade you.

In pursuing this goal, I begin with a general, discursive treatment of the notion of virtue. I then turn to a more compressed account of some controversial, and therefore especially illuminating, features that distinguish the perspective virtue ethics presents. I end by treating as fundamental a challenge to virtue ethics as I know: the viability of its underlying “organic model”. (A potent version of this model appears in ancient China.) That challenge also points us toward significant questions about the roles both of religion and of literary presentations in any consideration of virtue. (The ancient Chinese case, again, presents us with very illuminating examples.)

My focus, then, is on ancient China, but I think the examination’s import extends beyond just that focus, a situation that leads to one final prefatory note. My inquiry displays a comparativist’s interest in, some

¹ The theoretical and historical work of Bernard Williams has often provided an especially rich locale for debates about both these issues; for a brief but fine account, see Jenkins, 2006.
Virtue ethics in ancient China

would say obsession with, the abstract models and subjects that both arise from and undergird the enterprise of bringing disparate phenomena into relationships. Nevertheless, although I am a card-carrying comparativist – a rarely sighted specimen in the locales I normally inhabit – I undertake few concrete comparisons in this paper. A major reason is, of course, the need both to focus and to avoid recklessly thin generalizations in a piece like this.

Another reason, however, is that my most serious comparative work treats, at its Western pole, the Aristotelian Christian tradition. I can argue at tiresome length that this tradition is a genuine continuation of Greco-Roman antiquity and often a development of it. But it surely also differs in several important ways, and it unquestionably reflects the classical thinkers that medieval intellectuals either knew or thought important; e.g., much Aristotle and little Plato. To employ its often brilliant, if occasionally bizarre, understanding of classical philosophy would be to introduce a third perspective to the comparison that is this volume’s main concern. Let us begin, then, with an account of the basic features of virtue ethics.

2. Characteristics of virtue ethics

In speaking about virtue ethics in general, we do well to begin by underlining that a focus on virtue generates understandable suspicions in many people. Such a focus often seems to be a rhetorical adjunct either to a sentimental voyage back into the past or, far worse, to a dubious political agenda. As an old saying puts it, “When they begin to talk about virtue it’s time to emigrate.”

I begin, therefore, with an account that aims to show the ways in which a focus on virtue is benign, even instructive. Only after that do I turn to the perspective’s more controversial features. Both accounts, incidentally, use as neutral a theoretical terminology as I can, but there are inevitable choices, and mine reflect Western categories – only some of which will be interrogated later.

Virtues are qualities that display some characteristic pattern of desire and motivation, some disposition toward action. They are not simple thoughts that occur and pass: I do not manifest a virtue if I think how compassionate it would be to invite my lonely, foreign visitors to dinner and then say goodbye and usher them out. Nor are they emotional states that pass quickly: feeling acute sympathy for those guests and then saying goodbye also does not manifest the virtue of compassion.  

2 For more detailed discussions about various issues involved in both the idea of virtue and comparisons among them, see Yearley, 1990, especially pp. 6–17, 53–58 and Nussbaum’s
To speak more abstractly, a virtue is an example of human flourishing. It is a permanent addition to the self, part of what makes people who they are, a feature of what we call character. Moreover, there must be some evidence of the presence of what we can call thought and will if a quality is to count as a virtue. A virtue, then, is an inclination to act, desire, and feel that involves the exercise of judgment. The judgments may not be conscious: “to think a little and then act” is an absurd picture of human behavior even if we are talking just about intellectuals. Nevertheless, judgment or thinking occurs. That means in this context that, at minimum, I can elucidate at some point, in some fashion to my self or another person why I did something, why I was generous for example.

Virtuous activity, then, involves choosing specific virtues in light of some justifiable life plan or at least a perspective liable to elucidation in some form. I believe the best kind of human life involves generosity not selfishness, giving not just taking and possessing. I have a general view, and either explanations for it or at least some account of it, that lead me to believe that kind of life is better than one that lacks it. Central, moreover, to the appropriate motivation of truly virtuous action is the desire to manifest or express a valued state. Indeed, as we will see, it is the desire to express valued states that can make more prudential followers of virtue doubt the wisdom of those who aim to express virtues.

Those excellences that people consider exemplary fit within a list of virtues, a ranked list. The list defines what qualities are virtues. The rank whether it is implicit or explicit helps determine in which situations people should manifest one rather than another virtue. It allows a person to know, for example, that being assertive rather than patient, direct rather than ironic, is the correct behavior when you hear your friend being slandered.

Different virtues appear prominently in many lists of virtue, but all virtues can productively be thought of as being corrective, and therefore as resting on a picture of human weakness and need. Virtues correct some difficulty thought to be natural to human beings, some temptation we need resist or some motivation we need to strengthen. Industry, for example, corrects a propensity to idleness and perseverance a tendency to give up before it is necessary to do so.3

response. The unbecoming references to my own work here and elsewhere are made to accommodate those hardy souls who may wish either to read more detailed analyses or to check bibliographies.

3 For a further discussion of the ideas of virtues as corrective, and the related idea that virtues can be divided into inclinational and preservative categories, see Yearley 1990, pp. 14–17.
Recapitulating in abstract, brief form the central elements of this type of ethics before we examine more closely the more radical form is, I think, helpful. One is a concern with character – especially in its most fulfilled and aberrant forms – and therefore those issues about the self’s constituent parts, including the roles of dispositions and of judgments, that follow in the wake of that concern. Another is a capacious definition of the ethical, one that includes an emphasis on the characteristics and cultivation of well and badly lived lives. Still another is a limited group of human excellences and deficiencies that are susceptible to being put into a ranked list, a list that, even if not explicit, informs the choices people make. Last are the various claims and therefore problems, such as that virtues are corrective, that appear when people attempt to grasp the implications of the preceding features and both explore and justify them.

These elements are part of a general type of ethics, virtue ethics, which appears in different forms in various, dissimilar places and times. My judgment that different traditions share these is not, let me stress, a descriptive claim, although it draws on my understanding of several very different virtue traditions. Rather it is a theoretical claim about the necessary characteristics of such a perspective: that is, that it will contain the first three elements and exhibit a concern with the kinds of theoretical issues that inevitably arise from them. I admit that any given tradition will focus on, or just recognize more clearly, some claims and problems while ignoring others. Nevertheless, all will be present. This is a generalization I would not make about our next subject, features of radical forms of virtue ethics.

3. Six features of radical virtue ethics

Virtue ethics, like most ethical perspectives, has more and less radical forms, and I wish to examine six features of the perspective’s starker form. These features help illuminate the fundamental contours of the whole perspective. In so doing, they also highlight the most challenging, and therefore controversial, features of this kind of ethics. Several of these features, finally, also point to the subject we treat in our last section: the differences between perspectives that are continuous with ordinary life and those that are discontinuous with it and the importance of the religious and literary elements of virtue ethics.

First is the affirmation that different ethical and spiritual fulfillments fit into a clear-cut hierarchy in which some are considerably more valuable than others. That notion usually combines with other ideas with which many people today are uneasy. One is that few people can reach the highest stages on the ladder of achieved perfections. Another is that some, perhaps many, people may not even be full-fledged ethical agents and therefore must act in
imperfect ways and exhibit imperfect goods. This can, of course, also imply that many people must be managed, even coerced, if they both are to realize the goals they can and not disrupt the community’s legitimate enterprises.

Second and related is a claim, however explicit, about the need to make a sharp distinction between religious and ordinary virtues. The former draws on a sacred realm, a realm that resists representations in ordinary ways. Moreover, it not only differs from the ordinary realm but also often appears to judge severely its shortcomings. Those people in touch with the sacred realm, then, possess characteristic that not only are better than ordinary characteristics but also display their inadequacies.4

Third is a claim about the centrality of a distinctive kind of consolation, one that, unlike the consolation that appears in most forms of ethics, provides little comfort for decent, well-meaning people. Simply doing or trying to do right to put it simply is not enough to provide people with genuine satisfaction. That, in turn, means ethics and apparent tragedy, or at least ethics and instances of notable failures or comic inappropriateness, not only can co-exist but often do.

Fourth is a strong inclination to highlight the pathological attitudes the more strictly moral features of virtue can breed, in order to help people better weigh the importance of the moral sphere’s obligations against the demands of other spheres (Examples of these pathological attitudes are a tendency to overvalue morally induced self-sacrifice or the punctilious observance of all moral rules). This highlighting reflects a judgment that moral norms need not always trump the norms evident in other spheres of activity. The norms, that is, constituted by the pursuit of beauty, spiritual attainment, enlightened self-interest, or genuine sensual pleasure can, and should at times, trump moral norms.5

Fifth is a judgment about the limited role ordinary rationality plays in the exercise of virtue. The assessment of action has of course a rational dimension, even though there are close links between directives for actions and judgments about the beautiful. Nevertheless, this perspective harbors suspicions about most forms of rational justification in ethics relying instead on, say, the exemplary examples the culture provides. A major reason for the suspicions is a judgment about how easily rational justifications can be made to serve the unreflective self-interest of a person or a group.

---

4 On the distinction between ordinary and religious virtues, see Yearley 2003.
5 For a fuller account of this subject, if in a specific context, see Yearley, forthcoming, “Zhuang zi’s . . .”. Note especially the idea discussed there that laudable traits become pathological when their distinguishing features and thus ordinary tendencies become exaggerated in ways that place them on one end of a continuum that extends from the admirable to the pathological.
Last, is the claim that in ethics the *good person criterion* is necessary: the good person, that is, provides people with the ultimate criterion for deciding what characterizes any instance of human flourishing. (An admittedly circular notion is, therefore, indispensable to ethics). This claim rests on the notion that only the good person possesses the distinctive kind of attention to salient characteristics to make well the often delicate judgments about where a phenomenon fits on the continuum between the admirable and the pathological. A correct response to every situation does exist, then, and it will be manifested in the good person’s judgments and actions. But it can in virtually all cases neither be derived from a rule nor predicted in advance.6

4. Semblances of virtue, expressive virtue, and the role of the heroic

The good person criterion and its implications—the way, for instance, it gathers up crucial elements of almost all the other features—highlights the significance of one matter: The importance of attention to and judgments about both specifics and overarching notions of the good, especially as they affect motivation. These concerns are captured in a set of interlocking ideas that stand at the center of radical virtue ethics: virtues semblances; genuine virtue’s expressive not acquisitive character; and, finally, the role the heroic plays in virtuous activity. Let us, then, turn to these notions to fill out our account.

*Semblances of virtues* are actions that externally resemble the actions of full virtues but that lack important elements they have. With semblances apparently virtuous actions arise from an imperfectly virtuous character. For example, people do a virtuous act, such as helping a suffering person, not for itself but for motives like a desire to curry favor that non-virtuous people would have. Or they choose it not for their own reasons but because of some second hand support such as custom, unexamined authority, or the inertia provided by accepted, routine reactions.7

Fully virtuous activity involves, then, choosing virtue for itself, for the way it contribute to a person’s own sense of integrity. Moreover, it involves choosing it in light of some justifiable life plan or perspective. I do not possess the virtue of generosity unless I act because the best kind of human

---

6 See Yearley, 1993.
7 For examinations of the notion of semblances of virtue, as well as its relationship to counterfeits of virtue, see Yearley, 1990, pp. 17–23, 67–72, 80–81, 109–110. (The actions of the village honest person [xiangyuan] are semblances; see *Lun Yu* 17:13 and *Mengzi* 7b37.)
life involves generosity not selfishness. I possess a semblance of generosity if I act either without any sense of the best possible kind of life or because of some motive or general plan, such as that if I help specific people now they will think well of me or help me later.

Virtuous behavior has, then, not only *acquisitive* but also *expressive* motives. Virtuous people choose a virtuous action not only because it contributes to goods they want to acquire but also because it expresses their conception of the good. This *expressive* component, with it accompanying concern for *integrity* or *intrinsic goodness*, is at the core of what is meant by virtue. The essential feature of expressive virtue, therefore, is the response it contains to one basic question: Why might or even should people embrace an action or ideal, especially one that may endanger them, if they have severe doubts that it will have the kind of effects in the world that they hope it will have?

The answer is that the best kind of life simply demands such activity, and therefore no further questions about its contributions to the agent’s or anyone else’s happiness needs to be raised. Ideas of benefit or use are, then, either unimportant or of less significance than other concerns, and therefore people ought not be fundamentally concerned with the results of their actions. This does not mean such choices are made recklessly; indeed they must be well tempered if they are to be fully expressive. Nevertheless, it is neither the benefits received nor given that provide motivation. Rather, it is the good expressed and the integrity manifested that is the crucial motivating influence.8

This perspective will always seem bizarre to some people. Cautious pursuers of virtues or, more precisely, pursuers of perceived excellences will therefore always doubt the sanity of those lovers of virtue who aim to express virtue and their understanding of integrity. The cautious will correctly see this love and its apparent imprudence as connected to a heroic

---

8 For a more extensive treatment of the distinction between the acquisitive and the expressive, see Yearley 1990, pp. 20–23; that analysis draws on Irwin’s (1977) treatment. If this distinction is seen as simply descriptive then any expressive motivation is acceptable, but in traditional accounts evaluative elements are always prominent; for examples see Yearley 1990, pp. 129–143; 154–168. A muted version of this distinction will, of course, always inform ethical action because, first, we never are sure that our actions will generate the results we desire and, second, we judge that inadequate motives make an agent less likely to act in the desired way. Nevertheless, the uncertainty is much greater if expressive virtues are the subject because the final outcome is and even must be uncertain, and a full knowledge of that uncertainty must inform a person’s motivation. On the importance of integrity, see Hampshire; on the notions of integrity as well as of intrinsic goodness, see especially the theoretical discussion in B. Williams, 2002 and the historical discussion in Williams, 1993, and Williams 2006, pp. 118–137.
ideal. Their informed shock reinforces the centrality to this idea of virtue of the notion of the heroic.

The desire to express a valuable state and the apparent imprudence that often accompanies it displays, then, genuine virtue's link with ideas about the heroic. This remains true even though ideas about the heroic often travel in disreputable, even noxious company, especially when the central trope for the heroic is military action. Indeed, as thinkers like Mengzi and Zhuangzi knew well (and far better than, say, Aristotle), this situation makes identifying the truly heroic a taxing and subtle business.

We can, however, find help in a seemingly odd place: a statement by William James that interestingly enough Wittgenstein found particularly insightful. James said he “held the world to be essentially a theater for heroism. In heroism, we feel, life’s supreme mystery is hidden.” For James and I believe some ancients—including the odd trio of Mengzi, Zhuangzi, and Sophocles—heroes and heroism disclose to us realities understandable in no other way. Heroes disclose such things because they stand between the usually mysterious sacred realm and the manifest but limited truths of normal life. The heroic, then, both uncovers features of higher realities and illuminates the pedestrian character of ordinary activity.

Several features of this perspective are of special importance to us, and they need, given their alien character, to be briefly elucidated. First, heroes may disclose realities we can understand in no other way, but the disclosure they provide is far from direct and clear. It occurs by refraction, by a kind of indirection that means every illumination also involves a veiling or cloaking. This means, as we will examine more fully later, that only literary presentations can capture, or even point toward, what needs to be adequately presented. A refraction that both reveals and conceals demands, that is, a literary presentation.

The higher realities, second, resist or even directly challenge any description of them as “good” in a conventional sense. More precisely, these realities can, if human standards are the measure, be either virtuous or vicious—or some odd mix of each. To be a higher, more powerful, and perhaps even more knowing reality is not, then, automatically to fit within the usual human categories of the “good.”

Finally, the role heroes play, and the disclosures they make, call in question the adequacy of what we can call the “ethicized self”, a notion we will examine more closely later. The implications of the ethicized self are multiple, but they include the linked notions of the primacy of ethical

---

9 James p. 364; for a discussion of the notion of heroic virtues, see Williams, 1993 and Yearley, 1996a, 1998a.
categories and of the constant availability of consolation for the ethically well-intentioned. The perspective heroes display, in contrast, may support human ethical claims but it need not and it may not. That perspective challenges, then, the foundations of the idea that an ethicized self provides a structure that allows us to understand the world well.\textsuperscript{10}

These claims about heroism are dramatic, far-reaching, and of course controversial, and we will return to them. For now, however, I conclude my general account of virtue ethics in order to focus on the serious problems, one in particular, that virtue ethics presents.

5. Problematic features of virtue ethics

The potentially problematic features of virtue ethics are numerous, and they have been pointed out by critics in the ancient and modern worlds in both China and the West. Each, for example, of the six features of radical virtue ethics we discussed earlier is liable to certain obvious criticisms. They range from difficulties about the circular quality of the good person criterion; to an unease or worse about the attitude to rationality; to the, for many people, odious implications of the claims about hierarchy.

Often highlighted, however, are versions of the following three general criticisms. One arises from doubts that the perspective of virtue ethics can include full-blooded ideas of \textit{obligation}, especially those that emphasize the significance of personhood. Another arises from questions about the approach’s ability to capture well the roles that \textit{responsiveness} to different persons and situations play in many traditions, including of course Chinese ones. A last highlights the \textit{apparent conservatism} about accepted ideas and social structures that seems integral to the viewpoint.

Virtue ethics can, I think, treat these challenges with varying degrees of ease. The second, for instance, presents no fundamental problems, given virtue ethics’ understanding of the importance of responsiveness to the salient characteristics of situations. The first, however, may require basic if defensible adjustments in the basic perspective of virtue ethics – an example is Aquinas’s adjustments to Aristotle’s accounts of justice. The last, in contrast, raises substantial questions, as we will see in our penultimate section.

\textsuperscript{10} This explains why it is often best to speak of heroic excellence rather than heroic virtue. Excellence, that is, can be stretched to cover more relevant phenomena than can virtue; for an extended analysis of this point, see Nehamas, 1998 pp. 76–92. The idea of an “ethicized self” has, as we will see, dominated much Western reflection and some Chinese reflection. Indeed, one way to characterize the high tradition in Western philosophy and theology is to say that it argues the only true heroes are those who disclose the significance of the ethical. They therefore also provide the certainty and consolation that accompanies such significance.
I want here, however, to treat another question about this perspective, one different from if not unrelated to these three. It raises difficulties that are at least as basic as they do. Moreover, it points us in some fascinating, if perplexing directions, most notably those that concern the roles of both religion and literature in our thinking about virtue.

The question concerns the adequacy of a basic model in virtue ethics. Ordinary virtue theory rests on, I am even tempted to say depends on, an organic model. In this model, capacities are cultivated in ways that enable them to reach fruition, instances of laudable flourishing. These actualized fruit of an organic development differ from mere capacities or potentialities. They ensure reliability and therefore they also underlie the notion that people have characters we can both depend on and judge.

This organic model involves, then, the nurture of immature potentialities to stable realized forms, and it is both plausible and familiar. In fact, it is so plausible and so familiar that we are unsurprised about either its manifestations in our own life or its appearance in cultures as diverse as ancient China and Greco-Roman antiquity. And yet there are difficulties with even so apparently beguiling a model.

6. The appeal of, and disquiets about, organic models of virtue

The model beguiles us for multiple reasons. It rests on notions of nurture that are easily understandable. It finds reinforcing manifestations in the world of naturally growing things that surrounds us. It provides us with definite guidelines like those that inform the conscientious gardener about, for example, diligently fostering the growth of prized capacities.

Nevertheless, despite our comfort and its apparent appearances in diverse times and places, further reflection may make us doubt that the model adequately reflects important parts of our experience. The reliably courteous behavior of my mature son fits the model well. On reflection, however, the discrete processes of cultivation that produced his courteous behavior seem both to fit and ill fit the model: It fits the time when he was a generally pliable youngster. It ill fits the time when his emerging identity demanded he test most notions of courtesy. Indeed, traits and activities I now find to be most characteristic of and valuable about him fit less well, if at all, with the organic model. Examples include his measured testing as an adolescent of the ideal of courtesy and his later, well-considered decision to become a Chan Buddhist.

Such reminders force us to consider yet again the point of a familiar complaint, voiced so well by Wittgenstein, about the insidious effects on our understanding of two shortcomings. One is an over reliance on an impoverished diet of examples. The other is a tendency to rely too firmly on
delineated conceptual tools, even ones as basic as the notion of dispositions. Keeping these complaints in mind is always important, but it is, I think, especially important when comparative materials are our subject.

These considerations should at minimum alert us to the need to attend to situations in which the ordinary model might disguise or even distort rather than illuminate. That alertness can coexist with the general belief that an organic model provides the context that makes deviations from it intelligible. It informs, for instance, our understanding that even odd kinds of virtue presuppose the minimal results of familiar forms such as a rudimentary shaping or control of the emotions. Our suspicions about the model’s adequacy ought not lead us to deny it entirely, even if we think it lacks the ability to explain well everything that needs explanation.

We need, in fact, to appreciate fully the theoretical power of the organic model. The model informs for good reasons the usual explanations in most virtue ethics of what human virtues are and how they come into being. That is, virtues are dispositions, the products of lengthy processes of habituation that create and maintain them.\footnote{For a more extensive discussion of the model, see Yearley, 1990, pp. 11 and 58–60; for an analysis of different kinds of dispositions, see pp. 106–11.}

More precisely put, the model’s theoretical framework rests on the idea that all relevant processes are best understood in developmental terms that draw on biological ideas. Human nature, that is, is seen as having an innate constitution that manifests itself in processes of growth and culminates in specifiable forms. That fulfillment occurs, however, only if the organism is both uninjured and properly nurtured.

The basic conceptual model is relatively simple. A basic set of capacities are present at birth and their unhindered, nurtured development generates qualities that lead to specifiable actions or characteristic forms. Those in turn provide the standard that allows observers both to determine a being’s nature and to judge whether any specific trait or action represents its nature in normal, exemplary, or defective fashion.

The processes of cultivation usually are most effective and surely are most evident if they occur before a person is reflective enough to choose to acquire the dispositions produced. The exemplary instances of these processes appear in the active rearing of a small child. More complex, but also still understandable in a similar way, are those strict disciplines that people elect to follow when they are mature. A clear instance is the adoption of a regimen that utilizes precise forms of meditation or ritual activity to achieve a specific goal like equanimity.
There are, of course, other forms of cultivation. Another important but quite different form of ethical cultivation appears when a person comes to accept the validity of a theoretical perspective with ethical implications; to accept, that is, a perspective the subject of which is the contours of a well-lived life and the acceptance of which generates a shift in behavior. An example would be a person who comes to believe through reflection that disloyalty to a flawed superior harms the larger community and therefore abandons that kind of disloyal behavior.

This kind of “rational cultivation of virtue” is important both in itself and for comparisons between ancient China and Greco-Roman antiquity. Examining this topic involves, however, a host of subtle, contentious, and well-studied issues about, for instance, the character of argument and the relationships among very different kinds of dispositions. To keep our focus, I will consider the rational cultivation of virtue only in relationship to the organic model. Let us, then, turn to how the organic model appears in ancient Chinese thought.

7. Organic models of cultivation in ancient Chinese texts

The stronghold of organic ideas of cultivation in ancient China appears, of course, to be the Confucian tradition. That tradition surely contains striking instances, ranging from an emphasis on the central role of learning and ritual in the earliest texts to the more abstract formulations of nurture found in later texts. Even there, however, we do not always encounter straightforward organic accounts. The *Lun Yu* presents a complex picture of cultivation, even if one sorts out different strands in the text, with its varying portrayals of Confucius’s own teaching and its diverse comments on failed or imperfect attempts at cultivation.12

12 None of my treatments of specific figures in ancient China cite specific texts; instead I direct people to other of my works that include such citations.

Let me note, even underline, that I understand that all simple descriptions of this period are suspect because in so rich an environment there are powerful cross currents. Indeed, one can even wonder about the appropriateness of the metaphor of cross currents as it takes a brave soul to identify confidentially the basic contours of any single stream. For example, two distinct strands appear in ancient Confucianism — indeed can even appear, as with Mengzi, in the same thinker. In one strand (usually associated with Mengzi), Heaven gives each person a nature, and therefore anyone can become a sage, a fully flourishing, person. In another strand, (associated with Xunzi) past sages best understood Heaven’s plans and provided highly differentiated social forms that need to be followed if humans are to be perfected. In the former the sages are grammarians of human nature; in the latter they are legislators to human beings. In the former virtues like benevolence and righteousness will be highlighted. In the latter virtues like ritual (li) and loyalty will be highlighted.
The *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* do order the varied visions of the *Lun Yu* along organic lines, but even with those texts we find at times a more complicated picture. Saying this is not to deny that *Mengzi*‘s abstract treatment of the four sprouts and their growth is probably the paradigmatic instance in early Confucianism of an organic model. Nor is it to doubt that stories like those about the man of Song’s failed attempts at cultivation both reinforce and deepen that abstract model’s picture.

Nevertheless, the *Mengzi* has surprisingly few coherent examinations of either the character of dispositions or the modes for cultivating them, and one must ask why that occurs. In addition, the *Mengzi* has much material that can lead people – as it did later neo-Confucians – to read the text in terms of a very different model, one in which people discover an ever present reality that defines them.

It is significant, that is, that neo-Confucians replaced an organic model of virtue with what we can label a *discovery* model of virtue. This model contrasts sharply with an organic model because human nature is seen as a permanent set of dispositions that are obscured. People discover, then, what they truly are by overcoming impediments or defilements, such as errant passions or misguided perceptions, and uncovering a higher reality, a true “Self”. This reality transcends but connects with all individual selves and, most important, it contains a permanent set of dispositions that define each individual. I may harbor significant doubts that anything like a discovery model was available, or perhaps even conceivable, at the time the *Mengzi* was written, but most crucial here is the fact that this neo-Confucian reading is not only plausible but also illuminates parts of the text.13

The *Xunzi*, in contrast, presents a coherent and consistent presentation of an organic model. (This remains true even if the realm of craft rather than the realm of nurture often provides key metaphors for the text.) *Xunzi* assumes, that is, that human beings need to develop certain capacities and to control others. Moreover, he is sure that humans can best do that through processes of carefully modulated growth and reinforcement.

Nevertheless, even the *Xunzi* challenges any simple organic model. His concern with obsession (*bi*) is one example, but most notable is his account of ritual’s crucial role in treating both the origins and the ending of human life. Indeed, under one reading, an admittedly controversial one, this account brings *Xunzi*’s general perspective much closer to the

---

13 The issues surrounding my last claim are, of course, substantial; they involve difficult questions about both the role of ontological ideas and comparisons within China. The discovery model, not incidentally, provides theoretical underpinnings that help to explain how the literary cultivation of virtue can operate.
complex picture of the cultivation of virtue we see in other, far different
texts.\textsuperscript{14}

The most notable of these other texts is the *Zhuangzi*, especially if
one restricts that work’s capacious contents to the perspective of the inner
chapters and the few spiritual progeny of that perspective who appear
elsewhere in text. Although the *Zhuangzi* surely employs an organic model
of nurture, it also highlights actualizations, say with skill, that seem to
surpass what an organic processes can produce. Moreover, the text highlights
eruptive or even disruptive occurrences that produce extraordinary changes
in people. Training of an organic sort is surely present, then, but that training
can either couple with or lead to phenomena that differ considerably from
the ordinary results of that kind of training.

The depiction of those elements occurs through literary means, in fact
it seems to demand them. The *Zhuangzi* displays a dazzlingly diffuse set
of literary forms the combination of which provides compelling depictions
of transformations that challenge, even undercut, models of organic
development. Zhuangzi’s literary approach is not absent from other texts: it
not only constantly lurks in texts like the *Lun Yu* or the *Mengzi*, it also even
dominate crucial parts of those texts. Nevertheless, its prominence in the
*Zhuangzi* is striking. That text, in addition, contains a theory of language
that supports the need for such diverse literary forms if one is adequately to
treat both real virtue and the conditions of its production.\textsuperscript{15}

We will return to the role of literary presentations, but for now let us
examine another, if related subject: the character of those transformations
that generate fundamental changes in a person’s overall perspective and
resultant activity. These transformations provide the crucial test for the
organic model, and they do so because they challenge basic ideas that
underlie the model – notably the intertwined notions of dispositions and of
a continuously evolving natural being.

8. Organic models of virtue and fundamental metamorphoses

The transformations in question produce fundamental changes in people’s
overall perspective and the modes of activity that manifest them. The usual
Western term for this phenomenon is “conversion”, and paradigmatic
examples provide the background for the term’s use, especially Christian
examples like St. Paul on the Damascus Road or St. Augustine in the garden.
Nevertheless, terms like *metamorphosis* or transformation have also been

\textsuperscript{14} See Yearley, 1980 for Xunzi’s treatment of *bi*, and my account of Xunzi’s understanding
of these rituals in Yearley, forthcoming, “Xunzi…”.

\textsuperscript{15} See Yearley, 2005.
employed. These terms have the advantage of clearer Chinese analogues (e.g., *hua*) and of less overtly Christian resonances. Indeed, Ovid’s great work, *The Metamorphoses*, can be seen as the West’s exemplary account of such transformations.

The source of many such metamorphoses are fleeting experiences with very distinctive characteristics. These experiences not only disrupt normal processes but they also make impossible any easy return to them. (I find my usual routine almost unendurable after I finally recognize the import of my close friend’s spontaneous, unqualified generosity.) They seem to erupt, moreover, from realms alien to the ordinary world. (I can find nothing in my friend’s or my own character or context that explains either such generosity or my own belated recognition.)

These experiences contain, furthermore, their own unimpeachable authority, at least for the person who has the experience and those people who find that person trustworthy. (I find the value of the generosity displayed so self evident that all my ordinary critical responses are silenced, as are those of the people who respect me.) Finally, the experiences are thought to present new and immensely valuable states and goals. (I find myself facing a world the contours of which have been fundamentally rearranged by the introduction of such generosity.) All these general characteristic, then, define those experiences that generate genuine metamorphoses.

Their exact form and impact, nonetheless, differ greatly. Consider, for instance just how dissimilar are the accounts that we find in St. Paul and St. Augustine, and that the range in Chinese examples is even more substantial. Chinese cases, that is, extend from whatever is depicted when Zhuangzi is about to shoot the mysterious bird to what Xunzi thinks makes necessary elaborate death rituals.

Describing what occurs with and accompanies such occurrences presents, moreover, distinctive difficulties. They rarely fit well within ordinary notions of the useful or their contraries. Some, in fact, completely elude capture by the net of binary distinctions normal language provides. Attempts to explain many of them, furthermore, often seem to demand the use of perplexing notions such as those that surround categories like the “primordial” or the “archaic.” They belie, then, descriptions of human behavior that rely only on the language that organic cultivation provides.16

Moreover, when these experiences generate enduring changes in a person they often produce activities and ideas that challenge the fundamental presuppositions that inform ordinary understandings of life. A few of these,

16 The most sober, respectful, and appropriately perplexed inquiry into such experiences, despite its obvious limitations, remains William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. On the primordial and its role in Xunzi, see Yearley, forthcoming, “Xunzi …”.
often the most deeply perplexing ones, are reserved for only the most accomplished spiritual adepts. A striking example is the rarified form of courage that contains no fear, even though the presence of fear is understood to be a constitutive mark of courageous activity. More commonplace examples include the adoption of ideas about the value a life of voluntary poverty or celibacy in cultures that accept the value of possessing property, of expressing one’s sexuality, and of having children. (These latter examples are not only especially clear but they also have generated significant controversies during some periods in both China and the West.)

Metamorphoses like these are not highlighted in ancient Chinese texts (or even in Greco-Roman philosophical texts) in the way they are in many works from the Christian West. Nevertheless, we do find telling instances in early Chinese texts. At one end of a wide continuum of instances, we have Mengzi’s plain, soberly confident account of the movement from Mozi to Yang Zhu to Confucianism. At the other end, we have the passages that open and virtually close the Zhuangzi’s inner chapters. In chapter one, that is, we encounter the extravagant treatment of a great fish becoming an even greater bird and almost at the end of chapter seven we encounter the treatment of Liezi’s transformation to transgressive simplicity.

These examples and the perspective they point toward seem to raise serious questions about the adequacy of any organic model. Many people have, nevertheless, argued that all basic human transformations, even so-called conversions, are the result of gradual, organically connected shifts over time in dispositions. These shifts, they say, may manifest themselves, especially to the agent, in apparently substantial, sudden changes. But they are, in truth, the result of small changes that have been slowly accumulating.

9. Metamorphoses, the rationale for preserving an organic model, and the role of literary genres

This last approach gains its considerable plausibility from the belief that an organic model and the concept of dispositions must inform any sensible consideration of human affairs. The arguments for this position or, perhaps more precisely, the assumptions that inform it are clear. Each human has a character, a settled set of inclinations and forms of response. That notion, in fact, determines the crucial ability we have, and need, to explain what people are and will do.

Dispositions, in turn, underlie character – and thus all of a person’s actions, attitudes, and thoughts. Dispositions, however, grow only slowly and always

17 For the cases of celibacy and poverty, see Yearley 1998a, for the case of courage, see Yearley, 1990, pp. 136–143, 156–159.
by means of slight shifts. Gradual shifts, as well as close connections with what a person shifts from, must therefore define any process of transformation.

This demand for continuity and the accompanying confidence in philosophy’s ability to discern and explain orderly processes informs, may even underlie, the kind of theoretical inquiry we see practiced at such a high level in Greco-Roman antiquity and, at times, in ancient China. This demand doubtless matches the temperaments of some individuals (Aristotle often being identified as an exemplary case) who are uneasy with dissonance. More, however, than just personal idiosyncrasies are at work.

The demand for continuity relies on and displays the operations of a defensible conception of dispositions of the sort we just discussed. Moreover, it also rests on a compelling theoretical claim: The acceptance of any new perspective depends on a web of previously accepted beliefs and concepts because without them the new perspective could not be seriously entertained or perhaps even understood.

The force of these considerations, and the conceptual context on which they draw, is undeniable. Nevertheless, we must also account for the phenomena that appear in both our own experience and the texts we study. One way to negotiate through this apparent impasse is to take very seriously the idea that different genres, different forms of presentation, may capture, or at least cast light on, different facets of human life. The implications of this idea are of course complex and weighty, but the direction in which it points is clear.¹⁸

If we take seriously what different genres can do, it is to be expected that literary not theoretical approaches will be best able to depict compelling accounts of apparently significant changes. Indeed, the literary approaches best able to do this will often be of a special sort. They will, for instance, contain some narrative drive, or at least component, so that shifts over time can be displayed. Most important, the irreducible complexity and delicate elusiveness of the subject means the optimal approaches will arise from or border on poetic dictions, understanding the poetic, to use shorthand statements from the West, as “a raid on the inexpressible” – T.S. Eliot – or “the impossible made credible” – N.O. Brown.

It is unsurprising, then, that in ancient China the philosophically informed text that most powerfully treats radical changes, the Zhuangzi, is also the text that displays the most literary proficiency. Nor ought we wonder that the parts of the Lun Yu or even Mengzi that are least amenable to

¹⁸ An extensive discussion of these general problems, using Dante and Aquinas as examples, appears in Yearley 2004a. That treatment also examines the ways in which special problems with the theoretical conception of a disposition make necessary literary presentations.
theoretical analysis and most responsive to literary approaches often also concern such radical change. If we are to see significant metamorphoses in people’s virtuous behavior displayed and probed, we must look to texts like the *Zhuangzi* and those parts of other texts that resemble it. Only they will provide adequate representations of such changes and therefore examples that we can examine productively.¹⁹

We must not, of course, force these literary accounts into what can be the Procrustean bed theoretical categories provide. But neither should we ever deny that some version of the organic model and its attendant concepts is both defensible and applicable. The cogency of the dispositional model and the significance of ordinary contexts for understanding make that evident.

Nevertheless, we must also consider the likelihood that three related, perhaps jarring, matters demand our constant consideration. First, we need to remind ourselves continually that a demand for order and coherence may arise from suspect motives. Most notable is a desire to control what William James called the booming, buzzing confusion of experience. The desire to tame that experience can be great, even great enough to be willing to pay the price of precluding the possibility that other transformative forces, including ones from alien realms, operate in human lives.

Second, we need always to consider the possibility that in some cases no more than the most minimal version of continuity may be justifiable. The only continuity present may be one that allows us to find the changes both inhere in a person we recognize and are intelligible in some fashion. We may, moreover, need the special assistance that literary presentations provide to be able both to recognize the continuity and to find it intelligible.

In fact, and third, we must acknowledge that the only way in which some changes will be recognizable and intelligible is through the use of literary means. Literary presentations with their theoretical imprecision, imaginative flights, and continual brushing up against the elusive, ambiguous, and even unsayable may be necessary (The interchanges between Huizi and Zhaungzi

---

¹⁹ On the need for such modes of presentation, see Yearley, 1998b, 2004b, and 2005; for Confucius’s approach to this issue, see Holzman. Those accounts also examine further the difficult subject of whether only these approaches can produce significant versions of such changes in those people who read texts.

Jullien contains an evocative and provocative treatment of important aspects of this subject as it appears in China. An author distant in time and space, if not in viewpoint, from those we are considering here put this point in an exceptional way and wrote poetry and prose that illustrated it: Herman Melville, that is, wrote “For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands, and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth, – even though it be covertly, and by snatches.” Melville, p. 244.
echo this, as does the contrast between the aridity of Aquinas’s accounts of supernatural dispositions and the evocative power of Dante’s presentations of very similar phenomena.)

To take all this seriously is to be led to make a distinction, to use typological labels, between continuous or ameliorative perspectives and discontinuous or non-ameliorative perspectives, the former coupling with the organic model and the latter challenging its adequacy. The former, briefly put, operates within an ordinary framework; it is continuous with but ameliorative of it. The latter breaks from that framework and forgoes the attempt, except indirectly, to ameliorate its problems. Let us then examine more fully the character and implications of this distinction.

10. The character and implications of continuous and discontinuous perspectives, and the role of false fixities

The distinction between continuous or ameliorative perspectives and discontinuous or non-ameliorative perspectives must be understood to be a typological one. It can clarify our thinking but its major aim is to illuminate phenomena. Many features, for instance, of early Confucianism and Daoism can be clarified when we approach them as paradigmatic instances of these respective types, if ones that also contain currents that manifest the opposite type and can produce internal conflicts.

In a continuous or ameliorative perspective people work within the framework normal life provides. In a discontinuous or non-ameliorative perspective, however, they make a substantial break with normal life. Continuous perspectives aim to deepen and extend the best ethical and religious ideas people have. Discontinuous perspectives, on the other hand, view with suspicion any attempt only to build on or fix what is already present. They are also suspicious, therefore, of any attempts to bring comfort or consolation to decent, well-meaning people. They are wary of any perspective that can be said to make the world safe for well-intentioned people.

A continuous perspective applies bandages, if you will, to what are perceived as minor wounds. A discontinuous perspective, in contrast, calls for major surgery. The former, in turn, labels that kind of major surgery mutilation while the latter labels the application of bandages malpractice. These kinds of conflicts, revealingly, fit well with the tensions we discussed earlier between ordinary and radical virtue ethics. They also enable us to examine those characteristics of religion that challenge ordinary ideas of virtue and the organic model they presuppose.

The orientation manifest in a discontinuous perspective is distinguished by a concern with what we can term false fixities. Indeed, that concern underlies two matters of great importance to us. First, it registers an uneasiness with
most schemes of virtue because they rest on models of the self that reflect misleading notions of what is natural and therefore unchangeable. Second, it generates the desire to present true virtues in ways that avoid the grip such models have on ordinary forms of presentation, including those that display the most rigorous kinds of argument. These concerns arise from the attempt to deal with the general criticism, noted earlier, that perspectives in which virtues are central display a remarkable conservatism about accepted ideas and social structures.

Let us, then, turn to examine these matters, focusing initially on several basic claims about models of the self as they appear in virtue ethics. One is the claim that all models of the self are theoretical constructions, edifices made in order to achieve specific goals. Another is the claim that such models utilize false fixities, fixed features of the self that are seen not as theoretical creations but as part of the nature of things.

These claims do not imply that people can invent any model they might happen to want. So-called “natural facts”, such as many features of our biological constitution, constrain us. This remains true even if they are more permeable to interpretation and susceptible to cultivation than many people think, as any familiarity with the results of ascetic activity makes clear. Moreover, current webs of belief constrain people if they are to create plausible models. Those webs provide the structures within which people need to, or even must, think if they are to make sense.

Nevertheless, models of the self distinguish and order phenomena most of which are opaque or inherently disorderly. When evaluating them we rarely either have decisive tests or can find impartially collected evidence that allows us to decide about their correctness. Think, for instance, about the different processes used when we distinguish between our arms and our legs and between our reason and our emotions. The significance of these guiding purposes is made clear by attending to how the distinctions between and the hierarchical arrangement of reason and emotion often match the prevailing social structure and its justifying ideology.

The clearest example of this is probably the traditional Western model of the subordination of desire to reason and the most familiar, and notorious, instance of it occurs in Aristotle. We need not look far, however, to find Chinese counterparts. Some are painfully obvious, such as those that appear in Legalism, others are less prominent, such as in the silences that surround the fate of those in Xunzi who have no access to the rituals or musical performances needed for human fulfillment. Nevertheless, the Aristotelian example is especially clear and pungent, and therefore we will use it to epitomize the idea.

For Aristotle, reason should control the other elements in the self, and it does that if the person is a full human being who has been well formed
by a proper upbringing. Those who lack reason’s control can neither have fully flourishing selves nor lead the society. That unfortunate group includes three kinds of people:

- Those who completely lack the capacity to reason such as natural slaves.
- Those, such as women, who lack the full capacity to reason.
- Those whose capacities were undeveloped by proper upbringing, such as most other people in the society.

Examples like Aristotle’s draw on the fallacy of *false fixity*. Fixed features of the self are seen as part of the nature of things. A natural slave’s inability to reason or a woman’s inability to reason well are features that resemble a heavy object’s tendency to fall if unsupported.

These fixed features cannot be other than they are, and therefore they limit human deliberation. Sensible people, that is, do not attempt to deliberate about what cannot be changed. They think in terms of them, they do not think about them. To ruminate, then, about how to educate slaves or women to reason well is as hapless an enterprise as is ruminating about how to make heavy objects rise by themselves. The important enterprise, rather, is figuring out how best to utilize slaves, woman, or heavy objects.

Human history is, of course, littered with examples of false fixities, ideas that in retrospect we realize did not reflect the nature of things but reflected social ideologies that protected particular ways of life. Our present thinking, of course, is no less liable to being formed by them. Most important here, those people who approach matters from a discontinuous perspective are especially concerned with the false fixities that are present in ordinary ideas about the self and its capacities. These false fixities, they believe, deeply influence notions of virtue. They thereby also generate the conservatism about conventional ideas and social structures that is often criticized as being integral to perspectives in which virtues are central.

That concern, in turn, leads them to focus on how best to present that which differs markedly from such ordinary understandings but can be easily mistaken for them. That focus makes issues of genre, of modes of presentation, particularly important, and it helps explain the form of a text like the *Zhuangzi* or those parts of the *Mengzi* or *Lun Yu* that explore

---

20 B. Williams’ work on the rise and role of the ethicized self is of particular relevance to any inquiry in this area. For a further treatment of the fallacy of false fixities, see Hampshire, pp. 34–36; 57, and Yearley 1998b. A contemporary example may be the prominent model that portrays the self as made up of conflicting desires the strongest combination of which are rightly dominant; it matches a political system founded on interest group liberalism and one version of a free market.
the boundaries of ordinary understanding. Put simply, discontinuous perspectives work on a seemingly paradoxical principle: *We cannot get where we need to go and can go by starting where we are – even though we must start where we are.*

Literary approaches, especially those that draw on the poetic, contain one of the few ways to remain aware of this principle’s paradoxical point and yet not be reduced to silence. This is especially true of those literary approaches that attempt to depict the ways in which heroes illuminate, if indirectly and elusively, the sacred. Indeed, the more such heroes differ from ordinary ideals of heroism – say those evident in military or aristocratic activity – the more such literary approaches are necessary. New, truly different forms of heroism demand, then, the use of the resources literary presentations provide.

Considerations like these lead to two connected subjects: One is the religious features of this perspective. The other is the ways those features find expression both in religious forms and in literary forms, a situation that leads to an especially close relationship between, even a fusing of, the literary and the religious. This relationship or fusing presents a fascinating and important topic, but examining it would lead us not only far afield but also into new territory. I will, therefore, restrict my examination to the religious characteristics of a discontinuous perspective and only touch on the ways in which that topic also points toward the blending of the religious and the literary.

11. Religious features in discontinuous perspective

Any sustained reflection on discontinuous perspectives in the Chinese context leads us to consider more closely the religious elements that may be present in ancient Chinese texts that usually are called philosophical. Most may think, put differently, that a continuous perspective is all we need to examine well the subdued notions of religion that are evident, at times prominent, in many philosophical texts, but I think some features of ancient Chinese texts demand more than just that perspective.

The question of whether we label something “philosophical” or “religious” might seem to be unimportant. The word religious surely can properly refer to a multitude of quite different phenomenon. Moreover, the question of the religious character of phenomena often, we all know, produces answers that illuminate little but the perspective of those who respond to the question. A number of modern discussions about China, for example, reflect the desire to insure that crucial Chinese texts, especially Confucian ones, have none of the unsophisticated or even insidious qualities thought to characterize religion.
Nevertheless, the fragmentary remains of a venerable academic tradition do display a helpful approach. Recognizing that religions can often underlie and justify many features of the ordinary world, this tradition employs the word religion to refer specifically to an orientation that differs from and even judges many features of the ordinary world. That orientation has a dominating interest in certain universal and elemental features of human existence, features that bear on the human desire both to be free from ordinary woe and to face extraordinary woe well.²¹

This approach includes numerous phenomena that lack many of the religious qualities that characterize theistic religions. It will, however, demand the presence of the following four elements, each of which both points toward a discontinuous perspective and appears in the most important ancient Chinese philosophical texts. (I would not, incidentally, make the latter judgment about most of their Greco-Roman counterparts.)

One element is a focus on a sacred realm that is related to but differs from, often differs dramatically from, the ordinary human realm. This realm provides true religious adepts with a perspective from which they can evaluate ordinary activities in ways that most people find perplexing at best and insulting at worst. The *Zhuangzi* offers, of course, multiple instances of this, but many sections of, say, the *Lun Yu* also display it.

The second element concerns those adept’s belief in and presentation of various kinds of empowerment. The “energy” such empowerment produces exceeds what appears in ordinary life. It also underlies any person’s attainment of true flourishing. Finally, it can produce people who surpass the limits of ordinary understanding. An especially accessible example of this empowerment, one the *Zhuangzi* often employs, is skillful activity. The actualized states that result from skillfulness manifest a judgment and effectiveness that exceeds what can be taught, much less produced naturally. Explanations, even descriptions, of these states often utilize notions like the daemonic [*shen*], notions that point to contact with, or even possession by, powers that differ from ordinary human powers.²²

Unlike many kinds of theism – especially those that draw on the Greco-Roman tradition – an exact specification of these first two elements is often thought to be impossible – or even unwise. A sacred agnosticism is, then, employed and often defended. Specifying exactly, that is, how this empowerment operates or how the sacred and human realms generally interact, even how independent they are, is difficult enough to demand either

---

²¹ For a discussion of some of these issues, see Yearley, 2006. A different understanding of religion produces, of course, a different approach. Geertz’s influential description, for example, is at the opposite end of a continuum that includes this orientation.

²² See Yearley, 1996b, especially the distinctions among three kinds of drives.
silence or very figurative language. Such figurative language is believed, moreover, to aid rather than to impede the cultivation of virtue.

Our last element, one reinforced by the demand for imprecision, concerns the ways in which spiritual adepts relate to those traditions (philosophical, religious, and social) of which they are a part. These adepts recognize, that is, both that their traditions contain regenerative powers individuals alone could not produce and that they can also be a source of debilitating false fixities. This recognition leads them, on the one hand, to treasure their traditions and, on the other hand, to be unfailingly sensitive to several constant dangers: those present in false teachings, in misleading authorities, and in the communities that gather around each.

Put in our earlier terms, these adepts must constantly negotiate between the tradition’s distinctive discontinuous features and the tradition’s inclination to tilt toward continuous ideas, practices, and institution. An especially productive way to proceed with those negotiations is to use literary means, especially those that highlight conflicts and the role of sacred agnosticism. The subject is, then, very important, but a full exploration of it will have to await another day.

Our main concern here has been to present and negotiate another kind of conflict. That conflict is between the advantages brought by an approach that relies on virtue ethics and the problems that approach presents. Most notable are the problems that cluster around the ways in which metamorphoses challenge the organic model that underlies most virtue ethics.

Those problems are, of course, real. Nevertheless, they can also lead us to appreciate two matters that can often both elude us and are especially important in our considerations of ancient Chinese texts. One is the need to consider seriously the religious elements in philosophical texts that concern virtue. The other is the necessary role literary forms of presentation may play in treatments of some features of virtue. Only, I think, by attending to both these matters can we understand well what virtue ethics can tell us about China – and ourselves.

Bibliography

Hampshire, Stuart

Holzman, Donald
Irwin, Terence

James, William

Jenkins, Mark

Jullien, Francois

Melville, Herman

Nehamas, Alexander

Nussbaum, Martha

Williams, Bernard

Yearley, Lee H.
Virtue ethics in ancient China


Forthcoming:


Part IV

Greece and Rome
Parrhesy and irony
Plato’s Socrates and the Epicurean tradition

Michael Erler

1. Introduction

‘I would rather speak with the frankness of a natural philosopher, and reveal the things which are expedient to all mankind, even if no one is going to understand me, than assent to the received opinions and reap the adulation lavishly bestowed by the multitude’ (transl. Long/Sedley).

This saying, from the Epicurean Vatican sayings, is remarkable. For it tells us about the Epicurean understanding of philosophical discourse. Epicurus or one of his followers describes himself as a philosopher, who intends to propagate his doctrines to the audience, very much like a seer who reveals his oracles. In doing so, he practices unconditional openness. He does not aim at the consent of his audience using all means available but accepts the possibility that misunderstanding might occur. It might come as a surprise to modern readers to find an Epicurean presenting himself by using religious vocabulary and placing himself in a religious context, for, as is well known, Epicureanism regards itself as an enemy of all kinds of religious superstition, therefore criticizes traditional religious practices and defends a position which one might call deistic in that it denies any influence of the gods on human matters. In addition to that Epicurean language seeks clarity in expression and avoids darkness of expression which is a mark of oracular language. Despite of all this, it could be shown that the Epicurean use of religious parlance is not to be regarded as mere façon de parler, but part of their intention to deal with religious tradition not in order to get

1 I am grateful to Richard King for translating the German version into English. A slightly different German version has been published in R.F. Glei (ed.), Ironie. Griechische und lateinische Fallstudien, Trier 2009, 59–75.
3 Cf. Diog. Laert. 10,13, according to which Epicurus in his work On Rhetoric refers to clarity as the only aim of speaking and writing; on this point see M. Erler: ΕΠΙΘΔΕΥΕΙΝ ΑΣΑΦΕΙΑΝ. Zu PHerc. 1005, in: CErc. 21 (1991) 83–88.
rid of it but to integrate into their own philosophical system anything that appears to fit. In what follows, however, I will not deal with this aspect of the Epicurean text, interesting though it might be. Rather, I will focus on one element of the Epicurean’s self-representation, his claim to be a *parrhêsiastês* dedicated to openness of expression and quite prepared to communicate to his audience all he knows and everything that he thinks is philosophically true and to do this at all costs without regard of what his audience will be able to swallow. This attitude is of interest, because by using the term *parrhêsiazein* to characterize frank speaking, the Epicurean borrows a term which designates a democratic strategy of civic discourse and appropriates it for a philosophical context.

In classical Athens *parrhêsia* ‘frankness’ was used in the political sphere to express the right of free speech of anyone who enjoyed the status of a free Athenian citizen. It was regarded as the foundation of the democratic way of life. Later on, this basically democratic concept shifted from freedom of speech to designating personal candour, it became an integral part of friendship and was regarded as virtue or even as a duty in personal relationships without regard for rank or social status. It was here that the emphasis of social equality gave way to issues like integrity and frankness.

The Epicureans, though, were not the first to apply this democratic concept to philosophy. From the time of Isocrates onwards, or so it is claimed by modern interpreters, philosophers integrated *parrhêsia* as an element of their pedagogical concepts. Indeed Socrates’ role in the history of the concept of *parrhêsia* should not be underestimated. Interpreters, from Foucault’s Berkeley lectures in 1983 onwards, have quoted passages of Plato’s dialogues to show that Socrates as well makes use of this democratic concept and recently it even has been suggested that just because of his use of the democratic concept of *parrhêsia* Plato’s view of democracy should not be regarded as hostile, as it usually is by modern interpreters. This thesis, however, neglects some important aspect of the Socratic use of *parrhêsia* which makes it very special in view of later tradition, as represented, for instance, by the Epicureans.

Now, it is clearly suggested by what Aristotle has to say about the *megalopsychos*, the great-souled man, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Plato’s Socrates did play an important role in the tradition of philosophical frankness:

---

‘He (sc. the great-souled man) must be open both in love and in hate, since concealment shows timidity; and care more for the truth than for what people will think; and speak and act openly, since as he despises other men he is outspoken and frank (parrhēsiastēs), except when speaking with ironical self-deprecation, as he does to common people (transl. Rackham)’.

Obviously, Aristotle has Socrates in mind; one can see this easily when one reads, for instance, Plato’s Apology, where Socrates does indeed use frank speech when facing his judges, turning an apology into what could be called an accusation. In other Platonic dialogues as well the parrhēsiastēs Socrates often is harsh in his moral exhortations and confronts his partners with their deficiencies without respect of their age or status. And he expects to be treated the same way. ‘Do say what you believe’, he often demands of them. To speak one’s mind is the basis of the Socratic elenches: its aim is not only to test his partner’s opinions but also his character. In his dialogues Plato indeed illustrates the use of parrhēsia and reflects upon the role parrhēsia should play in the context of philosophical discourse. Plato, it seems, illustrates the importance of democratic parrhēsia in philosophical discourse and it has been argued that in so doing Plato wishes to signal that he is not as antidemocratic as most modern interpreters claim. However, it should not be overlooked that Plato is not here adopting a traditional concept without modification. There can be no doubt: frank speech is indeed part of Socrates’ philosophical strategy; yet, as Plato often does in dealing with traditional concepts, he modifies and transforms them while integrating them into his philosophical context. This also is true with democratic parrhēsia. For although he indeed often exercises parrhēsia he nevertheless feels free to restrict information in his conversations or uses forms of indirect speech, for instance he confesses his ignorance, which his partners interpret as concealment or eironeia. One might sympathise with some of Socrates’ partners, as the Epicureans obviously did, and ask how Socrates possibly could combine those two concepts of philosophical discourse which obviously seem to exclude each other.

I will argue in this paper that for Plato’s Socrates indirect philosophical discourse and parrhēsia do not exclude each another and that the Epicureans responded to that claim in that they denied this possibility and advocated direct speech as the only acceptable base of philosophical conversation. It seems to me that this dispute might also be of interest as background for

---

discussions about the importance of direct and indirect speech in modern philosophical and scientific discourse even when seen in intercultural context: Since the enlightenment of the ideal of direct speech and the imperative to communicate findings in sciences has been prevailing whereas restriction of wisdom and indirect speech often are regarded as signs of a moral deficiency. In intercultural discussions, the discrepancy between the acceptance of direct or indirect discourse has been regarded as an important distinction. So in the context of comparing cultures, it is to recall an early example of this discussion in which ‘not by chance as it seems to be’ Plato and the Epicureans, one of the important Hellenistic philosophical schools, played a decisive role. In what follows, I first would like to recall the political background of the concept of parrhēsia and of its Epicurean interpretation, I will then interpret a passage of Plato’s Gorgias and finally I will point out the similarities and differences of both conceptions and draw some conclusions.

2. The political concept of parrhēsia

The Epicurean, we saw, presents himself as parrhēsiastês; he makes use of frank speech in propagating his message and does not care whether this message is understood well by his audience. To put into practice parrhēsia, therefore, means to address someone in a frank manner, without assuming a difference in status between speakers. The goal of any parrhēsiastês is to explain what he thinks is right or wrong. In order to do so, he will not hold back any information which seems useful to him, without considering whether this might upset the addressee or not. In antiquity, the right to frank speech was regarded as the vital right of any Athenian citizen. By exercising parrhēsia, the speaker hence uses a concept which the Athenians would have identified as constitutive of democracy. In Euripides’ play named after him, Ion argued, ‘If I may do so, I pray my mother is Athenian, so that through her I may have rights of speech. For when a stranger comes into the city of pure blood, though in name a citizen, his mouth remains a slave: he has no right of speech’. Hippolytos, in Euripides’ play named after him, connects parrhēsia with liberty and makes those two concepts characteristics of Athens. Egalitarianism was regarded the foundation of parrhēsia. Restraint of the opportunity to use frank speech was regarded as sign of tyranny or lack of democracy. Parrhēsia, therefore, became an

---

9 Cf. Dem. 3. Olynth. 32; on the concept of parrhesia as democratic principle see S.S. Monoson, Plato’s Democratic entanglements, Princeton 2000, esp. 51ff. 154ff.; admittedly, Plato is here being made to look too democratic.


essential element of public political discourse, as Foucault emphasised in his 1982 Berkeley Lectures. One also should expect that this frank form of communication was exercised amongst friends in private contexts, although we do not have any evidence for this. It should be noted, however, that no special association with the idea of friendship was made before the 4th century. From the time of Isocrates, however, parrhêsia was praised as virtue exercised amongst friends but also in asymmetric relationships between political or financially powerful people and their subordinates, with whom they were related by some special relationship. A shift in the meaning of parrhêsia from “freedom of speech” to “personal candour” is to be noted. It is not by chance that parrhêsia occurs around this date in the context of moral teaching in the schools of philosophers. Now, parrhêsia is understood as responsibility and virtue of those who teach, but also of those who are taught.

As for teachers, exercising parrhêsia meant pointing out mistakes and blaming or encouraging their pupils without regard of their rank; as for pupils, they were expected to be receptive of criticism. These attitudes were regarded as the foundation of a successful philosophical discourse which might help get rid of errors and to form character. This expectation and view is expressed by Isocrates as well as by the Epicurean. Parrhêsia, it seems, developed into an integral part of the methods of philosophical instruction. That is why the parrhêsiastic method was dealt with in philosophical treatises. I remind you of works like De libertate dicendi (On the freedom of speech) by the Epicurean Philodemus, or later on in other philosophical contexts in treatises written by Plutarch or Clement of Alexandria. In these treatises the parrhêsiastic practice is analysed and illustrated together with the elenctic or nouthetic elements of pedagogical methods and it often is rigorously distinguished from its antonym, the art of flattery, which aims at unconditioned adaptation at the expectations and wishes of the recipient\(^\text{12}\). Of greatest interest is the treatise De libertate dicendi of the Epicurean Philodemus whose fragments are preserved by some of the Herculanean papyri\(^\text{13}\). This treatise helps to understand better the doctrinal background of the Epicurean saying which we quoted at the beginning of this paper. It also provides us with material to see similarities and differences, the palintonos harmonia so to speak, between what Plato and

---


what the Epicureans meant when they suggest the use of frank speech in philosophical contexts.

3. Epicurean *parrhēsia*

Let me therefore summarise briefly the content of this treatise; it is an epitome of lectures given by Philodemus’ teacher Zenon in Athens, which Philodemus attended. This treatise illustrates well how *parrhēsia* was used in the Epicurean school as means to disseminate their doctrines. In the treatise *De libertate dicendi* Philodemus praises friendship as an essential element of Epicurean teaching. Since the Epicurean school is regarded as a community of friends, Philodemus requires mutual participation for edification, admonition and correction, advocates openness and rejects concealment, strives for trust and wishes to avoid distrust. The aim of Epicurean education, of which *parrhēsia* is a basic element, is to reform the pupils character by emotional change and theoretical inquiry. Topics of the treatise consequently are questions like ‘how will we recognize the one who has endured frank criticism graciously and the one who is pretending (to do so)’ (transl. Konstan et al.). The emphasis lies on aspects like blame and correction. Since students of distinct general dispositions are to be reckoned on, weak and obedient ones and strong or disobedient ones, Philodemus differentiates *parrhēsia* in the sense of frankness communicating with many people from *parrhēsia* practised in the privacy of philosophical discussion. It is for the latter that he offers rules for a philosophical discourse which will prove useful and therapeutic for his pupil’s soul. Philodemus’ treatise focuses on the teacher, but it also take into account the reactions of the recipients. Time and again, Philodemus assures his reader that the foundation of philosophical discourse is direct, i.e. frank speech. The application of its elements like encouragement or criticism should be adjusted to the disposition of the addressee. For Philodemus makes a distinction between pupils who are easy to deal with and those who are to be treated in a harsh way and are to be corrected and criticized severely in order to make them approachable and receptive for the truth as the Epicureans saw it.

Philodemus’ treatise documents a discussion about the degree of reproach the wise man as teacher should apply and about how to treat the weak pupils who are difficult to cure and nevertheless to retain students who might have

---

15 Cf. fr. 88 Olivieri; PHer. 1082 col. II 1–3.
disobeyed. It has to be kept in mind, that this discussion does not concern
the content of the philosophical message. For the Epicureans are convinced
that the philosophical truth of their teaching can be communicated without
any restriction or modification; adjustments sometimes are necessary, but
they always concern the method and intensity of its communication, not its
content. Philodemus and others are convinced that frankness strengthens
the goodwill of those engaged in philosophical teaching. Yet Philodemus’
treatise shows that there was disagreement about the degree of reproach the
wise man as teacher should apply. Both sides agreed that the disciple should
not be insulted, but there was dispute as to whether parrhesia will suffice or
bitter reproach sometimes is necessary (fr. 60, 1–7) ‘and (some) have judged
it right to speak frankly (to) such people, but (moderately) given that sharp
frankness bears a similarity to insult, as if one were really insulting out of
ill will’, (transl. Konstan et al.). Philodemus, it seems, sides with those who
accept that the Epicurean wise man, as a teacher, sometimes has to criticize
in a harsh, clear and frank manner his pupils in order to enable them to
follow his lead and to swallow the philosophical message. But he insists that
this frank approach has to be adjusted to the disposition of the recipient.
Now here Philodemus might have had Stoic pedagogy in mind. For the
Stoics were accused of applying forms of indirect communications, instead
of plainly speaking the truth. But, of course, indirect speech also is what
Epicureans ‘and others’ regarded as characteristics of the Socratic form
of communication as documented for instance in the Platonic dialogues.
The Epicurean writings make it abundantly clear that Socrates’ indirect
way of communication was regarded as inimical to Epicurean frankness
of speech, which advocated a subtle approach of mixing praise and blame.
Despite those differences, it is obvious, that by the time of the Hellenistic
philosophical schools the political concept of parrhesia had turned into an
element of philosophical communication and especially in Epicurean context
became a sign of philosophical friendship and of goodwill towards one’s
philosophical friends. Parrhesia sometimes was used synonymously with
elenchos and nouthetein and was applied in a way very similar to Socrates’
use of the elenchos in Plato’s dialogues. Parrhesia played an important
role in a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of direct and
indirect communication in philosophical context.

Long, Stoic Studies, Cambridge 1996, 1–34); M. Erler, Sokrates’ Rolle im Hellenismus,
201–232.
4. Socratic/Platonic *parrhēsia*

Now, one might asks where and how the political concept of frankness was integrated into philosophical discourse. Modern interpreters often refer in a very general manner to Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon and ‘most importantly’ to Isocrates\(^{20}\). Of course those general references are helpful. But it should not be overlooked that Plato played an important and interesting role in this process of integration and transformation of the political notion of *parrhēsia* into an educational concept. The topics, problems and questions which Philodemus brings up in his treatise *De libertate dicendi* will remind the reader of Plato of situations and discussions in his dialogues. Indeed, it can be shown that it was Plato’s Socrates who transformed the concept *parrhēsia* in a way which is typical of him. For he modifies the understanding of *parrhēsia* in a way which contrasts not only with the traditional democratic notion, but also with the way Epicureans used the method. Let us therefore have a look at some passages from his dialogues. Plato’s dialogues present Socrates as protagonist of *parrhēsia* exercised in front of large audiences or in the more private atmosphere of philosophical intercourse. In the *Apology* Socrates claims that, in the speech in his defense, he did not conceal anything, knowing that the audience will hate him for what he said. This position might remind us of the Epicurean saying we quoted at the beginning of the paper. In both cases the speaker in the situation is political and public and the use of *parrhēsia* seems to be traditional. But also in philosophical discourse the topic of *parrhēsia* comes up and is practised. In the *Laches* Socrates is asked to give advice about how to educate young people. Since he is regarded as an expert in education, the parents want him to give his advice in a frank manner and without reservation\(^{21}\). There are other passages where Socrates’ parrēsiastic behaviour is illustrated. Of special interest is the *Gorgias*. For in this dialogue *parrhēsia* not only is addressed and exercised. In addition, the *Gorgias* illustrates the transformation and integration of political *parrhēsia* into a philosophical context. It is not by chance that this happens in the *Gorgias*, because in this dialogue Socrates argues that not people like Pericles, Kimon or other well known people are the politicians who serve Athens well, but it is Socrates, the philosopher, who claims to serve the Athenians best. For Socrates is not interested in dealing with political institutions. He cares for the souls of his fellow citizens (*epimeleia tês psychês*). Socrates the true politician: This might seem to be bizarre to some modern interpreters. But one should not forget that to the ancients the word *polis* does not necessarily entail the aspect of territory or institutions

---

21 Cf. Plat. Lach. 189a
like the modern concept of state. *Polis* rather means community of people as individuals. This is why Socrates calls his philosophical *pragma* ‘true politics’ and why Plato’s *Republic* has much to say about the human soul, but next to this nothing about political institutions. It is only in the second best option of a state, Magnesia, where institutions matter. This notion of *polis* forms the background for the discussions about rhetoric or ethical concepts like shame, benevolence or punishment. For from Socrates’ perspective of therapeutic ‘politics’ traditional concepts are transformed and integrated into Plato’s understanding of philosophy: Traditional rhetoric as art of defence changes into an art of therapeutic accusation which is to cure the souls of others from error, which is illustrated by Socrates who, in the *Apology*, despite defending himself, levels accusations at his judges in order to show them where they failed; punishment also becomes part of Socratic therapy, because it aims at improvement of his partner; *aidôs*, shame, as a well respected principle of good behaviour, becomes negative when it hinders someone to support his own convictions by argument as is illustrated by Gorgias and Polus in the dialogue *Gorgias*. To stick to one’s guns is what counts and that is what Socrates’ politics is all about. The same kind of transformation, it seems, is to be observed if one focuses on the Socratic use of *parrhêsia* in the *Gorgias* and elsewhere in the dialogues. Socrates agrees with Callicles: Polos and Gorgias failed, because they lacked openness, frank speech and readiness to defend their position properly and unconditionally. That is why they finally contradicted themselves (*Gorg.* 482e): frankness of speech (*parrhêsia*) as precondition of coherence of argument, lack of *parrhêsia* as causes of self-contradiction; this is what Socrates stands for. This is why, as Socrates says, frank speech (*parrhêsia*) is the basis of Socrates elenctic method as he claims in the *Gorgias*: ‘For I consider that if a man is to make a complete trial of the good or evil of the soul, he ought to have three qualities: knowledge, good-will, frankness (*parrhêsia*)’ (Transl. Jowett). ‘Many’, he continues, ‘whom I have known were unable to make the examination, because they were not wise as you are; others are wise, but they will not tell me the truth, because they have not the interest in me which you have; and these two strangers, Gorgias and Polus, are undoubtedly wise men and my very good friends, but they are not frank enough and they are too modest’ (transl. Jowett).

---

22 Cf. Plat. Gorg. 521d; Thuc. 7, 63,3.
23 Cf. on this point R. Geiger, Dialektische Tugenden. Untersuchungen zur Gesprächsform in den platonischen Dialogen, Paderborn 2006, 108ff. 120ff.
Socratic *parrhēsia*, it seems, includes openness of mind and the ability to defend positions without regard of the status of one’s partner and his position. The dialogue *Gorgias* illustrates how Socrates lives up to these standards and why therapeutic *parrhēsia* is an important precondition for Socratic philosophical discourse. Socrates never wavers and always sticks to what he believes in. That is, why he can say, that true philosophy always says the same thing. That is why Socrates banishes Homer from Callipolis, although this poet is dear to him, that is why Socrates treats partners like young Lysis in a humiliating manner, because he is a stubborn young man; this is why he deals with Nicias in a more mild way, because this general proves to be well prepared to accept criticism; this is why he guides young Theaetetus in the *Sophist* very cautiously, because he is a promising young person well equipped for doing philosophy. The dialogues demonstrate that Socrates’ *parrhēsia* combines gentle and harsh treatment of his partners with respect to their dispositions. He does so in a way which illustrates what the Epicurean Philodemus prescribes in his treatise *De liberate dicendi* as a parrhēsiastic method for philosophical lecturing. Like Philodemus, Socrates is quite convinced that openness and frank speech are the preconditions to test the opinions and the character of one’s partner. Socrates himself follows these rules. Socrates’ elenctic discourse indeed intends to clarify the mistakes and faults of his partners and to form their character. The starting point is that you realize one’s own mistakes, and does not accuse Socrates of trying to confuse you. This is why Socrates sometimes humiliates his partners. At first sight the similarities between Socrates’ parrhesiastic method and Philodemus’ analysis in *De liberate dicendi* are striking. Like Philodemus Plato obviously has integrated an important element of political communication into his philosophical discourse. Yet one major difference also emerges that should not be overlooked.

5. Parrhesy and irony

This difference becomes clear if we remember that Socrates does not always seem to follow the prescription of a traditional *parrhēsiastēs*. To return for a moment to Aristotle’s description of the *megalopsychos* who ‘cares more for the truth than for what people will think; and speaks and acts openly ‘except when speaking with ironical self-depreciation, as he does to common people’.

This is exactly what Socrates does in the dialogues when he sometimes seems to be not sure whether the soul is immortal, whereas in another

---

27 Cf. Plat. Lys. 210e.
28 Cf. note 4.
context he is convinced of its immortality. There is no doubt that Socrates’ exercises dissimulation in philosophical discussion. And it is exactly this kind of behaviour that causes complaint and protest. For it seems, that on those occasions Socrates does not behave according his own parrhesiastic rules and does to make it absolutely clear what he means. Many of his partners and modern readers will agree with Thrasymachos’ objection to the Socratic form of indirect communication by eirônia. Reading the dialogues one cannot help but agree with Thrasymachos. Indeed, Socrates often refuses to be frank and to say everything that might be helpful to solve the problems under discussion; this is to be observed in the so called aporetic dialogues as well as in later dialogues. One always discovers signals that more could be said to help to find a way out of the aporia. It becomes clear that the parrhêsiast Socrates sometimes postpones his plan to explain what he means, gives only hints at possible solutions, or bluntly refuses to help and the question is understandable, how this attitude is to harmonise with Socrates’ claim to be a philosophical parrhêsìast and an advocate of frank speech.

In order to answer this question, we have to remember that for Socrates’ philosophical method the capacity of his partners to understand is crucial. Socrates is always careful about misunderstanding on the part of his hearers. He often is afraid that they think that they would understand what he is arguing but in fact they do not. Avoiding or getting rid of misinterpretations is a basic condition for Socrates’ form of philosophical communication, which therefore is strictly adjusted to the disposition of the recipient: one does not speak to everybody about everything – as the dialogues illustrate and Socrates explains in the Phaedrus. Time and again Socrates draws attention to the dangers of misinterpretations of what he is trying to say. Even if one hears a thesis which seems to solve a problem under discussion, one cannot be sure to have understood what is meant before one tries to reconstruct the argument that leads to the result.

It is for that reason that the parrhêsìast Socrates is quite prepared to hold back knowledge, sometimes to argue ad hominem and even to conceal his opinion if he thinks the recipient is not fit to understand, quite the

29 Cf. Plat. Apol. 40cff.
31 Cf. Theaet. 184a.
contrary of what the Epicureans did. For when Philodemus postulates that the philosopher should adapt his argumentation to the disposition of the addressee, that does not concern the contents but only the form and intensity of the treatment of the addressee, for instance whether he should apply a harsh or mild form of reproach. Socrates however adjusts the content of his message to the disposition of his addressee: Already Ficino\textsuperscript{33} observed that Socrates applied \textit{eirôneia} as form of communication in certain cases, for instance when talking to sophists or eristic in the \textit{Euthydemos}. When he communicates with philosophical friends as in the \textit{Phaedo} or in the \textit{Republic} Socrates sometimes also decides to hold back information, but in these cases he does so openly while offering reasons for his behaviour. One example must suffice here: At a central point of Socrates’ conversation with Glaukon and Adeimantos in the \textit{Republic} the question crops up what the good is. Although his partners insist, Socrates refuses to explain what he thinks the good really is although he makes it clear that he might be able to\textsuperscript{34}. Instead, he offers the famous images of the line, of the sun and the cave. More than that: he tells Plato’s brothers why he refuses to give them the information they require. He frankly tells them that he doubts whether they will be able to understand, what he would say (transl. Jowett)\textsuperscript{35}: ‘Dear Glaukon, I said, you will not be able to follow me here, though I would do my best’.

It is obvious: Socrates does indeed hold back information, but he does so in a very frank manner which might hurt his partners, for he refers to the competence or rather the lack of competence of his partners. Now the interesting thing is: These partners are not at all offended by this parrhesiastic remark. Glaukon accepts Socrates remarks and even encourages Socrates to proceed as he wishes\textsuperscript{36} ‘as far as I am able to follow’. He obviously accepts Socrates’ behaviour as part of his educational method just as later Philodemus demands from his pupils and as others do in Plato’s dialogues. For instance when Diotima lectures Socrates about \textit{erôs} in the \textit{Symposium}, she humiliates him and even casts doubts on his competence and wonders, whether she should tell him all she knows. Socrates plays the role of a docile pupil, who happily accepts this treatment from his teacher Diotima\textsuperscript{37}.

This little scene might be seen as Plato’s commentary on the method Socrates himself applies in the dialogues, where indeed he often expresses

\textsuperscript{34} Cf. Th.A. Szlezák, Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie, Berlin 1985, 258ff.
\textsuperscript{35} Cf. Plat. Rep. 533a.
\textsuperscript{36} Cf. Plat. Rep. 534a-b.
hope that his partners will follow him, but also casts doubts on their capacity to do so and therefore often decides to hold back information to avoid misinterpretation\textsuperscript{38}. But as we have seen even then Socrates is able to mix frank speech with restriction of information for educational reasons when he thinks the disposition of the recipient calls for it. Only once Plato does himself seem to have broken this rule: when he delivered his famous lecture ‘on the good’, giving to the crowd all the information he had without regard for their capacity to understand, very much like the Epicurean postulates, he failed\textsuperscript{39}. It becomes clear, or so it seems to me, that \textit{parrhēsia} becomes an integral part of Plato’s philosophical method; but it also is obvious that, in the process of integration, the formerly democratic concept of \textit{parrhēsia} undergoes a transformation: it now includes the option to conceal or even to withhold information when it is made clear that this is what Socrates is doing. Still, the Epicureans did not accept it, as would most modern interpreters; they often side with Thrasymachos.

It should be borne in mind, however, that both ways of using \textit{parrhēsia} represent different ways of perceiving what communication should be like; both are part of different educational conceptions. In both cases the intention is to help to gain knowledge by frank speech which sometimes include encouragement but also reproach and even humiliation of the addressee; both take into account the disposition of the recipient and the right moment. Already Democritus indicated\textsuperscript{40} that a proper sign of character is frank speech, but that the danger lies in working out the right point in time.

Plato and the Epicurean part company, however, as far as the content of the philosophical message and its restriction is concerned. It is for this reason that Epicureans, on the one hand, recognised Socrates as a paradigmatic personality, but at the time strongly disapproved of his philosophical method just because it entailed the right to conceal or withhold knowledge\textsuperscript{41}. They were convinced that a real philosopher always should transmit his message to everybody of any age and rank\textsuperscript{42} as is illustrated by Raphael’s famous painting ‘La scuola di Atene’ and the Epicurean group at the left side. He should do so with great clearness and without holding back anything. This is why in the second century AD an otherwise unknown Diogenes decided...
to publish a monumental inscription on a wall of the ancient agora of Oinoanda in Asia minor which he designed like a book offering Epicurean texts about canonic, physics, ethics, private letters of Epicurus, Epicurean sayings and commentaries of his own to the public in order to help readers from all over the world to save their souls from the miseries caused by the lack of enlightenment, as Diogenes says. Diogenes firmly believed ‘as he also confesses’ that this inscription should and could be read and understood by most of the people. Diogenes calls the publication of his philosophical message which addresses the reader directly a kind of politics: ‘Even though I am not engaging in public affairs’, he says. ‘I say these things through the inscription just as if I were taking action’ (fr. 3 I 4ff. Smith, Transl. Smith). We remember that Socrates claimed to be the only real politician because he cares for the souls of the citizens. Obviously the Epicurean Diogenes regards himself as a second Socrates in this respect. But Socrates or Plato, of course, never would have written their message on a wall with open access to everyone. For this would deprive them of the possibility to practise their way of parrhēsia, which includes indirect forms or restriction of information.

6. Conclusion

We analyzed a saying about the Epicurean understanding of philosophical discourse which praised free speech and frank criticism (parrhēsia) as an important therapeutic element of philosophical communication that does not allow for any form of indirect speech. We then saw that Plato in his dialogues illustrated how parrhēsia becomes integrated into the philosophical context, but that he transformed parrhēsia in that Plato’s Socrates was able to combine parrhēsia with elements of indirect speech and the refusal always to give all information necessary. From a historical perspective, the Epicurean understanding prevailed. We today as well might sympathize more with the Epicurean position which indeed seems to anticipate the modern imperatives for communication that appeared in the modern Enlightenment when the community of scientific knowledge and the right to access was propagated, whereas the restriction of knowledge and keeping it secret was regarded as immoral behaviour, as modern Sociology would have it. We now see that this did not happen then for the first time, but can be observed also in times of ancient enlightenment, for instance in the school of Epicurus, which obviously propagated their position in opposition

44 Ibidem.
to Plato. If, however, as is claimed by Merton\textsuperscript{45}, this communal character of science in modern enlightenment ‘is reflected in the recognition of their (sc. the scientists’) recognition of their dependence upon a cultural heritage’, this is not the case in the Epicurean enlightenment, because Epicurus notoriously denied standing on anyone’s shoulders\textsuperscript{46}. In this respect it is Plato who comes closer to the modern attitude. For he often stresses that he borrows from traditions, transforms and integrates them into his philosophical system as he does in the case of traditional \textit{parrhēsia}. Maybe this process of transformation of an important element of philosophical discourse and the differences with the Epicurean understanding are of interest for the discussion about intercultural relationships. For it has been argued that indirect speech could be regarded as a characteristic of Far Eastern traditions whereas the European tradition prefers forms of direct discourses. It is not up to me to decide this. I merely wanted to show that it might be useful to recall an ancient discussion of this problem.


9

The knowledge about human well-being in Plato’s *Laches*

Jörg Hardy

In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates is on the search for the conditions of a good, successful life (or happiness, *eudaimonia*). The good life is the supreme goal of all our actions (*Gorgias* 467c–e, 472c–d, 499e, 500c, *Symposium* 205a, *Republic* 357b–c). For Socrates, the good life is the ‘examined life’, as opposed to what he in the *Apology* famously calls the “life without examination that is not worth living” (38a5f., cf. *Crito* 48b4–10). The examined life is the life of a person whose actions are guided by the knowledge about human well-being that is to be acquired by way of questioning ourselves and examining our and others’ beliefs as explained in the *Apology* (28a, 37e–38a, 41b–c). The way in which the process of cross-examination (and self-examination) can influence a person’s life becomes quite clear in the *Laches*, where Nicias, a friend of Socrates, reports that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man’s argument until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived. And when he does submit to this questioning, you don’t realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly examined *every last detail*? (187e6–188a3, translation, with slight modifications, by R. K. Sprague, in: Cooper, ed. 1997: 673).

A conversation with Socrates leads, *wherever* it starts from, finally to the ‘life one lives and one has lived’, and will not end until one has examined every last detail. The conversation that prevails in the *Laches* starts from the question of how “to make the souls of young men as good as possible” (186a5–6). The discussion of this question leads, guided by Socrates, to the question what courage as part of virtue is.

The *Laches* is also one of our best sources for the Socratic account of virtue as knowledge. In a very dense and significant passage of that dialogue, Socrates gives the following characterization of a man who
possesses the knowledge that Socrates and Nicias consider the same as the whole of virtue:

Does a man with this kind of knowledge (sc. the knowledge of all good and bad things) seem to depart from virtue in any respect if he really knows, in the case of all goods whatsoever, what they are and will be and have been, and similarly in the case of evils? And do you regard that man as lacking in soundness of mind or righteousness and reverence who alone has the ability to deal circumspectly with gods and men, with respect to what is to be dreaded and dared, and to produce goods through his knowledge of how to associate with them correctly? – I think you have a point, Socrates. (199d4–e2, translation, with some modifications, by R. K. Sprague, in: Cooper, ed. 1997: 684)

This remarkable passage exhibits all the features of Socrates’ conception of virtue as a kind of knowledge. Socrates here speaks of a man who knows all the good and bad things, whenever a good or bad thing happens (d5–6), and who possesses all the virtues (d7–e1) so that he does not only know the good or bad things but also knows how to deal with these things. The good life requires virtue (or human excellence, arete). Virtue is the source of good actions. Socrates claims that “the knowledge of the good and bad” (Laches 199d4–7, Charmides 174c1–2) is not only necessary but even sufficient to virtue. Socrates’ thesis that a certain kind of knowledge is sufficient to virtue – the so-called Socratic intellectualism – has, so it seems to me, two important implications, which call for explanation: If the knowledge of the good and bad can in fact guide (and change) our life as a whole (Laches 187e–188a), it is the knowledge about the supreme goals of all our particular actions, and if this knowledge determines our actions, it is associated with a motivational force.1

The passage 199d4–e2 is the central part of the terminal argument 198b–199e in the Laches. Let me first outline the context of the argument: In the Laches, Socrates, Laches, and Nicias undertake various attempts to define courage. Socrates wants to find out whether the interlocutors have sufficient knowledge of courage as a part of virtue. Laches defines courage first as perseverance and next as perseverance with wisdom. Unfortunately, Laches cannot find a definition of courage that includes all the cases of wise perseverance that exemplify courageous behaviour and excludes the cases of a wise perseverance that is not praiseworthy. Nicias defines courage as “the knowledge of terrible or emboldening things in war and in every other situation” (194e11–195a1). Socrates drops perseverance as an element of courage because Nicias does not refer to perseverance in his account of courage as knowledge. But Nicias’ proposal fails, too. Nicias agrees on

---

1 I elaborate this thesis in Hardy 2010, and 2011.
the assumption that the knowledge of terrible or emboldening things is the same as the knowledge of the general good or bad qualities of any kind of things, which is the same as the whole of virtue. Thus, Nicias’ definition of courage – so it seems – contradicts the assumption that courage is a part of virtue.

The final argument in the *Laches* raises two questions that I address in this paper: How do perseverance and the knowledge of the good and bad relate to each other? Does Socrates think that courage is merely a matter of propositional knowledge of terrible or emboldening things? This question concerns a well-known objection against Socratic intellectualism. Does Socrates want to explain the non-cognitive (non-propositional) factors in human virtue such as the perseverance that seems to be characteristic of courage away or does he aim to explain these factors in a different (non-conventional) way? The second question that I am concerned with in this paper is about how the two theses about courage as a part of virtue and courage as the whole of virtue relate to each other. Do these theses necessarily contradict each other? My answers to these two questions will also concern the question of the unity of the virtues. The thesis that the knowledge of good and bad is the same as virtue (as explained in *Laches* 194d4–e2) expresses what scholars call the unity-of-virtue-thesis.² How are we to understand that the knowledge of what courage is reveals the knowledge of the whole of virtue?

In this paper, I argue for a non-reductive interpretation of Socrates’ account of virtue as knowledge that we find the *Laches*. My suggestion is that Socrates in the *Laches* provides an account of a comprehensive – both theoretical, and practical – knowledge of the good and bad, which encompasses the perseverance that is characteristic of courage as a character trait, that is, as a person’s motivation to perform courageous actions.

1. Courage is perseverance? The discussion with Laches

In the *Laches*, Lysimachus and Melesias ask their friends Laches and Nicias for advice on how to educate their sons the way that they become good citizens (180a–d). However, Laches and Nicias disagree in their advice, and so Lysimachus asks Socrates to cast the deciding vote. Socrates replies

² In the *Laches*, we find that the virtues form a unity insofar as they are part of the virtue which Socrates identifies with the knowledge of the good and bad in 199d4–e1. Things are more difficult in the *Protagoras*. Devereux 1992 and Vlastos 1994 argue that there is a conflict between the *Laches* and the *Protagoras* on the unity of the virtues. I cannot discuss this problem in this paper in which I mainly focus on the *Laches*. On the various aspects of the problem of the unity of virtue in Plato and later ancient philosophy see Cooper 1997.
The knowledge about human well-being in Plato's *Laches*

that voting cannot replace examining the topic in question because “it is by knowledge that one ought to make decisions, if one is to make them well, and not by majority rule” (184e). The topic in question is “how human virtue may come to the soul of a young man and make him better” (190b). Socrates elicits from his interlocutors that advising on how to acquire virtue requires the knowledge about what virtue actually is. “For if we don’t know what it is how are we going to advise anyone as to the best method of acquiring it? – I do not think that there is any way in which we can do this” (190b8–c2). Socrates elicits from Laches that those who give advice on a certain topic F claim to know what F is. And Socrates also assumes that if one knows what F is one is able to clearly state what F is (190c4–6). The task is, then, to state what courage is.

In his first statement, Laches gives an example: If someone is willing to stay at his post, he is courageous (190e5–6). Socrates seems to accept this example. However, Socrates treats Laches’ statement as a definition of courage, and so Laches’ statement is much too narrow. In the opening conversation with Laches, Socrates takes two important methodological steps at once. He broadens the range of courage, and he is asking for a definition of the single human power that is the same capacity in all the various cases of courageous behaviour (192b5–8). According to Socrates, there are many ways to act courageously: There are those who are courageous in warfare, in dangers at sea, in illness and poverty and affairs of state (191d), and there are also those who “possess courage in pleasures, some in pains, some in desires, and some in fears” (191d6–7). Thus Socrates and Laches would need a definition of the human power to act courageously in the face of fear and pain and desire or pleasure (192b5–8) in order to identify the power that would make ‘the souls of young men as good as possible’ (186a5–6).

According to Socrates’ characterization of courage (191d–e), it seems that courage is to be found in all human activities. Given this extremely broad range of courage, the unity of courage has the same extension as virtue as a whole. In other words: the unity of courage seems to be the unity of virtue, too. It seems that every single virtuous, that is, good and beneficial, action requires courage. And so it might not come as too great a surprise that the search for a definition of courage – despite Socrates’ initial suggestion that the interlocutors should not begin with asking about the whole of human virtue – finally amounts to a definition of virtue as a whole.

In his second attempt to state what courage is, Laches first defines courage as “a certain kind of perseverance of the soul” (192b9) and next, guided by Socrates, as “perseverance with wisdom” (192c8, d10–11). When examining Laches’ first definition of courage as perseverance (192c–d), Socrates draws two (closely related but different) conclusions from the premise he and Laches agree upon. Socrates first refutes the statement that
courage is just any kind of perseverance and he then elicits from Laches an enhanced definition of courage as perseverance joined with wisdom:

_**Laches:**_ I think (courage) is a sort of perseverance of the soul (192b9).

_**Socrates:**_ I think that you don’t regard every kind of perseverance as courage ... I am fairly sure that you, Laches, regard courage as a very praiseworthy thing (192c3–6). And you would say that perseverance joined with wisdom is a praiseworthy and good thing?

_**Laches:**_ Yes, indeed (192c8–10).

_**Socrates:**_ And if it is joined with folly, isn’t it just the opposite, harmful ...?

_**Laches:**_ Yes. (192d1–3).

_**Socrates:**_ And would you call a thing praiseworthy, which is one of the harmful things?

_**Laches:**_ No, that would be wrong. (192d4–6).

_**Socrates:**_ _Then_ you won’t allow this kind of perseverance (i.e. the one joined with folly) to be courage since it is _not_ praiseworthy, whereas courage _is_ praiseworthy?

_**Laches:**_ You are right (192d7–9).

_**Socrates:**_ _Then_, on your account, it would be wise perseverance which would be courage?

_**Laches:**_ So it seems (192d10–12).

The passage entails two different arguments. The first argument refutes the assumption that any instance of perseverance would be an instance of courage:

1. For any action: An action is courageous if and only if it is an instance of perseverance. (192b9)
2. For any action: If an action is courageous, it is praiseworthy. (192c3–6)
3. But perseverance joined with folly is harmful. (192c8–10)
4. If an action is harmful, it is not praiseworthy. (192d4–6)
5. Thus, perseverance joined with folly is not praiseworthy. (192d7–9)
6. Thus, it is not true that any action is courageous if and only if an instance of perseverance. In other words: courage is not just any kind of perseverance.

This argument shows that courage cannot be mere perseverance. However, Socrates also infers from the premises that courage is, on Laches’ account, perseverance joined with wisdom (192d10–12). Since Laches regards courage as a most praiseworthy thing (192c5–6) and since he agrees that perseverance joined with wisdom _is_ a praiseworthy and good thing (192c8–
10), then, according to Laches’ view, ‘it would be wise perseverance which would be courage’ (192d10–11). Laches agrees. But the new, enhanced definition 192d10–12 does not follow from the premises, which Socrates and Laches agree upon3 – unless Socrates makes a further (tacit) assumption, such as the following: courage is either perseverance joined by wisdom or perseverance joined with folly. To add this assumption allows us to lay out the second argument in the passage 192b9–d12 as a valid argument in favour of the thesis that courage is perseverance joined with wisdom:

(1) If an action is courageous, it is praiseworthy. (192c3–6)
(2) Perseverance joined with folly is harmful. (192c8–10)
(3) If an action is harmful it is not praiseworthy. (192d4–6)
(4) Thus, perseverance joined with folly, it is not praiseworthy. (192d7–9)
(5) Thus, it is not true that courage is perseverance joined with folly. (192d7–9)
(6) Courage is either perseverance joined by wisdom or perseverance joined with folly.4
(7) Thus, courage is perseverance joined with wisdom.

Socrates next considers “in what things” the courageous person is wise and he gives a series of examples which show a kind of wisdom that is concerned with “everything both great and small” (192e–193d):

1. A clever financier who perseveres in investing money in a project, which he knows will finally be a profitable investment, is not courageous.
2. A physician who perseveres in maintaining a certain therapy required for the patient’s health and who refuses to give the patient a little water, is not courageous. (We may imagine a scenario in which a patient’s illness requires a diet that includes not drinking water for a certain period of time. It might, however, not do too much harm to the patient to give him a small amount of water as a release but the physician is not courageous enough to take that little risk.)
3. (a) If a military commander perseveres in attacking a certain position which he knows is weaker than his own, he is not courageous.
   (b) His opponent who perseveres in defending a certain position which

3 From \( p \rightarrow q \) & \( r \rightarrow q \) does not follow \( p \leftrightarrow r \).
4 Admittedly, this assumption sounds strange. If we, however, want to read the second argument that we find in 192b9–d12 as a valid argument, we have to add an assumption that allows us to do so. It seems reasonable to me to make the assumption (6) since Socrates explicitly invokes the contrast between perseverance joined by wisdom and its opposite two times in the passage 192b9–d12.
he knows is weaker than the opposing attacking force, is courageous. More precisely, he is more courageous than the other one who is a stronger position.

4. Likewise, (a) if a military man who is skilled in a certain craft such as a cavalryman or a bowman perseveres in fighting against an opponent who is unskilled in that craft, he is less courageous than (b) his opponent.

5. (a) An expert well-diver shows more endurance in diving into a cistern than those who are not skilled in that craft. But (b) those who are not experts are more courageous.

These examples can be divided into two groups. The first one consists of the examples 1, 2, 3a, 4a, and 5a in which a person displays perseverance joined by wisdom (as some kind of technical knowledge) but is not courageous because his behaviour is not praiseworthy. The second group consists of the examples 3b, 4b, and 5b in which a person performs a really praiseworthy action but her action lacks the support of technical knowledge, which would significantly increase her chances of success.

There is a problem with examples 3, 4, and 5. It would be implausible to say that a skilled person when he is successfully practising his expertise does – because of this – not act in a praiseworthy way. The problem is resolved if we understand Socrates as making the following point: If we compare experts who make use of their technical skills in pursuing a certain goal with laypersons who do not possess a certain expertise but nonetheless pursue the same goal (such as the unskilled well-diver), then the laypersons’ actions are praiseworthy. What Socrates seems to have in mind here is that the unskilled persons in 3b, 4b, and 5b primarily aim at achieving a certain praiseworthy goal, and this is what makes their actions itself praiseworthy.\(^5\)

The examples of the first group support the following argument:

(1) Any action is an instance of courage if and only if it is an instance of perseverance joined with wisdom.

(2) There are some actions, which exhibit perseverance joined with wisdom but do not exhibit courage (because these actions are not praiseworthy).

(3) Thus it is not true that any action is an instance of courage if and only if it is an instance of perseverance joined with wisdom.

The examples of the second group support this argument:

1. Any action is an instance of courage if and only if it is an instance of perseverance joined with wisdom.
2. There are some actions, which exhibit perseverance and courage (because these actions are praiseworthy) but do not exhibit *wisdom*.
3. Thus it is not true that any action is an instance of courage if and only if it is an instance perseverance joined with wisdom.

The examples of the first group show cases in which an agent does not perform a praiseworthy action. And the examples of the second group show cases in which an agent performs a praiseworthy action but lacks the technical wisdom that others possess and that would increase the agent’s chances of success. The examples refute the definition of courage as perseverance joined with wisdom. A wisdom that is concerned with “everything both great and small” is a mere technical and instrumental wisdom that might serve very different purposes as the examples show.6

Those who persevere in pursuing a praiseworthy goal under certain dangerous circumstances, while lacking the expertise that others possess, are, according to Socrates and Laches, more courageous than those who possess expertise. Wouldn’t it, then, be quite reasonable to assume that courage is wise, praiseworthy perseverance? The answer depends on how we understand the wisdom-element in Laches’ proposal. Recall that Laches’ first definition of courage as perseverance (or endurance) had to be revised since courage is always praiseworthy and only perseverance joined by wisdom is praiseworthy. Thus, a particular praiseworthy action at a present situation is as such not sufficient for courage since courage is a person’s disposition that would always bring about praiseworthy actions. What Laches misses is that technical knowledge can, as such, never ensure praiseworthy actions. The counter-examples show that some actions in the face of danger are in fact courageous because these actions are praiseworthy. Moreover, these examples leave room for the hypothesis that courage is the wisdom or knowledge through which one would *always* perform praiseworthy actions.

Socrates does not refute Laches’ suggestions on the ground that he thinks that courage is not perseverance. Laches did not find a definition that includes all the cases of wise perseverance which exemplify courageous behaviour and excludes the cases of a wise perseverance that is not praiseworthy. However, Socrates and Laches can still maintain that courage does require both a

---

certain kind of perseverance, and a certain kind of knowledge (or wisdom). This is confirmed in a quite subtle way by Socrates’ comments on the outcome of the investigation of courage as perseverance. Socrates concludes that he and Laches were looking for a definition of courage but their deeds are not harmonizing with their words: “In deeds I think anyone would say that we partook of courage, but in words I don’t suppose he would, if he were to listen to our present discussion” (193e1–4). Socrates and Laches indeed persevered in seeking a definition of courage. But “in words” they did not partake of courage (so far) because they did not succeed in showing a sufficient knowledge of what courage is. Socrates and Laches persevered in examining suggestions about courage but their perseverance is, at this point, not joined with the wisdom that is required for sufficiently stating what courage is. Nonetheless Socrates encourages Laches to continue the search for what courage is “so that courage itself won’t make fun of us for not searching for it courageously” (194a2–4). Socrates’ comments 193e1–4 and 193e8–194a5 suggest that courage is indeed some kind of perseverance (or endurance).7

In order to disarm the objections that arise from Socrates’ counter-examples, one had to define wisdom as both technical wisdom, and the knowledge of “great” things which ensures praiseworthy actions. The key to an understanding of courage is praiseworthiness. If Socrates rejects the definition of courage as perseverance joined with wisdom on the ground of the assumption that courage is always praiseworthy, this assumption seems to imply that the wisdom that is an element of courage is the source of praiseworthy actions. In other words, the wisdom that is required for courage is the knowledge that is described in the latter passage 194d4e1 – the comprehensive “knowledge of the good and bad” which ensures praiseworthy actions.

2. Courage is knowledge? The discussion with Nicias

Having been asked for assistance, Nicias first says that it strikes him that Socrates and Laches were not employing an excellent saying which he knows from Socrates. Nicias has often heard Socrates saying “that every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant.” Agreeing, Nicias considers courage a kind of knowledge. Nicias states his own idea about courage very clearly.

---

7 As Devereux 1992: 777 puts it: “Given that Socrates does nothing to disabuse Laches of his belief that endurance is essential to courage – indeed, one might argue that he actually endorses the belief – the conclusion seems obvious: endurance should be included in the definition of courage.”
The knowledge about human well-being in Plato’s Laches

(194e11–195a1): “courage is the knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation.”

Laches makes an intelligent objection: Those who possess knowledge of terrible or emboldening things in a particular domain are not necessarily courageous (195b–c). This objection points to the fact that knowledge about true propositions is different from the virtue, that is, the character trait, which is the source of an agent’s motivation. So if some kind of knowledge is in fact sufficient for a person’s motivation to act courageously, this must, then, be a special kind of knowledge—a knowledge that is associated with a motivational force. Unfortunately, Nicias does not directly reply to the point of Laches’ objection. Instead, he clarifies the nature of the knowledge he has in mind. The courageous person possesses, according to Nicias, not only expertise in a particular domain but the general knowledge about what is to be feared or to be dreaded. Neither a physician nor a seer nor any other expert does as such possess this knowledge (194c–196a). For the same reason, animals cannot be courageous (196c–196e).

Nicias had reminded Socrates of an excellent saying that he once (and often) heard from him, and Socrates seems to remember what he had once (and often) said before. In his interpretation of Nicias’ definition of courage, Socrates elaborates the general knowledge of the things that are to be feared or to be dreaded. Socrates first restates the assumption that courage is a part of virtue. Socrates specifies one element of the definiens of Nicias’ initial definition specify one element of the definiens of Nicias’ initial definition. Terrible things produce fear, while emboldening things do not produce fear (but confidence). Fear is an expectation of an imminent bad thing (and confidence is an expectation of an imminent good thing (198b6–9). Thus the terrible things are imminent bad things, while the emboldening things are imminent good things (198c2–4). As Nicias agrees he now defines courage as the knowledge of bad and good things (198c6–7). Next Socrates explains the knowledge-element of Nicias’ definition. For any kind of knowledge: The same knowledge knows what is best whether the object is past, present, or future (198d2–5, 199a6–8). Then courage is not only the knowledge of terrible or emboldening things in the future but knowledge of terrible or emboldening things at any time, and this knowledge is furthermore the knowledge of all good or bad things. According to Nicias’ revised definition, courage is the knowledge of what is bad and good at any time, in other words, the knowledge of the general good and bad qualities of things (199b9–c1, 199c5–d1). This definition fits quite well with Socrates’ own initial characterization of courage (191d–e). Socrates identifies the knowledge of the good and bad with the possession of the whole of virtue (199d4–e1). Nicias agrees, and this agreement puts him in the quandary of not knowing how to reconcile his revised definition with the assumption
about courage as a part of virtue. The argument *Laches* 198b–199e may be laid out this way:

1. A person is courageous if and only if she knows imminent terrible or emboldening things (194e11–195a1, 196d1–2, 198b6–7, 199a 10–b2).
2. Every imminent terrible or emboldening thing is a bad or good thing (198c2–4, 198b6–9).
3. Thus, a person is courageous if and only if she knows imminent good or bad things (198c6–7).
4. A person knows imminent things with the quality F if and only if she knows the definition of F (198d1–a9, 199a6–8).
5. Thus, a person is courageous if and only if she possesses definitional knowledge of good and bad things [in the sense of (4)] (199b9–c2, c4–d3).
6. A person possesses knowledge of the good and bad things if and only if she possesses the whole of virtue (199d4–e2).
7. Thus, a person is courageous if and only if she possesses the whole of virtue (199e3–5).
8. Courage is but a part of virtue (198a4–b1, 199e3–4).
9. Thus, if a person is courageous, she possesses the whole of virtue and does not possess the whole of virtue (199e6–9).
10. [Thus, it is not true: A person is courageous if and only if she knows imminent terrible or emboldening things (199e3–11).]8

What does the argument show? Nicias’ initial proposal (198b6–7) needed to be revised to include the knowledge of all good and bad things. But the revised definition (7), according to which courage is the whole of virtue (199e3–5) seems to contradict the assumption (8) that courage is a part of virtue (198a1–6). Socrates concludes that he and Nicias did not find out what courage is. It seems that Nicias has to abandon either his definition of courage or his assumption that courage is a part of virtue.9 The interlocutors of the Laches do not provide us with an uncontroversial definition of courage, and the problem of the final argument is not solved in the dialogue’s discussion. However, Plato might not have designed the

---


The knowledge about human well-being in Plato’s *Laches* to end up in a perplexity that would be unsolvable in principle. The dialogue’s agenda is set with Socrates’ initial questions of what virtue *is* and whether he, Laches, and Nicias possess a sufficient knowledge of courage as a part of virtue (190b–d).

Laches cannot state what he thinks what courage is. He cannot provide a sufficient definition of courage. But Socrates does not disabuse Laches of the thought that courage is a certain kind of perseverance. Nicias too did not succeed in defending his definition. But Socrates does not disabuse Nicias of the thought that courage is the knowledge of terrible or emboldening things. Why should we not put these two elements together? Scholars have pointed to the fact the Plato seems to invite his readers to combine the two accounts that are under consideration in the discussions with Laches and Nicias. Kahn (1996: 167) suggests a combination of Laches’ and Nicias’ proposals that would be a “perfectly respectable definition of courage: perseverance and toughness of soul guided by the knowledge of what is good and what is bad, what is and is not to be feared. “The knowledge Socrates identifies with virtue is a comprehensive knowledge, which encompasses the motivating force(s) of the virtues my own suggestion is that the task Plato sets for the readers of the *Laches* is to find a solution to the problem of the terminal argument that both reconciles the two apparently contradictory theses about courage, and conjoins the two elements wise endurance and knowledge of the good and bad. Let us first take a closer look at the alleged contradiction that has put Nicias in a quandary.

3. The unity of the virtues in the Laches

Recall that Socrates introduced courage as a part of what the interlocutors might know about virtue: “Let us not begin straightaway with an investigation of the whole of virtue – that would perhaps be too great a task – but let us first see if we have sufficient knowledge about some part of it” (190c8–10). This part is courage since it is courage, which one might develop if one takes lessons in the art of fighting in armor. “Then let us first of all, Laches, try to say what courage is” (190d7–8). The assumption about courage as a part of virtue is primarily a methodological assumption. On the assumption that the interlocutor might have sufficient knowledge about courage as one part of virtue, they should be able to say what courage is. In the discussion with Nicias, Socrates repeats his methodological point:

You know that when we (sc. Laches and Socrates) were investigating courage at the beginning of the argument, we were investigating it as a part of virtue? Yes. Do you also speak of the same parts that I do? Certainly. Besides courage I call the other parts of virtue such as soundness of mind and righteousness – do you say the same? Certainly. Hold that point. We agree to this. (198a1–b2)
Socrates wants to reassure that he and Nicias are talking about the same thing: courage is one part of human excellence. Socrates does not make any far-reaching ontological claim about the whole and the parts of virtue. When Socrates restates his methodological assumption in the discussion with Nicias, he says that courage is a part of virtue besides others like soundness of mind, righteousness and other such things (198a7–9), “all of which together are called virtue” (198a4–5). Does the revised definition of courage contradict the initial assumption that courage is a part of virtue? Understood as a methodological assumption, the part-of-virtue-thesis says that the knowledge of courage is the knowledge of a part of virtue. This does not contradict the thesis that the knowledge of courage entails the knowledge of the whole of virtue. Socrates does not say that there is one virtue and that the several names like “courage” or “soundness of mind” refer to something different from the one virtue. There is an illuminating passage in the Sophist (251a7–b4) that shows how we can refer to one and the same thing by using several terms:

[The visitor:] Let’s give an account of how we call the very same thing, whatever it may be, by several names. – Give me an example. – Surely we speak of a man even when we name him several things, that is, when we apply colours to him and shapes, sizes, defects and virtues. In these cases and a million others we say that he is not only a man but also good and many different things. And similarly on the same account we take a thing to be one, and at the same time we speak of it as many by using many names for it. (translation by N.P. White, in Cooper ed. 1997: 273)

Similarly, we can speak of the one virtue when we call courage, soundness of mind etc. parts of it.

Moreover, it might well be that a part P of a certain thing F, to which we refer by using several terms can at the same time ‘be’ the whole of F in that the one part P represents the whole of F. *pars pro toto*. If we interpret the part-of-virtue-thesis as stated in 198a1–b2 in terms of the revised definition 199d4–e1, it says that a person possesses virtue if she possesses courage (as one part of virtue) and also ‘all the other things besides courage’ such as soundness of mind, righteousness etc. – in which case it had just the same meaning as the unity-thesis. The assumption that courage is a part of virtue would contradict the unity-thesis only if it says that there are some persons who possess the knowledge about the general features of terrible or emboldening things and who are courageous but not righteous, temperate, pious, and so on. This is what Protagoras claims in the dialogue named after him (*Protagoras* 349b–d, cf. 329e), but neither Socrates nor Nicias make that claim. If we read the assumption about courage as a part of virtue as saying that courage is an element of the comprehensive knowledge of the good and bad, it has just the same meaning as Socrates’ general thesis.
The knowledge about human well-being in Plato's *Laches*

about virtue (199d4–e2). The virtues that are part of the comprehensive knowledge of the good and bad entail each other. This is why one particular virtue like courage in fact represents the whole of virtue.

Nicias seems to miss the precise meaning of his revised definition of courage for otherwise he could have disarmed the objection that his new definition contradicts the assumption that courage is a part of virtue. Socrates objects to Nicias’ revised definition that his new statement does not harmonize with the initial assumption about courage as one part of virtue: “The thing you are now talking about, Nicias, would not be a part of virtue but rather the whole of virtue … And we have stated that courage is one of the parts of virtue … Then what we are saying now does not appear to hold good.” Had Nicias understood what he ‘is now talking about’, he could have replied ‘Yes, indeed. What I am now talking about is the virtue of the excellent man who is not missing any particular virtue because he knows all good and bad things and is bale to deal with all these things correctly. And courage is one part of this complex state of soul – besides such things as soundness of mind and righteousness all of which together all called virtue. For this reason my definition of the part of virtue which we call courage is a definition of the whole or virtue, too.’ Unfortunately, Nicias does not know what Socrates knows about virtue and he therefore fails to provide an account of courage that would solve the apparent contradiction.

4. The two-fold nature of virtue

According to Penner (1973, and 1992), Socrates wants us to see that Nicias misses this: If courage is knowledge, it is not just a part of virtue, but in fact the whole of virtue. I agree. However, what exactly does the courageous

---

10 Irwin 1995: 43f. puts the problem with Nicias’ account of courage this way: “The assumption that bravery is a proper part of virtue was introduced to make the inquiry easier … But the main question at the beginning … was not about bravery in particular, but about how to make people ‘fine and good’; bravery was introduced only as the aspect … that seemed most relevant to the occasion. Socrates gave no reason in support of the initial assumption, and nothing in the argument of the dialogue depends on the assumption. Plato never suggests, then, the assumption that bravery is a proper part of virtue is more plausible than the premises of the argument for the unity of virtue have turned out to be … Socrates has made it seem plausible that the fine and good person acts bravely because of the sort of knowledge that turns out to be sufficient for the other virtues as well.” I agree: Plato never suggests that the assumption that bravery is a part of virtue is more plausible than the unity-of-virtue-thesis. But if we read the assumption about courage as a part of virtue the way that courage is an element of the comprehensive knowledge of the good and bad (199d4–e2), these theses do not compete with each other.

11 However, I do not think that Penner’s (1973) assumption that the virtues are identical with each other is necessary for an understanding of the final argument in the *Laches*. On this point I agree with Devereux 1992: 786 who claims that “wisdom directly entails
man (as envisaged in 199d4–e1) know, and what is the state of mind that Socrates identifies with the courageous’ knowledge? If the knowledge of the good and bad is sufficient for courageous behaviour, it appears that perseverance (or endurance) is not an essential part of courage (and virtue as a whole). Devereux, (1992: 779) considers a solution to this problem: “If endurance were a necessary concomitant of knowledge of good and evil, then there would not necessarily be any conflict between the sufficiency of knowledge thesis and the claim that endurance is an essential and distinctive characteristic of courage.” I find this suggestion persuasive. But, again, what kind of knowledge is sufficient for the state of mind of the courageous man as explained in 199d4–e1?

Let us look at the passage that I have quoted in my introduction again:

Does a man with the knowledge of all good and bad things seem to depart from virtue in any respect if he really knows, in the case of all goods whatsoever, what they are and will be and have been, and similarly in the case of evils? And do you regard that man as lacking in soundness of mind or righteousness and reverence who alone has the ability to deal circumspectly with gods and men, with respect to what is to be dreaded and dared, and to produce goods through his knowledge of how to associate with them correctly?

The excellent man knows all the terrible or emboldening things (d9–e1), all the good and bad things (d5), whenever a good or bad thing happens (d5–6, cf. 198d1–a9, 199b6–8), and this man also possesses all the virtues (d7–e1); he does not only know the good things, but he also knows how to produce good things, that is, how to perform good, beneficial actions. Who would doubt that the knowledge so conceived is the same as the whole of virtue? The knowledge of one general quality of good and bad things, such as the knowledge of terrible or emboldening things, entails the knowledge of all the other relevant qualities of good and bad things, and the same holds for the relation between courage and the whole of virtue: A person possesses one particular virtue such as courage if and only if she possesses all the other virtues, too.

On Socrates’ account of the comprehensive knowledge of the good and bad (199d4–e2), the knowledge of the general qualities of terrible or emboldening things entails the knowledge of all the other relevant general qualities of good or bad things. In the same way, the virtues as motivational forces ‘entail’ each other. In order to know the terrible and emboldening things, one has to know the other virtues and is the key to their unity; … only wisdom is exemplified in all virtuous activity … The knowledge essential to each of the other virtues is knowledge of good and evil, and what differentiates them is some additional distinctive factor or quality (e.g., endurance in the case of courage).”
the other relevant good or bad qualities of terrible or emboldening things, too. And in order to act courageously, one has to be just, temperate etc., too. If a person is courageous because of her general knowledge of the good and bad, she does not only act with wise endurance but she also has all the other attitudes (and motivational forces) that belong to virtue entire.

The crucial point that Socrates makes in his statement of the comprehensive “knowledge of the good and bad” in 194d4–e2 is, as I take it, this one: An agent's success in performing good, beneficial actions depends on the unimpeded interaction of the various virtues. In order to perform (really) good, beneficial actions, one has to know all the various general good or bad qualities of a particular subject with which one has to deal in a certain situation – one has to know why a particular thing is under certain present circumstances a good, emboldening or a bad, terrible thing –, and one also has to have a complex virtuous attitude towards those things so that one is in a given situation courageous and at the same time temperate, just etc. The state of mind that Socrates equates with knowledge involves both, knowledge of true propositions about good or bad things, and the, so to speak, examined desires and emotions such as fear or confidence that put an agent in the position to act in accordance with her knowledge. The virtuous person knows all the general features of good and bad things, and she is motivated to perform good and beneficial actions. This is what Socrates means when he says that the one who possesses the knowledge of the good and bad ‘is able to deal with good and bad things and to produce good things through his knowledge’ (199d7–e2).

Does the excellent man also display perseverance in producing good things? Perhaps, Socrates considers perseverance no longer relevant. In his description of the perfectly courageous man, Socrates does not mention perseverance. If, however, the person he envisages in 199d4–e1 knows how to deal with “gods and men, with respect to what is to dreaded and dared and to produce goods through his knowledge”, he does so because of his perseverance which is joined by his knowledge. Socrates never says that the courageous man does not have a character trait like perseverance (which would be absurd). When a captain courageously sails through stormy weather in order to bring Odysseus back to Ithaca or Othello to Cyprus, he perseveres in staying on course. When Socrates defends his friend Laches on a battlefield, he perseveres in fighting against the attacking opponents. When he remains at his ‘post in life’ as explained in the Apology (28d–e), he perseveres in questioning and examining himself and others. And Lysimachus is willing to endure investigating virtue together with Socrates (Laches 200d–201c). It seems to be clear from Socrates’ account of the knowledge of the good and bad that this particular knowledge encompasses the motivational force(s) of courage (and of the other particular virtues, too).
One might object: Doesn’t Socrates speak of knowledge and nothing else but knowledge? He does. And what does he mean by speaking of the knowledge of the good and bad? He refers to an agent’s complex state of soul that enables her to know what is all things considered good and bad and to act accordingly. Knowledge of true propositions alone does not make us act. What makes us act is the combination of a belief and a desire. The courageous person has the desire to perform praiseworthy actions and we may also assume that the excellent man in 199d4–e2 has emotions like fear or confidence. This is explicitly stated in the *Protagoras*.

5. Knowledge and courage in *Protagoras* 359c–360e

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates aims “to show that all things are knowledge, righteousness, soundness of the mind, even courage” (360e–361c). The discussion between Socrates and Protagoras starts from two contrary assumptions: Protagoras claims that virtue can be taught (for teaching virtue is his business), whereas Socrates doubts that virtue can be taught. After Protagoras has given a “long speech” on that issue, Socrates asks him whether he thinks that virtue is a unity or not. More precisely, Socrates wants to know whether Protagoras holds that one can possess one particular virtue without possessing the other virtues. Protagoras says that the particular virtues in fact do not entail each other. For example, “there are many courageous men who are unjust, or just men who are not wise” (329e, restated 349d–e). This is the thesis Socrates examines throughout the remainder of the dialogue.

After a first discussion (349e–351e) in which Socrates and Protagoras did not come to an agreement about the relation of courage and knowledge (or wisdom), Socrates makes a new attempt. He claims that knowledge always rules so that someone’s knowledge about what is good or bad will always determine her actions, as opposed to the conventional view, according to which “many people know what is best to do are not willing to do it, though it is in their power, but do something else” (352d). Protagoras agrees on Socrates’ view, and Socrates then wants to take a closer look at the phenomenon that seems to give evidence to the conventional view: acting against better judgement (*akrasia*). Socrates’ treatment of *akrasia* raises a number of questions. For the purpose of this paper, I shall briefly outline what I take to be the main points of Socrates’ conception of the art of measurement that Socrates invokes in the final argument 359c–360e in the *Protagoras*. Socrates first cites what he takes to be the conventional

---

view about knowledge (and its weakness). According to this view, there are
many cases in which one knows what is best, but is overcome by pleasure
and hence does what is actually bad. Socrates claims that what is pleasant
or painful is good or bad, too. If this is true, the one who acts against
his better judgement ‘takes fewer good things at the cost of greater evils’;
he knows what is good and pleasant (and more pleasant than all relevant
alternatives) but chooses what is bad and unpleasant. This is impossible,
if one follows the Socratic maxim, which says that if we weigh pleasant
things against each other, we always have to take the more pleasant ones
(356a8–c1). If what is pleasant is good, what we take to be pleasant is, then,
also desirable. Socrates then explains an art of measurement that leads to
exact knowledge about what is good, pleasant, and desirable (356c–357b).
Socrates argues for two theses: (1) If one knows what is good or best (and
pleasant), one will always choose it. (2) Bad (wrong) actions are done
through ignorance.

Having explained the art of measurement as the source of the knowledge
about good and pleasant actions, Socrates comes back to the dispute he had
with Protagoras on how courage relates to the whole of virtue (359a–c). Socrates’
account of the knowledge that rules all our actions (and rules out
choosing something bad) raises the following problem (359c–d): Let courage
be the expectation of terrible or emboldening things, and let these things be
bad or good things. If no one goes for what is not good (and pleasant) for
him, and if the courageous men know the terrible, bad things, it follows,
so it seems, that the wise (knowledgeable) men do not want to go for those
things. If this were true, the wise (knowledgeable) men are not courageous.
Protagoras objects, “the things that cowards go for are exactly the opposite
of those that the courageous go for. For instance, courageous men are willing
to go on war, but cowards aren’t”. Agreeing, Socrates makes his essential
point in the overall argument of the Protagoras. Socrates and Protagoras
agree that courageous actions are good, pleasant, and praiseworthy. If we
apply the Socratic maxim 356a–c to courageous actions, it follows that the
courageous person who knows the actions, which are dangerous, but also
good, pleasant, and praiseworthy, wants to undertake these actions. This is
why the courageous people have – because of their knowledge – a particular
kind of fear or confidence, too:

So in general, when a courageous man is afraid, his fear is not something
disgraceful, nor his confidence when he is confident? That’s right. And if not
disgraceful, are they not praiseworthy? He agreed. And if praiseworthy, good as
well? Yes. By contrast, the fear and the confidence of cowards, madmen, and the
foolhardy are disgraceful? He agreed. And is their confidence disgraceful and
bad for any reason than ignorance and error? It is as you say . . . So cowardice
proves to be error about what is to be feared and what is not? He nodded.
And the opposite of cowardice is courage? Yes ... So wisdom about what is to be feared and what is not is courage? (Protagoras 360a8–d3, translation by Taylor 1976: 54f.)

The willingness to go for dangerous things is the specific difference between the courageous and the coward. Courageous people want to undertake dangerous actions when it is good, pleasant, and praiseworthy. The source of their motivation is their knowledge (or wisdom). If knowledge (or wisdom) is a necessary condition for courage, there are no persons who are courageous but not wise – contrary to Protagoras’ claim (329e, 349d–e). With great reluctance, Protagoras accepts the refutation of his thesis (360d–e). The terminal argument 358a–360e of the Protagoras may be summarized like this:

(1) A person is courageous if and only if she is motivated to undertake dangerous, good, pleasant, and praiseworthy actions. (360a7–b4)
(2) A person is motivated to undertake dangerous, good, pleasant, and praiseworthy actions if and only if she possesses the knowledge (or wisdom) about those actions. (360b4–c1)
(3) Thus, a person is courageous if and only if she possesses the knowledge (or wisdom) about dangerous, good, pleasant, and praiseworthy actions. (360c6–d5)

It is most interesting to note that the wise, knowledgeable person also has emotions (or a certain attitude towards her emotions) like fear or confidence. Socrates says, “when a courageous man is afraid, his fear is not something disgraceful, nor his confidence when he is confident”. By contrast, the fear and the confidence of cowards are disgraceful. Notice the strict parallel between the possession of knowledge/wisdom or the lack of knowledge and the character traits courage and cowardice (360c–d): “So cowardice is an error about what is to be feared and what isn’t” – “the opposite of cowardice is courage” – “wisdom about what is to be feared and what isn’t is the opposite of error about that” – “So wisdom about what is to be feared and what isn’t is courage”. The knowledge or wisdom about what is to be feared and what is not makes the courageous’ fear and confidence into a praiseworthy and, so to speak, examined fear and confidence. The fear or confidence of the courageous person is the source of her (courageous) actions.

In the Laches and the Protagoras Socrates wants us to see that good, beneficial, and praiseworthy actions require an unimpeded interaction of the various virtues. We have to strive for the general knowledge about the good and bad in order to form all-things-considered-judgements about good or bad things. And in order to be courageous one has also to be temperate, righteous etc. However, we are not always aware of these two requirements
of good actions. We may put the message that the Socratic doctrine of the unity of the virtues conveys this way: We know that our success in acting depends on the interaction of our various mental capacities, and we also know that we sometimes (probably often) do not have enough knowledge about ourselves in order to perform the good actions that we want to perform. This is why we should actively care for the wisdom and virtue that is required for our happiness.13

References

Irwin, T. 1995. Plato’s Ethics, Oxford
Reshotko, N. 2006. Socratic Virtue. Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad. Cambridge

13 I am grateful to George Rudebusch and Jerry Santas for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.


Aristotle
Ethics without morality?

Johannes Hübner

1. Introduction

In his introductory book *Philosophical Ethics* Stephen Darwall presents Aristotle along with Nietzsche in the part of the book with the title “Philosophical Ethics Without Morality?” The question mark seems to indicate doubt regarding the prospects of doing ethics without morality. In contrast, I will be concerned with the problem whether Aristotle’s ethics is appropriately classified as ethics without morality.

The question presupposes a narrow notion of morality apt to be contrasted with ethics in a more general sense. According to Darwall, ethics is the “inquiry into what we ought to desire, feel, be, or do”, whereas morality is defined as the part of ethics concerned with “universal norms of right and wrong conduct that are held to obligate all persons”, i.e. with moral laws. Darwall separates Aristotle from philosophical moralists such as Hobbes, Mill, and Kant who have a so-called law-based conception of ethics. Darwall marks the contrast to Aristotle’s ethics by describing it as ideal-based. He is hardly alone in thinking of Aristotle as proposing an ethical theory without morality. Especially contemporary proponents of virtue ethics tend to classify Aristotelian ethics in a similar way. E.g., for Elizabeth Anscombe Aristotle is an example that shows how one can do ethics without the concepts of moral law and obligation. For those who want to turn their backs on law-based conceptions of ethics, the attraction of an Aristotelian alternative will in part depend on how to answer the question of this paper.

I follow Darwall in viewing morality and ethics as part and whole, and I also adopt his definition of morality. Darwall’s definition calls attention to three connected features of universal norms: They pertain to right and wrong; they create obligations for action; and, finally, every person is

---

1 Darwall (1998, 5, 14).
held accountable for not violating them. With reference to these features I propose to classify an ethical conception as a moral theory if and only if it satisfies the following conditions:

- It provides terms for the evaluation of conduct as right and wrong.
- It includes the concept of obligations for action.
- It incorporates the idea of obligations for all persons.

For ease of reference, I will call these conditions Evaluation, Normativity, and Universality, respectively. The question of this paper is whether Aristotle's ethics is a moral theory in the sense that it meets the three conditions. However, I will not be concerned to ask whether Aristotle's ethics is law-based. These two problems do not amount to the same question. For while it is not clear from the outset whether Aristotle has a moral theory, it does seem quite obviously inappropriate to credit him with a law-based conception as is found in Stoicism. I will sidestep the latter issue.

A few comments concerning the conditions and appropriate strategies of vindicating their presence in Aristotle's ethics are in order.

**Evaluation:** The first two conditions are closely connected since an action is right if there is an obligation to do it and wrong if one should refrain from doing it. Still, it is worthwhile to consider the first condition separately. Does Aristotle think that conduct is evaluable as right and wrong? A widespread view of Aristotle's evaluative vocabulary suggests a negative answer. Darwall gives expression to the view in the following way: “Aristotle's basic terms for evaluating conduct are noble and base, not right and wrong. He was concerned, not with questions of guilt or innocence, but with what gives cause for shame and proper pride.” Darwall makes a contrast between what is noble and base, on the one hand, and right and wrong, on the other. This contrast is intelligible only if the two pairs of notions are presumed to be conceptually independent. So Darwall seems to be committed to denying that ‘x is noble’ implies ‘x is right’ and that ‘x is base’ implies ‘x is wrong’. In order to assess this view it is necessary to examine Aristotle's basic evaluative terms, their relation to ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and their criterion of application.

**Normativity:** Normative terms are usually seen as identical or conceptually connected with terms expressing obligations for action. Since permissive notions are easily definable with the help of terms of obligations, it is not necessary to discuss them explicitly.

---

4 Cf. the opening of Chrysippus, *On Law*: “Law is king of all things human and divine. Law must preside over what is honourable and base, as ruler and as guide, and thus be the standard of right and wrong, prescribing to animals whose nature is political what they should do, and prohibiting them from what they should not do.” (LS 67 R; SVF 3.314)


order to prove that Aristotle’s ethics meets the condition of Normativity one should not only look out for uses of ‘ought’ and similar terms. It is also relevant whether and how he deals with questions of responsibility, or, to use Darwall’s phrase, whether he was concerned “with questions of guilt or innocence”. For if an ethical standard creates obligations, any agents whose conduct fails to measure up will be potentially subject to blame and punishment.

Universality: Ethical evaluation might be normative in this sense and still be relative to properties of the individuals, e.g. sex, age, social status, political power, wealth, and culture. An ethical theory providing for universal standards of right and wrong conduct would rule out such relativisms. For this reason, I will ask whether according to Aristotle right and wrong (or, for that matter, noble and base) cross cultural borders.

2. Evaluation

There are at least two sets of evaluative terms in Aristotle’s ethics: those pertaining to agents and their characters and those concerned with actions and intentional attitudes such as desire and decision. Terms from either set are connected with the central concept of ethical virtue (aretê) and its contrary, vice (kakia). The man of good character is the one who possesses the virtues. He is called spoudaios (‘excellent’), agathos (‘good’) and epieikês (‘decent’). The vicious man is called krokos (‘bad’), mochthêros (‘depraved’) and phaulos (‘inferior’, ‘mean’). Actions and intentional attitudes are positively evaluated as kalon (‘noble’, ‘fine’), agathon, spoudaios and orthos (‘correct’), and negatively as aischron (‘base’, ‘shameful’) and phaulon. The connection of these terms with virtue and vice is that noble deeds are in accordance with virtue whereas base deeds are done in accordance with vice.

In order to elucidate the meaning of these terms and their connection with what is right and wrong one has to turn to Aristotle’s conception of the virtues. The part of the soul to which the virtues belong participates

---

7 Aristotle distinguishes ethical virtues such as courage from intellectual virtues such as wisdom. I will omit the adjective when it is clear that ethical virtue is meant.
8 Concerning character: for spoudaios cf. e.g. Cat. 8.10b7; EN I.13. 1102b8; III.4. 1113a32; X.5. 1176a16, X.6. 1176b25. For agathos cf. e.g. EN I.13. 1102b5; II.3. 1104b33; X.6. 1176a18. For epieikês cf. e.g. EN. IX.4. 1166b28. For kakos cf. e.g. EN I.13. 1102b5; II.3. 1104b33; III.1. 1110b30. For phaulos cf. e.g. EN I.13. 1102b8; EE VII.5. 1239b13. For mochthêros cf. e.g. III.1. 1110b28; IX.8. 1169a13. Concerning actions and attitudes: for kalon cf. e.g. EN III.5. 1113b9–12; III.6. 1115a12. For spoudaios cf. e.g. EN VI.2. 1139a25; VII.4. 1148a23. For orthos in application to desire cf. e.g. EN VI.2. 1139a24–5; An. III.10. 433a26–7. For aischron cf. e.g. EN III.5. 1113b9–12; VII.8. 1150a28. For phaulon cf. e.g. EN VII.1. 1145b12–3; VII.2. 1146a10–6.
in reason in a way and is the seat of emotions and desires. Although not reasonable by itself, this part is “capable of listening to reason and obeying it”.  

Reason is the faculty which commands and governs emotions and desires. Virtue, the excellence of this part, is by definition dependent on reason: it “is a disposition issuing in decisions, depending on intermediacy of the kind relative to us [= relative to circumstances of our action], this being determined by rational prescription (logos) and in the way in which the wise person (phronimos) would determine it.”

A few comments are in order. Emotions are connected with pleasure and pain, and appetite strives for gain of pleasure and avoidance of pain. If pleasure and pain have such a role, then at least some emotions provide motives for action. Since virtue is the excellent quality of the emotional soul, the emotions of the virtuous person give rise to the right motives and decisions. Emotions are correct if they conform to what is required (to deon) by whatever circumstances the agent is confronted with. The corresponding motives and decisions will be as they ought to be, i.e. they will be right. The requirements are variable and can be characterized only schematically as avoidance of “deficiency and excess”. To give an example, a soldier should neither attack too rashly nor retreat too willingly. In general, the virtuous person is properly affected in a given situation just in case her emotions are neither too strong nor too weak and neither arise too often nor too rarely – that is, if she reaches the intermediate point between the extremes.

What this amounts to in particular situations must be determinable by the “wise person” (phronimos) and the “rule” or “prescription” (logos). Practical wisdom (phronêsis) is one of the intellectual excellences and distinguishes the person who is able to deliberate well about “what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general”. It is not quite clear how to render logos in this context and how to view its relation to phronimos. On one possible interpretation logos refers to the type of rule wise people apply when they perceive a concrete situation in the light of their practical experience (“in circumstances of type C one should do x”). Another interpretation takes logos to stand for a more specific prescription so that

---

10 EE II.1. 1219b30, 1220a1, 21–2.
11 EN II.6. 1106b36–1107a2. The translations are from Rowe (Broadie & Rowe 2002).
12 For the requirements (to deon) cf. II.6. 1107a4; II.3. 1104b22; II.6. 1106b21–23; III.2. 1112a5–11; III.7. 1115b15–20; III.11. 1119a12–18; VI.12. 1144a17.
13 EN II.2. 1104a12.
15 EN VI.5. 1140a28.
16 This suggestion is due to Geoffrey Lloyd.
the contrast to the wise person would be less clearly marked ("in this situation you should do x").\(^{17}\) But whether we construe them as general or specific, (correct) prescriptions are practical truths. Since practical truth is a matter of practical wisdom, Aristotle’s definition makes virtue conceptually dependent upon practical wisdom. The correctness (orthon) of virtue is in accordance with practical wisdom.\(^{18}\) As practical wisdom tells us what we ought to do it follows that aretai notions are dependent upon the deontic ‘ought’ (dei). The upshot with regard to Aristotle’s terms for evaluating is that in any given circumstances of action there are requirements (to deon) which are determinable by practical wisdom.\(^{19}\) Since virtuous action has to meet these requirements,\(^{20}\) judging an action to be virtuous (fine, good) implies judging it to be right. Correspondingly, base (vicious, bad) actions fail to meet the requirements of wisdom, so saying that the action is base entails that it is wrong.

There is evidence that Aristotelian evaluative vocabulary incorporates the distinction between right and wrong. (i) Mistakes (harmatia) in conduct consist in not behaving as one ought to.\(^{21}\) Such mistakes can be due to ignorance “of what one should do and what one should abstain from”. As Aristotle points out, “it is because of this sort of mistake (hamartia) that there come to be unjust people, and bad people in general.”\(^{22}\) It seems unavoidable for Aristotle to say that mistakes resulting from this kind of ignorance are cases of wrong behavior. (ii) According to Aristotle the demands of virtue correspond to the laws of a good state since what the laws order and forbid is just what the virtues require, provided that “the law has been laid down correctly”.\(^{23}\) So conformity to virtue determines the correctness of laws, and to know the laws is to know whether actions are right or wrong. Therefore, an action is right if it conforms to virtue and wrong if it does not. (iii) The Greek words dikaios and adikos not only mean ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ but can also be used in a general sense which has to be rendered by ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Aristotle incorporates this sense


\(^{18}\) EN X.8. 1178a18.

\(^{19}\) EN II.2. 1103b31–34; III.5. 1114b29; III.7. 1115b19.

\(^{20}\) This condition is only necessary and not sufficient. In addition, fine action is for the sake of what is fine. EN II.4. 1105a32; III.7. 1115a12–3, 23; IV.1. 1120a24; VI.12. 1144b19–20.

\(^{21}\) EN III.7. 1115b15–20.

\(^{22}\) EN III.1. 1110b28–30.

\(^{23}\) EN V.1. 1129b19–25. Cf. V.2. 1130b22–24: “broadly speaking most of the things enjoined by law are those that are prescribed from the point of view of excellence as a whole; for the law prescribes that one should live in accordance with each excellence and forbids living in accordance with each corresponding bad state.”
by his notion of general justice. General justice is the sum of all virtues insofar as their actualization concerns others: “the person who possesses it has the capacity to put his excellence to use in relation to another person as well, and not just by himself.”24 For Aristotle, saying that an action is in accord with general justice is a way of evaluating it as right. These three points support the conclusion that there is, after all, an intimate conceptual connection between Aristotle’s evaluative terms and the concepts of right and wrong.

The next step is to consider their criterion of application. We have already seen that practical wisdom is the excellence that enables the agent to understand what is right and wrong. Since practical syllogisms need general premises, Aristotle talks about principles for the sake of which everything should be done.25 But although there are rules about what one should do and what one should refrain from doing, there is no single most general principle from which all the other, more specific rules are to be inferred. This raises the question of what point of reference constitutes the starting point of practical wisdom. Since practical wisdom is defined as excellence in understanding what the good life of human beings consists in, the point of reference must be provided by a conception of good human life.

Any correct account of the human good will have to take into account that human beings “by nature” live in families and cities.26 Aristotle shares the Platonic assumption that individual life succeeds only within a community. The requirements of social life will impose restrictions on any conception of the good. Here what Aristotle calls the “other-regarding” aspect of morality comes into play: every virtue is to be conceived in such a way as to make it intelligible that its exercise involves taking into account the interests of others.27 This does not mean that the wise person proceeds in two independent steps: figuring out what personal values make his individual life satisfying and then adding some restrictions necessary to secure a place for her within society. Rather, developing a conception of the good life and taking into account the interests and values of others should be seen as two aspects of the same project. Insight into what we owe each other and insight into what makes our life worthwhile belong together. The conception of good life is ultimately what enables us to evaluate action as right and wrong.

24 EN V.1. 1129b29–31. One might say that morality in the modern sense is defined by the other-regarding perspective (cf. Wolf 2007, 114–5). I do not want to stress this point in order to be faithful to Darwall’s definition of morality.
25 EN VI.5. 1140b15–19; cf. VI.12.1144a31–36.
26 EN I.7. 1097b11; VII.12. 1162a18; IX.9. 1169b18–9; Pol. I.2. 1253a1–18.
27 EN V.1. 1129b27, 1130a4; VI.11. 1143a32.
It remains to consider the presumed links between base and noble and shame and pride. Darwall describes Aristotle’s view in the following way: “What is ignoble and base gives cause for shame, not for guilt. Shame is the feeling we have when we see ourselves as worthy of disdain, scorn, or ridicule, whereas guilt is what we feel when we see what we have done as culpable or blameworthy. For Aristotle, the distinctively human ethical categories concern, not culpability, but what is worthy of or beneath one.”  

Consider, first, the attitude of shame. If Darwall were right, Aristotle should provide a prominent place for shame, e.g. by subscribing to the claim of Phaedrus in Plato’s *Symposium* that without a “sense of shame and striving towards fine things neither state nor individual could do anything great and fine”. But in fact shame plays only a minor role in Aristotle’s ethics. It concerns one’s reputation among apparently good people and is “defined as a kind of fear of disrepute”. Though sense of shame is a good thing for young people to have, it is not the final aim of moral education but rather a step towards it. The ultimate aim is virtue; once a man possesses the virtues he will avoid all actions about which one should feel shame. So, contrary to Darwall’s suggestion, shame is not a crucial element in obtaining what is noble.

At first sight, pride might seem even less important for Aristotle, but, provided that we understand pride in the sense of self-respect, there is some support for this part of Darwall’s position. If self-respect means that a person (correctly) believes her own conception of life to be worthwhile and (correctly) judges herself to be able to realize her conception, then self-respect is tantamount to the kind of harmony that Aristotle takes to be the mark of the virtuous man. In the virtuous man, desire, reason and action are in tune with each other since he desires what his reason judges to be good and acts accordingly. So fine actions are such that pursuing them advances self-respect. But this partial vindication of Darwall’s position does not amount to showing that Aristotle’s evaluative terms do not imply ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. For fine actions are not fine because of their connection with self-respect; rather they allow for self-respect because they are fine and because they are in accord with a worthwhile conception of life.

---

29 Darwall (1998, 206).
30 Plato, *Symposium* 178d.
31 For the idea of shame as a central ingredient in early Greek thought and culture cf. Dodds (1951, ch. II). Dodds claims that between Homer and Plato a transition from shame-culture to guilt-culture took place.
32 EN IV.9. 1128b11–2; cf. EE III.7. 1233b26–29; Rhet. II.6.
33 Cf. Rawls (1971, § 67). The qualification ‘correctly’ is added.
3. Normativity

Now let us briefly consider the condition of Normativity. Does Aristotle have the concept of obligations for action? We have already noted Aristotle’s assumption that circumstances of action present the agent with certain requirements (to deon). The decent man is affected in the way he should be affected and does what he should (dei) do. The brave is even prepared to die for the good of his country.35 “For bravery consists in following reason, and reason enjoins (keleuei) to choose the noble.”36 It seems unavoidable to equate what the agent is required to do, or what he should so, with what he is obliged to do. It is the task of practical wisdom to understand one’s general and particular obligations with an eye towards the conception of good life.

Further evidence for the thesis that Aristotle’s ethics includes the concept of obligation is afforded by the fact that in EN book III Aristotle explores our responsibility for action and character. It is hard to see how to reconcile this fact with Darwall’s claim that Aristotle was not concerned with questions of guilt or innocence. According to Aristotle, we are held responsible for voluntary action and, contrary to Darwall’s hypothesis, we are subject to blame (psogos) and punishment (kolasis)37 if we voluntarily do shameful things. Such sanctions imply that there is an obligation to refrain from doing what is shameful. One might argue that for Aristotle punishment is not necessarily connected with the idea of obligation, on the basis of the fact that he describes it as “a kind of medical treatment”.38 However, the case of medical treatment Aristotle has in mind is special in that the person herself is responsible (aitios) for the disease39 and held accountable.

4. Universality

According to the condition of Universality an ethical theory is a moral theory only if it incorporates the idea of obligations for all persons. Normativity and Obligation are necessary for Universality but not sufficient. If a religion forbids eating meat on Friday, its members are obliged to refrain from eating meat on Friday. Within the religion, refraining from eating meat on Friday is not a matter of taste but a matter of observing a criterion of wrong and right. Still, the criterion is not universal since it does not require obedience of all persons but only of all believers. If a member eats meat on Friday he fails not qua

36 EE III.1. 1229a1–2.
37 EN III.1. 1109b31, 35; 1110b33; III.5. 1113b21–1114a3.
38 EN II.3. 1104b16–18.
39 EN III.5. 1113b30.
Universality implies equality of all persons with respect to universal norms. Accordingly, Darwall rests his case for the absence of Universality in Aristotle's ethics partially upon the following claim: “Nor does any doctrine of ethical equality play a significant role in Aristotle’s thought (as is evident in Aristotle’s views about women and slaves in the Politics [1252a 31–1252b 1; 1259b 18–12; [sic] 1260b 20]).”40 No doubt Aristotle’s views about women and slaves are among the least attractive elements of his political thought. He claims that slaves and women are “by nature” ruled and that ruler und ruled differ in kind.41 Nonetheless I think it would be a mistake to infer that Aristotle is not concerned with ethical equality. Rather, Aristotle mistakes differences of sense and ethnicity for differences which justify ethical inequality. We should distinguish questions concerning Aristotle’s conception of morality from question concerning his view of persons, or human beings. Ethical equality does matter for Aristotle. He thinks that the best constitution available to the majority of states should be “common and equal”, which implies that the interests of all citizens are to be supported equally.42 At the same time in his view many people are not (not even in capacity) citizens, and with this we cannot agree. But concerning the structure of Aristotle’s ethics we may distinguish the two points and focus on the question whether what is ethically right and wrong is so for all citizens, while the question whether all human beings are taken to be (potential) citizens in the full sense may be neglected. If according to Aristotle not all human beings are subject to the same ethical considerations, this is due to his view of human beings, not to his conception of ethics.

A second argument against the presence of Universality in Aristotle’s ethics focuses on the normative role Aristotle ascribes to the virtuous man: the virtuous man is distinguished by his “ability to see what is true in every set of circumstances, being like a carpenter’s rule or measure (kanôn kai metron) for them”.43 The normative function of the virtuous man is captured by the claim that if something, e.g. a possible course of action, seems F to the virtuous man it is F, where proper substitutions for F are ‘good’, ‘honourable’, and even ‘pleasant’.44 This claim might seem to support cultural relativism. One might say that the criterion of what is truly

41 Pol. I 13, 1259b37.
43 EN III.4. 1113a31–33.
good is provided not by some rule of reason or by virtue in the abstract, but rather by some concrete virtuous man. Now, the argument runs, concrete men live in different cultures and are brought up differently. If chastity is considered a virtue in community A but not in B, chaste behavior will seem good only to the virtuous man who has grown up in A. Though he will serve as the reference point of decent behavior within A, there would be no point in appealing to him to condemn unchaste behavior within B or to decide whether unchaste behavior is wrong in an absolute sense.

This argument does not seem convincing to me, for two reasons. First, the argument presupposes that when Aristotle talks about the virtuous man as a “measure” what he has in mind is a concrete person who has been brought up within the customs of a given community. But it is not clear that Aristotle means to contrast the virtuous man who is a “measure” with virtue abstractly conceived. On the contrary, in one passage he refers to both virtue and the good person as “measure” as if the two were interchangeable. The sentence concerns what is truly pleasant and runs thus: “It is virtue and the good person, in so far as he is such, that is the measure for each sort of thing.” Saying that what does not seem pleasant to the virtuous person is not truly pleasant is equivalent to saying that an action cannot be truly pleasant if it violates the requirements of some virtue. So the virtuous person is not an extra norm over and above virtue abstractly conceived.

Second, in appealing to the good person as measure, Aristotle does not intend to avoid the idea of an independent norm of good altogether. Rather, he postpones reference to some independent norm. To see this, consider two ways we might think of the virtuous man: either he is perfectly good, or he is good, but only imperfectly. In the first case the claim ‘what seems good to the virtuous man is good’ turns out to be analytically true, comparable to ‘x is red if x would look red to standard observers in standard conditions’. The claim must be true since the perfectly virtuous person is defined as someone to whom nothing appears as good without being so. But this definition refers to an independent notion of the good. If on the other hand the virtuous man is only imperfectly good, there are some bad actions that nevertheless appear good to him. Therefore, we should qualify the claim and say that x is good if x seems good to the virtuous person insofar as he is good. (Note that Aristotle himself provides a similar qualification in the sentence quoted above.) As in the first case, the explanation makes reference to a notion of the good that must be independent of any particular good person. So the criterion of what is truly good is ultimately not provided by any concrete virtuous man.

45 EN X.5. 1176a17–8.
Further, the argument against Universality rests on the tacit assumption that the supposedly virtuous men in communities A and B are virtuous although only in A chastity is considered a virtue. But this assumption is questionable if Aristotle thinks that virtue is to be ascribed with reference to some independent notion of good. If chastity is a virtue, this must be true for all communities. Thus for Aristotle the man in B lacks a virtue. In order to become virtuous he would have to distance himself from the customs of B.

Now I want to put forward an argument for the claim that Aristotle’s ethics satisfies the condition of Universality. In my discussion of Aristotle’s terms for evaluating conduct I have appealed to the conceptual connection between virtue and correct prescription (logos). EN VI starts with a reminder that the nature of the correct prescription is yet to be clarified, followed by a promise to fill the gap. Aristotle does not, as might be expected, fulfill this promise by giving a general rule, a principle similar to the golden rule which might be used to derive some more specific action-guiding rules. In fact, there is no hint that we could appeal to something comparable to the golden rule to derive correct prescriptions. Instead, he devotes his discussion entirely to practical wisdom (wisdom, for short) and its relation to other intellectual excellences. Aristotle even goes so far as to identify the correct prescription with wisdom. To make sense of book VI we need to assume that insight into the nature of wisdom is the key to our understanding of the determining mark (horos) of correct prescription. Consequently, it is to his account of wisdom that we should turn in trying to answer the question whether Aristotle thinks of ethical evaluation as universal.

Wisdom is defined as “true disposition involving rational prescription, efficacious of action” in the sphere of what is good and bad for human beings.” So wisdom entails both a correct conception of the human good and the capacity to act accordingly in particular circumstances. Aristotle stresses both aspects. On the one hand, he contrasts the technical concern for a restricted sphere of expertise such as health with the wise man’s concern for “what sort of things conduce to the good life in general”. The wise man develops and adopts a correct conception of the good for man. Although we do not choose to be happy, we do choose a kind of life, the decision for the right kind of life being the most important practical truth.

47 “Efficacious of action” renders praktikê; “has to do with action” (Rowe) seems too weak.
48 EN VI.5. 1140b5–6.
the wise man is capable of attaining. On the other hand, Aristotle makes it clear that the wise man's conception of the human good must bear upon his decisions and actions: “Nor is wisdom only concerned with universals: to be wise, one must also be familiar with the particular, since wisdom is efficacious of action and the sphere of action is constituted by particulars.”

The wise man has a certain kind of sensitivity to the requirements imposed on his decisions and actions by the particular situations he finds himself in. Thanks to his conception of the human good, the light in which relevant circumstances present themselves to the wise man favours the right decision so that he is moved to a course of actions which benefits both him and others. The second aspect of wisdom requires practical experience (empeiria).

The important result with regard to Universality is that being wise entails having a correct conception of the human good. If the correct prescription (logos) – the element which determines whether a virtue is correct – is a matter of wisdom, the ultimate point of reference for ethical correctness is the good life. Therefore, to show that the standard for ethical correctness is universal is to show that the components of a good life are the same for all human beings. A clear indication that Aristotle holds this to be the case can be found in the course of the ergon argument in EN I.7. The task of this argument is to provide a “more distinct” statement of what happiness is by establishing the function of human beings. The crucial point is that in stating the characteristic activity constituting happiness, Aristotle refers to the species of man and to the specifically human function (1097b34). Though the notion of human nature does not figure prominently in his argument, the distinctions between different forms of life correspond to different natures of plants, non-human animals, and human beings. Since the distinctively human function implies reason (1098a7–8) and corresponds to the human good (1097b27), the human good involves use of reason. So any conception which confines the human good to a life of unreflective pleasure is wrong. This is true not only for the Greeks, but for all human beings. A conception of the human good going beyond recommending use of reason would

---

52 For the notion of practical truth cf. EN VI.2. 1139a22–31.
53 EN VI.7. 1141b14–16.
54 I tend toward the view that this sensitivity is distinctive of (practical) nous in EN VI.12. 1143a35–b5. Nous here seems to be the capacity to see a given set of circumstances as providing starting points or opportunities for good action. My main point in this section does not, however, hinge on this view.
55 EN VI.8. 1142a11–16; VI.11. 1143b14.
56 EN I.7. 1097b23–25.
57 McDowell (1980, 366) defends a neutral interpretation of the ergon argument. He claims that its conclusion remains neutral about any substantive view of happiness. But McDowell admits that the life of “unreflective gratification of appetite” is excluded.
have to take into account that human beings live in families, societies and cities. Since this is another fact about human nature, it rules out cultural relativism.

In general, given that Aristotle’s view of the good life rests on the function and nature of man, the correct conception of the good life is valid for all human beings, as all human beings have the same function and nature. (As noted above, we should disregard Aristotle’s views concerning differences in kind among human beings.) Therefore all human beings (insofar as they have the same function and nature) are subject to prescriptions which ultimately refer to the human good.

5. An Objection

My arguments for the claim that Aristotle’s ethics satisfies the conditions of Normativity and Universality rely on the assumption that ethical virtue conceptually depends on the correct prescription delivered by wisdom. As I pointed out, an action which conforms to virtue must be right in the normative and universal sense because virtue depends on a rational prescription which, in the final analysis, refers to what is good for all human beings. Against this it might be objected that, in emphasizing the dependence of virtue on wisdom, I failed to take into account the fact that wisdom in turn depends on virtue. The mutual dependence of virtue and wisdom suggests a line of thought which may seem to threaten my case for Universality.

Aristotle points out in EN VI.12 that it is impossible to be wise without possessing the virtues, for wisdom without virtue would be mere cleverness in carrying out any aim whatsoever. But the ends of a wise person are good, so that good ends serving as principles or starting points of practical syllogisms must present themselves as good to the wise man. Good ends present themselves as good only to the virtuous: “for virtue makes the goal correct, while wisdom makes what conduces to it correct.” If wisdom does not prescribe ends but rather uncritically adopts the ends of virtue, some kind of cultural relativism seems unavoidable. In education (the objection continues) we are trained to confirm to traditional sets of virtues established in our communities so that, if the training succeeds, we pursue just those

59 EM VI.12. 1144a23–b1.
60 EN VI.12. 1144a8–9. Cf. EE II.11. 1227b12–1228a2; EN VI.12. 1144a20–22; VI.13.1145a2–6; VII.8. 1151a15–19. This role of wisdom accords with Aristotle’s views that wisdom is excellence of the deliberating faculty of soul and that “we deliberate, not about ends, but about what forwards those ends.” (EN II.3. 1112b11–2)
goals which are required by the traditional set. This is true of all of our goals, no matter whether they define our conception of the good life or are only means to ends. If there is no independent standard of correctness, evaluation of a goal as good amounts to nothing more than saying that the goal accords with the traditional set. Wisdom cannot provide such a standard because, as we have just seen, it depends on the prior adoption of goals that are determined by what virtue demands. This means that nothing but the traditional set of virtues gives content to our notion of what is good. There is no difference between genuine virtue and what is considered a virtue within a given community.

Though the objection touches on a controversial question of interpretation, I think it is clear that there must be something wrong with it. As we have noted in discussing the nature of virtue, the emotional soul the excellence of which is virtue should obey reason. Just like Plato, Aristotle claims that reason should rule. But if the objection were correct, Aristotle would end up with Hume’s concept of reason as the “slave of the passions”.

If something went wrong, what is it? First we should note the question Aristotle is concerned with in VI.12: what use are the intellectual excellences, especially wisdom? Aristotle focuses on the perspective of those who already possess the virtues. The sentence “for virtue makes the goal correct, while wisdom makes what conduces to it correct” serves to vindicate the usefulness of wisdom from this perspective. If a person is (in a way) already virtuous, her goals are bound to be correct. But if she lacks wisdom, her actions often fail to attain what is good since she is not able to organize her ends properly. Wishing to devote one’s life to the benefit of others is one thing, but doing so in a well deliberated and effective way is another, one that is clearly within the area of competence proper to wisdom. Having an adequate long-term plan how to achieve the end is correctness in “what conduces to the end”, viz. a conception of the good life. So we can see that the sentence quoted does not contradict Aristotle’s statements to the effect that getting things right concerning the conception of life is a task of wisdom. The first part of my answer to the objection, then, is that wisdom is essentially involved in developing correct goals of action.

The second part emerges if we look more closely at Aristotle’s argument for the dependence of wisdom on virtue. What I want to suggest is that the

---

62 Such a person would have habituated virtue but not virtue in the strict sense which might be called reflective virtue. Reflective virtue presupposes wisdom.
63 A similar point is made by Taylor (2003, 145).
64 In order to avoid inconsistency one should include in “what conduces to the end” (ta pros to telos, VI.13. 1145a6; 1144a7–8) the components of good life. Cf. Bostock (2000, 94).
way wisdom depends on virtue is not the same as the way virtue depends on wisdom. Aristotle explains that wisdom is not “without virtue, as has been said and as is clear in any case; for chains of practical reasoning have a starting point (archê) – ‘since the end, i.e. what is best, is such-and-such’ (whatever it may be: for the sake of argument let it be anything one happens to choose), and this is not evident except to the person who possesses virtue, since badness distorts a person and causes him to be deceived about the starting points of action. So it is evident that it is impossible to be wise without possessing virtue.”

In the passage to which he refers with “as has been said”, Aristotle explains that only the starting points of practical, but not those of theoretical thinking are “corrupted by pleasure and pain”. The reason is simply that practical thinking is practical, i.e. thinking which “sets in motion” and provides the starting points for action. An example might illustrate the point. If someone is convinced that helping others is good, he will be moved to act accordingly in appropriate circumstances. Whenever he is aware of a helpless person, the fact that there is a helpless person will move him to help. This is the force of a practical conviction. Accordingly, acquiring a practical conviction is not a matter of gaining theoretical knowledge. The relevant process is conditional on the state of the emotional soul and phantasia, i.e. on virtue. The way certain circumstances affect the just soul is such that the circumstances present themselves as reasons for acting. By contrast, if a person is “corrupted by pleasure and pain” he is not in the least moved to help when he sees helpless people. Therefore, helping others cannot seem good to him because otherwise he would be moved to help. That helping is good cannot be made evident to him by way of argument because he lacks the sense for what is good and bad.

A similar point is made in VII.8. 1151a14–19. In the course of a comparison of the incontinent and the self-indulgent person Aristotle explains that it is “easy to persuade the former that he should change his behaviour, the latter not”. The reason is that the self-indulgent will not be sensitive to rational criticism since the principles of practical reasoning cannot be made evident to him. The only way to change his practical convictions would be a complete reversal of character by reeducation, which Aristotle regards as impossible.

We are now in a better position to understand in what way wisdom is conditional on virtue. The dependence is not conceptual but rather

---

65 EN VI.12. 1144a30–36.
66 EN VI.5. 1140b11–21.
67 EN VI.2. 1139a36.
68 For phantasia and phainesthai cf. EN III.4. 1113a30; III.5. 1114a31–b3; VII.8. 1150b28; de Anima III.11. 434a5–10.
psychological. The vicious man cannot believe that things which actually are good are good because his practical principles are corrupted. He is not capable of rational criticism with regard to his own practical convictions, but that does not imply that rational criticism is not possible at all. The wise person is capable of reflecting on practical convictions, those of another person as well as those he holds himself. He will reject the convictions of the vicious (though he will not be able to make this clear to the vicious), and he will understand why his own convictions and virtues are good because he will recognize in what way they conduce to the human good. (In this way he will achieve virtue in the strict sense, i.e. the reflective sort of virtue which is confirmed by wisdom.) As a matter of psychological fact he would not have the capacity of critical reflection if he were not virtuous. But that does not mean that he has to rely upon an already accepted set of virtues as an unquestioned standard of correctness. What provides the standard is not virtue but reason and insight into the human good, even though only the virtuous person can apply this standard. Therefore, the objection fails.

6. Conclusion

I have tried to show that Aristotle’s ethics meets the three conditions of Evaluation, Normativity and Universality. Insight into the human good, combined with practical experience, provides a criterion of right and wrong conduct and makes the agent sensitive to obligations which arise in any particular circumstances and require obedience by all persons. If my arguments are successful, Aristotle’s ethics is a moral theory.

References

Korsgaard, C.M. (1996), The Sources of Normativity, Cambridge: CUP

Aristotle: Ethics without morality?


Aristotle on friendship as the paradigmatic form of relationship

Jan Szaif

Aristotle’s books on friendship contain the most elaborate theory of friendship among the philosophical writings of Greek antiquity that have been preserved for us. The first section of my paper will discuss why friendship is a central theme in Aristotle’s ethics, while it is usually marginalized in modern moral theory. In section (2), I will elaborate why, among the various forms of affectionate interpersonal relationship, friendship serves as the paradigm in Aristotle’s ethics. I will also formulate a thesis according to which this paradigm points to a life of shared philosophical activities as a form of life that transcends traditional social role-models and their underlying values. I will then (3) outline some of the essential elements of Aristotle’s analysis of the essence of philia (friendship) in order to confirm my thesis. Finally (4), I will critically discuss the merits of a modern objection against Aristotle’s theory – one that claims that his theory doesn’t do justice to the specifically individual character of genuine friendship.

1. Why is friendship a central theme in Aristotle’s ethics?

While in the context of ancient Greek philosophical ethics friendship was treated as a very significant topic, the situation is strikingly different in modern moral philosophy. Although one can notice a certain revival of the topic of individual attachments in contemporary philosophical debates, the general tendency in the modern era has been to neglect or, at least, to marginalize this topic. How can we explain this difference?

The basic concern of moral theory in the modern era has been to analyze and justify the moral norms which set limits to our individual pursuit of happiness. A crucial assumption in the background has been the idea that there is an antagonistic conflict between the inclinations of our natural self-love and the norms of morality. From the point of view of this assumed antagonism,
the partiality of exclusive friendships appeared to be a manifestation of our natural self-love and potentially in conflict with the requirements of morality.

In order to explain why ancient philosophical ethics, and Aristotle’s ethics in particular, had a very different approach to this matter, I need to say something about the basic tasks of ethical theory as conceived by the Greeks. Ancient ethical theory is, first and foremost, a theory of the good or happy human life (eudaimonia) and of the qualities that make up an excellent character (the forms of ‘virtue’, aretē). More generally, it is also a theory of the human goods required for a human life to fully succeed and to achieve excellence and happiness. Friendship is viewed as one of the basic human goods and, at the same time, as closely connected to the topic of virtue, since it is assumed that only people with a sufficiently good character can appreciate and maintain genuine friendship. Let’s elaborate a bit on those claims and the concepts involved.

Greek philosophy generally assumed that a human being, once he or she has sufficiently developed the rational capacity to form an idea of her life as a whole, takes a fundamental interest in the quality and success of her life. To be sure, humans often act in ways that are contrary to the goal of leading a good and happy life. Yet in doing so, they don’t change their fundamental self-regarding goal but rather miss it due to deficiencies in their character formation or practical intelligence.

Accordingly, the starting point of ancient ethical theory was not a concern for the clarification and justification of moral duty, but rather for the clarification of the goal we all want to achieve anyway – qua rational beings – even though we may not yet have a correct understanding of this goal. The term “eudaimonia” serves as a label for the excellent condition of a human life, whatever that condition may consist in.

I hasten to emphasize that it is very hard to find a good equivalent for the term “eudaimonia” in English. The traditional translation “happiness” is misleading since the word “happiness” tends to be understood as a name for a certain way of experiencing one’s life, a specific mood or feeling, while the emphasis of the Greek term is on the objective quality of a life. Originally, this word means a ‘blessed’, ideally prosperous, life – which already suggests the idea that eudaimonia results from the acquisition or realization of certain goods. The conventional, pre-philosophical, view is that a life is ideally prosperous if it acquires and maintains great social, bodily, and material goods: lasting reputation, a healthy and handsome body, wealth, a thriving family, etc. Philosophical theories likewise view eudaimonia as resulting from the acquisition or realization of certain central goods (or a central good). But they develop a different understanding regarding what kinds of goods constitute the best human life, the emphasis now lying on goods realized in the soul. In this paper,
I will paraphrase the term “eudaimonia” as “the good and happy life,” but it should be understood that what counts as a eudaimonic life is determined by certain objective standards, not merely by subjective preference. The rational person understands what a truly good life for human beings consists in and tries to adjust his or her preferences accordingly.

So far I have been emphasizing that ancient ethical theory was a theory of the good human life. Yet since leading a good life presupposes the development of certain capabilities and a certain character formation, ancient ethicists also devote great efforts to the analysis of human virtue – or rather human aretê – again a term hard to translate. The word “aretê” can, in this context, signify any kind of acquired stable disposition of the soul (hexis) thanks to which someone is capable of performing well in his life. This includes not only valuable character traits (or ‘ethical virtues’, not necessarily in a specifically moral sense) but also various forms of intellectual knowledge and competence.

Now, in some way or other, all the major ethical schools in antiquity maintained that certain valuable dispositions of the human soul were crucial for the realization of a good human life. But while they agreed that nobody could achieve a good and happy life without an excellent formation of the soul (consisting, say, in ‘wisdom and virtue’), they were divided about whether this excellent formation could also guarantee the happiness (eudaimonia) of one’s life even in the face of adverse external circumstances. They asked, in other words, whether or not a perfect inner disposition of the soul would be self-sufficient – meaning self-sufficient with respect to achieving the overarching goal of a good and happy life. Closely connected was the question of what kinds of goods external to the soul, if any, were needed to preserve the excellence of a human life. Does human eudaimonia require, in addition to wisdom, goods like health, political freedom, and close friendships?

As regards friendship, it was generally agreed that this was a topic deserving close scrutiny, for it was viewed as the highest, or most significant, form of two-person relationship (whereas the law-governed commonwealth was usually seen as the highest form of group-based interpersonal union). It was widely acknowledged that, if there are external goods at all that contribute to our happiness, friendship would be one of the major external human goods, both in view of its role in the progress toward excellence and as an important medium for the eudaimonic activities characteristic of the life of an accomplished person. Yet these intuitions about the significance of friendship also posed a serious challenge to those philosophical ethicists who defended the thesis of the self-sufficiency of the wise and virtuous person: If our happiness depends, at least in part, on the flourishing of our friendships, and if friendships, furthermore, involve a genuine concern for
the well-being of our friends, then our happiness becomes exposed to the misfortunes that may befall our friends and friendships, and it can therefore not be wholly self-sufficient. ²

Among the major ancient ethicists, Aristotle was the one least committed to the problematic idea of the self-sufficiency of wisdom and virtue. He could thus formulate a theory of friendship that strikes us modern readers as better doing justice to the nature and value of friendship than the attempts of other ancient schools. Moreover, since he views friendship as an essential expression of human virtue, and an essential component of a happy life grounded in the virtues, it was also consistent of him to give the investigation of friendship a very prominent place in his ethics.

2. Friendship as the paradigm of a freely chosen two-person relationship

I have talked about the different approaches of ancient and modern ethical theory and about why the topic of individual relationships is a central concern for ancient Greek ethics while modern moral theory tends to neglect it. Next, I want to discuss the reasons for the reduced contemporary relevance of specifically that kind of individual relationship which is called friendship, as compared to other types of two-person relationship. For even those contemporary philosophical approaches that pay much attention to the significance of affectionate, interpersonal relationships would focus on a broader notion of love that encompasses relations with a sexual component, rather than on friendship. Aristotle’s analysis of friendship, to be sure, is incorporated in a broader investigation of relationships under the heading of “philia” that also touches upon the marital relationship. But marriage, or marriage-like relationships, are clearly not the focus of Aristotle’s investigation of philia. I think it is important to understand the reasons for this difference of emphasis; and for this purpose, we will have to take into account the different cultural and social backgrounds.

It seems characteristic of societies with strong traditional values and no publicly organized welfare that family relations, and also other forms

² The Stoic claim that all good people are friends with each other, whether or not they know each other, can be seen as an attempt to refute the idea of the vulnerability of human happiness through loss of friendship while acknowledging the value of friendship: The friendship between the good is not vulnerable since a good person, whatever the circumstances, remains a friend as long as she remains good (and would no longer be worthy of friendship if she ceased to be good). Death, on the other hand, is no genuine evil so that one does not need to grieve over a friend’s death for the sake of the friend.
of socially defined association and companionship, play a crucial role in
determining the social position of the individual and in providing a social
safety net. The ancient Greek notion of *philia*[^3] can be applied so broadly as
to cover, more or less, all forms of cooperative interpersonal relationships
that result from, and are regimented by, the social and cultural norms of
society, including family relations, political allegiances, and even cooperative
business relations. This would include two-person relationships as well as
group relations.[^4] Yet “*philia*” can also name relationships which, instead
of being primarily the result of given social positions and institutionalized
procedures of association, are founded in the individual choice of two
persons who want to share important aspects of their lives in light of their
shared values and their mutual appreciation and affection. It is a notable
fact that in ancient Greek philosophy this latter type of relationship came to
be seen as the paradigmatic type of *philia*.

Thus, the approach of ancient Greek philosophy is in this respect rather
close to the modern perspective which emphasizes individuality and the
role of personal choice. Yet even so friendship today seems to have lost
its centrality among the freely chosen relationships. A significant factor,
in this respect, seems to be the fact that marriage, or marriage-like forms
of partnership, have gradually taken over some of the crucial qualities
associated with emphatic friendship in ancient conceptions.

To provide some evidence for this claim, we may simply look at a list of
characteristics that were, according to Aristotle, *commonly* associated with
the ideal of friendship (NE 9.4, 1166a2–105). (The chapter in which he gives
this list draws a comparison between self-love and friendship, but we can
neglect this context here. The list is in itself of great interest.)

According to this list, *philia*/friendship is:

1) a mutual attitude of non-instrumental active benevolence (benevolence
exercised “for the other person’s sake”);

[^3]: On the classical ancient notion of *philia* (including the non-philosophical literature)

[^4]: Roughly, two people are ‘friends’ in virtue of a group relation if they are friends in virtue
of belonging to this same group. A two-person friendship, on the other hand, is a type of
friendship that obtains independently of some group affiliation. A two-person-relationship
does not have to be the result of free choice. In a traditional society, marriage is usually
arranged, and so not really a result of free choice, yet still a paradigmatic example of a two-
person-relationship. An example of *philia* defined by membership in a group would be the
type of political *philia* that obtains between members of the same political movement who
can be, say, ‘comrades’ and personal rivals at the same time.

[^5]: A similar list can be found in EE 7.6, 1240a23–b3.
2) a reciprocal desire for the other to continue existing and living, not motivated by mere self-interest;
3) a shared life;
4) a correspondence of preferences;
5) a proneness to share the other's joys and sorrows.\textsuperscript{6}

 Obviously, this set of characteristics could also be used in a description of the modern ideal of marital love. Yet in contrast with Aristotelian friendship, marriage, or marriage-like partnerships, often aim at establishing a family; and they are, today, also supposed to live up to an ideal of 'romantic love' which includes erotic fulfillment.

 It makes of course a huge difference if erotic attraction is a defining factor in a relationship. It is, not least, because of the exclusion of the aspect of erotic attraction that we classify Aristotle's conception of \textit{philia} as a conception of friendship rather than love. (There are, to be sure, other forms of non-erotic love, e.g. parental love, which differ in other ways from friendship proper.) Aristotle includes marital love in his treatise, yet only under the heading of a secondary, 'unequal' form of \textit{philia} which, due to its inequality, cannot satisfy the notion of friendship.\textsuperscript{7} He is, furthermore, not interested in the erotic nature of this type of relationship, in line with the predominant traditional understanding of marriage as a social institution whose main purpose is the formation of a family.

 With respect to Aristotle's treatment of marital love, we should bear in mind some very general facts about the original function of marriage in pre-modern societies (and of course I will have to simplify). The central social function of the institution of marriage seems to have been the procreation of children who would be legitimate heirs with well-defined obligations toward their parents. Since marriages were usually arranged by the parents, they were not the result of free choice based on mutual affection and appreciation. In the Greek society of Plato's and Aristotle's time, marriage was still an institution of this kind. Their culture was, on the other hand, already sufficiently advanced to allow for a concept of love or friendship

\textsuperscript{6} EE 7.6 1240a30–33 (see also 1244a20–30) states that these criteria can conflict with each other, at least in the case of lesser forms of friendship. Yet Aristotle's comments in the remainder of this chapter, and in its twin chapter NE 9.4, imply that the self-love of the good, and likewise the love between the good (i.e. genuine friendship), satisfy all the listed criteria together.

\textsuperscript{7} For the marital relationship see NE 8.10, 1160b33–61a3; 12, 1162a16–33. (Note that at NE 1162a25–27 he qualifies his remarks on the unequal character of marital \textit{philia} somewhat by mentioning that the marital relationship can also acquire the character of a \textit{philia} based on mutual recognition of \textit{aretê} – yet the \textit{aretê} of the male and the female partners are supposed to be different in kind.)
based on individual, autonomous choice. Yet marriage was not yet seen as serving this kind of purpose.8

In contrast with marriage, there was another type of love which was conceived as based on erotic attraction, often involving sexual activity, and which did result from free choice (though not necessarily of the deliberative kind). I mean the homoerotic relationships between males of different age, grown-ups and youngsters, which played an important role in the Greek societies of the archaic and classical eras. The exact role and character of this type of relationship, called ‘paiderastia’, in the various Greek city-states and various social classes is disputed, but there can be no reasonable doubt that in a society like Athens it was a common practice and that it answered, and was regulated by, certain social expectations and conventions. The origin of this erotic model seems to have been a form of initiation of adolescents into the male society, especially into an aristocratic warrior class, which is why this institution played a very significant role in the aristocratic warrior societies of Crete and Sparta. Yet also the very different, democratic society of Athens embraced this practice, although it certainly had to reinterpret it in some way or other because of the cultural differences between Athens and the societies of Sparta or Crete. Moreover, since the Athenian society of the fifth and forth centuries was rather complex and dynamic, and subject to different and incompatible traditions and social values, it probably did not have a homogeneous understanding of the purpose and the norms that should regulate this kind of relationship.

Athenian philosophy, and foremost that of Plato, reacted to the crisis of the ethical and political value system, and in Plato’s case this included extensive considerations about the function and right exercise of paiderastia.10 In Plato, it is indeed this type of relationship which serves as the paradigm of an affectionate two-person relationship, while Aristotle (at least in his extant works) barely mentions it.11 Plato tries to develop and defend a conception of paiderastia according to which it would serve a pedagogical and educational purpose inspired and stimulated by an erotic impulse (yet suppressing the desire for sexual gratification). Why does this type of

---

8 It should be noted that in some Stoic sources, and also in the writings of the later Platonist philosopher Plutarch, we find a new kind of appreciation for marital love which integrates important aspects of the philosophical notion of ethical friendship. For Plutarch, cf. *Amatorius (Erotikos)* 767C ff. (esp. 769A–770A), idem, *Coniug. praec.* 142E ff.; as an example of a Stoic text, cf. Antipater of Tarsos, SVF III, p. 255, l. 11 ff.

9 The standard reference work is Dover 1978.

10 Plato’s aporetic dialogue *Lysis* is dedicated to the notion of *philia* while the *Symposium* and the speeches in the *Phaedrus* address *paiderastia*. For Plato, these two topics are closely connected.

relationship have no place in Aristotle’s theory of *philia*? Plato’s version of *paiderastia* was, of course, an ideal, not a social reality. So Aristotle didn’t have to reflect on it as a real social phenomenon. Yet he does also hint at an ideal of philosophical *philia*. Why is his so different from Plato’s?

Let’s first note that the Greek term “*philia*” does not specifically connote erotic attraction yet also does not exclude it. Thus erotic types of love can be subsumed under the broad notion of *philia*. Now, as regards Aristotle’s attitude toward *paiderastia*, it is quite obvious why it fails to satisfy the Aristotelian criteria for the prime form of *philia* (criteria that I will elaborate on in the next chapter): Relationships that are driven by an erotic *impulse* don’t conform to the idea central in Aristotle that true friendship should result from deliberate choice based on the appreciation of the other person’s ethos. Secondly, *paiderastia* is a clear case of unequal relationship. The social role models for the lover (*erastês*) and the loved one (*erômenos*) are different, as are their age and their social knowledge and experience. The erotic impulse in the *erastês* is triggered by physical beauty in the beloved, while the *erômenos* is supposed to make a reasonable choice that picks a lover based on his *aretê* (in the broad sense of ‘excellence’, as defined by the prevailing social standard that required more than just good looks). The *erômenos* himself was only expected to show the *promise* of future *aretê*, and the relationship was supposed to assist the development of his *aretê*. To be sure, Plato’s reinterpretation of *paiderastia* is based on a different understanding of what it means to have *aretê*, and thus results in a quite different conception of how lovers should act. Yet it confirms at least three basic aspects of *paiderastia* which are incompatible with Aristotle’s model, *viz.* the grounding in a strong erotic impulse (cf. *Phaedrus* 253d–55e), the inequality of the two partners in terms of age and character development, and the difference of role-models for the *erômenos* and the *erastês*.

Yet there is also something crucial that both philosophical ideals of *philia* have in common: The Platonic, no less than the Aristotelian, ideal offers a model of friendship or love that transcends the given social role-models and their underlying values. At least this is a thesis I am defending in this paper. For Aristotle I will try to vindicate this thesis in the next section. Let’s begin, though, with a quick look at Plato’s position in this respect. We can note the following important points (based primarily on the *Phaedrus*):

1) He tries to define new role models for this kind of relationship, toge
with a new conception of the function this relationship ought to serve.

---

12 Compare Aristotle’s comment in EE 7.12, 1245a16–18, on the inequality between teachers and students.
They are derived from a radically new conception of human education—a conception of human education that is essentially ‘philosophical’ in character since it recommends a life dedicated to philosophical and scientific research as the highest form of human accomplishment and as the ideal that should inform the pedagogical erôs at work in this new mode of paiderastia.¹³

2) The philosophical life-form itself has no secured locus within the social framework of the Greek polis (notwithstanding the fact that an ideal polis would be focused on enabling the philosophical life-form and derive its principles of governance from philosophical theory). The philosopher lives quasi outside the economic and political structure of his actual city-state, aloof or, even worse, an obnoxious quibbler in the eyes of his fellow-citizens.¹⁴

Note also that Plato was part of a broader intellectual movement in the wake of Socrates. He was not the only ‘Socratic’ to develop a conception of a philosophically inspired relationship that integrates erôs and philia.¹⁵ We focus on him since his works have been preserved, while those of the other Socratics haven’t (with the exception of Xenophon, who is, in most regards, of lesser interest¹⁶).

I will now return to Aristotle in order to provide some evidence for my claim that his conception of (non-erotic) friendship also points toward a model of philosophical philia based not only on individual choice but also on values that transcend the given social (and also religious) norms.

3. An outline of Aristotle’s analysis of the essence of friendship

We have two long treatises on philia written by Aristotle, one included in his Nicomachean Ethics (NE VIII–IX), the other in his Eudemian Ethics (EE

---

¹³ The theme of education through philosophy is pervasive in Plato’s writings, starting with the early Socratic dialogues and their criticisms of the educational role of poets and other established authorities, but also of the ‘sophists’. In the later periods of his work, most notably in the Republic, this is extended into a broad program of scientific higher education the core of which is provided by philosophical dialectic. In the Phaedrus, the themes of paiderastic love and learning/education come together; compare especially the passage 252e–53a that adumbrates the idea of a pedagogical erôs with the passages 275d–76a, 276e–77a, and 277e–78b, which point out the crucial role of the ‘living logos’ (i.e. dialectic discourse and conversation) in teaching and learning.

¹⁴ Cf. Rep. 487b–497a, Tht. 172c–177c; see also Ferrari 1992, 266f, on how Plato describes erôs as transcending the social norms.


¹⁶ This rather unenthusiastic view on Xenophon’s merits is widely shared, though not everybody agrees. For Xenophon’s Socrates on friendship cf. Mem. II, 4–6.
Aristotle on friendship as the paradigmatic VII). The NE-version is probably the one written later. The fact that the treatise in the NE amounts to roughly one fifth of this entire work is already a strong indication of the significance that this topic has for Aristotle. The two treatises bear many similarities but also differ in some significant ways. For our purposes here, we won’t have to discuss those differences. Although the EE-version is very interesting in its own right, it has come down to us in a somewhat fragmentary condition. Our exposition will be primarily based on the NE-version.

The various kinds of relationships that Aristotle subsumes under the heading of *philia* are classified by him according to two sets of criteria which also serve to single out one kind as the perfect *philia*, or, in other words, as the only kind that fully realizes the notion, or essence, of *philia*.

The first criterion is based on a distinction of three types of value that make things likable (*philêta*) and that can also motivate interpersonal *philia*: One can like something because it is useful, or because it is a source of pleasure, or in response to its intrinsic value. Depending on what sort of interest, or value-response, an interpersonal *philia* is based on – utility, the desire for pleasurable company, or the favorable attitude towards another person’s intrinsic value – different types of friendship emerge. I will distinguish them here as the utilitarian, hedonic, and ethical types of friendship. (When I call the latter type ‘ethical’, this is to be understood in the ancient Greek sense of relating to someone’s *ethos*, i.e. their character and mindset, to the goodness of which this type of friendship responds.)

The second main criterion is whether or not the relationship holds between people that assign each other equal value in the relevant respect. *Philia* between two persons who agree that the one has a higher value in this relationship than the other, would be a case of unequal *philia*. This second classification crosscuts the first one – utility-friendship, for instance,

---

17 A chapter on *philia* as an emotion in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (Rhet. 2.4) is also pertinent. It contains a definition of the notions “*philia*” and “*philos* (friend),” and assembles a number of accepted views or insights on friendship, without systematic treatment. – The text of the EE has been preserved in a very bad state. I am citing the EE after the Walzer/Mingay-edition (Oxford Classical Texts) from 1991, which has a more up-to-date apparatus; yet for the text, I rely for the most part on the more successful Teubner-edition from 1880 by Susemihl. Many of the emendations suggested in the footnotes to Solomon’s fine Oxford translation of the EE (*Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 9. OUP, 1925) are also quite plausible. The *Corpus Aristotelicum* contains a third treatise on friendship which is a part of the *Magna Moralia* (MM). Many scholars, including the author of this paper, believe that the MM is a work of the school of Aristotle. For further discussion, compare Kenny 1978.

19 NE 8.2, 1155b17 ff. (cf. 2.3, 1104b30 f.); see also EE 7.2, 1235b18 ff.
20 NE 8.7; 13, 1162a34–b4; EE 7.3–4 (esp. 1238b16–19, 26–30).
can be of both the equal and the unequal kind (NE 8.13, 1162a34–b4; EE 7.4, 1239a1–4) – but, more importantly, it also allows to address forms of *philia* that are derived from certain natural functions or relations which preclude equality (in Aristotle's eyes) – namely those relations in particular that compose the structure of the family. Aristotle emphasizes that in the case of *philia*, equality, which allows for equal mutual appreciation among the partners, has primacy over unequal relations (NE 8.7, 1158b29–33). It is also those equal relations where the notion of "being friends" (*philoi*, as opposed to the broader notion of *philia*) can be applied more fittingly.21

Aristotle emphasizes that friendship is built upon *goodwill* (benevolence), and that in the case of friendship, this goodwill has to be *reciprocal* (NE 8.2, 1155b27–34) and such that both partners are mutually aware of their attitudes (NE 8.2, 1155b34–1156a5; cf. EE 7.2, 1236a15).

Aristotle finds an order of conceptual priority also among the different forms of equal *philia*. He holds that only *philia* among persons who choose each other out of a mutual appreciation for the other's *intrinsic* value fully satisfies the notion of interpersonal *philia* (NE 8.4, 1157a16–33; EE 7.2, 1236a15–32, b2–5, b20–32). The utilitarian and hedonic kinds of friendship qualify as *philia* only in virtue of certain similarities with this primary kind (NE 8.4, 1157a1, a31f., b5). Crucial in this connection is the notion of *goodwill*. Aristotle holds that only the ethical type involves genuine goodwill, which is why only it fully satisfies the notion of friendship.22 –

---

21 Cf. Konstan 1997, 67–69, on the narrower meaning of "*philoi". – In EE 7.4, 1239a1–21, Aristotle states very clearly that we can talk of *friends* only in the case of equal *philia* while in the case of unequal relations there may be reciprocated *philia*, but not friendship (as in the case of love between children and their mothers). His own usage, however, is not as consistent as the passage in the EE, or Konstan, want to have it (e.g. 1239b2–5; NE 1159b1–2). Yet at least it seems clear that the talk of *being friends* fits better with equal than with unequal relationships.

22 Pangle 2003, 52–56, is right to emphasize that hedonic friendship comes closer to ethical friendship, in Aristotle's analysis, than utilitarian friendship does. Yet she goes much too far in approximating the two. Ethical friendship does not draw its primary stimulus from the interest in pleasurable company but from the high esteem for someone else's practical persona (i.e. the persona constituted and manifested by one's practical choices; cf. Price 1989, 105, 107). This orientation toward virtue is not incompatible with pleasure as a component of shared activities since it is a tenet of Aristotle's ethics that, under normal circumstances, the activities in accordance with *aretê* that contribute to one's *eudaimonia* are also pleasurable, since the unhindered exercise of one's virtues is pleasurable. Yet the virtuous person is not motivated in her decision to act virtuously by an interest in pleasure. – Such a hedonistic calculus, if it provided the primary motive, would invalidate the virtuous quality of the action. – The virtuous motive is to act virtuously (cf. NE 6.12, 1144a11–23; 13, 1144b25–30); the feeling of pleasure only accompanies the action and further enhances its eudaimonic quality, but might also not occur if the circumstances are unfavorable (NE 1153a14f; see also 1174b14–23, 1175a10–16). Similarly, the activities in which the attitude of friendship finds its eudaimonic fulfillment are pleasurable; but
Or this, at least, is the traditional interpretation which I am endorsing. There is a well-known controversy among scholars about whether or not Aristotle means to suggest that only ethical friendship is founded on genuine goodwill for the other person. A number of interpreters, most notably Cooper 1976/77, defend the view that all types of friendship include some form of goodwill toward the other. Yet I am going to disregard this interpretation here since I hold that the traditional reading has better textual support.

See also, for instance, Nussbaum 1986, 355(with footnote)–357, who follows Cooper, and, with some qualifications, Pangle 2003, 45–47. See Price 1989, 149–157, for a cautious but detailed criticism of Cooper’s argument; see also Pakaluk 1998, 61–63.

Aristotle shares some blame for this controversy since his exposition in the NE is somewhat confusing on this specific point: In NE 8.2–3, Aristotle derives his division of three kinds of friendship from the three types of reason for liking something, and, at the same time, provides a sort of definition of friendship that seems to apply to all three kinds of friendship equally. As an interim conclusion, the text states at 1156a3–5 that friendship obtains when two people show goodwill for each other, based on one of the three aspects of likability, and are aware of each other’s attitude. This sounds as if there is one genus of friendship, which includes the element of goodwill toward the other person (and for the sake of the other person) and is divided into three species according to the kind of good or benefit that provides the motive for liking. Yet the continuation of the argument (1156a6–19) makes two things very clear: The hedonic and utilitarian types of friendship are not co-ordinate at the same level with ethical friendship but are, rather, deficient forms of friendship that qualify as friendship only in virtue of certain similarities with ‘genuine’ friendship (cf. 1157a1, a31f., b5). Secondly, they do not include genuine goodwill for the other person. Well-wishing, in their case, is conditional upon the benefit that one reaps from this relationship, instead of being inspired by the intrinsic value embodied in this person’s character (1156a9–24; cf. b7–11). The premise that these lesser types of friendship are not based on goodwill toward the other person, for the sake of this person, is also implied in other passages (listed by Cooper 1976/77, 641, as ‘aberrant’: 1157a14–16; 1164a1–13; 1165b1–4), and (pace Cooper) clearly stated in the chapter on goodwill (NE 9.7, cf. EE 7.7). Now, the apparent inconsistency in Aristotle’s exposition arises from the fact that he first introduces, or seems to introduce, all three types of friendship as involving goodwill for the other person’s sake, yet later restricts goodwill to the case of character-based friendships. Cooper tries to resolve this apparent inconsistency by claiming that hedonic and utilitarian friendships do, after all, also include a genuine, if weaker and more superficial, element of other-regarding goodwill – weaker than in the case of character-friendship because the goodwill, and hence friendship, will vanish once the type of benefit that one expects from this relationship is no longer forthcoming, and more superficial because this kind of goodwill does not require close familiarity with, and appreciation of, the other person’s character. (Cooper seems to have in mind the kind of goodwill and cordiality that a store owner may feel toward a nice costumer of many years, which may manifest itself in little altruistic acts, but will subside once the customer can no longer pay for his purchases; cf. 1976/77, 638f.) – Yet in the face of passages that clearly assert that the lesser types of philia are not based on non-instrumental well-wishing, this is not a satisfactory interpretation of Aristotle. The better way of handling this apparent inconsistency (which, by the way, has no parallel in the corresponding chapter of the EE)
The crucial point of his argument, according to the interpretation that I favor, is based on the following observation: Usefulness is a relational, not an intrinsic value property. Someone is not useful, period, but useful to somebody, useful for some purpose. Similarly, ‘pleasant’ indicates that someone is a source of pleasure for someone else. Thus goodwill, if elicited by my self-regarding observation of the other person’s usefulness, or pleasantness, is not really directed toward this other person, but rather toward myself (cf. 9.5, 1167a15–17), given that my positive attitude toward the other person is conditional upon the benefit, or pleasure, that I can draw from this association. Put in Aristotelian terms, it is directed toward the other person only ‘incidentally’ (kata symbebêkos), pursuant to a non-essential quality that this person bears in relation to me.25

Thus, genuine goodwill, from which genuine friendship develops, has to respond to some value property that characterizes the other person essentially, as the person that he is, irrespective of the causal effects that associating with him can have for me. Yet the intrinsic value in question cannot be a value inherent to every human being qua human being (cf. EE 7.2, 1237a16). After all, friendship is selective. The virtues, on the other hand, are properties that allow to discriminate between different people according to their personal worthiness, and they are also not relational in the relevant way but inhere to the other person’s character and mindset: Somebody is courageous, period (and not just courageous ‘for me’); or he has the virtue of good practical judgment, period (and not just in relation to me).

is to read the statement at 1156a3–5 as an interim conclusion that is going to be qualified in the subsequent steps of the argument. – If we read Aristotle’s account as suggested, the result of his analysis does not need to exclude the possibility of ‘lightweight’ altruistic acts and attitudes in utilitarian or hedonic friendships. They could simply be an aspect of friendliness and generosity that people of good character display toward people they are acquainted with. Yet what Aristotle’s analysis wants to capture is the core motive of friendship. If a businessperson discontinues her contact with a business friend after this friend has gone bankrupt, or if a lover in a superficial relationship starts winding down this relationship when he no longer finds his partner attractive, it becomes obvious that the rationale of the relationship was mutual utility, or pleasure, not attachment to the other person’s personality. Such kinds of ‘friendship’ seem to be frequent enough, and I don’t see why such an analysis should be counted as philosophically too weak, as Cooper and others seem to fear. (I have, by the way, no issue with the other part of Cooper’s main argument, viz. his claim that character friendship in Aristotle is more inclusive than its application to only the paragons of virtue [1976/77, 626–9], notwithstanding the fact that the friendship of perfectly good people serves as the ideal standard.)

25 Cf. NE 8.3, 1156a10–19; 1156b10f.; cf. 9.5, 1167a16f.; 1, 1164a10–13. – Regarding the much discussed question how the various kinds of friendship form a conceptual unity (and how the NE account compares, in this regard, to the application of the notion of ‘focal meaning’ in EE VII), my reading bears some similarity to that developed by Walker 1979 in response to Fortenbaugh 1975. See also Price 1989, 131–161, for a somewhat different solution.
Note that Aristotle maintains (NE 8.3, 1156a10–19, b7–12; 4, 1157b3) that by acknowledging my friend’s intrinsic value I am valuing him for what he is by himself (1156a11), or as the person who he is (hêi estin hosper estin, 1156a17f). As a result, I will act kindly toward him for his own sake, i.e. independently of my self-serving interests (1165b10, cf. 1155b31, 1157b32). Yet, at the same time, Aristotle relates this acknowledgement of the other person’s value to the appreciation of his aretê; and aretê, in Aristotle’s view, is a function of certain commendable character qualities and intellectual strengths.26 But why would appreciating a person’s aretê, being a set of qualities this person happens to have, amount to the same thing as liking him for who he is?

The way Aristotle seems to reduce my recognition of the intrinsic value of another individual to the appreciation of a set of commendable qualities that I perceive in him or her has given rise to some powerful objections against Aristotle’s concept of genuine friendship. I will address them in section 4 of this paper; for now, let me just give a short answer that stays within the framework of Aristotle’s ethical theory:

As has been well set out by Hugh Price (Price 1989, 105–108), it is an Aristotelian principle that, from the point of view of human practice, humans are essentially originators of actions.27 A human agent is an origin of actions by way of engaging in practical deliberations and decisions that are directed toward the goals the agent is intellectually and emotionally committed to. My choices reflect my attitudes (i.e. my ethos), and also retroact on them. Thus they both express, and help to develop, my ‘self’, or ‘persona’ (to use Price’s terminology), and it is as such a ‘persona,’ that I enter into relationships with other ‘choosers’. My value, too, as this particular persona is a function of my practical attitudes together with the choices in which they have resulted. It is for this reason that valuing my friend for who he is – i.e. as this specific persona, or ‘chooser’ – means to value him in light of his ethos.

In what follows, I will focus on this type of friendship which responds to the intrinsic value of a human agent – ‘true friendship’ as Aristotle calls it (NE 1157a24, EE 1236b28, 31) since it alone fully realizes the essence of philia.

26 The word ‘aretê’ can denote any kind of functional excellence of an object of a certain kind. When applied to humans, it can, in the traditional ancient Greek understanding, comprise not only the commendable character qualities (e.g. courage) and intellectual strengths (e.g. practical wisdom), but also other factors that determine the person’s social recognition, like good looks, noble birth, a social rank with much ‘clout’. Aristotle, however, in line with the tradition of philosophical ethics, identifies a person’s aretê specifically with the virtues of his character and intellect.

27 Compare NE 6.2, 1139b5 with 3.3, 1112b31f.; 5, 1113b18f.; EE 2.6, 1222b18–20
Although reciprocal goodwill, inspired by the perception of the other person’s intrinsic value, is the basis of friendship, mere mutual well-wishing is not enough – even if both should become aware of the other’s attitude. For goodwill may stay at the level of temporary, inactive well-wishing, whereas true friendship is a stable and lasting attitude and requires, most importantly, the willingness to act for the well-being of the other (beneficence), and this also in situations that demand great efforts, perhaps even self-sacrifice.28

Friendship, in contrast with falling in love (philēsis), is not an emotional state that befalls us but rather a permanent attitude (hexis) involving a deliberate choice or preference (prohairesis).29 More precisely, it involves a deliberate and openly reciprocal act of choosing the other person as a friend (antiprohairesis, EE 7.2, 1236b3, 1237a32). As an act of deliberate choosing, it is not arbitrary or purely emotional. Rather it is inspired by the recognition of the intrinsic value of the other person.

Genuine friendship is, furthermore, not a fast choice. It cannot be such since it is based on the appreciation of, and trust in, the friend’s character, and it takes a long time to actually know a person and be assured of his character.30

Genuine friendship, no less than the virtues, is an attitude (hexis) that correlates with certain intrinsically valuable activities through which it finds its highest fulfillment. These activities, being intrinsically valuable for the persons who engage in them, are also components of their good and happy lives (eudaimonia); for a virtuous person identifies his or her happiness (or at least its core) with a set of intrinsically valuable activities.31 (Note that the activities characteristic of ethical friendship are not just valuable qua virtuous activities – in that regard, they would only be activations of a virtuous disposition – but also valuable qua active realization of ethical friendship; for friendship, too, is an intrinsically valuable attitude if it results from the right kind of value orientation. And although the value orientation that lies at the basis of ethical friendship is rooted in aretē, it cannot be reduced to aretē since it involves affection for a particular person based on shared values, while the scope of aretē, as such, is never limited to a particular other person.)

As characteristic activities of friendship Aristotle names, on the one hand, acts of help and support for the friend and, on the other, valuable activities

28 NE 8.5, 1157b11–13; 17–19; 9.5, 1166b30–67a12 (see also 4, 1166a3 f.). See also Rhet. 2.4, 1381a1.
29 NE 8.5, 1157b28–31; cf. EE 7.2, 1236b2–6; 1237a30–33.
30 NE 8.3, 1156b24–32; 8.6, 1158a14 f.; 9.10, 1171a1 f.; EE 7.2, 1237b34–38a3.
31 This is implied in Aristotle’ definitions of eudaimonia as developed in NE I and EE I–II.
that they do together, ultimately a shared life. One may wonder how these
two statements fit together. After all, the one kind of activity is one-sided,
asymmetrical: helping and supporting; while the other is symmetrical:
shared activities, for instance the practice of shared philosophical discourse
and investigation. Yet we need to take into account what specific concerns
Aristotle is addressing when he highlights these two aspects. When he
emphasizes the significance of acts of support and help, his explicit point is
that friendship involves both giving and receiving help but that the attitude
(hexis) of friendship is more appropriately, more ‘happily’, exercised in
acts of giving. – Although both kinds of exchange belong to friendship,
the true fulfillment of a friend’s attitude is to be found in giving rather
than receiving.32 – He uses this observation also in order to highlight the
difference between ethical and utilitarian friendships, since receiving benefits
is, indeed, the very point of utilitarian friendship.

When, on the other hand, he talks about shared activities as the fulfillment
of friendship, his point is that friendship is a form of communion, or
intertwining, of lives (biographies) through shared activities.33 If the one
gives while the other receives, it is only the one that gives who can fully
act out his or her friendship. For an activity of friendship to be shared,
both partners have to be equally active, and in such a way that it is their
joint activity. A central example, in Aristotle’s view, is the activity of
conversing with each other.34 A dialogue, in contrast with the alternating, in
tandem performance of two monologues, is essentially a joint activity. Like
friendship itself, dialogue does not obliterate the difference between the two
partners. They remain two distinct selves, each making distinctly their own
contributions to this activity while responding to the other’s contributions;
and by doing so, they bring something about which is essentially a joint
activity, viz. meaningful conversation.

Let’s now take up again my thesis that Aristotle’s theory of friendship,
no less than Plato’s theory of erôs (though in a different way), points to an
ideal of two-person relationship resulting from free choice and inspired by
the value of philosophical practice that transcends the conventional social
values and role-models.

We have to distinguish two claims contained in this thesis that require
some justification, first, the claim that shared philosophical activity provides,
for Aristotle, the highest model of amicably shared practice (1), and, second,
that philosophy is a form of practice that transcends the conventional social

32 NE 8.1, 1155a6–9; 13, 1162b6–8; 9.7, 1167b28 ff.; 8, 1169a18–b2; 9, 1169b10–22; 11,
1171b12–25.
33 NE 8.5, 1157b5–24; 9.12, 1171b29–72a14; EE 7.12, 1245a11–b19.
34 NE 9.9, 1170b10–14 (see also EE 7.12, 1245a13–16).
values and role-models (2). I will be rather brief with respect to the second claim. The first claim, however, needs more scrutiny.

Ad (2): We should distinguish two ways in which a philosophically conceived way of life can stand outside the socially predefined models. It can either be a direct challenge to conventionally accepted conceptions of moral propriety and good judgment – witness the way in which certain Cynics, inspired by the principle that only the norms of nature, not those of social convention, should direct our actions, challenged accepted standards of propriety, for instance by publicly engaging in sexual acts, and ignoring social expectations as to how one should dress. Or it can stand outside the given role-models because it conceives of a new form of activity that has no precedent among the established role models and draws on new values, yet without antagonizing widely accepted standards of moral propriety.

Yet why would one think that a life of philosophical activity stands outside the pre-defined role-models? We know how drastically Plato could emphasize the disengagement of the philosopher with the society he happens to live in. One reason for this was probably the lack of a generally accepted institutional basis for the Platonic program of education through scientific training (and the situation was, in this regard, not much different for Aristotle’s school founded roughly three decades later). But the more important reason for the disengagement of the Platonic philosopher relates to the system of values that inspire the philosophical life. Traditional piety, rooted in myths and ritual practice, and traditional ideas about desirable social success, are replaced by the idea of a life of rigorous scientific activity that will not only yield knowledge of the rational foundations of reality but also reveal the ultimate roots of value and issue in a new form of piety. It will thus provide a theoretical understanding and a set of practical standards for one's life that are independent of, and in many regards incompatible with, the accepted religious ideas and social standards of success. This is the reason why the philosopher, according to Plato, is not at home in the society he happens to live in.

35 Plato was the first to establish some form of institution of higher learning dedicated to rigorous standards of argumentation and methodology. But it was a private initiative, with no legal status that would have done justice to its educational and scientific purpose, and, more importantly, also without the kind of secure social recognition that institutions of higher learning enjoy today. It was essentially a new idea about how human education and culture should be conceived. All this is still more or less true of Aristotle’s own ‘school,’ the Peripatos (cf. Lynch 1972). The situation must have changed after Athens had lost its political power. Its fame, and also its economy, came to rely more and more on its role as a center of learning. Thus the expert-philosopher may have been an accepted role-model in the later history of Athens.
Aristotle, to be sure, rejects Plato’s metaphysical theory of separate ‘forms’. Yet his own metaphysical theory (i.e. the theory of the first and most universal principles explored in his *Metaphysics*) is also incompatible with the traditional understanding of Greek religious mythology; and he takes this theory to be the highest achievement of philosophical science in general, and thus its ultimate goal. Aristotelian metaphysics, moreover, is not value-free theory but rather a discovery of the most admirable aspects of reality and for this reason the most rewarding kind of human activity.36 In this way, the Aristotelian philosopher, too, discovers a new foundation for his or her life that transcends the traditional religious and evaluative foundations.

This is compatible with Aristotle’s relatively conservative approach to moral virtue concepts. Aristotle’s ethics is clearly less radical than Plato’s in this respect, not to mention the Cynics or early Stoics. He is, to be sure, a Socratic in that he clearly affirms that an action can count as virtuous only if motivated by its virtuous character, not by selfish concerns about one’s social standing and possible social sanctions. Yet his account of the normative content of the virtues does not so much try to create new virtues as analyze the commonly accepted ones. The highest form, however, of excellence, according to Aristotle, does not consist of the ethical virtues but of those intellectual achievements that lead to an adequate metaphysical theory, and this theory (for instance in the version of Metaph. XII) clearly challenges, and falsifies, the traditional religious conceptions at the basis of Greek society. Thus, notwithstanding his virtue-ethical conservatism, Aristotle’s conception of human *eudaimonia* promotes a way of life, and a form of friendship congenial to it, that differs from traditional role-models not only in its commitment to scientific practice as the highest form of life but also in its orientation toward new sources of value.37

*Ad (1):* I have briefly talked about why friendship seeks fulfillment in shared activities. Genuine friendship, in contrast with utility friendship, does not serve some external purpose. It is an end in itself and, as such, one of the constituents of a blessed human life (*eudaimonia*). Yet analogous to the virtues, there is a distinction between friendship as an attitude, or ‘habitus’ (*hexis*) in the soul, and its active realization. The ‘habitus’ is

36 NE 6.7, 1141a9–b8; 6.13, 1145a6–11; 10.7–9; Metaph. 1.2, 982b28–83a11.
37 Aristotle was, of course, not the first to advertise philosophy as a form of life based on a more adequate source of value that can also inspire a specifically philosophical form of love or friendship. This idea seems to date back at least to the time of Socrates and his early followers. Yet even in Aristotle’s days, it was still an idea that stood apart from the commonly accepted models of living well. This is also the reason why this kind of philosophical ethics gave rise to utopian conceptions of an ideal society that would be more congenial to philosophy. Cf. books VII–VIII of Aristotle’s *Politics*. 
itself teleologically directed toward an activity – not as if this activity were external to the ‘habitus’, but as its fullest realization. The shared activities fulfill this purpose – actively to live as friends – and as such they are an end in themselves.

But there are various kinds of activities that friends can share. Which are the ones that they would prefer to share?

In NE 9.12, Aristotle clearly asserts that friends want to share those activities that for them define what a good life consists in. So somebody who views drinking and gaming as the epitome of happiness, would also want to share these activities with his best friends. For the time that one shares with one’s friends is not be separated from the time that is dedicated to one’s eudaimonic activities. Rather it is those very activities that define one’s personal conception of happiness which the friends want to further enrich, and to enjoy even better\(^3\), by sharing them with each other. Thus, since for Aristotle philosophical and scientific inquiry, especially when it is done not for an external purpose (i.e. without a utilitarian consideration), is the objectively most valuable kind of activity\(^4\), it is also fitting that he would see shared philosophical and scientific activity as the objectively best way to live out the ideal of friendship (NE 9.12, 1172a1–8; EE 7.12, 1245a18–22).

One might object at this point that this focus on pure theôria is incompatible with the idea that friendship should be based on valuing someone else as a chooser: What the philosophical friends value is their research and its objects; they find it convenient to co-operate with someone else, but this other person is not the focus of their valuing – so one could argue. Yet this objection would be based on a misunderstanding. It is true that pure theôria, being the highest kind of human intellectual activity, is directed toward necessary and eternal truths that lie outside the range of our human practice. Yet, first, dedicating one’s life to this philosophical endeavor is itself a practical choice. Secondly, valuing other persons for what they are in themselves, is valuing them for their choices and for the ethos underlying

---

38 NE 9.12, 1171b29–72a8 (reading eu zên with Bekker instead of the redundant syzên in line a8; see also Gauthier/Jolif 1970, ad loc.); EE. 7.12, 1245b7f; see also NE 9.9, 1169b16–22; 1170a4–8; EE 7.12, 1245a18–21.
39 Cf. EE 8.3, 1249a21–b25; NE 6.13, 1145a6–11; NE X.7–8. This point touches upon the central controversy among scholars between supporters of an inclusive-end and a dominant-end interpretation of Aristotle’s concept of eudaimonia; for more details, and a justification of my own moderate dominant-end interpretation, cf. Szaif 2006.
40 Note that I am using the term ‘practical’ in a specifically Aristotelian sense; A choice is ‘practical’, as opposed to ‘technical’ or – as we might say – ‘pragmatic’, if it responds to the question how one ought to live so as to live well, while pragmatic choices select means to certain more specific ends, like: What do I have to do in order to get to NY by tomorrow?
Aristotle on friendship as the paradigmatic
these choices. Consequently, friendship can be based on a shared ethos of philosophical research. True, the desire for affectionate friendship does not result from our intellectual curiosity; it has other roots in human nature (NE 9.9, 1169b16–22; see also 1.7, 1097b8–11). Yet this observation does not contradict the claim that affectionate friendship may find its highest fulfillment in a shared activity dedicated to the objects of theôria.

Thus far we have argued that Aristotle has good reason for giving shared philosophizing an elevated rank among the activities to be shared among friends. Nevertheless it should, at least at first blush, strike us as odd that (to my knowledge) Aristotle never mentions morally meritorious activities among his examples of shared activities. For genuine friendship, being grounded in the appreciation of aretê, requires our valuing of the other person’s ethical virtues as well, since they are part of what constitutes personal excellence. Thus, notwithstanding what has just been said about the value of sharing philosophical activities, we would expect morally meritorious activities also to be included among those worthy to be shared. So why does he disregard them in the relevant passages? Why does he not, for instance, include the exercise of courage in a military campaign among his examples? (Think of Achilles and Patroclus, one of the paradigmatic pairs of friends in the Greek tradition.) Or how about joint charitable activities?

Before I try to answer these questions, first a general observation regarding the role of ethical virtues in enabling true friendship. There can be no doubt that, in Aristotle’s view, the recognition of the other’s ethical virtues plays a very significant role for the mutual esteem that lies at the basis of ethical friendship. Furthermore, ethical virtues are indispensable for genuine, stable friendship also because they impart the fairness and reliability without which nobody would be able to sustain the role of a trustworthy friend. Yet one needs to distinguish between, on the one hand, the character qualities that make a person worthy of our esteem and fit to be a friend, and, on the other, those shared activities which are the fulfillment, or full active realization (energeia), of the attitude of friendship. The fact that we cannot respect, and sustain a friendship with, someone who lacks the essential ethical virtues does not entail that the highest fulfillment of friendship lies in specifically ethical activities. – Yet it also does not exclude it; therefore we need an explanation for why ethical activities are not mentioned at all when Aristotle lists examples of shared activities.

As to our example of two friends jointly engaging in courageous military actions, an answer on Aristotle’s behalf is rather easy to give. War is indeed

41 This has also been noted by Pakaluk 1998, 225, who also correctly observes the connection with the concept of leisured activities.
the most noble exercise of courage, according to Aristotle (since bravery in war, in contrast with courage exercised in private affairs, serves the greater good: *viz.* the good of the entire commonwealth). Yet Aristotle also objects in no uncertain terms to the idea that war could be an end in itself (NE 1177b9–12). There are, to be sure, situations in which the virtuous individual, in his role as citizen, will have to participate in war and exercise his courage; and in doing so, he will engage in acts that have a distinguished moral merit and are thus intrinsically valuable *qua* virtuous activity. Yet nevertheless, nobody with a sound mind would choose war for the sake of war, but only as a lesser evil and as a means to an end, the end being the preservation or restoration of peace in freedom. For this reason, war cannot be a preferred eudaimonic activity, and hence also not the kind of activity to be *shared* in the eudaimonic practice of friendship.

Note that Aristotle emphasizes the importance of peace as a goal with the concept of *leisure* in mind (1177b4–6; cf. Pol. 7.14, 1333a35f; 15, 1334a14–16). Leisure is so central because it is defined as a time in life when we are free not to engage in activities we would not undertake other than as a mere means to an end external to this activity: especially any kind of labor that we take on in order to secure our own livelihood, or the safety and livelihood of our loved-ones and the community that we belong to. Those unleisured activities cannot be avoided altogether (even if the person has sufficient wealth), yet they are not the kind of activities that constitute the good and happy life (*eudaimonia*). Even the most meritorious among them, namely political activities undertaken for sake of the commonwealth, can provide only a second-best version of a good life compared to a life dedicated to the right kind of leisured activity. 42

As for acts of generosity, they do seem to fit Aristotle’s model of leisured activity, since a person who is self-sufficient, i.e. whose external needs have been provided for, will engage in generous giving as one form of meaningful and enjoyable activity (NE, 8.1, 1155a4–9; 9, 11, 1171a22–27, 1171b12–16). However, Aristotle thinks that generosity should be exercised according to standards of desert and appropriateness, and the *most* appropriate (though not exclusively appropriate) beneficiaries of one’s generosity are one’s friends (1169b10–13). In this way, the analysis of generosity links up with the topic of friendship; and the treatise on friendship does, accordingly, emphasize the satisfaction that comes from generosity dispensed upon one’s friends. Yet for reasons that I have already explained, acts of generosity *toward* one’s friends don’t qualify as activities *shared among* the friends.

---

42 The distinction between leisured and unleisured activities is elaborated in some chapters of Pol. VII–VIII, the treatise on the ideal political constitution (see Pol. 7.3, 7.14–15, 8.3).
Yet how about joint generosity toward a third party? Aristotle does not have our notion of charitable activity as a form of supererogatory achievement – for historical reasons that I don't have to delve into in this paper. Rather he looks at it from the point of view of a virtue-ethicist who sees generosity (*eleuthériotēs*) as one of the characteristics of a noble character. But even granted that generosity is most fittingly exercised in support of a friend, there should be room also for generous acts that benefit third parties. So why not include this as an activity to be shared? Aristotle refrains from including such specifically morally motivated activities in his list of shared activities presumably because the act of giving, as a moral act, is essentially individual. True, one can lump money together in order to help a person in need. But the generous act, specifically as a *moral* act, i.e. as a decision embraced out of some moral concern, would consist in deciding to add one's share to the amount because it is good to help this person. This kind of decision cannot be shared; it is irreducibly individual. Deliberating about it can be a joint activity. Yet it is not the deliberation but the decision, together with its guiding motive, that confers moral value upon an action.43

So far I have only talked about the fact that activities which are specifically morally motivated are not mentioned among the examples of how friends engage in shared activities. Let's now look at the shared activities he does mention. In NE 9.12, he makes the important statement (with reference, I think, to ethos-based friendship) that friends want to share those activities which for each of them define their being (existence) – "being" in a practical, not a biological sense: the kind of life they live – and which are the reason why they find their lives worth living (1172a1–3). Aristotle then adds a list of examples:

"Therefore some drink together (1), others play dice together (2), while others again do physical exercise together and go hunting together (3), or they philosophize together (4), for they all spend their time together in that activity which, of all activities in life, they like best."

(1172a3–6)

Now, the first two types of activity mentioned in this list (drinking together, playing dice together) are good enough as examples of *shared* activity, but they obviously do not qualify as activities that are truly eudaimonic and

---

43 Sherman 1987, 608, clearly points out this aspect of "rational agency" in Aristotle ethics; yet she also seems to view joint ethical activities as the core of the shared life between friends (e.g. 597–9). Against Sherman, I would emphasize the difference between deliberating together, which is a joint activity, and the final decision, which is irreducibly individual in the same way as everyone's responsibility for their actions is. Price, likewise, lays much emphasis on this idea of participation in a friend's action through joint deliberation (1989, 123f, 130). For the reasons indicated here, I don't think that this is Aristotle's view.
could give fulfillment to a friendship among more accomplished persons. The case is more complicated for the couple of activities mentioned next (3): Aristotle probably has a traditional aristocratic ethos in mind, since physical exercise with the goal of strengthening and beautifying one’s body, and hunting, are typical components of the conventional aristocratic life. This form of life is inspired by an ideal of aretê, but, from the superior point of view of the philosopher, its guiding conception falls short of an adequate understanding of aretê since it is too much focused on social recognition (which includes recognition of one’s beauty and recognition of one’s hunting prowess). It does not realize that the relevant aretê is a quality of the soul and thus independent from social recognition. Thus this example, too, would fall under the heading of character friendship still only broadly speaking, though it ranks higher than the first two examples. This leaves example (4), philosophizing together, as the only one fully worthy of the ideal of friendship based on the mutual recognition of aretê.

When we look at EE 7.12, we obtain a similar result. This is a fiendishly difficult chapter, though, not least because of many textual problems, which it is not our business here to discuss. Let me just point out what, for our purposes, are the crucial assertions there and how I construe them. 1245a21 mentions the following three types of ‘goods’ to be shared by friends:

(1) bodily pleasure,
(2) watching musical performances (theôria mousikê), and
(3) philosophy (which, for Aristotle, includes scientific research).

Example (1) relates to the pleasures of eating and drinking together, explicitly mentioned in the same passage (1245a13), but could also include sexual pleasures, the most intense type of bodily pleasure. (The attendance of prostitutes was a common feature of Greek male dinner parties.) Example (2) refers to the role of spectators in ‘musical’ performances, most eminently the public performance of tragedies. Now, this, or also the listening to, and conversing about, recitals of Homeric songs, and other types of highly regarded poetry, is a crucial part of paideia (education, personal culture) as traditionally conceived, with the poets being hailed as the ‘educators of Greece’. Yet, again, in the Socratic tradition of philosophical

44 Note that there is a broader and a narrower sense of ‘ethical’ friendship. Broadly speaking, any instance of friendship that is triggered by one’s liking for someone else’s character, is ‘ethical’ (i.e. ethos-based); strictly speaking, though, only those people whose character exhibits true excellence fully satisfy this concept. I agree with Cooper 1976/77, 629, that this has to do with Aristotle’s teleological style of looking at the phenomena.
ethics (to which Aristotle belongs as well, broadly speaking) this type of education and personal culture is not accepted as providing true *aretê*.

Thus we are, again, left with philosophy as the only unproblematic example mentioned of an activity that could provide fulfillment to genuine *aretê*-based friendship, and I don’t think that this is a mere coincidence. Given that for Aristotle true *aretê* consists of only the intellectual and the ethical excellences, and given also what we said about the reasons for why he did not mention the exercise of ethical virtues among the examples of shared activities, shared philosophizing (*symphilosophein*) is really the only type of activity left to serve as the highest fulfillment of friendship.46

But why is Aristotle not more explicit in highlighting this role of philosophy? Why only hints? I think that this has to do with the ‘division of labor’, so to speak, between the various treatises in the Aristotelian *Ethics*. It belongs to the tasks of the treatise of friendship to provide a formal account of friendship that relates friendship to *aretê*, and to *aretê*-based eudaimonic activity which can be shared and thus serve as active realization (*energeia*) of friendship. It is not the task of the treatise on friendship to establish the premise that among all the activities there are (and can be shared) philosophy is the most eudaimonic one. This is left to the investigation of human *eudaimonia* as such and established in EE 8.3 and NE 10.6–9.

4. Does Aristotle’s account do justice to the individual character of friendship?

In the remainder of my paper I want to address a problem that is particularly acute from the modern perspective: the question whether Aristotle’s account of genuine friendship does justice to the individual character of friendship. Although my position on this point is not going to be very original, it might still be worth our while to take up this question since we are dealing here with such a widespread misperception.

First, I want to point out how the notion of individuality can be linked to the ideal of friendship, and then I will explain why it can appear that in this respect there is a serious shortcoming in Aristotle’s account.

There are (at least) two ways how the notion of friendship can be linked to that of individuality:

1) Friendship is a relationship between two individuals who have specifically chosen each other. Contrast this with a universal attitude that would be directed toward *all* humans, or all humans of *a certain kind*.

46 Note that Aristotelian friends also share other, less elevated, activities when they spend their time together (EE 7.12, 1245b37–39, b4f). But these don’t define their friendship.
2) In modern thinking on these matters, it is a widely shared assumption that the esteem for the other person that lies at the foundation of true friendship responds to the value of this person’s *unique* individual personality. This modern attitude was already hinted at in Montaigne’s famous comment on why he loved his friend La Boétie: “Parceque c’était lui, parceque c’était moi” (*Essais*, livre 1er, ch. 28). This quote appears to suggest that there is something unique about the other person that makes me love him or her, and that this unique characteristic cannot be fully captured in a description.47

Aristotelian friendship satisfies criterion (1): To begin with, it clearly differs from a notion of universal love for all humankind. (Among the ancient Greek virtue concepts, *philanthrôpia*, in one of its meanings, comes closest to the idea of a caring attitude toward all fellow-humans. Aristotle mentions *philanthrôpia* rarely and has no particular interest in this virtue.) Secondly, Aristotle does not see friendship as a relation that holds between *all* virtuous persons (as the Stoics seem to have claimed – this would be a case of friendship toward all humans of a certain kind); *aretê* is only a prerequisite of genuine *philia*, not a sufficient condition. One person of good character will feel goodwill toward another whom he or she believes to have a good character. Yet such goodwill contains only the potential for friendship. More is required for developing an actual friendship, especially vicinity and sufficient time so that one can get thoroughly acquainted with the other person. This requires that one dedicate a lot of time to shared activities with the other person, and it cannot be achieved with many persons at the same time. (Therefore, it does not, even from a strategic viewpoint, make sense to replace a proven friend with some new acquaintance who *seems* to have even better qualities. As Aristotle quips in EE 7.2, 1237b36–38a3: One ought not to pick a friend the same way one picks a coat.) Thus true friendship is rare and highly particularized.48

Yet how does Aristotle’s theory fare with regard to the second criterion of individuality? – This is the target of modern objections.

Here is an influential line of argumentation49: When Aristotle asserts that in the case of genuine friendship I love and appreciate the other person for his own sake: for being the person he is (*hêi estin hosper estin*), his position

---

47 I am not committing myself here to a specific interpretation of the authorial meaning; rather I am using this quote as a slogan that resonates with the modern understanding of love. Cf. Pangle 2003, 57–78, for an instructive comparison between Aristotle and Montaigne, in which she also tries to interpret Montaigne’s essay in its context.


49 A well-known example of this kind of critique can be found in Vlastos 1973 (see 33, fn. 100, for his assessment of Aristotle’s theory).
appears to anticipate our modern understanding of friendship and love as being inspired by the other person’s unique personality. Yet when he then goes on the equate this attitude with the appreciation of the other person’s excellent character or ‘virtue’, this reveals that his understanding fails to capture this specific feature of friendship or love. For if virtue, or some other general quality, is the crucial reason why I care for this person, he or she is not really the unique and irreplaceable point of reference of my love. The character-virtues are not unique in the way someone’s personality is unique. If I want to spend my time with people that I can fully respect because they have the right character, and one such person dies – well, very likely there are others whose companionship would be equally adequate. So why should I, for instance, grieve much about the loss of a friend, given that there are other people equally worthy of my friendship? If I want to spend my time with people that I can fully respect because they have the right character, and one such person dies – well, very likely there are others whose companionship would be equally adequate. So why should I, for instance, grieve much about the loss of a friend, given that there are other people equally worthy of my friendship?50 (In this connection one has to bear in mind that ancient ethical theories, including Aristotle’s, due to their rationalist tendency, classify an emotional state as ethically sound only if it is in line with our rational evaluation. So if losing a friend is not really an evil either because human happiness does not depend on having friends, or because what matters is not the presence of this person in particular but of some person of the right kind, then a wise and good person ought not to feel deep sorrow about the loss of a particular friend.)

So, how does Aristotle’s theory fare in the face of this objection?

One kind of response would certainly not be satisfactory: One might suggest that the Aristotelian wise person would feel sorry about the death of a friend in view of the time and effort he in vain has invested into building up this friendship that has now come to a premature end. – This kind of sorrow would be entirely selfish, a form of self-pitying, incompatible with true friendship. That this is also Aristotle’s view, is entailed by his remarks about the friend as a ‘second self’.51 According to this idea, the friend is a practical point of reference analogous to how I relate to myself and my own well-being. Humans naturally care about themselves and their well-being. They are, for themselves, ends in themselves. It is a mark of genuine friendship, according to Aristotle, that the friend becomes a second such ultimate reference point, a second person toward which I am so disposed as to view his or her existence and well-being as an ultimate end for myself. Note also that this other person, to whom I relate as a second ‘myself’, is

50 Compare Seneca, Ep. mor. 9.5, as an example of an attitude (inspired by Stoic philosophy) which openly affirms the substitutability of a friend: “Just as Phidias [a famous sculptor; J Sz.], if he lose a statue, can straightway carve another, even so our master in the art of making friendships can fill the place of a friend he has lost” (transl. Gummere; quoted after Pangle, 2003, 115)
51 NE 9.4, 1166a29–32; 9, 1172b5–7; 12, 1171b33f; see also EE 7.12, 1245a29f.
not a type but a uniquely occurring individual. Thus if I lost my friend, I would lose a good that I could not recover by finding someone else who is similar; for this other person, though similar, would still not be him, or her. Consequently, the grief felt over the loss of one’s friend will spring from this sort of other-directed caring which relates to a person both as an individual and as an ultimate end.\footnote{It is a somewhat odd feature of Aristotle’s theory of friendship that he does not mention grieving over the loss of a friend. (None of the passages from the NE and the \textit{Rhetoric} cited by Nussbaum 1986, 363, mentions grief; NE 1099b5–6 only mentions that the premature loss of good friends diminishes a good person’s eudaimonia, without specifying any particular emotional reactions. I think one could point out that the comparison with Priam present in this passage suggests grieving since Priam was known to have grieved over his losses. But that is, of course, not a very strong piece of textual evidence.) It is likewise odd that his treatise about emotions in \textit{Rhetoric II} disregards grief (cf. Konstan 2006, 244ff). In his comments on friendship, Aristotle does emphasize that a friend joins his friend in grieving over a misfortune that has befallen him (\textit{synalgein, sullypein}, e.g. 1166a7–8, 1171a6–8, 27–33; EE 1240a33–b1; Rhet. 1381a3–7). Yet it is, of course, no longer possible for me to join my friend’s grief if he is dead. Aristotle may simply have held it self-evident that one would feel grief over the death of a close friend, though not in an excessive manner (cf. 1171b6–12).}

So, Aristotle’s description of a friend’s attitude shows that Aristotelian friendship does not view the other simply as a replaceable instance of a general type. But does Aristotle’s theory, perhaps, fail to specify the right reason for a friend’s attachment to another particular individual? This seems to be the gist of the objection based on the second criterion of individuality mentioned above.

Yet how plausible, to begin with, is the premise underlying this objection, namely that a theory of friendship should focus on unique personality as the foundation of true friendship?

It has been rightly pointed out in this connection that we need to distinguish between the object of attachment and the reasons for valuing the person that support this attachment.\footnote{Cf. Kosman 1976, 64; Price 1989, 98–100, 105, 108f.} So if, for instance, a teacher likes a student because of his or her good essay writing, it is still this particular student that is liked and not merely a type (like ‘good-essay writing student’). On the other hand, there is, in such a case, no deep personal attachment to the student as there is in the case of genuine friendship. This makes us wonder if the sort of personal commitment to a particular person that we find in genuine friendship does not require reasons that have to do with his or her unique personality. So even granting the distinction between the objects of attachment and the reasons for the attachment, there still seems to be a case for the claim that a theory that can specify only certain general character traits as reasons for this kind of attachment, fails to capture the essence of genuine friendship.
In response to this criticism, let us first point out that there is much that is unclear about the premise that the friend’s ‘unique personality’ could provide the adequate reason for the attachment.

Is it the *personality*, which in the case of humans also happens to be unique, that provides the reason for valuing the other person? Or is it, rather, the *uniqueness* of this personality?

It is obvious that uniqueness as such, as an ontological attribute, can’t be the reference-point. Each stone is unique. Moreover, people we hate are also unique.

But supporters of this kind of view have in mind something like qualitative uniqueness. After all, the friend values the other person’s ‘personality’, and personality is a qualitative concept. Now, the notion of qualitative uniqueness is not unproblematic. It seems that nothing in principle prevents that there be a *doppelgänger* (i.e. qualitatively exact copy) for any person in the world. Yet, notwithstanding this ontological worry, it seems that, for ethical purposes, the notion of qualitative uniqueness is good enough. (This kind of uniqueness is, by the way, also a matter of differing degrees, not something absolute and non-gradable.)

Now, granting the viability of a notion of unique personality for the purposes of ethical theory, it still holds true that I may know another person’s unique personality all too well and hate him none the less – or rather *because* I know what kind of person he is. So the qualitative uniqueness of a personality as such cannot provide the reason for why we choose to be friends with this person.

So, if it cannot be uniqueness that provides the reason, it has to be the perception of certain qualitative characteristics – characteristics that we value highly in a personality; and this brings us back to Aristotle’s notion to ethical friendship, for in Aristotle’s ancient Greek conceptual framework the qualitative appreciation of someone’s personality would be understood as the acknowledgement of his or her personal *aretê*.

Yet how about the *weaknesses*? Can my love for a friend not also include his weaknesses and be stimulated by his neediness, or encouraged by the fact that he is not ‘too perfect’? Does this not show that Aristotle’s one-sided focus on the strengths of the other person’s character and intellect as motivating friendship is out of sync with the phenomenon of friendship?

Here we have to draw some distinctions. As regards the emotional reaction to somebody’s neediness (the impulse to take care of, and care for, this person since he or she *needs* care), this seems to belong to the topic of love (e.g. parental love) rather than friendship. Yet as for the observation that a developing friendship can derive some encouragement from the perception of the other person’s weakness, this can be usefully compared to Aristotle’s
observation that friendship proper is based on the acknowledgment of equal personal value. A person with sound judgment is all too aware of his or her own weaknesses, and, consequently, the perception of imperfection in the other person can be a productive factor for forming a friendship, given that it facilitates a sense of equal worth between the two partners. This is acknowledged by Aristotle when he says that there can be no friendship between a god and a man because the former is so much more perfect (NE 8.7, 1158b33–36). On the other hand, it would be absurd to claim that sound friendship could be based only on the mutual perception of weaknesses. My valuing specifically this person, rather than that one, requires that I also perceive some important positive qualities in him or her.

Thus, in the end, neither the uniqueness of a personality, nor its weaknesses and neediness taken in isolation, can provide a decisive reason for attaching oneself to a particular person as a friend. My valuing the other person needs to relate to certain qualities in him or her that I value. Ultimately, though, it is also a result of contingent circumstances that I am attached to this person, or this small group of persons, but not to this other person with similar, or similarly valuable, qualities. There is, to be sure, a story to be told that explains how I got attached to this person rather than the other one: We met at the right time and were able to spend enough time together to discover each other's qualities and develop a deep friendship. This could have happened with that other person, too, but for circumstantial reasons it didn't.

References


Gill, Ch., Altruism or Reciprocity in Greek Ethical Philosophy, in idem e.a. (eds.), Reciprocity in Ancient Greece, Oxford 1998, 303–328.


Part V

Comparisons
The emotions are currently one of the most intensely controversial topics in cognitive science. The late 19th and early 20th century history of their analysis was bedevilled by ultra-reductionist accounts, the view, for example, of William James, carried to an extreme by behaviourists such as John Watson (1931), to the effect that emotions are caused by physical changes in the body. It is because the visceral or the glandular system reacts to physical stimuli in a certain way that we feel a particular emotion. Behaviourism is no longer particularly fashionable. But radical disagreement continues on at least six fundamental issues. (1) Are there certain basic universal emotions and if so, which are they? (2) Are emotions to be viewed as distinct species, or do they form a continuum? (3) Related to that, are they experienced as singletons, or rather as bundles or syndromes? (4) What are the elements of cognition in the emotions? Are emotions to be equated with, or reduced to, propositional attitudes? (5) What is the role of emotion in the development of a moral sense, and do children experience emotions in the same way as adults do? (6) How far are views on the emotions influenced, or even determined, by the particular natural languages we speak?

I shall not be able to tackle all these issues here, of course. My main remit is what the ancient Greeks and Chinese had to say about the emotions: but I shall discuss their views in part in relation to that larger agenda, to see what we can learn from them on those topics in cognitive science and especially on the issue between cross-cultural universals and cultural realism.¹ So before I tackle the Greeks and Chinese themselves, I need to outline some of the biological and anthropological background briefly.

¹ What follows draws extensively on my more detailed discussion of the issues in Lloyd 2007, especially ch. 4
In the wake of the behaviourists, first, some of the neuroscientists have expressed optimistic views on how far emotional experience is susceptible to neurophysiological and biochemical analysis. It is true that the roles of specific chemical mediators and transmitters, acetylcholine, endogenous morphine, dopamine, adrenaline, noradrenaline, serotonin, are now reasonably well understood, as also are the effects of drugs that influence affect, amphetamines, barbiturates, chlorpromazine (Changeux 1985). Using neurophysiological and biochemical interventions, researchers have been able artificially to induce in animals behaviour associated with certain emotions in humans. The implantation of an electrode in the brain of a rat has enabled it to trigger a ‘pleasurable’ experience for itself – which it repeats several hundred times if allowed to do so. Similarly the external manifestations (at least) of ‘rage’ have been artificially induced in cats.

Again the study of brain-damaged patients, and more especially the use of brain-scans (PET scanning, positron emission tomography) have established with some precision which parts of the brain are active in various types of mental, including emotional, experiences. Detailed investigations have been undertaken to describe the functions of the limbic system taken as a whole, and of the amygdala in particular (Damasio 1994, LeDoux 1996). The findings are impressively specific and localised. Yet there is always the problem of matching what brain scans reveal with the subjective reports of the feelings experienced. Differences in the latter are not necessarily picked up on brain scans and conversely not everything that brain scans record correlates with specific modalities in the emotions reported. So neuroscience can take you so far, but no further.

Where social anthropology is concerned there is a wide spectrum of views on offer. At one end Howell (1981), Lutz (1988), and Rosaldo (1984) have all claimed that in the societies they have investigated (the Chewong, the Ifaluk and the Ilongot) no distinction is drawn between ‘thinking’ and ‘emotion’, and there have been impressively detailed studies of the particular feelings that are the focus of attention in particular cultures. Among the Ifaluk, studied by Lutz (1988: 92), the term song is to used describe a reaction to the violation of a community norm. Again fago is a distinctive expression to convey a particular combination of compassion, love and sadness.

But at the opposite end of the spectrum Wierzbicka (1999) has claimed that all emotions can be analysed in terms of what she calls the Natural Semantic Metalanguage. There are, she maintains, shared universal concepts, the ‘bedrock of cross-cultural understanding’, that include feel, want, know, think, say, do, happen, good and bad. But the two main problems with this thesis are that it ignores or underplays the ambiguities in the very terms she cites in her ‘bed-rock’ analyses, and that it is enormously reductive. To take just a single example (Wiezbicka 1999: 53–4), ‘happiness’ turns out
to depend, in her view, on two key components, ‘I wanted things like this to happen’ and ‘I can’t want anything else’. But if ‘want’ means ‘desired’ or ‘liked’ in the first element, that seems too strong for the second. For happiness is compatible with having other likes and dislikes besides the current experience.²

Although I cannot argue the case here, it seems clear first that there are culture-specific emotions in the sense of ones made salient in particular cultures, but also secondly that this does not mean that they are unintelligible to outsiders. The fact that there is no equivalent to the Ifaluk term song in English does not mean we can have no grasp of what it means. However we do have to remember that emotional experiences are highly personal and we may sometimes register that our own mother tongue is barely adequate to express what we feel.

If you will allow me to draw on my own personal experience to illustrate the point further, my father’s first language was Welsh, though in London where I was brought up, we all spoke English at home. He introduced me, however, early on, to two Welsh terms for which no simple equivalent exists in English, namely hiraeth and hwyl. Hiraeth is the longing for Wales that exiles feel, and in many circumstances ‘nostalgia’ will do as a gloss, though most Welsh would deny that they are simply nostalgic for their country. Hwyl is the inspiration that certain performers are recognised to possess, not always, but in some of their performances, where the reactions of the audiences are an important contributory factor. This is not just a matter of the ‘gift of the gab’, although it certainly includes that, but also one of the passionate conviction of the speaker in what he or she is saying.³ Here I learnt the meaning of the term by first-hand experience in chapel services, for example, though the performers who exhibit hwyl include poets and philosophers, as well as preachers. Both terms became a part of the idiolect I acquired – English with a smattering of Welsh for use within a closed group of family and Welsh friends.

² Other difficulties come to light in the analysis of ‘shock’ (Wierzbicka 1999: 97), where the problem is one of an apparent incompatibility. Here the elements include, ‘I didn’t think that something like this could happen’ and ‘I can’t think now’, the latter evidently in the sense that the person is at a loss. Yet if the experiencer cannot think, in any strict sense, then he or she is not in a position to have the thought that corresponds to the feeling of shock (‘X felt something like this because X thought something like this’).

³ A standard Welsh Dictionary (Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru, Cardiff, 1987, vol 2, 1937–8) starts its four column entry on hwyl with the concrete sense ‘sail’, leading next to ‘journey, progress, revolution’ and then to this: ‘healthy physical or mental condition, good form, one’s right senses, wits; tune (of musical instrument); temper, mood, frame of mind; nature, disposition; degree of success achieved in the execution of particular task, etc; fervour (especially religious), ecstasy, unction, gusto, zest; characteristic musical intonation or sing-song cadence formerly much in vogue in the perorations of the Welsh pulpit’.
With those preliminaries, let me now turn to the Greeks, first, and then the Chinese. Two distinct types of controversies surround the ancient Greeks’ conceptual maps of the emotions (which have been the subject of a recent comprehensive survey by Konstan 2006). First ancient Greek writers themselves took very different views of many of the key questions – and this provides us with our opening for, among other things, a diachronic investigation of the factors at work in these disputes. Secondly the correct interpretation of those views is a matter of controversy among modern commentators. Some remarks on the second group of problems will serve to indicate the radical nature of some Greek attitudes.

One focus of scholarly controversy has been the correct interpretation of the view that is ascribed to certain Stoic philosophers in general, and to Chrysippus, the third head of the school, in particular, namely that we should eliminate the pathē. Some take that to be a recommendation to get rid of the passions, that is the extreme emotions. They point to the fact that certain feelings, such as joy, appear to be allowed. They are called eupatheiai (which we can gloss roughly as ‘well-reasoned impulses’) in our sources (Diogenes Laertius 7 116), although whether that was a term the Stoics themselves used is unclear. But others have argued for a more radical line of interpretation, namely that Chrysippus recommended eliminating the feelings as a whole.

Pathos, in its most general sense, as is well known, can refer to anything that happens to you. The cognate verb pascho means ‘suffer’ or ‘undergo’ in that general sense. Although not everything we undergo is negative, pathos was often used interchangeably with nosos, nousos or nosema, for disease, where the Greeks, like ourselves, distinguished between physical and mental diseases, diseases of the body, and those of the soul, though again like ourselves they acknowledged a class of complaints where both body and soul were affected.

The association of the main general term for ‘feelings’ with diseases has far-reaching implications and immediately suggests a map of what we might call the ‘emotions’ that differs appreciably from our own (cf. Lloyd 2003). How those implications were worked out in Chrysippus’ theory is particularly surprising. Clearly there would be nothing to take us aback in a policy to eliminate physical disease, though there the problem would be how that is to be achieved, for it certainly is not always within our power

---

4 Long and Sedley 1987: 2, 407. Sumpatheiai, another term that might suggest a positive role for certain pathe, relates in the first instance to the resonances between physical objects (as in musical harmonics, or in referred pain) rather than to the fellow feeling among human beings (as in our term ‘sympathy’), although it is true that Zeno stated that we should regard all humans as our fellow citizens (Long and Sedley 1987: 1, 429, 67 A 1).
to do so. But Chrysippus’ target is much wider. The *pathe* he wishes to extirpate are certain impulses (*hormai*). But all impulses imply assent. That means that the *pathe* do not just incorporate judgements (*kriseis*): they *are* judgements. Yet the kind of mistake they make is not a mere error of fact. Rather it implies a conation that is – temporarily at least – out of the control of reason. In principle, reason should arrive at true judgements. The *pathe* he suggests we should get rid of are disturbances when the rational faculty is not in total command. Indeed ‘irrational’ (*alogos*) enters into the definition of each of the four main species of *pathe* (distress, fear, appetite and pleasure, Long and Sedley 1987: 1, 411, 65 B) as well as into that of *pathos* itself (Long and Sedley 1987: 1, 410f, 65 A).

The Stoics hold that the Sage would be in complete control. The Sage’s judgements are never at fault: there is no question of the Sage being deceived. Where the ordinary human being might be in the grip of fear or anger – thinking that a harm had been done or was about to be suffered – the Sage knew that for one who is secure in virtue there is nothing to fear or to be angry about. The Sage is thus invulnerable to misfortune and immune to disturbance of any kind. Health, for instance, was not a good, only a ‘preferred indifferent’ and so physical disease did not count as an evil. So the Sage would not be concerned at its occurrence, nor upset at a failure to be restored to health. Where mental disturbances were concerned, the Sage’s rational faculty ensured that there was no room for error, for false judgements or for any of those impulses that were liable to upset lesser humans.

The picture that emerges – the ‘emotional keyboard’ as some of the anthropologists call it – seems at first sight quite extreme and it is tempting to dismiss it as aberrant, the product of idiosyncratic speculations on the part of an isolated and quite unrepresentative group of intellectuals. Yet that would be a mistake. First the Stoics were not the only ancient Greeks to advocate the repression of most of the experiences we associate with the emotions. Secondly and more fundamentally the view they adopted exploits, even it goes further than, tendencies that are already present in the use of the generic term *pathos* in discourse about what we call the emotions.

One feature of Stoic psychology that *is* exceptional, however, is their insistence on the unitary nature of the soul. For them the soul just is the rational faculty and wayward impulses have to be located within it, when we fall short of perfect rationality. Yet for many earlier Greek writers, and not just philosophers, disorder in the soul was interpreted primarily as a conflict between its several parts or faculties. That theme is already strongly marked in Homer. In a famous passage in the *Odyssey* (20.17f) (twice cited by Plato in the *Republic* 390d and 441b) Odysseus, newly returned home to Ithaca, has to restrain himself when he sees the dissolute behaviour of the women in his palace. He has to stop himself from killing them on the spot.
‘He struck his breast and thus reproved his heart: “Endure, heart, for you have endured worse than this, on the day when the shameless Cylops ate your brave comrades...”’.

As is well known, the Homeric epics have a rich vocabulary of terms to express psychic functions, many localised to physical parts of the body (as kardie/kradie and etor are to the heart, phrenes to the lungs) or to the blood or breath of the living body. That led Snell (1948/1953) to deny there is a unitary notion of the self in Homer, but that is clearly an overreaction (cf. Padel 1992). It is, after all, Odysseus who decides, in that passage I have just quoted, not to execute the whores in the palace on the spot. It is true, however, that there is no single term in Homer that is the equivalent to emotion, no single part of the body responsible for all and only what we would call emotional experiences. Thumos, associated in certain passages with breath and with life, is the seat of desire and appetite, but it is also where deliberation may occur (Il 1 193) as well as pleasure (Il 7 189).

But what happens when the philosophers start analysing the functions and faculties of the soul? One might have imagined that, once philosophical reflection got under way, the outcome would be simply to make explicit what was already implicit in the Greek language. In practice, however, that was very far from being the case. Plato produces his tripartite soul, opposing reason first to the appetites, and then to the spirited part, where to thumoeides owes something to Homeric thumos, even though the focus is now on the noble indignation a person feels when a wrong has been done, now on courage or manliness, andreia (cf. Hobbs 2000). But all three parts have their specific pleasures, reason included: the philosopher is, after all, the person who loves wisdom.

But Aristotle objects not just to Plato’s views on the relation between the soul and the body, claiming famously that it is absurd to ask whether the soul and body are one or not. He also rejects Platonic tripartition, on the grounds, partly, that it would break up the faculty of desire, orexis. On Plato’s view wish would end up in the rational part, and appetite and spirit (for which Aristotle uses epithumia and thumos respectively) would be in the irrational. Whatever has perception experiences pleasure and pain, and whatever experiences pleasure and pain also experiences appetite, which is the desire for the pleasant. So while desire may be for a variety of objects, it serves a crucial biological function throughout the animal kingdom, being the faculty that motivates the animal both in nutrition and in reproduction. Even so that does not give him a unified psychological faculty of the emotions of course, even though he devotes much attention to what we would call such in his ethics, the Rhetoric and the Poetics.

So now let me recapitulate the two main points that interest me from my comparative perspective before I add a third final one before turning to
the Chinese materials. The two key points are first that there is no unified concept of the emotions as such, whether inside or outside philosophy. The main generic term, in this context, namely *pathos*, covers far more than just the emotions or feelings, comprising also physical and mental diseases and indeed sufferings of any type. So from that point of view, the Stoics, with whom I began, were not so much out of touch with common Greek sentiments as might at first sight appear.

Secondly there is no consensus, in this area, either between the philosophers and others, or among the philosophers. The monists, such as the Stoics, postulated a single rational faculty with the consequent difficulty that I have mentioned of accounting for every kind of negative impulse as a disturbance of reason. But the pluralists, who offered various views as to the separate parts or faculties of the soul, still faced the problem of what united them – of what made Socrates Socrates and not just a bundle of disconnected capacities.

The third recurrent feature that needs pointing out is the mixture of the descriptive and the normative. The prime influence on the psychological theories the philosophers proposed often comes from their moral philosophy, though to be sure these two are generally interdependent. The accounts of the soul that were put forward did not just purport to say what is the case. They carried implications for how we should conduct ourselves. One point on which Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics were agreed was that reason should be in control. Some saw happiness and the good life in positive terms, as the exercise of reason as the highest faculty that humans possess. Others took a more defensive, if not negative, stance, describing the goal as freedom from anxiety, ataraxia. But on both types of view the attainment of true welfare was liable to be threatened by the prospect of the desires or the appetites running amok. Even the Epicureans, for whom the good was identified with the pleasant, were careful to distinguish between desires that are natural and necessary (such as drinking when thirsty), those that are natural but not necessary (such as for expensive foods) and those that are neither natural nor necessary (illustrated by a desire for statues, Scholion to Key Doctrines 29, Long and Sedley 1987: I, 116, 21 I).5

For the Stoics, with their unified psychology, everything depended on good judgement. But for Plato and Aristotle quite how one faculty, reason, was to exercise control over another, whether the epithumetikon or Aristotle’s orexis, desire, posed a problem. When Plato represented the three parts of

---

5 The example is interesting in view of the argument proposed by Frischer 1982 that the iconography of the statues of Epicurus and his followers served the purpose of propaganda for the school – to convey the idea of the tranquillity that adherence to his doctrines brought with it (cf Zanker 1988 on Augustus).
the soul with the image of the chariot team in the *Phaedrus* (253c), reason is pictured as the charioteer and the other two faculties as two horses, one good (the *thumoeides*) the other wayward (the *epithumetikon*). The vocabulary in which this human exercises control is – as Ferrari 1987: 185ff showed – surprisingly violent. True, the situation envisaged is when a person is reminded of his beloved, a positive experience since it can lead to an appreciation of true beauty, but a threatening one since passions are aroused. The charioteer is described as pulling on the reins ‘so violently that he brings both horses down on their haunches’ (*Phaedrus* 254c). When the bad horse again exerts itself, in its expression of desire to have sex with the beloved, the driver’s reaction is even more extreme. He ‘jerks back the bit in the mouth of the wanton horse with an even stronger pull, bespatters his railing tongue and his jaws with blood and forcing him down on legs and haunches delivers him over to anguish’ (254e). Evidently reason here acts in anything but a cool, calm and collected fashion. It matches force with force indeed.

In the similar image in the *Republic* (588c ff) reason is represented by a human, while the other two parts are imagined, the one as a lion, the other as a many-headed monster. Again the analogy works as a graphic representation of conflict, where one element is trying to control and needs to control the others: yet this is at the cost of a certain recursiveness. The desires have to be curbed, and this is the work of reason. But when the attempt is made to explain how one faculty can indeed interact with another quite distinct one, reason tends to be pictured in human terms. Conflict within the psyche is then represented on the analogy of conflict between humans and beasts. Many Greeks seem to have felt threatened by the wild animals they imagined inside their own souls.

If we turn now to our evidence for ancient Chinese thought, there is as much disagreement among Chinese writers on questions ranging from human nature and the correct attitude towards desires, to the ideal of the Sage, as there is on analogous issues among the Greeks. But none of the principal generic terms used to speak of the feelings in Chinese carries with it the potentially heavy pejorative undertones of the Greek *pathos*, even though particular strong emotions were considered disorders that needed treatment in traditional Chinese medicine. Sivin (1987: 287ff.) identifies seven of these, *xi* (喜, joy), *nu* (怒, anger), *you* (憂, sorrow), *si* (思, ‘ratiocination’, or worry), *bei* (悲, grief), *kong* (恐, ‘apprehension’), and *jing* (驚, fear or fright). Elsewhere we find five-fold classifications, often though not always associated with the notion of the five interacting phases, though it would be a mistake to suggest there was a single orthodoxy on the question. Joy, anger, fear and sorrow figure in most accounts, but *ai* (哀, grief) sometimes replaces *si*. In some more extended lists, love (*ai*, 愛), hate (*wu*, 恐) and desire (*yu*, 欲) are treated as coordinate with joy and anger.
One of the generic terms used, zhi (志, ‘impulse’), puts the emphasis on conation and intention (in other contexts the term is rendered ‘will’). But other terms also appear for feelings in general. Qing (情) is often used in connection with xing(性) to speak of humans’ essential nature as a whole, but neither carries any pejorative undertones. No more does the pair gan/ying (感應) used in many contexts (not just human ones) of stimulus and response. Quite the reverse valency appears in the positive overtones apparent in the use of the same graph, 楽, which read as yue means music, read as le means joy and when read as yao means to delight in. No Chinese philosopher presents a radically conflictual theory of a bi-, tri- or multipartite soul: no more do we find a stark dichotomy between soul and body conceived, as by Plato, as two distinct substances, the one invisible and destined for immortality, the other visible, the soul’s prison. 6

To be sure there are many writers who condemn excessive desires. Let me rehearse some of the main material from Xunzi, from Lüshi chunqiu and from Huainanzi, before tackling more ambivalent texts, the Daodejing and Zhuangzi. In the third century BCE Xunzi, 8.11, remarks that indulging the emotions or your inborn nature is a sign of the ordinary person, not behaviour to be admired. Yet in Against the Twelve (Chapter 6) he criticises each of two diametrically opposed attitudes, the one that gives free rein to the desires, and the second that represses them. He attacks Tuo Xiao and Wei Mou on the first score, and Tian Zhong (or Chen Zhong) and Shi Qiu as examples of the second tendency. Unfortunately their works are not extant and so we have to rely on Xunzi and his commentators for their views. For Xunzi himself, human nature is inherently evil, by which he means that it requires education and acculturation (23.1a). The emotions are an inescapable part of our inborn nature, shared by everyone from the ‘mere gatekeeper’ to the ‘Son of Heaven’, the Emperor (22.5b). But they need to be rectified, he says at 8.7. Even the Sage follows his desires and fulfils his emotions (21.7d): having regulated them he is in tune with principles of order. This is a very different ideal from the Stoics’ recommendation to extirpate the pathe, even though the wished-for end result, Sagehood, may look as if it were the same.

---

6 In classical Chinese thought there are various notions of ‘ghosts’ (gui 鬼), and ‘spirits’ (shen 神), and of spiritual aspects of human beings (hun and po, sometimes combined in the binome hunpo, 魂 魄) but while these are all the subject of concerned attention, they do not hold out hopes of immortal bliss. Some have argued that hun and po reflect dualist beliefs when, on separation from the body on death, hun goes to heaven and po to earth. But in a critical re-evaluation of the evidence, including that from grave stelai, Brashier (1996) cast doubt on this and pointed out that the departure of hunpo does not necessarily bring about death, and hunpo deficiency is associated with ill-health: cf Lloyd 2005: 102 and 162 n. 11 with further secondary references.
Similarly in the great third century BCE cosmological synthesis, the *Lüshi chunqiu*, excessive emotions – here joy, anger, anxiety/sorrow, fear, grief – harm life (3/2/1). Yet heaven gave appetites and desires to humans, when it gave them life (2/3/1) and those that are essential are inherently self-limiting. ‘The Sage keeps these limits in good repair to make the desires stop at the right place: this is why when he acts he does not transgress the limits belonging to his essential nature (*qing*). Thus, the desire of the ear for the five sounds, of the eye for the five colours, and of the mouth for the five flavours, belongs to our essential nature. In regard to these three, the desires of the noble and base, the wise and stupid, the worthy and unworthy are as one’ (Knoblock and Riegel 2000: 84).’ So far as those desires go, even Shennong and the Yellow Emperor are on a par with the tyrants Jie and Zhou – and so too, as a later chapter, 19/6/2, adds, are barbarians and Chinese. ‘The Man and Yi barbarians – despite their backward tongues, their different customs and odd practices, despite their clothes, caps and belts, houses and encampments... and their preferences of sound, sight and flavour all being different from ours – are one with us and the same as us in satisfying their desires.’ Not even the three Sage Kings could eliminate (*ge*, 革) their desires. The Sages selected those sounds, colours and flavours that would benefit our natures (*xing*) and they rejected what might harm them (1/2/3). However, the vast majority of honoured and wealthy people of today are deluded in such matters and so their natures are damaged.

Similarly a century or so later, *Huainanzi* remarks (I 19a) that pleasure and anger can get in the way of the Dao, and sadness and joy upset virtue. Yet it is self-indulgence that causes the damage, rather than feelings and emotions in themselves. The Sage enjoys internal contentment (I 20a, 21b–22a).

Most Chinese writers tend to accept the emotions as part of human nature with equanimity. But in some the position is more ambivalent. The opening stanza of the *Daodejing* (Graham 1989: 219) famously begins, ‘The Way that can be Way-ed is not the constant way. The name that can be named is not the constant name. What has no name is the beginning of heaven and earth, what has a name is the mother of the myriad things.’ There then follows the double recommendation: ‘Therefore by constantly having no desire observe the sublimest in it, by constantly having desire observe where it tends. The two have the same source but different names. Call it the same, the “Dark”. The darkest of the dark is the gate of the sublime in everything,’ The paradox is that it seems that it is only by desiring that we can reach freedom from desire. The two have the same name, but then what can be named is not the constant name, and that must apply also to whatever it is that the last couplet enjoins us to ‘call’ the same, namely the ‘Dark’, whether
that is the source of desiring and desirelessness, or that pair itself. The ideal is indeed one well beyond what we can hope to attain in ordinary experience and even beyond what we can express in ordinary language. Yet when it deals with the more mundane problem of government, the *Daodejing* (57) speaks of the Sage ‘desiring not to desire’ whereupon ‘the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block’. Evidently the idea is that the Sage governs thanks to the example he sets of transcending desire.

In the equally radical *qiwulun* chapter of *Zhuangzi* (2) both assertion and denial, stating that ‘it is’, or stating that ‘it is not’, are undermined: the Sage adopts, or relies on, view-points with no categorical commitment to them. Yet Zhuangzi is sometimes represented as accepting what happens with calm and equanimity. This is the case with the story that appears in *Zhuangzi* 18 (Graham 1989: 175–6) which describes his reactions to his wife’s death. His friend Hui Shi comes to offer his condolences and finds Zhuangzi drumming on a pot and singing. That strikes Hui Shi as the epitome of shamefulness. But Zhuangzi replies: ‘Not so. When she first died, do you suppose that I was able not to feel the loss?’ He peered back into her beginnings; there was a time before there was a life ... before there was shape ... before there was *qi*. It was by the alteration of *qi* into shape and then into life that life came. ‘Now once more altered she has gone over to death. This is to be companion with spring and autumn, summer and winter, in the procession of the four seasons. When someone was about to lie down and sleep in the greatest of mansions, I with my sobbing knew no better than to bewail her. The thought came to me that I was being uncomprehending towards destiny, so I stopped.’

As in the *Daodejing*, so too in *Zhuangzi*, the Sage practises ‘no ado’, *wu wei* (無為). But this is *ataraxia* of a different kind from that aimed at by Hellenistic Greek philosophers. For both Stoics and Epicureans the attainment of peace of mind is the end result of considerable philosophical application, including the realisation of the equation of the good with virtue (in the Stoic view) or with pleasure (in the Epicurean). Even the Sceptics, for whom *ataraxia* supervenes on the discovery that there are no positive doctrines to be had concerning unseen reality or hidden causes, have to engage in the search – the *skepsis* from which they get their name – to get to that position. For the Daoist sage ‘no ado’ implies no such strenuous effort and is indeed incompatible with such. It is not just that the violent control of the desires, by reason, as in Plato’s image of the chariot-team, is at odds with the Daoist ideal: the Sage achieves freedom from ‘ado’ of any kind.

It is perhaps particularly remarkable that in the dispute over whether human nature (*xing*) is inherently good (as Mencius held) or evil (as in Xunzi) or indeed indifferent between the two (the position of Gaozi reported by Mencius), it is common ground to all three positions that desires and feelings are part of that nature. I have mentioned Xunzi criticising both
those who tried to repress desires and those who advocated indulging them, but clearly holding himself that desires belong indeed to our inborn nature. Gaozi is said to have remarked (Graham 1989: 121) that ‘eating and sexuality are from our nature’ and internal, but righteousness (yi, 義) is external, a matter of relationships between one human and another.

That division did not satisfy Mencius. His counter was that human nature is intrinsically good and he based that claim on an appeal to the empathy that all humans feel towards other humans. ‘The reason why I say that all humans have a heart which feels for others is that supposing people see a child about to fall into a well they all have a heart which is shocked and sympathises. It is not for the sake of being on good terms with the child’s parents, it is not for the sake of winning praise from neighbours and friends, nor is it the case because they dislike the noise of it crying. Judging by this, without a heart which sympathises you are not a human, without a heart aware of shame you are not a human, without a heart which defers to others you are not a human, without a heart which approves and condemns you are not a human’ (2 A 6, Graham 1989: 125–6, modified).

Even if we concentrate, as I have done, on some prominent Chinese writers in the period down to the end of the Han, there is considerable diversity in the views expressed on the feelings and emotions and on what our proper attitudes to them should be. As with the Greek evidence, attempts at global generalisations fall foul of that diversity. At the same time we may remark certain differences both in the focus of dispute in Greece and China, and in the range of positive recommendations that were made. Xin (心), for the Chinese, as is well known, covers both heart and mind, and is the seat both of thoughts and of feelings. But this does not become the locus of philosophical disputes proposing a variety of analyses of the different parts or faculties of the soul, let alone suggesting alternative theories on the conflicts that arise within it.

Moreover secondly and relatedly, we do not find Chinese philosophers going as far as some Greek ones did in their advocacy of the need to stamp out the appetites. Many, as we have seen, warn against self-indulgence, and some were for repressing the emotions (as we discover from Xunzi’s criticisms of Tian Zhong and Shi Qiu in particular). However, so far as our extant sources go, we have nothing to parallel Plato’s paradoxical account of the violence that reason has to use to control violent emotions. Tian Zhong’s position is just one end of the spectrum in which a diversity of opinions about the possible dangers of self-indulgence is expressed. But that was not in the name of the glorification of reason.

Thirdly and conversely, the association we find in Mencius, between human fellow-feeling and the sense of morality, goes further than any Greek philosophical text in recognising the positive role of feelings as the source
The Greeks and Chinese on the emotions

of goodness. The Greeks had their advocates of the common humanity of human beings, as potential citizens of the world, indeed. But that last was rather an abstract or theoretical philosophical position which was in some tension with the perceived differences between Greeks and barbarians, free men and slaves. The Chinese too, to be sure, were also influenced by their perceptions of the distinctions between themselves and other folk. Yet Mencius, as we saw, builds on his understanding of common human feelings to suggest a basic goodness in all humans.

As I began by remarking, the topic of the emotions is highly controversial and we are still some way away from a satisfactory synthesis. Nor shall I attempt one here, but limit myself to identifying some of the component factors that need to be taken into account. First on the side of what is common to all humans, we can include there first the overall structure of our brains (even though there are individual differences, including for instance in brain weight in proportion to body size). Nor should we suppose that there are important differences between human populations, past or present, in the reactions to biochemical mediators for instance.

Secondly, it is obvious that human infants and young children all undergo processes of social incorporation and acculturation and that as they do so, they learn different things, and acquire different skills, depending upon the group into which they are integrated. All normal human children have the ability to acquire a language and obviously the actual languages they do acquire differ substantially, not least in the vocabulary available to describe feelings and emotions. But it is not just a vocabulary that a child will pick up. Keeping an eye on its mother’s responses, it will learn which patterns of behaviour are acceptable, which not. It will come to register that some objects in its environment are alive, others not, some intentional agents and others not, even though there may be differences both in the stages at which those distinctions become well-established and even in how they are applied. Certain of the behaviour patterns that are learnt have neurophysiological correlates. Initially labile synapses become established (Changeux and Ricoeur 2000: 112). The repetition of the behaviour confirms the connections, and a given stimulus is then more likely to produce the given response – not that such patterns become unavoidable in other than extreme, pathological, cases.

On the one hand, the plasticity of human cognitive structures allows for different patterns of development. On the other, which patterns will be developed differs between different groups. The question that then arises is whether or to what extent commonalities exist where the feelings and emotions are concerned. Are there basic emotions that are indeed universal, however much they may be masked by apparent divergences in the surface vocabulary used to describe them? The most favoured candidates – fear and aggression – correspond to what are believed to be part of our evolutionary
inheritance. There is an obvious evolutionary advantage both in registering that a predator may attack, and in registering that a prey is there to be attacked. Those are feelings that humans will need in the struggle for survival in competition with other species of animals – a point that applies not just to individuals but also to groups. Tooby and Cosmides (1989, 1990), indeed, have argued, with some force and plausibility, that the development of the emotions in general, and of the sense of the need to cooperate with fellow members of the same species in particular, was crucial to the early evolution of human beings. It may well be that an expansion in the feelings registered and in their expression carried adaptive advantages for humans when dealing with co-specifics, not just other humans in the group to which an individual belonged, but also with others again in other groups.

But while in this context, too, the postulate of some basic cross-cultural universals seems justifiable, that does not take us very far. The potential range of sensitivities acquired by the growing child in any group far outstrips what it will need – or its ancestors would have needed – merely for survival. The commonality here is that it will become socially incorporated – but the modalities of its acculturation will vary with the society or the group in question. The influence of the natural language it first acquires is hugely pervasive – indeed we can detect traces of that in the ways in which even some quite sophisticated researchers in this field sometimes seem unduly swayed by particular features of the English language. But depending on where the child is brought up, it will not just pick up the vocabulary of certain emotions (such as fear and anger) that it may register even before the acquisition of language, but also learn about ‘guilt’ and ‘shame’ and ‘sadness’, not to speak of *song* and *hwyl*. It will learn too about the body language of its culture, not just facial expressions that have been claimed to be well recognised across the world as signals of particular emotions, but also those that are culture-specific. Those brought up in England, if they are unwary, may think of laughter as always expressing joy – until they travel to Japan and find that it may also indicate embarrassment.

Reference to ancient attitudes and terminology may serve a double purpose in our inquiry. First, like the field work of contemporary anthropologists, it helps us to appreciate the possibility of alternative maps of the emotions,

---

7 It is striking that Wierzbicka, who holds to the possibility of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, argues against ‘fear’ and ‘anger’ as such being cross-cultural universals, Wierzbicka 1999: ch 7.

8 One of the most enthusiastic proponents for the thesis of universals in facial expressions is Paul Ekman (1980, 1982) though his work has attracted sharp criticism in particular for assuming that facial displays express discrete emotional states – the problem of how emotional states are to be individuated that I mentioned before (Fridlund 1997: 104, cf Wierzbicka 1999: 172).
not just including those we easily recognise, but some that enlarge our conception of the possible world of the emotions themselves. Insofar as we are able to arrive at an approximate understanding of the ideas in question, it reassures us that our understanding is not totally constrained by what is available in our own natural language, even though we have, of course, eventually to give some gloss to our comprehension of others’ complex vocabularies using our, native, terminology.

Secondly, there is a particular advantage in the study of complex ancient civilisations that is not always mirrored in modern anthropology. This lies in the point I have insisted on for both ancient Greece and ancient China, namely that each society developed a range of different ideas – including some sophisticated explicit theories – concerning the emotions and advocated different policies about how to cope with them. The very fact of this diversity, within ancient Greek and within ancient Chinese, shows that they were not prisoners of their natural languages either, any more than we are of English. That certainly contributes to defeating a strong version of the linguistic determinism of Sapir (1949) and Whorf (1967).

I do not mean to deny that the basic vocabulary common to all the writers we can consult carries overtones and undertones, as pathos did for the Greeks, and qing and xing for the Chinese. Rather the point is that neither the Greeks nor the Chinese were limited to a single view of the emotions by their language or their culture. If human children have a certain plasticity and can learn about the emotions and their evaluation from the adults and the other children by whom they are surrounded, human adults enjoy a similar capacity for growth, and can modify and transcend received opinions, even those that are deeply entrenched in the cultures to which they primarily belong. After all, my whole study here of the emotions is predicated on the assumption that, using the English language but guarding against the influences on our analysis it may exert, it is still possible to express and explore widely divergent points of view about the emotions.

From what points of view, I may now ask in conclusion, are emotions a given, and from what others are they socially constructed? How should we adjudicate the strengths and weaknesses of the universalist and cultural-relativist positions? The urge to treat those two as mutually exclusive and exhaustive, and to plump for one while rejecting the other, should be resisted\(^9\).

---

\(^9\) Mallon and Stich (2000) somewhat optimistically develop an argument to reconcile the social constructivist, and the universalist, view of emotion by way of diagnosing a confusion in the meanings and references of emotion terms. The social constructivist relies on a ‘thick’ description of ‘fear’, for example, encompassing antecedent conditions, as well as culturally learned responses, and insists that this varies from culture to culture, while the universalist, on a narrow view of the reference of ‘fear’ as what Mallon and Stich relabel ‘core fear’, can concede some variety but counter that there is still a universal emotion prototype.
Some of those who have argued on other than purely biological grounds that there are clear-cut universals underlying the diversity of emotional vocabularies seem guided by their a priori assumption of the psychic unity of humankind. Those who insist on the diversity through and through, ignoring some of the findings of the neuroscientists and evolutionary psychologists, seem intent on resisting the potentially ethnocentric tendencies in the constitution of those ‘universals’. It goes without saying that such ideological considerations, on the one side or on the other, militate against a measured cross-disciplinary study of the phenomena.

Both biology on the one hand, and social anthropology and linguistics on the other, have much to contribute to our understanding of this complex domain. We must certainly pay due attention to the immense diversity of the maps of the emotions that are attested in different societies, ancient and modern, and in different languages. We can and should expand our own understanding of the subject by studying how other people in other places and at other times have behaved and what they have had to say about their feelings. They express that in distinctive vocabularies, where there are twin fallacies to be avoided. First to claim that those vocabularies are incommensurable is to overreact to their distinctiveness. We always have to work hard to capture the nuances of alien terms. But if difficult, that is not impossible, in principle nor in practice.

But the converse mistake is the reductionist one of postulating a natural semantic metalanguage to express what is essential to each and every complex emotion and set of them. Our personal experiences may well be more diverse than any natural language can, or would want to, express.

True, the open-endedness of the map of the emotions may be all very well, but children have to learn how to behave. They have to be given clear signals and learn to send clear ones themselves, while learning also, as senders and receivers, about ambiguous ones and their usefulness too. But if so, the socially constructed elements in those maps should be seen as serving, precisely, social and cultural purposes. They hang on the norms and values of the group in question. On the other side, some of the ‘given’ elements in this field are the result of biological analysis, and yet ‘given’ only in the sense that they are what neurophysiology and biochemistry inform us about. This does not help the universalist as much as many might suppose.

Matching brain scans with subjective experiences reveals gaps where the impressionistic, even if not necessarily culturally determined, qualitative language we have to use for those experiences does not capture all the information that the scans provide: nor conversely do the scans necessarily pick up the precise modalities of the complex subjective response. The cultural relativists take as their starting-point the reported diversity in the vocabularies used to express feelings, but should not ignore both the
inter-translatability of parts at least of those vocabularies and the common biology that underpins them.

What we need, in this and other similarly problematic subject-areas, is to recognise on the one hand what I call the multidimensionality of the phenomena and on the other the possibility of different styles of inquiry. Those are the concepts I use to evade both the Scylla of naive realism and the Charybdis of relativism (cf. Lloyd 2007). There is no single line of investigation that should take precedence over all others. We should make the best use of different types and levels of analysis and allow that at points they may be difficult to reconcile as they may indeed relate to different aspects of those multidimensional phenomena. Neurophysiology, biochemistry, social anthropology, linguistics, psychology, even ancient history, all have particular insights to offer on those aspects of the questions on which they focus. If there is no single nature here, to be cut definitively, as Plato wished, at the joints, that does not mean that those insights are illusory, nor that each society, each language, arbitrarily labels what it labels as the salient emotions. If we can agree to that, then what we need is a multidisciplinary approach to a subject that is so clearly important in education, in morality, in interpersonal relations and even in personal well-being.

References

Frischer, B. (1982), The Sculpted Word (Berkeley).
Graham, A.C. (1989), Disputers of the Tao (La Salle, Ill.).
13

Complexity and simplicity in Aristotle and early Daoist thought

David B. Wong

1. Why an inquiry into the values of complexity and simplicity?

The question of how one ought to live has occupied the center of the Greek and Chinese philosophical traditions. Modern philosophy, and most especially contemporary philosophy, has largely remained silent on what is arguably the first question of philosophy and has focused on the narrower question of what one morally ought to do or what are morally right actions. Acceptance of a plurality of valuable and justifiable ways to live has served as the most common excuse for such silence. Too many contemporary philosophers have nothing to say on a subject if they cannot hope to have the final word or the singular truth. Alternatively, most of what they have to say is that there is no final word or singular truth, as if that were all that was left to say. In this essay I return to some of what the ancients have said about what a fulfilling or worthwhile life is, and I ask what we can make of what they say from the standpoint of the contemporary acceptance of pluralism about the good life. My strategy is to approach Greek and Chinese philosophy with questions about the value of complexity and simplicity in living. My focus shall be on Aristotle and the composers of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. I make no claim that these thinkers are representative of the Greek and Chinese traditions in general, or that the differences between them are representative of general

1 This paper is a revision of one that was presented to the conference “Ethics in Ancient China and Greco-Roman Antiquity,” in Munich, Germany, in October 2007, and at Bryn Mawr College in October 2009. I wish to thank the participants of the conference and my audience at Bryn Mawr for many stimulating questions and comments. I wish to thank Amélie Rorty and Stephen Salkever for their comments while we were all fellows at the National Humanities Center in 2007, and Michael Krausz for intense conversations about intuitive action, music and the undifferentiated whole.

2 A notable exception to the silence of contemporary philosophers on the question of how one ought to live is Joel J. Kupperman. See his *Six Myths about the Good Life* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006).
differences between the traditions. My sense is that with two traditions that are as enormously complex and internally diverse as these, we are better off being humble about such generalizations and sticking with more specific comparisons.

One reason for approaching the ancients with complexity and simplicity in mind is that John Rawls has explicitly brought complexity into our conversation about the good life through his “Aristotelian Principle,” which is an attempt to extract from Aristotle an insight into the good for human beings and to deploy it in a liberal theory of justice that is founded on acceptance of pluralism about the good life. The fact that Rawls is attempting to bring Aristotle into a pluralistic context confers added significance. Moreover, the Aristotelian Principle reflects a broader contemporary tendency to value virtuosity of various sorts. There also is a contemporary countereffect of valuing simplicity, perhaps in an attempt to escape the frequently overwhelming complexity of our lives for a more focused and perhaps more tranquil condition.

In fact, a danger is that we may be projecting our own contemporary concerns about complexity and simplicity onto Aristotle. I will begin by looking at Rawls’ Aristotelian Principle to see how much Aristotle there really is in it. I will argue that the Rawls’ principle says more about us than Aristotle, who turns out to value an important kind of simplicity associated with the Godlike and eternal. I then turn to the Daodejing and Zhuangzi, Daoist texts that explicitly advocate that “less is more.” I will argue that while simplicity is valued in certain ways, there are others in which complexity and valued are valued. My aim in this paper is not simply to correct our possible misconceptions of these ancients, but to carry something from them for reflection on what a good life may be for us. I do not doubt that there is much in and about these texts that remains opaque or incongruent with or orthogonal to our contemporary concerns, but I will be looking for that which can be carried over. Moreover, what we cannot carry over may be instructive too, especially if what we cannot carry over turns out to be surprising. If it turns out that there are such differences between the ancients and us, they might afford us a fresh look not only on them but also on ourselves.

2. How Aristotelian is the Aristotelian Principle?

Rawls formulates the Aristotelian Principle to state that, other things being equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities, and that this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized or the greater its complexity. The intuitive idea is that human beings take more pleasure in doing something as they become more proficient at it, and of two activities
they do equally well, they prefer the one calling on a larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations.³ Rawls interprets the Aristotelian Principle as requiring greater inclusiveness: the “clearest cases of greater complexity are those in which one of the activities to be compared includes all the skills and discriminations of the other activity and some further ones in addition.”⁴ Rawls’ deployment of the Aristotelian Principle is part of a complex and subtle argument for congruence between the individual’s good and adherence to the two principles of justice: the liberties assured by the first principle allow individuals to develop and pursue the complex activities satisfying the Aristotelian Principle. Rawls’ justification for the Aristotelian Principle depends on the claim “that the more enjoyable activities and the more desirable and enduring pleasures spring from the exercise of greater abilities involving more complex discriminations.”⁵ The Aristotelian Principle is compatible, asserts Rawls, with the things Aristotle says about happiness, activity, and enjoyment in the *Nichomachean Ethics* Book 7, chapters 11–14, and Book 10, Chapters 1–5.

In Book 7, the most relevant passage related to complexity is in Chapter 14 (1154b22–1154b32):

> There is no one thing that is always pleasant, because our nature is not simple but there is another element in us as well, inasmuch as we are perishable creatures, so that if the one element does something, this is unnatural to the other nature, and when the two elements are evenly balanced, what is done seems neither painful nor pleasant; for if the nature of anything were simple, the same action would always be most pleasant to it. This is why God always enjoys a single and simple pleasure; for there is not only an activity of movement but an activity of immobility, and pleasure is found more in rest than in movement. But ‘change in all things is sweet’, as the poet says, because of some vice; for as it is the vicious man that is changeable, so the nature that needs change is vicious; for it is not simple nor good.⁶

Before this passage, Aristotle has rejected the idea that the bodily pleasures are never to be chosen, because we are beings with bodies. Our complex natures include the part that is capable of contemplating eternal truths. And we also know from earlier parts of the *Nichomachean Ethics* that our natures are social, which is why justice is a virtue for us. So Aristotle

---

⁴ Rawls, p. 427.
⁵ Rawls, n. 20, p. 426.
seems to acknowledge the human need for complexity in different sorts of pleasurable activity, and apparently the need arises from our complex nature. The picture we get here is not well expressed by the Aristotelian Principle, for he has clearly presented the human condition of composite nature and the need for varied activity as inferior to the condition of God, which is simple and immutable and therefore has the greatest pleasure.

Among the Book 10 passages Rawls cites, the most striking one that bears on the Aristotelian Principle is in Chapter 4 (1174b15–1175b24):

... it follows that in the case of each sense the best activity is that of the best-conditioned organ in relation to the finest of its objects. And this activity will be the most complete and pleasant. For, while there is pleasure in respect of any sense, and in respect of thought and contemplation no less, the most complete is pleasantest, and that of a well-conditioned organ in relation to the worthiest of its objects is the most complete; and the pleasure completes the activity.7

Later in Book 10 (1177a–1177b26), Aristotle states that the intellect’s objects are the worthiest. Contemplative activity, Aristotle goes on to argue, has all the characteristics of the most blessed of lives: it is the most continuous; the pleasantest of excellent activities; marvelous for its purity and enduringness; and it is self-sufficient, loved for its own sake and leisurely unlike political or military affairs. Striking here is the absence of complexity as a value. No doubt, the objects of contemplation include objects and systems with complex structures, but it is not their complexity that makes them fine but their eternal and immutable natures. No doubt, the capacity to make fine discriminations belongs to the organ of the intellect, but there is little sign that this capacity is valued for its pure virtuosity, but rather because it is endowed with the capacities it needs to continuously apprehend the finest of objects. What God does, for Aristotle, is contemplate. When we contemplate, we act according to that thing that is Godlike in us. We can contemplate that which drives all motion, and in that sense become attuned to the cosmos.

In contrast, consider Rawls’ reasons for holding the Aristotelian Principle: complex activities offer more enjoyment because they satisfy desires for variety and novelty of experience, “and leave room for feats of ingenuity and invention. They evoke “pleasures of anticipation and surprise, and often the overall form of the activity, its structural development, is fascinating and beautiful.” Simpler activities exclude the possibility of individual style and personal expression which complex activities permit or even require.8 These

7 Ross, p. 1856.
8 Rawls, p. 427.
reasons stand in marked contrast to Aristotle’s appreciation for the continuity and purity of the pleasure of contemplating the eternal and immutable. The overall picture we get from Aristotle is not at all the celebration of the virtuosity of complex abilities to make fine discriminations and the newness it brings to experience, nor a celebration of individuality and personal style, but, if anything, a concession to our composite natures that makes a more complex life a necessity, but not something to be yearned for. The yearning seems to go the other way, approaching as far as possible for us the divine simplicity of God and attunement with what drives all natural things.

Rawls’ interpretation of Aristotle is related to a more generally accepted understanding of Aristotle as holding in the superiority of human beings to nonhuman animals and plants, supposedly, because we are capable of a greater variety of, and more complex, activities. However, Catherine Osborne has argued persuasively that a careful reading of De Anima’s treatment of the soul yields no such value. There is an order in the sequence of functions from nourishment, growth and reproduction, perception, and thought: the later items in the sequence presuppose the existence of the earlier ones. The later in the sequence, the more capacities there are, and the more goals, and therefore more things to do. But having more things to do is not necessarily better. Because animals have derivative and complex functions, they are more dependent “upon the provision of a large range of opportunities and supplies” and it is therefore more improbable that they will achieve the kind of bliss that is total fulfillment of their goals. For Aristotle, “each fully formed member of a species has all the functions that it is good for a thing to have, so as to live a full life being what it is.” Because human beings have more functions, it is harder to be a successful human being than it is to be a successful plant. But harder does not, for Aristotle, make for better.

This is not to deny that Aristotle thinks pleasure is to be had in studying those works of Nature that are brought into being and perish. Though they are not of the highest worth, the study of the mutable and mortal, including not only human beings but also animals “which have no attractiveness to the senses, “provides joys which cannot be measured,” Aristotle says in Parts of Animals I (645a7–11). Notice here, moreover, that the study of human beings is not put above that of the other animals and plants. There is a value hierarchy here, but only between two groups, and human beings are placed in the group that has lower value.

10 Osborne, p. 101.
11 My thanks to Steve Salkever for bringing Osborne and Parts of Animals to my attention.
Seeing how far the Aristotelian principle is from Aristotle ultimately leads us to confront a difference in value. Rawls is trying to identity a characteristic of the human good that spans a reasonable pluralism of conceptions of the good, and given this goal of supporting the congruence between the individuals’ good and realization of the liberal theory of justice in society, it is not surprising that he would hit upon a principle that reflects the values of virtuosity, ingenuity, and novelty. These values are compatible with a range of other values that might go into a conception of the good. From Aristotle’s point of view, however, the exercise of more complex and more inclusive abilities is not anything in itself that is or necessarily should be valued over simpler and less inclusive abilities. It depends on what the abilities are and on the ends to which they are put. A human life that realizes godlike contemplative abilities plus the abilities to engage in political life plus the abilities all animals have that are related to their bodies is not superior to the life of God who simply contemplates. In this case, what is simpler is better, though not necessarily for human beings given their composite nature. Since we are human beings who must live with others, if nothing else for the sake of sustaining our abilities to contemplate, we will have more complex lives than God, but if we, with Aristotle, value contemplative activity above all other activities, we must live in ways that accord with that priority. We seek to approach the superior activity of God insofar as that is possible given the constraints imposed by our natures.

We need not agree with Aristotle’s supreme valuation of the eternal and immutable to see his general point that complexity of activity is not per se something to be prized. Nor is Rawls correct in his descriptive claim that people actually do prefer, other things being equal, more complex activity. Sometimes, for some people, simpler is better: simpler activities can afford a greater purity of pleasure by enabling us to focus on doing one thing. To take an example very different from the sort Aristotle would have had in mind, the simple act of running can be experienced as more pleasurable than a more complex activity that includes running, such as basketball or tennis, because it enables a purer experience of the release of energy and a more continuous attunement to the rhythms of one’s own body that is normally lost in work activities and even the more complex forms of play.

12 Sir Geoffrey Lloyd has made a related point to me about the dual meaning of the Greek adjective haploûs: it can mean simple, in the sense of straightforward; or it can mean simple-minded or silly. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, revised and augmented throughout by Sir Henry Stuart Jones with the assistance of Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940). The entry for haploûs was accessed online Sept 26, 2009 @ http://old.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%2312211.
But there is something else going on in Aristotle when he plumps for the superiority of contemplation, and it is not just his valorization of what is eternal and immutable. The superiority of contemplation involves our approach to the Godlike, our attunement with what moves all things. The theme of attunement with the source of all change and all things also shows up in early Daoism, and so we encounter a surprising overlap between Aristotle and the Daoism. Attunement with the source, furthermore, is also associated with simplicity in Daoism, but, as we shall see, not in simple ways.

3. Simplicity (interlaced with complexity) of attunement and action in the Daodejing and Zhuangzi

The theme of simplicity appears in the Zhuangzi and the Daodejing as the idea of winnowing down to the essentials so that one may better attune to them. In Chapter 20 of the Zhuangzi, we are told to make few our needs and to lessen our desires so that we can get along without rations and also ford the rivers, drift upon the sea and wander alone with the Way to the Land of Great Silence. The Daodejing Chapter 48\(^{13}\) (MWD 11) articulates a similar theme. One reduces until one reaches \textit{wu wei} (literally, “non-action,” but more informatively translated as “effortless action”\(^{14}\)), and nothing is left undone. Attunement through reduction puts one not only in attunement with what is essential in one’s person but what is essential outside, so that special efficacy is achieved.

This intuitive and particularly efficacious mode of action, termed \textit{wu wei} in the Daodejing and often illustrated in the Zhuangzi by stories of extraordinary skill such as the one about Cook Ding, is often depicted as a spontaneous, unselfconscious “flow” of activity, and relative to these characteristics it is a simple mode of action.\(^{15}\) That is, it is simple compared

\(^{13}\) The initial citation to a chapter in the Daodejing will be to the Wang Bi version, and the number of the chapter in the Ma Wang Dui (MWD) version will be given in parentheses.


\(^{15}\) I refrain from calling “\textit{wu wei}” the kind of intuitive, efficacious activity featured in the “skill” stories of the Zhuangzi because that text does not nearly feature that phrase as prominently as it is featured in the Daodejing (it’s in fact not used in the skill stories), and I want to avoid the impression that important themes that are associated with the phrase in the Daodejing are also found with equal prominence in the Zhuangzi. Nevertheless, there is present in both Daoist texts the notion of a particularly efficacious kind of activity, perfectly fitted to the particular features of the situation or material at hand, which is experienced as spontaneous and does not require (or largely require) self-conscious monitoring of what one is doing. I will use relatively colorless phrases such as “intuitive action” to designate this kind.
to the kind of actions that are guided in a step-by-step self-conscious fashion through reflective monitoring of what one is doing. The action is simple by virtue of its felt immediacy and ease, its lack of reflective self-monitoring, but it is also a complex achievement in other ways. First, it takes a long period of practice. Before Cook Ding was able to cut up oxen with marvelous ease with nary a nick to his knife blade, he had to put in a period of apprenticeship in which he saw oxen wherever he looked. After that period, he never saw a whole ox, never even looked with the eye when he cut but was guided by his vital energies, his qi 氣. Second, it is a mode of action that in practice takes into account the finest differences between situations. Each ox is different. The location of spaces in between the bones is different. The Cook’s intuitive cutting is exquisitely responsive to what is there, even if no self-conscious thought records the differences between oxen.

Indeed, the kind of simplicity displayed by this sort of intuitive activity seems to be tied up with this exquisite responsiveness. For people such as the Cook, their period of apprenticeship allows them to perform without conscious self-direction the component actions forming the infrastructure of the activity as a whole, and this allows their consciousness to fully focus on the material or relevant features of the situation at hand. Thus the Cook has become especially skilled at wielding the knife and keeping it under the control of his hand while slicing through muscle and joints and no longer has to pay conscious attention to the mechanics of these component actions of cutting up the ox. Rather, he is able to focus on the feel of the blade as it slides through the spaces. The skill level achieved is analogous to that of a musician who has mastered the technique of playing her instrument and who is freed to focus her attention on the music as she makes it, rather than, say the correct technique for bowing a violin. There is complex virtuosity that is displayed in this skilled intuitive action, and it is made possible by a kind of simplicity relative to action guided by reflective self-monitoring. The simplicity of this kind of intuitive activity, then, is consistent with complex skills of discrimination in perception and response.

There is, however, an underlying layer of complexity that is suggested by a moment in the Cook’s self-description:

However, whenever I come to something intricate, I see where it will be hard to handle and cautiously prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, you scarcely see the flick of the chopper – and at one stroke the tangle has been unraveled, as a clod crumbles to the ground.16

16 Translation by A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), p. 64.
This moment in the Cook’s story indicates not just that the flow of unselfconscious activity can be interrupted when the agent gets to a part of the activity that requires self-monitoring, but also that a continuous self-monitoring is operating at another level, perhaps pushed into the background of the subconscious or conscious when things are going smoothly, but present nevertheless in case self-conscious direction is needed in the foreground of consciousness. Such complex layering is made possible by parallel processing involving different areas and circuits of the brain, with feedback mechanisms to enable coordination between the two levels of intuitive and self-monitoring processing. The musician, to resume the analogy suggested earlier, may on one level be totally absorbed in the activity of music, but monitoring how the performance is going on another level, and ready to activate self-monitored action when the going gets tough. Those who operate primarily with the intuitive mode in the foreground of consciousness and those who operate with more frequent intervention by the self-monitor exemplify different types of musical excellence. Consider, for example, Artur Rubenstein, celebrated for his intuitive expressiveness and in whom technical mistakes are noticeable, and Vladimir Horowitz, greatly admired for his technical precision but also assessed as somewhat cold in his perfection.\footnote{I owe a great deal to Michael Krausz for these points about musical performance and their connection to the Cook Ding story.}

A kind of simplicity that supports skilled intuitive activity is emptiness of mind. The lessening of desire advocated in both the \textit{Daodejing} and the \textit{Zhuangzi} has the effect of clearing the mind for enhanced receptivity. The first chapter of the \textit{Zhuangzi} describes the effects of seeing the world through the filter of one’s desires: one sees things only in terms of what might satisfy those desires. When Huizi tried to think of what to do with the shells of huge gourds he had grown, he ended up smashing them to pieces because they would not serve the uses he had preconceived for them. They were too heavy to be used as water dippers or water containers. Zhuangzi chides him for not thinking of lashing the shells together to make a kind of raft upon which to go floating around the lakes and rivers. A recurrent theme throughout the first chapter is that we are ruled by our preconceptions of the uses of things, which keeps us from being able to recognize the usefulness of the “useless.” When performing skill activities such as Cook Ding’s, preoccupation with the “uses” of these activities can interfere with our ability to perform them well.

However, there is another layer of complexity that underlies the simplicity of Daoist intuitive action. Contrary to those who would characterize it as
nonpurposive, the simplicity of this action is consistent with its being guided by purpose, even if the purpose is not at the forefront of consciousness or is “forgotten” once the action is initiated. Cook Ding was, after all, a cook. There is yet another layer of complexity in the purposes that might underlie Daoist intuitive action. I have in mind the Daoist criticism of purposefully striving to realize values such as ren 仁 and yi 義 (ethical concepts central to Confucianism and translated by A. C. Graham as “Goodwill” and “Duty” respectively and also translated variously by others as “benevolence” or “humanness” and “righteousness” or “appropriateness”). The old fisherman in Chapter 31 of the Zhuangzi chides the character of Confucius for, among other things, searching out the distinction between these values, watching for the moment to act or refrain, measuring what he gives against what he receives, rearranging his essential likes and dislikes, readjusting his occasions for pleasure and anger when instead he should be carefully guarding the genuine in him. The unforced and genuine produces that which the Confucian strains but fails to achieve: filiality in the son, compassion in the father, loyalty in the minister, justice in the lord. Yet consider that this passage could only appeal to those who would desire to restore filiality, compassion, loyalty, and justice. That is a purpose. And if Confucians strive in a strained fashion to achieve that purpose, in such a way as to defeat themselves, it does not seem a simple matter to avoid their error.

The Zhuangzi passage goes along with Daodejing Chapter 18 (MWD 62), which associates rejection of the great dao 道 with the rise of ren and yi, great hypocrisy with the advent of ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’, lack of harmony in the six relations with filial piety and compassion, and chaos in the state with upright ministers. Chapter 19 (MWD 63) continues this theme by associating the elimination of ‘sageliness’ and throwing away of ‘knowledge’ with benefiting the people a hundredfold, the elimination of ren and throwing away of yi with the return of filial piety and compassion. These chapters are plausibly read as warning that preaching moral values in the face of felt moral decay will only get people to profess values, not to live up to them in any genuine fashion. In an age of opportunism and backstabbing, preaching only gets people to treat moral ideals as the occasion for another kind of competition with others. They condemn others for their immorality and puff themselves up for their own morality.

The path back from experience and corruption also lies in shedding desires for recognition and praise from others. As Chapter 24 (MWD 66) has it, he who boasts or puffs himself up cannot stand. He who brags about himself

19 See the translation by A.C. Graham, p. 251.
will not last long. In fact, seeking to shine among others might have a deep connection to the failure of virtue ideals such as the Confucians espoused, if the failure of preaching moral ideals lies in their playing into games of competition and self-glorification. Chapter 4 of the Zhuangzi says that 德 (power, virtue) is dissipated by that which gives birth to knowledge, and that is competition. To make a name for oneself is to compete with others. Knowledge is a tool in that competition. To insist in the presence of a tyrant on 仁 and 毅 amounts to taking advantage of someone’s ugliness to make one look handsome. The point to be drawn here for the purposes of our reflections on simplicity in Daoism is that beneath the imagery of child-like innocence is rather acute psychological perception about the hazards of apparently sincere moral self-cultivation. The hazards can be morally self-defeating for the agent who seeks cultivation, and self-defeating in her attempts to move others to similar ends. There is a kind of simplicity involved here, but one that through experience strives for innocence from striving.

This is not to deny that Daoist advice to simplify is often phrased in much more radical and sweeping ways. Chapter 20 (MWD 64) suggests that the sage-ruler becomes more childlike than others, who continue to make fine distinctions. He is even compared to an infant who has not yet learned to smile. His mind is the mind of a fool, ignorant and stupid, muddled and confused, formless like the ocean, drawing sustenance from the Mother. We are invited to put scare quotes around “fool, ignorant, and stupid, muddled and confused.” This is how others would view the sage. Yet the return to a kind of innocence is unmistakably signaled, and so is the suggestion of merging with an undifferentiated source of all that can be differentiated. In Chapter 55 (MWD 18), the one who abundantly possesses 德 that is rooted in 道 is likened to a newborn babe who does not know the meaning of male and female but whose male member will stir because its virility is at its height. For the mind to dictate to one’s vital energies is said to be violent (心使氣曰強). The scope of rejection widens, it seems, to culture per se. Here again is the theme of simplicity associated with attunement to the source. In the case of the early Daoist texts, that to which one becomes attuned is in some fundamental sense undifferentiated, and that seems to call for radical simplicity in one’s person.

The task of returning to innocent attunement is accordingly a very large task. To forget culture is not an action that can simply be willed, and like trying to get to sleep, trying to forget it can make it ever more salient in consciousness. Perhaps a response to this problem lies in Chapter 10

---

20 Based on the translation by Graham, p. 67.
David B. Wong

(MWD 54), which hints of meditative practice in asking, “In concentrating your breath until it is soft, can you be like an infant?” In cleaning your mirror of mystery, can you make it without blemish?” Whether or not one takes the advice to return to childlike innocence literally, one can take seriously the potential benefits of meditative practice. The scientific study of the effects of meditation is just beginning, but one interesting result is that it appears to calm activity in the amygdala, the part of the brain involved in processing emotion, particularly with negative affect. Calming the turbulence of negative emotion, stilling internal emotional “noise,” might indeed cause consciousness to be more responsive to “other things.”

And what about the efficacy of the sage-ruler who accomplishes this simple yet complex state of being, an innocent child-like state that is reached by traveling through knowing and experience? He places himself behind his subjects in order to lead them (Daodejing, Chapter 66, MWD 29). Does this mean that the sage-ruler simply follows his subjects and makes no decisions of his own? But in other places such as Chapter 3 (MWD 47) the key to the subjects’ return to innocence seems to lie in what the ruler does or does not do. He does not honor persons of excellence precisely in order to prevent the sort of competition mentioned earlier. He does not value scarce goods in order to prevent theft, and he does not display the desirable to keep them from being unsettled. In short, he empties his subjects’ minds but fills their bellies, weakens their purpose but strengthens their bones, causes them to be free of knowledge and desire and causes the knowledgeable not to dare. The juxtaposition of these passages makes for two different options in interpretation, neither of them pointing to a very “simple” way of acting for the ruler.

One possibility is to seize upon the possibility that a kind of clever manipulation of subjects is being suggested – keep one’s subjects ignorant so that they won’t know what they’re missing and therefore won’t seek it. Another possibility is to recognize that a ruler, particularly a sage-ruler, can implement strategies that go in different directions, perhaps at different times, or in different respects. A ruler can “follow” his subjects by being extremely sensitive to their concerns and tendencies and by making clear that it is their welfare that is foremost for him (Chapter 56, MWD 12, says the sage makes as his own the mind of the people). This will allow him to know where they can be led and where they can’t, or where the cost of trying to lead them there would be prohibitive. On the other hand, while

---

being so sensitive, he can still lead by modeling for them what is important and what is superfluous or even damaging to the psyche to pursue with zeal. Chapter 80 (MWD 30) advises the ruler to bring his subjects to the point where they have no thought of migrating elsewhere, where they have carts and boats but no use for them, armor and weapons but no reason to display them. On the other hand, he is to make it so that they will savor their food, find their clothes beautiful, take pleasure in their customs, and feel secure in their dwellings. Upon any interpretation that seeks to reconcile the relevant chapters about the actions of the sage-ruler, the simplicity of action and its amazing efficacy can be no simple thing to bring about. On my favored interpretation, to lead one must follow in certain ways and yet also try to set in place an environment where people will engage in their best instincts and not their worst.

The complexity and delicacy in this philosophy of leadership threatens to conflict with the theme of returning to the original state, suggested by the imagery of return to childhood and infancy. The most charitable interpretation of the Daodejing on this matter is to refuse to take the imagery of childhood and infancy literally while maintaining that at the level of metaphor it should be taken seriously. An adult who becomes childlike has characteristics that resemble a child’s, but these are characteristics as possessed by an adult and are accordingly transformed. As pointed out earlier, the sort of intuitive action valorized by the Daoist texts presupposes a sense of purposiveness in the adult that certainly is not present in the young child or infant. And in affairs of state, it means deftness in the delicate task of knowing when to follow the people by not trying to lead them where they can’t be led and when to try to change what they desire by changing the conditions under which they come to desire. Nevertheless, an adult with such wisdom can be childlike in the lack of personal ambition, the freshness of perspective that comes from a tranquil emotional state and fewer desires, and in the kind of initial willingness to trust others’ good will that can bring out the best in them. The sage-ruler is like a child in the right ways, at the right time.

4. Counterpoints to simplicity in the Zhuangzi

The Zhuangzi in particular introduces another level of sophisticated reflection on some of the kinds of simplicity mentioned so far. The text expresses doubts as to whether the grain of things will enable a sage-ruler to create and sustain a Laoist utopia, a doubt expressed by a pessimistic Confucius in Chapter 4 as he says to his idealistic student Yan Hui: “I’m afraid you are simply going to your execution.” The thrust of the text as a whole lies much more in the direction of discussing the individual’s quest
for a dao rather than the ruler’s quest for a social dao. There are themes of simplicity articulated in this discussion as well, with accompanying counterpoints of complexity.

The first kind of simplicity mentioned in discussion of the individual’s quest for a dao is reduction of attachment. A common interpretation of both the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi is that they urge the kind of cosmic identification with the whole that means giving up normal human attachments to particular others. And surely something like this theme is very much present in the Zhuangzi, and it is tied up with the urge to merge with an undifferentiated whole that resists reduction to any perspective we can bring on it. This theme is illustrated by the story of four Daoist masters in Chapter 6 of the Zhuangzi. In one part of the story, Master Lai falls ill and explains his acceptance of death as obedience to Yin and Yang, which are more than mother and father to him: “That hugest of clumps of soil loaded me with a body, had me toiling through a life, eased me with old age, rests me with death; therefore that I found it good to live is the very reason why I find it good to die.” The story celebrates a kind of freedom from suffering that comes from identification with the whole and release from identification with the human.

In light of this story, one might take the theme of identification with the whole as advocating complete detachment from the human world of emotion and relationship to other people. Consider, however, Chapter 18. When Huizi came to condole upon the death of Zhuangzi’s wife, he found Zhuangzi squatting upon the floor, drumming on a pot and singing. Huizi says, “It is bad enough to refuse to bewail the death of someone with whom one has brought up children and grown old together, but what could be more shameful than to drum upon a pot and sing?” Zhuangzi replies, “Not so. When she first died, do you suppose that I was able not to feel the loss?” But he then recognized that her birth, life, and death were part of a process that goes back beyond the beginnings of life, shape and energy, and that in death she has gone to become a companion to the seasons and to lie down and “sleep in the greatest of mansions.” The thought then came to him that “I was being uncomprehending towards destiny, so I stopped.”

The story of the death of Zhuangzi’s wife portrays more complexity of emotional response than the stories about the four masters, where

---

23 Graham, p. 88.
24 Paraphrase based on the translation by Graham, p. 123.
25 Graham, p. 124.
signs of sorrow and grief are brusquely dismissed. By contrast, Zhuangzi acknowledges an attachment to his lost wife even as he explains his eventual letting go gained from identification with the whole. The story is appealing in the way it presents both the Zhuangzi with familiar human emotions and the Zhuangzi daemonically identifying with the whole. As a small part of the whole, he is a man, and as a man, he must feel the loss of his wife and sob over her death, but as a man with intellect and imagination capable of embracing the whole, he can come to accept her death, his felt loss, and also to continue to embrace his wife as part of the whole, as one who has laid down in the “greatest of mansions.” Embrace of the whole entails acceptance of sorrow and grief as natural reactions to extinction, but the very act of doing so can bring solace and acceptance, for the human sounds of sorrow and grief contribute to the chorus of sounds made by the pipes of earth and the pipes of people, all of which ultimately come from the Great Clod that breathes through them (in the striking image of the opening of Chapter 2). Indeed, the image of Zhuangzi’s pounding on a tub and singing suggests something beyond solace and consolation: a kind of wildness that accompanies an unconditional embrace of the whole that requires no reason for change, no explanation, and no ultimate source that can be understood.

Why is identification both with the human and with Heaven necessary? Why not simply embrace a Heaven that treats the human on a par with a fly’s foreleg and shed any special attachment to the human? One reason not to do this is that to fully detach from the human is to treat as absolute the dichotomy between the human and Heaven. It is simply to reverse the likes and dislikes of one’s original narrow perspective of complete identification with the human, and to fall into a different narrowing perspective. Consider the following passage from Chapter 23:

To be skilled in what is Heaven’s and deft in what is man’s, only the perfect man is capable of that. Only the animal is able to be animal, only the animal is able to be Heaven’s. The perfect man hates Heaven, hates what is from Heaven in man, and above all the question ‘Is it in me from Heaven or from man’?  

In commenting on this passage, Graham remarks, “One cannot in the last resort distinguish the work of Heaven and of the man in the skilled spontaneity of the Taoist or the craftsman: if one tries, what is left as Heaven’s is the purely animal, and from this point of view it is wrong to prefer Heaven.”  

I agree that a purely detached Zhuangzi does not fit comfortably with the logic in both the inner and outer chapters that propels us away from fixation

26 Graham, p. 106.
27 Ibid.
on dichotomies altogether. Resting secure in the “knowledge” that we are insignificant in relation to the cosmos is also to presume too much for our powers to know.

The kind of resilience displayed by Zhuangzi in the story of his wife reflects the resolve to keep the human and Heaven together. There is attachment to the human, to the small, because of the smallness of oneself, and there is the ability to detach because of the largeness of one’s imaginative identification with the whole. Extirpating one’s special feelings for particular others seems a self-protective move. It is to flee from our humanity based on fear of loss. It appeals to the urge to become invulnerable by wanting nothing that the world can take away. But that is the easy way out to conquer one’s fear of loss: to make loss impossible. The difficult and more worthy project is engaging with others and cultivating the ability to deal with their loss when it occurs. If we are to make it be spring with everything, as we are advised to do in the 5th chapter of the Zhuangzi, we should in spring-like fashion open ourselves up to and be expansive with the whole that cannot be destroyed, but also with the people in our lives, with the fragile and transient, and whose value is to be treasured all the more because they will not last. That is the more complex attitude toward human attachment that is made possible by the very rich and complex text of the Zhuangzi.

The second kind of simplicity to which the Zhuangzi provides a counterpoint is simplicity of attunement to the world. It is the simplicity of merger with the source. However, this simplicity is underlain by a complexity that is provided by skepticism about the possibility of merger. The Zhuangzi is a unique blend of what I have elsewhere called themes of engagement and themes of skepticism. The themes of engagement are ones I have characterized earlier: that we can come into an attunement with the world that allows extraordinary efficacy of action and peace of mind. However, such engaged themes are often entangled in the text with skeptical questioning of the human pretensions to know, such as pointing out the relativity of perception to the size and time scale of human beings.

A.C. Graham translates the title of the first chapter, xiao you as “Going Rambling Without a Destination.” We begin in the ocean

28 Ibid.
29 Graham, p. 80.
30 I agree with a remark that Cheng Chung-ying has made about my interpretation to the effect that the Daodejing displays much more confidence in the human ability to know how to live in the world, though I hasten to add that the skepticism expressed about conceptual frameworks even in that work opens the way for the far more sophisticated epistemology of the Zhuangzi.
with the enormous fish Kun, fly up high in the sky when the fish turns into
the bird Peng, and look down with the bird towards the ground where we
live. All it sees is blue, just as we do when we look up at the sky. The reader
rambles on to the perspective of the small creatures with small outlooks.
The cicada and dove cannot comprehend the scale of Peng’s flight because
their idea of the upper limit of flight extends only to a tree branch. The
word yao in the title connotes the idea of going beyond, and the reader is
indeed taken beyond the familiar domains of the human social world to
absorb the lesson that the perceptions of all creatures are shaped by their
size and location in relation to what they perceive in their environments.
The life span of each kind of creature also conditions its experience of
the world: “The mushroom of a morning does not know old and new
moon, the cricket does not know spring and autumn; their time is too
short.”31

There is in fact no contradiction here between the skeptical and engaged
themes. Much of the skeptical argument in the Zhuangzi is directed toward
undermining our initial perspectives so that we may *broaden* them or become
more flexible in adopting new perspectives. The skeptical thrust is directed
at current perspectives conceived as obscuring what else is there for us to
experience, but there is a non-skeptical thrust in that the new perspectives
we are invited to adopt really do seem to reveal something genuine we have
not experienced before. As the new perspectives loosen the grip of the old
ones, we are aware that *their* grip on us is subject to loosening by still further
new perspectives. Zhuangzi’s skepticism is not bounded by a privileged kind
of knowing (I do not read the text as skeptically questioning the power of
words, arguments, and theories while privileging the veridicality of wordless,
intuitive insight into the present moment), nor is it the dogmatic assertion
that we can know nothing. It is a continuous willingness to question the
truth or completeness of whatever is the currently received view; it is the
willingness to be surprised, openness to and even enjoyment in being jolted.
The interplay between skepticism and engagement is a dialectical process
with no end in sight. Skeptical questioning of our current perspectives opens
us to new perspectives, and in adopting these new perspectives we can
make genuine discoveries. But it is precisely because these discoveries can
undermine our assumptions of what we thought we knew that we keep on
asking skeptical questions that lead to further new discoveries, at least some
of which will again undermine our current assumptions. The text of the
Zhuangzi is an enactment of this dialectical interplay, and presents no final
conclusions for the reader to draw. It rather invites the reader to continue

31  Chapter 1, Graham, p. 44.
that interplay, and belief in the mystical attunement to the grain of things cannot be exempt from that interplay.\textsuperscript{32}

5. Some reflections

During the writing of this paper, I experienced something like this dialectical interplay. At the beginning, I had in mind the rather simple association of valuing complexity with Aristotle and valuing simplicity with the Daoists. What I found in Aristotle was a yearning for a certain kind of divine simplicity and in the Daoists layers of complexity interwoven with or underlying the ideal of simplicity. For every theme of simplicity in a rich text such as the \textit{Zhuangzi} there is a matching counterpoint that moves the reader towards recognition of the need for complexity. Instead of the value of complexity per se or simplicity per se, there is an overarching theme of attuning with the source of it all and also the theme that simplicity is good to the extent that it allows to focus without distraction on what is most important.

The intuitive action that resembles the kind celebrated in the \textit{Daodejing} and the \textit{Zhuangzi} has brought tremendous satisfaction to human beings. I earlier hinted at some partial explanations of how such action could be especially efficacious through delegation of component actions to subconscious processes that free the mind to focus on salient features of the situation or material at hand. Simplicity, in the sense of a paring down of desire, a stilling of the ordinary busyness of consciousness can plausibly enhance such focus. However, intuitive action from another perspective is marvelously complex activity that consists of finely discriminated response to particular features of the material or situation at hand. It involves a constant self-monitoring that may stay in the background of the subconscious or conscious but push to the forefront of consciousness when needed.

Our contemporary reasons for valuing complexity as a form of impressive virtuosity and for valuing simplicity as relief from overwhelming complexity can remain reasons for us, but the ancients had hit upon other things to prize that we would do well to consider. Simplicity, in the sense of paring desires and ends that are dispensable, unnecessarily distracting, or even harmful, enables singleness of concentration on the important, the crucial, or on what in the present situation calls for response. Aristotle, the \textit{Daodejing} and the \textit{Zhuangzi} all associate simplicity in this sense and the theme of attunement with that which could be characterized as the source (in Aristotle’s case,

\textsuperscript{32} I make a case for this interpretation in “Zhuangzi and the Obsession with Being Right,” \textit{History of Philosophy Quarterly} 22 (2005): 91–107.
of movement and change, and in the case of the Daoist texts, not only of movement and change but also of the multiplicity of things).

For the ancients, the most important is connection to the source and the whole. It is worth thinking about, or trying to live, some connection the whole that does not require us to bury our skeptical bent, and in that respect the *Zhuangzi* can be deeply attractive, even though its moments of wild abandon can seem fearfully distant to the sensibilities of most of us. A sense of attunement with the whole that allows solace and acceptance of our very human losses and sorrows – that sense of simplicity that is the overcoming of separation recommends itself to our consideration, especially for those of us who find the monotheistic or polytheistic religions implausibly anthropomorphic, a yearning for the spiritual must find another way of connecting to the whole that does not require suspension of disbelief and attachment to the human.

As to the problem posed at the beginning of this paper – of wondering what we contemporaries can say about how we ought to live given a general acceptance of pluralism of good ways to live, I would propose what I take to be the Zhuangist answer: we need not deny the real goodness of our own values and ways to live, but rather be prepared to recognize the real goodness of alternatives, and instead of worrying whether we have found the one true way of ordering all these values and these ways of life in a hierarchy of best, better and good, we might rather open ourselves up to the possibility of incorporating at least some of the alternative values and ways of life we have discovered. Instead of searching for a way to place all values in their proper places, we should enjoy the freedom to acknowledge and synthesize new values and ways of life we have discovered and to recognize that even our original value commitments suggest unexpected values and ways of life upon further examination.

The remarkable thing about the *Zhuangzi* is the combination it presents of joy in exploration and humility about what it is that we could be said to know. A Zhuangist delight in discovery and even in the upset of previously entrenched fundamental assumptions, along with the awareness that what one believes now is probably in some way false or incomplete, seems suitable both to our capabilities and our limitations. I find it to be congenial to a contemporary pluralistic attitude toward conceptions of the good life and with an appropriate humility about what is “best” for human beings to strive for.
The ethics of prediction

Lisa Raphals

The ability to predict might appear to be an unambiguous good, especially in the ancient world where, we are told, people were constantly at the mercy of natural forces. Furthermore, the ability to predict was also linked to the development of Greek *techne* and science, which, at least in the positivist history of science, is always represented in the most positive terms. By prediction I mean a wide variety of attempts to predict events in the lives of individuals, families and polities, as well as attempts to predict natural or cosmological events and anomalies, often for political purposes. I begin reviewing some contemporary debates about the virtues of prediction. Next I ask whether and in what form the ethics of prediction was an issue in Chinese and Greek antiquity. I then focus on two contexts: defenses of medical and military prognostication and debates about divination.

1. The ethics of prediction

At present the status of prediction is controversial in several areas of medical ethics and public policy. A comprehensive review is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but let me mention a few areas of controversy. (1) Does prediction ultimately benefit its ostensible beneficiary? (2) Can prediction result in public harm even if it is accurate? (3) Can prediction shade into a level of control that is in some sense excessive or unnatural?

1.1. Does prediction benefit its beneficiary?

There are many situations in which it is not clear that prediction about our individual wellbeing benefits its beneficiary. A few examples:

(a) Situations in which we cannot intervene. Do we wish to know that we are doomed to die of a certain disease if it is one we can do nothing to
prevent? By contrast, in the cases of ailments in whose course we can intervene, a great deal of effort is put in to ensuring that we have the proper diagnostic lab tests and in convincing us to regulate our diet, habits, exercise, etc.

(b) Knowledge is power. Will harm befall us if predictions about us (accurate or otherwise) fall into hands not of our choice, for example those of employers or insurance companies? This concern has been an obstacle to genetic screening, or even AIDS testing.

(c) Error. A different set of ethical problems arise in cases where a prediction turns out to be empirically wrong, and may harm us directly or indirectly. Consider the recent case of Mr. John Brandrick of Cornwall, age 62, who was initially diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer. Given a short time to live, he quit his job and sold his house and possessions in order to enjoy fully the last time allotted to him. The diagnosis was later modified to pancreatitis, which would not affect his life expectancy. But he had effectively squandered all his provisions for his future, having been informed by authoritative opinion that he had none.

1.2. Can prediction result in excessive control?

No one would reasonably object to our attempting to counter-balance genetic “weak points” by preventative regimes that offset out individual vulnerabilities to heart disease, diabetes, etc., but attempts to alter our genetic makeup are another story. As new technologies increase the range of genetic screening available or even alter our children’s genetic makeup, new debates arise about what level of intervention into nature is proper for humans to exercise. Should we manage the genetics of our unborn children by selecting for gender, intelligence, predisposition to psychiatric ailments? There is widespread, though not universal approval of prenatal screening (potentially followed by abortion) for Down’s syndrome or life threatening congenital ailments. Other procedures are more controversial.


Using ultrasound to select for gender is now illegal in some countries. Broad genetic screening for medical risk factors is controversial.³

1.3. Prediction and public welfare

Predictions that involve public policy present different problems than predictions about individual health or wellbeing. There are significant social implications for prediction of such events as earthquakes, population growth, global warming, and other ecological disasters. For example, earthquake prediction, accurate and otherwise, has social consequences for the areas of land-use control, building codes, and potential social and economic costs.⁴ Global warming has international implications beyond the control (or political will or legislative ability) of any one country.

How, if at all, did the reflective thinkers of ancient Greece and China address the ethics of prediction? Was it considered a topic that required explanation or justification? What types of situation did they attempt to predict, and were there perceived ethical issues?

One cannot over-generalize topics for prediction over long time spans due to changing methods, institutional, social and political settings, and changing consultants and technical experts. But an overview of types of events that were subjects of prediction might look something like this:

1. religious issues: the goodwill of gods, heroes or ancestors, especially toward ruling houses.
2. military matters, especially victory or defeat.
3. weather prediction for civil (agriculture, floods, etc., arguably an ethical duty) or military purposes.
4. medical prognostication. Whether a sick person would live or die, and the related question of whether a (presumably healthy) individual was destined to be long- or short-lived.
5. family matters, especially predictions about marriages and children, but also questions about potential choice of occupation, place of residence, and short term matters such as business, journeys, etc.


6. Fate prediction of various kinds, including the fortunes of individuals, families and polities. Discussions of the justification, desirability or ethical status of prediction are hard come by.

2. Defenses of prediction

Defenses of prediction appear in the ancient world in both theory and practice, but they are not widespread. Perhaps the most explicit is the defense of the possibility of military prediction in the Sunzi military strategy manual, the *Sunzi bingfa*. Other arguments for prediction in the form of medical prognostication also appear in –5th century Greek and –2nd century Chinese texts. In the Greek world, they appear in several Hippocratic texts which explicitly argue for the importance and value of medical prognostication. In the Chinese contexts, a very different apologia for medical prognostication appears in the defense of the Han physician Chunyu Yi in the 105th chapter of the *Shiji*. These contrast, in surprising ways, with the current status of medical prognostication.

2.1. Predicting victory or defeat

*Sunzi’s Art of War*, famous for its formulation that “warfare is the art of deception,” presents military and political ethics that are closely linked to Daoist ideas of change and efficacy. The *Sunzi* presents the martial skills of the strategist-general in abstract form. The genre of *bingfa* or military manuals covered both strategy and tactics. The Militarists (*bing jia*) were listed as a school in early bibliographic classifications. These texts indicate both the presence of a military philosophy and the increasingly intellectual character of warfare. The existence of a military philosophy, transmitted in texts, makes war an act of mind, insofar as its principles can be formulated and taught.5

---

As a work of martial philosophy, the *Sunzi* emphasized the importance of war to the state, its intellectual character, the importance of the strategic abilities, and finally, the undesirability of warfare and the need to minimize conflict and conserve energy. It presents a philosophy of warfare that emphasized the abilities of the general, as both distinct and independent from those of the ruler. It also formulates a number of principles of both strategy and tactics. Most important for the purposes of this discussion is the claim that it is possible to accurately predict victory and defeat. As a result, the intellectual skills of the strategist-general can save a state from disastrous military action.

The *Sunzi bingfa* begins with the statement of a philosophical view of warfare: that the art of war is of vital importance to the survival of any state, and as a field of inquiry, must not be neglected. The *Sunzi* next stresses the intellectual character of warfare, specifically that victory arises from moral and intellectual faculties, rather than pure physical strength, these views formed the basis for a new calculus of power, which emphasized the role and skills of the general, rather than the number and forcefulness of his troops.

Calculation was based on the assessment of five fundamental factors which govern warfare, including arithmetical calculation to tally the relative strengths of the two sides. The text argues that the art of war is governed by five constant factors that can be used to predict victory or defeat.

夫未戰而廟算勝者，得算多也；未戰而廟算不勝者，得算少也；多算勝，少算不勝，而況於無算乎？吾以此觀之，勝負見矣。

It is by scoring many points (suan) that one wins a war before the event in a rehearsal in the temple; it is by scoring few points that one loses a war before the event in a rehearsal in the temple. The side which scores many points will win; the side which scores few points will not win, let alone the side which scores no points at all. When I make observations on the basis of this, the outcome of a war becomes apparent.

The five factors are: *dao*, Heaven, Earth, the general, and *fa* or laws, methods and procedures. Dao causes the people to be in harmony, at one with, their leader. Heaven is described as yin and yang, cold and warm, timeliness in governance. The Earth factor is concerned with whether distances are easy or difficult of access, open or constricted, or leading to life or death. The general is a crucial factor. To be victorious, he must possess the five qualities

---

6 *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法 (Zhuzi jicheng ed.), 1.1.
7 *Sunzi bingfa* 1.19–20; tr. Lau 332.
of: wisdom, trustworthiness, benevolence, courage, and strictness. Finally, the category of fā includes the proper ranking of both army and officers, the maintenance of roads, and the control of costs.

The Sunzi claims that these five factors form a basis for accurate assessment of military situations and the prediction of victory and defeat in war. The text asks: which sovereign has the dao; which general has ability; where do heaven and earth promise success; where is discipline most rigorously enforced; which army is more forceful; which side has the best training; and which side enforces rewards and punishments most consistently?

The Sunzi repeatedly stresses that prediction is itself a means to victory:

凡此五者，將莫不聞，知之者勝，不知者不勝。

These five should be known to every general. He who knows them will conquer; he who does not will not. 8

2.2. Hippocratic texts

Several Hippocratic texts give explicit defenses of medical prognostication. Articulations admonishes the physician to forewarn (katamanteusasthai) patients in cases where a shoulder dislocation may return. 9 Additional evidence comes from Epidemics. Hippocratic physicians above all avoided doing harm to their patients. As the Oath specifies:

Διωτήμασί τε χρήσομαι ἐπ’ ὠφελείῃ καμνόντων κατὰ δύναμιν καὶ κρίσιν ἐμήν, ἐπὶ δηλήσει δὲ καὶ ἀδικία εἰρέσειν.

I will direct the regimens for my patients to their advantage according to my ability and my judgment, and I will abstain from all evil and all injustice. 10

An important aspect of avoiding doing harm was careful attention to the timing of predictions, especially predictions of a crisis, because the wrong action, or the right action at the wrong time, could be destructive. Many cases in the Epidemics stress the importance of the correct timing of medical intervention. For example, Epidemics 3, case 8 recounts a case of a man with a high fever, in which the physician performed a venesection on the eighth day of the illness. The text reports that his pain was relieved, that his fever went down on the eleventh day, he began to expectorate on the seventeenth day; he had a minor crisis on the twentieth day, and a general crisis on the thirty-fourth day. 11

8 Sunzi bingfa 1.8.
10 Hippoc. Lex, Littré IV 630–631.
11 Littré III 56–57.
In this sense, correct prediction was an active ethical element of the physician’s practice. But a very different defense of prognostication is given in the eponymous text *Prognosis* (Prognôstikon), which begins:

It seems to be highly desirable that a physician should pay much attention to prognosis. If he is able to tell his patients when he visits them not only about their past and present symptoms, but also to tell them what is going to happen, as well as to fill in the details they have omitted, he will increase his reputation as a medical practitioner and people will have no qualms in putting themselves under his care. Moreover, he will the better be able to effect a cure if he can foretell, from the present symptoms, the future course of the disease.\(^\text{12}\)

The text adds that it is impossible to cure all patients, so it is important to have a thorough acquaintance with the future course of different diseases.

In this way one may become a good physician and justly win high fame. In the case of patients who were going to survive, he would be able to safeguard them the better from complications by having a longer time to take precautions. By realizing and announcing beforehand which patients were going to die, he would absolve himself from any blame.\(^\text{13}\)

*Prognosis* stresses the importance of prognosis because it improves the prospects for cure, but also because it adds to the reputation of the physician. The text stresses that not all patients can be cured, and that the effective physician must be able to distinguish those who could be. *Prognosis* stresses the course of disease cannot be predicted from its beginnings. In addition to detailed knowledge of signs, physician must consider epidemic and climactic factors.\(^\text{14}\) The argument here is that prognosis: (1) adds to the reputation of the physician, and (2) improves his ability to effect a cure (since not all patients can be cured), and (3) removes the physician from blame. These pragmatic issues are only indirectly concerned with the ethical status of prediction.

As Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, *techne* was closely associated with practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), forethought, planning, and prediction. Given the resources of *techne*, why should anyone subject herself to the vagaries of chance or *tuche*?\(^\text{15}\) *Techne* is the deliberate application of human intelligence

---


14  Other accounts of techne occur in two texts from the earlier parts of the Hippocratic corpus: On Ancient Medicine (Peri arkhaiês iêtrikês, Littré I 570–637) and On the Art (Peri Technês, Littré VI 2–26), both probably dating to the late fifth century.

to control of the world, nature, or circumstance, and the person who possesses it has resources with which to confront chance and contingency.\(^{16}\)

It is also worth noting that Hippocratic prognosis differed from iatromancy in its emphasis on physical signs and critical days.\(^{17}\) Nonetheless, there were distinct similarities between the language of prognosis and the language of iatromancy, since Hippocratic physicians also used dreams for diagnosis. *On Regimen* 4, a text on dreams, provided both a theoretic basis and detailed instructions for dream interpretation.

In the cases of such dreams as are divine and presage good or of bad fortune, to poleis or to private individuals, those who know how to judge them have a precise art (*akribei technê*). But in cases where the soul presages disease of the body – surfeit, depletion, excess of something natural or change to something unaccustomed – those who judge these things sometimes get it right but sometimes miss the mark.\(^ {18}\)

*On Regimen* 4 indicates the medical significance of a wide range of dreams. It prescribes in terms of diet, exercise, and purges, and uses a microcosm-macrocosm perspective in correlating signs in the heavens (revealed in dreams) to corresponding elements of and conditions of the body. It uses a different kind of prognostication than *Prognosis*. It focuses on the signs that occur in dreams, and provides an explanation for their diagnostic power. Its prescriptions always include prayer, with the signs revealed in dream determining which gods should receive prayer.

In summary different Hippocratic texts give different methods and explanations of the power of prognosis. None seriously question its desirability, and some specifically link it with the activity of the gods. The explicit justification for prognosis is pragmatic.

\(^{16}\) Another defense of *techne* (rather than prediction per se, but prediction is closely linked with *techne*) appears in Aristotle’s account of the technai in Metaphysics 1.1. Aristotle described the technai in terms of four aspects: universality, teachability, precision and concern with explanation, again closely linked to the goals of prediction and control. See Nussbaum, p. 96 and D.S. Hutchinson, “Doctrines of the Mean and the Debate Concerning Skills in Fourth Century, Medicine, Rhetoric and Ethics,” in R.J. Hankinson (ed.), *Method, Medicine and Metaphysics: Studies in the Philosophy of Ancient Science* (Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1988).

\(^{17}\) E.g. facial appearance, both awake and asleep, the condition of eyes, lips, posture and manner of reclining, and such signs as sores, hand gestures, breathing (rapid, relaxed, etc.), fits and sweating, and swellings or edema, cold, and the appearance of excreta. The significance of symptoms was dependent on critical days. Symptoms such as sweating or fever could be good signs on critical days, but bad signs at other times. Other factors that affected the significant of symptoms included the age of the patient. The crisis times for most diseases were at 4-day intervals for 20 days, especially on days 7, 11, 14, 17 and 20.

2.3. The defense of Chunyu Yi

An indirect defense of prediction appears in the twenty-five medical cases contained in the biography of the Han physician Chunyu Yi in Shiji 105. Sima Qian structures this biography around a defining incident in Chunyu’s life: charges brought against him to the Han throne, his reprieve through the memorial of his daughter Ti Ying and his subsequent memorial on the merits of his medical practices and prognostic ability.19 In the memorial he claimed the ability to predict accurately which illnesses were fatal and which curable.

No explicit notion of precision is specified, and Chunyu acknowledges that his prognosis is not perfect.21 Nonetheless, the force of his rhetoric is to claim that, in the treatment and diagnosis of disease, he is able “to use pulse diagnosis to distinguish between life and death with infallible results” (診病 決死生, 有驗, 精良).22 This claim justifies his withholding treatment in certain cases, and represents pulse diagnosis as a technique that separates him from potentially competing physicians.

The account of the cases follows a flexible formula, which includes an identification of the patient Chunyu was summoned to examine and a description of his use of pulse diagnosis. This includes the name of the disorder, its symptoms, and Chunyu’s treatment method. Most important for the present purposes, each case includes a prognosis, followed by an account of the actual outcome of the illness. In most cases the prognosis was correct and the outcome was a verification. Finally, there is a statement

19 This incident is dated to 167 B.C.E., during the reign of Han Wen Di (r.180–157 B.C.E.). The biography consists of arguments by Ti Ying, by Chunyu Yi, and by Sima Qian. Ti Ying’s argument against mutilating punishments persuades Xiao Wen, not only to release her father, but to change the law. They are repeated verbatim at Lienüzhuan 列女傳 (Sibu beiyao ed.) 6.16.
20 Shiji 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959) 105:2796
21 Shiji 105:2817.
22 Shiji 105:2796.
of the cause of the illness, usually including references to yin-yang vessel theory.

For example, Chunyu’s prognosis techniques led him to a different diagnosis than other physicians:

眾醫皆以為蹙入中，而刺之。臣意診之，曰：「溺疝也，令人不得前後溲。」
循曰：「不得前後溲三日矣。」臣意飲以火齊湯，一飲得前後溲，再飲大溲，
三飲而疾愈。病得之內。

All the doctors took his malady to be convulsions that had penetrated into the interior and had treated him with acupuncture needles. I examined him and said: “This is a gushing accumulation; it makes him unable to urinate or defecate.” Xun said: “I have not urinated or defecated for three days.” I gave him a decoction of huo qi to drink. After drinking it once, he urinated, the second time, he defecated, the third time, the illness was cured. The illness developed in the interior.\(^{23}\)

More serious were cases in which prognostication led Chunyu to refuse to treat a patient with a fatal illness. For example, Chunyu is consulted by another physician, who had fallen ill and had treated himself. Chunyu disagreed with his colleague’s self-treatment, and warns that he will die in a hundred days, but did not attempt to treat the man.\(^{24}\)

At the time he compiled the Twenty-five Cases, Chunyu was exonerated of legal culpability and freed from both prison and the threat of mutilating punishment. Ti Ying’s defense saved his life, but it did not address the justice of the charges brought against him. Her argument never touched on why he had refused to treat patients. He simply chose not to treat people he believed he could not help. Chunyu justifies his conduct by claims for the accuracy of his predictions. The rhetorical force of the formula by which he describes his cases is to show: (1) that his decisions to intervene or not, depended on the ability to predict success or failure; (2) that he was successful in all cases in which he predicted success, and intervened; (3) that his predictions were accurate in all cases where he refused to intervene. The patient died; (4) that all his predictions were accurate (as of the time of the compilation); and (5) that he was more astute in both prediction and treatment than “other physicians” (He frequently distinguishes his own diagnoses and predictions from theirs.)

In summary, although Chunyu Yi does not present an explicit justification for medical prognosis, his legal and moral defense in the Twenty-five Cases is entirely based on the notion of accurate prediction as his main claim for skill and competence as a physician.

\(^{23}\) Case 3, Shiji 105:2799.
\(^{24}\) Case 22, Shiji 105:2810–11.
2.4. Contemporary debates on medical prognostication

Pragmatic defenses of prognosis in both Chinese and Greek antiquity contrast with a reluctance to engage in prognosis by contemporary physicians. In one “thick description” of bioethial decision making, Nicholas Christakis, a professor or medicine and sociology at the University of Chicago, has argued that, despite the expectations of their patients, many contemporary physicians do not prognosticate. As he describes it, “patients expect physicians to prognosticate in a fashion that is simultaneously – yet impossibly – honest, accurate, and optimistic.”\(^{25}\) But as a result, physicians find themselves in complex and ambivalent social roles, which make prognostication troubling, stressful, and even “dreadful,” especially prognostications about the end of life. One strategy they employ to resolve these difficulties is a thoroughgoing avoidance of prognostication.\(^{26}\) To make matters worse, he argues, despite its centrality and importance, “prognosis is virtually absent from medical education, medical texts, medical research and patient care.”\(^{27}\) Nor is this avoidance accidental nor incidental, “for there are powerful norms in the medical profession militating against both the development and the communication of prognoses. Physicians are socialized to avoid prognostication.\(^{28}\) Physicians, he argues, avoid prognostication for several reasons, including its objective difficulty, the consequences of error and emotional difficulty for both patient and physician, and the existence of a complementary relationship between therapy and prognosis in both theory and practice: if therapy is available, prognosis tends to be avoided. Physicians also associate prognostication with death, and with their own belief in the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Christakis argues that the avoidance of prognostication has important implications for bioethical decision making, and that prognostication is an important and deeply moral aspect of the physician’s social role.

Although prediction in the form of medical prognostication was explained and justified in very different ways in China and Greece, it was clearly viewed as part of the function, and perhaps even the moral duty, of a physician. By contrast, contemporary physicians, who have a far greater array of predictive techniques at their disposal, tend to avoid and fear it.


\(^{26}\) Christakis, *Daedalus* p. 197 and 199.

\(^{27}\) Christakis, *Daedalus* 128.4 p. 198.

\(^{28}\) Christakis, *Daedalus* 128.4, p. 198. He focuses on two aspects of prognostication: foreseeing and foretelling. Foreseeing is the physician’s inward and cognitive estimate of a the path of a patient’s illness, foretelling the communication of this at estimate to the patient.
3. Debates about divination

In practice prediction overlapped with the practice of divination, but with important differences. I use the term divination in the most inclusive sense to refer to all activities seeking to find the meaning of hidden events in the past, present, or future, and regardless of whether divinatory signs are understood as direct or indirect communications by a divine entity.

As a mode of prediction, divination has typically been regarded as primitive superstition or as a pseudoscience to be disparaged and debunked. A range of studies over the past two decades have focused on important sociological and epistemological dimensions of divination, both in antiquity and in the present. This recent scholarship has underscored the rationality of divination, the pervasive influence of divinatory thinking, its complex social history, its role in the development of other hermeneutic traditions, and its place in an archaeology of knowledge. Divination can be viewed as a set of coherent reasonable technologies for predicting (and potentially controlling) the future, and as a set of social practices whose importance extended far beyond telling the future. Prediction was not its only function, or possibly even its major one. Other important goals of divination were the creation of social consensus and the diffusion of responsibility and blame. These concerns did not revolve around the accuracy of prediction.

3.1. Tacit acceptance or approval

The “default” position in both traditions was the approval and practice of divination, including by those we are accustomed to think of as “philosophers.”

3.1.1. Chinese “Masters” texts

In a Chinese context, there is extensive evidence of contact and active competition between diviners and the “Masters” whose textual lineages form the corpus of Warring States philosophy. Teaching for pay in a master-disciple relationship was one of several livelihoods made possible by literacy and textual or specialist expertise. Others were employment by a state, family or community or self-employment as a “freelance” diviners in the marketplace. As court, military and technical specialists with expertise in astronomy, mathematics medicine and ritual, diviners also gained their livelihoods and authority through the mastery and exegesis of texts and archives. This competition involved career choice, patronage, students and the status of genres and modes of knowledge. Discourse on divination was a part of this intellectual milieu. But the approval of it comes for very different reasons in different cases.
Within this discourse, the major “Confucian” theorists come out as defenders of divination, albeit with some reservations. Confucius famously recommended a respectful distance from “ghosts and spirits” (Analects 6.22), but repeats a saying (13.22) that only a person with constancy can be a wu 巫 spirit medium or physician. The picture of his views becomes more nuanced if we look at texts outside the canon of the Confucian exegetes, from both the received tradition and texts excavated from tombs. In the Mawangdui text titled “Essentials” (Yao), Confucius compares his own goals with those of astrologers and wu: the virtue he seeks is superior to the “turtle and milfoil divinations of incantators and wu” (祝巫卜筮). Although these passages seem to argue that cultivating virtue (de) is superior to divination, other texts such as the Lüshi chunqiu describe Confucius himself performing divination and discussing it with his students.

The case becomes more complex with Mencius, who at several points describes a person’s virtue or inner nature as manifesting in the body. At 2A2 he describes qi as filling the body and commanded by the will (zhi 志). He recommends nourishing it with genuineness (zhen 真) and keeping it from harm. He describes its concentration or dispersal as a function of morality, and born of accumulated righteousness (ji yi 集義). At 7A21 he describes the four virtues of the junzi (ren, yi, li and zhi) as rooted in the heartmind, and visible in the body in the harmony of the countenance and in the appearance of the back and limbs. When benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are rooted in the mind, they produce a glossy color that is visible in the face and limbs.

But if virtue is visible in the body, it is also logically possible to “read” it, and Mencius effectively defends the practice of physiognomy:

存乎人者，莫良於眸子。眸子不能掩其惡。胸中正，則眸子瞭焉；胸中不正，則眸子眊焉。聽其言也，觀其眸子，人焉廋哉？

In examining others, nothing is more effective than the pupils. The pupils cannot conceal evil. If that within the chest is upright (zheng), the pupils are clear and bright; if it is not, they are clouded. If you listen to their words and examine their pupils, how can people hide anything? (4A15)

---

31 Mencius 2A2, especially lines 12 and 15–17. For qi as virtue manifested in the body and visible in the eyes, see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
32 Mencius 4A15.
The Han iconoclast Wang Chong in fact attacks Mencius as a physiognomist who “physiognomized people by their pupils,” on the grounds that clarity or cloudiness of the eyes is determined at birth and does not depend on character.33

Divination was also an important area of disagreement between Confucius and his earliest critics, the Mohists. Both the Analects and the Mohist Canon include accounts of debates in which the “Master” (Confucius and Mozi, respectively) gets the better of a wu spirit medium. Confucius discusses political reform with the wu Maqi 巫馬旗, who cannot grasp his ideas.34 Mozi and the wu Mazi 馬子 debate the relative value of the knowledge of contemporary innovators, the sage kings of antiquity, and ghosts and spirits (accessed by divination).35 The Mohists also regarded divination as an effective component of defensive military strategy. Generals were advised to employ wu and diviners, but keep their results and methods strictly secret from the army.36

Other political texts such as the Guanzi (late 4c) also recommend divination. The text’s eponymous sage advises his patron Duke Huan of Qi to “scrutinize the portents of Heaven and observe the results of divination.”37 Another passage tries to explain the efficacy of divination through the powers of the tortoise.38 Finally, the Guanzi recommends divination on the pragmatic grounds that diviners and technical experts could protect a ruler from the effects of changing conditions, confusion and recklessness. (The text even specifies how much they should be paid.)39

The point of these examples is that these various thinkers considered divination normal and acceptable, even if at times they chose to distance themselves from diviners. In addition to generally positive attitudes toward divination, virtually all Chinese philosophers argued about the nature of ming 命 or destiny (discussed below). They disagreed about the nature of

35 Mozi 墨子 (Xinbian zhuzi jicheng, Taibei: Zhonghua, 1987), bk. 11, ch. 46, p. 385, tr. Mei, 212. Other arguments address: (1) whether moral action depends on human or divine aid; (2) the relative merits of the sage kings of antiquity and innovators of their own time; and (3) the Mohist doctrine of affection for all (jian ai 業愛) Mozi, Book 11, Ch. 46, pp. 392–98, tr. Mei, pp. 215–20.
36 Mozi, Ch. 68, pp. 7–8
38 It “lives in water and is opened by fire, so it can foretell the myriad things and establish what will bring about good fortune and disaster.” Guanzi 14/39, “Shui di,” p. 677, cf. Rickett 2.104–5.
ming and what to do about it, but all considered it part of the landscape. Indeed, it has been argued that early Chinese understandings of wisdom revolved around understanding ming. Yet these two debates were separate.

3.1.2. Presocratics

Greek mantic discourse recognized that knowledge of the future somehow implied its preexistence. Tension between belief in the efficacy of divination and belief in inexorable fate first appears in Homer. The problem of the poets was to reconcile divination (which sought to “change” the future) with belief in the plan of Zeus. The philosophers had an opposite problem: to theorize divination in ways that reconciled traditional religion with new theories of nature, cause and so forth.

Most philosophers before Socrates (c.469–399) either affirmed some kind of belief in divination, or held beliefs compatible with it, including Thales,40 Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Anaxagoras, whose nous can be converted into attentive Providence. Democritus based his notions of prediction on laws of mechanical movement of atoms in space. Yet even he believed in the possibility of presentiment of future events because he considered the universe to be ordered by divine will according to providence.41

The two major presocratic critics of divination were Xenophanes and Heraclitus. Xenophanes repudiated divination in its entirety, attacking the immorality of the Homeric gods (frs. 11 and 12) and the anthropomorphism of Greek religion (fr. 14–16). The god postulated by Xenophanes would have no motive to provide divinatory knowledge to humans, nor would humans understand it. Heraclitus criticized the religious conventions of his day in order to advance new notions of flux and the union of opposites. He rejected technical divination, oneirology, and ritual purifications after murder. But he did not reject fate or divination. He accepted the inspired divination of the Sibyl and Pythia (fr. 92), and asserted that the Delphic oracle offers signs to humankind, and: “neither speaks nor hides, but signifies” (oute legei oute kruptei alla sêmainei, fr. 93).

Other presocratics may have been diviners. Diogenes (8.32) reports that Pythagoras instructed his students to “honor every kind of divination” (mantiken pasan timan); and (8.21) that he was called “Pyth-agogas” because he outdid the Pyth-ia in the truth of his public pronouncements (agora). The “Purifications” of Empedocles begins with a claim to be in high

---

40  Plut., Conv. sept. sap. 3.2. All fragments are from Diehls-Kranz unless otherwise indicated.
41  Cic. Disc. 1.5. Divine beings (eidola) could reveal the future to humans by appearing and speaking, and could project visible and audible images, perceptible in dreams during (DK Fr. 166; Plut. Quaest. conv. 735a–b.)
demand everywhere, to: “some seeking mantic arts, others seeking healing oracular speech for all kinds of diseases” (fr. 112).

But perhaps the most interesting Greek philosopher for the present discussion is the Platonic Socrates, the apocryphal creator of so much of Greek philosophy. Did Socrates believe in divination? The question is not trivial, because it becomes an important element in the trial that led to his death. The moral status of Socrates’ philosophic activities is a central point in his trial, and his claim that these pursuits are grounded in divination is central to his defense. He describes the oracle to Chaerephon (that no man is wiser than Socrates) as the source of his philosophical mission, and repeatedly affirms his trust in his daimonion to warn him against error (Apol. 20e, 22c, 31d, 40a–b).

Commentators typically disregard this trust in divination as a source of truth, and the implication that Socrates’ moral and philosophical convictions are religious in origin. But, as Brickhouse and Smith have argued, the daimonion provides him with certainty that he must serve the god by practicing philosophy in Athens, but not about anything else, including the nature of virtue (which must be understood from the elenchus). This leaves Socrates in the position of being certain that his philosophical activities are virtuous but unable to offer a logos to explain their virtue.42 So in recommending the mantic arts he was not advocating laziness or shortcuts because he did not consider divine knowledge a substitute for human knowledge.

And Socrates did recommend them, as attested by two of his students: Plato and Xenophon. In addition to his own defense, he urged his friends to trust themselves in cases where the results were certain, but to consult the Pythia in uncertain ones, for example his advice to Xenophon on whether to join the expedition of Cyrus (Xen. Anab. 3.1).43

Socrates thus brought divination into the purview of philosophy; and Plato (–428 to –347) and his successors continued that approach.

Plato enjoins the city to consult the oracle on religious and moral issues (Rep 427b; Laws 738b–d).44 He also linked divination to the benevolent activity of the gods, describing mantike as the first of four kinds of divine madness (Phaed. 244a–e). It is the madness of priestesses possessed by Apollo, who provide great benefits to others when mad, and none when sane (244b). The observation of birds (ornithon) and signs (semeion) are

43 Xenophon goes to Delphi, but asks the wrong question: not whether to go, but to which god to sacrifice for success on the expedition. Socrates rebuked Xenophon, but advises him to obey the oracle’s advice and go.
44 Plat. Laws 738b–d.
as inferior to it as is human sanity to divine madness, which purifies and
inspires (244c–e). Similar arguments appear in the *Timaeus* (71b–e).

3.2. Critiques (Epistemological and Ethical)

Critiques of divination are especially interesting insofar as they reflect the
results of self-conscious reflection and have very specific targets. In both China
and Greece, debates about divination arose relatively late, in China with the
growth of a specifically Confucian philosophy in the late Warring States and
in Greece with the efforts of –3c Stoics to address arguments of Aristotle
and his later contemporaries. Some critiques are strikingly Chinese, others
peculiarly Greek. Some are common to both, but used for different reasons
and in different ways. Some are epistemological claims that divination is an
inferior, inconsistent, or ineffective mode of knowledge. Others are ethical,
and attack both individual practitioners and the ethics of divination itself.
Some arguments used to attack and defend divination are strikingly Chinese,
others peculiarly Greek, and some common to both, although used for
different reasons and in different ways. Whereas positive statements about
divination tend to be general, critiques tend to have specific targets.

Epistemological critiques of divination argue that it is an inferior,
inconsistent, or ineffective mode of knowledge. Ethical attacks focus on
both individual practitioners and the ethics of divination itself. In both
China and Greece organized schools made claims to a universal knowledge
beyond the limitations of technical specialists.

3.2.1. Chinese critiques

The most significant Chinese critique of divination is the Daoist claim that
only knowledge of *dao* provides understanding of the future; divination is
an inferior practice and an inferior mode of knowledge. The *Zhuangzi* and
*Guanzi* contrast the equanimity of the sage with the frenetic manipulations
of the diviner, and recommend meditation and “inward training.” As the
*Zhuangzi* puts it: “Can you embrace the One? Can you not lose it? Can
you understand good and ill auspice without tortoise or yarrow? (能無卜
筮而知吉凶乎!) Can you stop? Can you let it go?”45 The *Guanzi* tells us
how: “Concentrate your qi like a Spirit, and the myriad things will be inside
your hand. Can you concentrate; can you make it one?”46 The force of

45 *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (ed. Guo Qingfan 郭藩籓, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 23,
p. 785.
46 *Guanzi* 16/49, “Neiye,” p. 5a (cf. Rickett 2.50–51) and 13/37, “Xinshu xia,” p. 6a
(cf. Rickett 2.60).
these statements is to contrast the equanimity of the sage with the frenetic manipulations of the diviner.\footnote{Another Guanzi passage praises a sage, who: “does not use sun and moon, but his affairs are accomplished by them. does not divine by tortoise or yarrow, but skillfully predicts good and ill auspice.” 不日不月，而事以從。不卜不筮，而謹知吉凶. Guanzi 13/38, “Bai xin,” p. 10a (cf. Rickett 2.89).}

Confucian polemics against divinatory techne are ethical. Zuozhuan accounts stress the superiority of prediction based on moral character over the results of divination. For Confucians, moral character became a precondition for divination and the Yi was transformed from a technical manual into a Confucian classic for universal moral guidance that, according to Xunzi, supplanted divination.

Xunzi attacks divination on specifically ethical grounds (while affirming its value as part of state ritual). In “Against Physiognomy” (非相) he argues that: physiognomizing people’s forms is inferior to speaking of their heartminds (相形不如論心).\footnote{Xunzi yinde (Shanghai: Guji, 1986), 5/2, cf. Dubs p. 72.} Poor physiognomy does not deter someone with correct values, and good physiognomy cannot take the place of incorrect values. (He attempts to ground this claim empirically with accounts of the poor physiognomy of a list of sages and rulers that even includes Confucius.) What makes us human is the act of making distinctions; this does not depend on physiognomy, which is determined at birth.\footnote{Xunzi 5/25, cf. Dubs p. 80.} A different ethical strain in the Huainanzi associates divination with deceit and deception.\footnote{Huainanzi (Sibu beiyao ed.) 8: 1b and 6: 9bff. A similar account in the Yantielun (ca. –60) contrasts the search for auspicious days with the ethical orientation of the sages of the ancient past. See Yantielun 鹽鐵論 (Tianjin: Tianjin Guji, 1983), “San bu zu,” 29.204.}

A very different attack on divination comes from militarist texts, which explicitly position their own methods of prediction against divination. Traditional methods of tortoise and yarrow divination were part of the Zhou aristocratic military order that was replaced by new forms of military command during the Warring States period. That transition led to a new art of generalship and new philosophies of martiality. As in the case of medicine, the transition as not clear-cut, and there is evidence of competition and coexistence between two competing approaches to military prediction, and the relations of authority and persuasion that were also part of military decision making.

Late Warring States military strategy manuals attacked the use of battlefield divination. The Sunzi rejects military prognostication and directs the general to proscribe discussion of omens.\footnote{Sunzi bingfa 11.195 (trans. Ames 1993, p. 158).} The Wei Liaozi attacks the use of prognostications based on the techniques of “Punishment and
Virtue” (xingde) and “Heavenly Offices” (tianguan) to determine the time and method of battle. Yet these explicit proscriptions suggest that such techniques were in widespread use.

Other passages in strategy manuals suggest the ongoing use of divination, even if the new strategist-generals rejected the older methods of the warrior aristocracy. For example, the Simafa lists the factors that determine victory or defeat as Heaven, materiel, and moral excellence. However, it relies on auspicious tortoise divination to define the “Heaven” factor: “when the time and day of battle are fixed and the tortoise shows victory” (gui sheng 龜勝). When the Lütao describes King Wen receiving a strategy text from Taigong, the story begins with King Wen using divination to decide whether to go hunting. A chapter in this text on the “legs and arms” of a commander includes three astronomical officials (tianwen 天文) who clearly practice divination. Their responsibilities include stars, calendrics, observing winds and qi, predicting auspicious days and times, looking into signs, weather phenomena, anomalies, and thus understanding “the mind of Heaven.” Another chapter describes the procedure for appointing a general, including a tortoise divination by the Taishi to determine an auspicious day.

3.2.2. Greek Arguments

The positive Greek consensus on divination always coexisted with ad hominem attacks against individual practitioners. But divination itself became an object of heated debate in Hellenistic Greece because of its key role in new arguments about fate, causality, necessity, determinism and their ethical implications, both for Stoic advocates of divination and for their Epicurean and skeptical critics. That debate, as in China, had both epistemological and ethic ramifications, but for very different reasons.

The most significant epistemological element in the Hellenistic debates was skepticism, both asserted and denied. Another type of critique was

---


54 Taigong liutao 1: 1a.

55 Taigong liutao 3: 9b and 3: 11a (trans Sawyer 1993, pp. 60–61 an 64).
purely empirical: do oracles work? Empirical arguments figure unevenly in Greek debates, and it is noteworthy that recorded comments and tests of the reliability of oracles of oracles come from foreigners; Greeks seemed to consider such tests both unnecessary and impious.\textsuperscript{56} Most the most famous is the “test” oracle of Croesus as reported in Herodotus. The two other figures reported to comment on the accuracy of oracles are also non-Greeks: Amasis and Xerxes).\textsuperscript{57}

From Plato to Aristotle there is a sudden and brutal transition. Aristotle rejects exterior or inductive divination and relies on dreams and physiological explanations. As Bouché-Leclercq puts it, Plato tried to absorb science in revelation; Aristotle sought to absorb revelation in science.\textsuperscript{58} Chrysippus and the Stoic defenders of divination claimed empirical efficacy but denied any causal link between the “signs” of divination and their signifiers. Causal explanation would make divination a science like any other; it would lose its privileged metaphysical status as a hermeneutic for divine knowledge and agency.

Aristotle was the first to raise the possibility that a deterministic destiny precludes moral choice, and ethical debates about divination were driven Hellenistic debates on determinism, moral responsibility, and, by implication autonomy. Efforts to reconcile determinism and responsibility (what we moderns call “soft determinism”) become a major issue in Stoic attempts to refute the deterministic implications of the Master Argument, the Lazy Argument, and other attacks on Stoic determinism, from Epicurus to Plutarch.

These arguments about divination and fate were part of a broad debate about modality, modal logic, determinism, ethics and agency that preoccupied many of the Hellenistic philosophers. The ethical problem of human responsibility for events foretold by gods first appear in Homer, but pre-fifth century texts do not emphasize these difficulties.\textsuperscript{59} It was Aristotle

\textsuperscript{56} For the test oracle of Croesus, see Hdt. 1.46–55. The two other figures reported to comment on the accuracy of oracles were Amasis (Hdt. 2.174) and Xerxes and Mardonius (Hdt. 8.133–36).

\textsuperscript{57} The Egyptian ruler Amasis based his patronage of oracles on his own perception of their accuracy. Before becoming king, he had sometimes resorted to theft, and been brought before oracles by his accusers. Sometimes the oracles found him guilty and sometimes they acquitted him. When he became king, he neglected the altars of the oracles who had acquitted him (which he knew to be worthless), and considered infallible and patronized the ones who had found him guilty (Hdt. 2.174). After Xerxes’ defeat at the battle of Salamis, Mardonius sent an envoy to all the oracles and “charged him to go to all the oracles and test them (Hdt. 8.133–36). Herodotus not know the exact question asked.


\textsuperscript{59} For example, the mechanistic atomism of Democritus raises issues of human responsibility for a modern reader, but not, apparently, for Democritus. Plato touches on the relation of destiny and human choice in Republic 10, but destiny and determinism are not a central issue.
who made choice central to notions of human responsibility. Determinism threatens human choice and human freedom, and Aristotle was the first to suggest that determinism precludes morality and agency, which were central to his concept of the good life. Aristotle treated cause as a matter of explanation, and did not connect the notions of cause and necessity. He viewed events not as chains of cause and effect but as ripples from a stone in a pond. He thus denied that all events are determined by necessary chains of causation. He held that some events result from chance rather than necessity, but his treatment of chance and coincidence did not rule out determinism. His primary interest was in the problem of explanation (the possibility that there are chance events with no scientific explanation), without recourse to indeterminism.60 Hellenistic debates about determinism and freedom began as reactions to Aristotle’s incomplete analysis of causation, determinism and responsibility. The question of whether the future can be know is logically distinct from the question of whether the universe is deterministic, but in antiquity arguments about fate and prediction were considered related, perhaps because individual fate was so often the object of prediction. (I follow Sorabji’s definition of determinism as the view that whatever happens has all along been necessary in the sense of fixed or inevitable. His definition uses necessity, rather than causation, and does not deny moral responsibility, as do “hard” determinists. Chrysippus was a “soft” determinist or compatibilist in that he asserted both determinism and moral responsibility. Causal determinism is the idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions.61)

But there was general agreement that for a future event to be knowable, it must in some sense be caused. The Stoics treated prediction under the rubric of divination and used divination to argue theories of fate. Their account of prediction and divination was part of an integrated systematic theory that included ethics, theology and metaphysics. These debates begin with Chrysippus, the third head of the Stoic school, who attempted to use logic to “prove” that “all things happen according to fate.”62 He begins with the earlier consensus on divination, which seems to have been a standard Stoic

62 το πάντα καθ’ ειμαιρομένη γίνεται (Diog. Laert. Vit. 7.149); Fato omnia sunt (Cic. Fat. 20), cf. Diogenianus in Eus. Praep. ev. 6.8.1, 2 and 6. Diogenes also ascribes the fate principle to Zeno, Boethus and Posidonius. For its importance to Stoic ontology and physics see Bobzien 1998, pp. 56–58.
The ethics of prediction

argument for a fate principle. He devised a “syllogism” to prove that the gods exist and reveal the future: “If there are gods and they do not declare the future to mortals, then either they do not love humans, or they do not know the future, or they think that knowledge of the future will not benefit humanity, or they think it against their own majesty to presignify to mortals what the future will be, or they themselves are not able to determine it.”

Chrysippus tried to develop new accounts of possibility and necessity that were consistent with both moral responsibility and the Stoic “fate principle.” He described his modal theory as a “proof,” but also makes or implies empirical claims for divination. Posidonius attempted to theorize divination by _sumpatheia_, divine providence, and claims that nature gives signs of future events, which unfold over time in the manner of a cable unwinding. Epicurean critics argued that chance, rather than fate, controlled events, and skeptics refused to acknowledge any role for providence. Plutarch defended inspired divination and the reputation of the Delphic oracle, but attacked Chrysippus for contradictions between his theories of possibility and fate. In Plutarch’s own theory of moral agency, fate mixed and interwoven with chance. In this and other middle Platonic views, moral choice is not fated, but fate affects the consequences of moral choice. These arguments, Stoic notions of co-fated events, and notions of events contrary to fate attempted to solve the moral dilemma by incrementally ramifying the concept of fate to soften its deterministic edges. They are reminiscent of some of the antifatalist arguments of the Han philosopher Wang Chong, who, also introduced new categorizations of fate and placed a new emphasis on the role of chance in human events.

4. Philosophical debates on self, agency, prediction and fate

Finally I turn to philosophical debates about prediction, including the question of whether prediction implies determinism, and its relation to notions of individual agency and responsibility.

Debates on the nature of self, agency and fate are central to both the Chinese and Greek philosophical traditions. They tend to be phrased in terms of questions of fatalism, predestination and determinism or in terms of moral agency. By contrast, social practices of divination and prediction encoded the creation of “life plans” (in the Taylorian sense). Divination is...

---

63 Each is refuted; thus if the gods do not reveal the future it can only mean that there are no gods. Chrysippus gives this demonstration to us, proving each one by way of the other. For he wants to prove that “everything happens in accordance with fate” from “divination exists,” and he cannot prove that “divination exists” by any other means than by assuming that “everything happens in accordance with fate.” Cic. _Div._ 2.101 (cf. 1.10).
not normally considered in this debate, save as a concomitant to questions of fate etc. In both Greece and China, divination did become an object of philosophical debate, but usually within the framework of fatalism, determinism, etc., for which it had important implications. But debates on divination, fate, agency and responsibility had important implications for Chinese views of personal and moral autonomy (as they did for Greek, but there are significant differences between Chinese and Greek divinatory discourse).

Some tacit notion of personal autonomy is a precondition for any aspiration to affect the future through divination. Prediction of events quickly shades into control of events. There is a fine line between a query about the future (“Will there be disasters over the next ten days?”) and a request (“May there be none!”). Divination began as a negotiation with gods and spirits, in which some active agent must be doing the negotiating (or even, as Michael Puett has recently argued, attempting to supplant divine powers through self-cultivation). The more naturalistic view of divination that eventually developed in both Greece and China also presupposes an active agent. Techniques to predict the future and optimize one’s own prospects presuppose an active agent with life plans to be optimized in Charles Taylor’s sense of the term “respondent.”

And for that active agent, Greek or Chinese, new techniques were powerful tools.

4.1. Greek arguments on divination and fate

Debates on divination, fate, agency and responsibility had important implications for Chinese and Greek views of personal and moral autonomy. This is an area of significant difference between Chinese and Greek divinatory discourse.

Greek argument about fate, as we have seen from the critiques of divination above, turned on problems of causation and responsibility. Divination, fate and determinism were all objects of Chinese philosophical debate, but Chinese discussions of divination were quite distinct from treatments of fate, fatalism and determinism, or in turn for arguments about moral agency. Debates about divination typically pitted Masters text specialists against

---

practitioners of technical arts, whereas debates about *ming* (fate or destiny) were a much more internal affair. Masters texts debated whether there was such a thing, what it was, whether it was predetermined, predictable, moral or mechanical in operation, and whether it was subject to human or divine intervention. (Both texts and later commentaries associated particular attitudes toward *ming* with particular schools, for example, understanding *ming* (知命) with Confucius, opposing it (非命) with the Mohists, etc. Confucian authors made the issue of *ming* central by defining an understanding of *ming* a prerequisite for self-cultivation, and few questions took precedence over debates about the role of fate in human life.

4.2. Chinese arguments

Most Chinese accounts of divination do not pursue questions of determinism and causality. An exception is the “Discourse on Heaven,” in which Xunzi argues that prayer and divination do not cause their objects, and important decisions should not be based on divination. Prayers for rain do not cause rain; prayer and divination do not cause good fortune. By contrast, determinism appears as a matter of philosophical debate in Warring States and subsequent debates about *ming*. Determinist positions included the idea that *ming* is fixed (*ming ding*) and that mechanical and predictable regularities determine fate (*ming yun*). Mohist critiques of Confucius included charges of fatalism or determinism (*fei ming*), but the two are not clearly distinguished. It is generally unproductive to ask why a certain development did not occur, in this case why Warring States discussions of divination did not lead to a more abstract consideration of causality. Part of the difficulty may have been the wide semantic field of the word *ming* itself. By Han times, its range of meanings included (among others) fate, predestination, causal connections, and manifestations of Heaven’s will, and events beyond human control. The problem of fate reemerges as an important issue in Han philosophical debates, prominently (for Han Confucians) the idea that kings received mandate of heaven.

---

65 Xunzi 17/38–39, cf. Dubs 288. Xunzi’s student Han Fei also argues that prayer does not cause good fortune (Hanfeizi 19/50, Xian xue, pp. 1102–3, tr. Liao 2.308), but neither pursues the issue of causality at any length.


In recent years, our understanding of early Chinese views of divination, fate and agency has been transformed by new evidence from excavated texts that prominently include divination manuals, presumably used by the occupants of the tombs in which they were found. The excavated texts address topics more typically associated with the history of science, such as medico-religious techniques for health and longevity, and methods to understand and control the future (personal and political) through divination. Such texts fall below the radar of “Confucian” discussions of political agency and political autonomy in the Analects,” Mencius, etc.

During the Warring States period, the loci of divination broadened from the king to elites to the populace as a whole. It also proliferated from a few dominant forms (tortoise and yarrow) to a wide range of techniques and sub-techniques. Chinese texts classify these as what has been called shushu 数術 culture or “Numbers and Techniques.” There are many examples of the use of this kind of technical expertise in both ritual and private contexts. Divination texts have been excavated from many Chinese sites over last thirty years or so. For example (1) accounts of divination and sacrifices to gods and ancestors (Baoshan, Wangshan, Tianxingguan); (2) “books of days” that allowed users to predict (in)auspicious days and times for a wide variety of activities (Jiudian, Shuihudi, Mawangdui); and astrocalendric tables and instruments. When we turn to the tombs of actual government administrators and high officials, what they chose to have buried with them was not (for the most part) the arguments of the Confucian classics, but these technical works on longevity and divination.

In summary, the Chinese and Greek debates about prediction and divination have very different flavors. Both disparaged their “inferior knowledge,” couching their arguments in the very different metaphysics of early Daoism and Platonism. Greek counterarguments were significantly and self-consciously skeptical, whereas skepticism is not a central argument in Chinese debates about divination. Ethics (social and religious), by contrast, was a significant factor in both Chinese and Greek debates, but in culturally very particular ways. Some Chinese ethical critiques considered divination a manifestation of acquisitiveness and inauthenticity; others rejected it as inferior to prediction based on moral character. Greek ethical debates focus on divination as a concomitant of determinism, and the perceived conflict between the key value of moral choice and the determinism implied in certain accounts of necessity and causality. The extremely elaborate and quasi-logical debate that ensued is peculiarly Greek, and goes hand in hand

with other features of Greek debate: proof, apodeixis, and quasi-legal modes of argumentation.

Despite these profound differences there are some similarities. Both traditions broadly held that valid and authentic divination: (1) is fundamentally the same as textual interpretation (in other words, that it is hermeneutic), (2) that it is a “right” reading of the text of the cosmos, or nature (in other words, that it is “correct” semiosis, however understood), and (3) that it arises from the sagacity, wisdom, insight, or more broadly the “virtue” of the diviner understood in terms that combine religious and philosophical values and perspectives.

5. Conclusions

It is apparent throughout that both Chinese and Greek justifications of medical and military prediction are embedded in authority claims by the technical experts who practised these arts. Nonetheless, we cannot dismiss their arguments as “mere rhetoric.” Their justifications of prediction were phrased primarily in pragmatic terms, but that is not to say that they had no ethical dimension. According to the Sunzi, the ethical status of a state and its general were predictors of victory. The descriptions of prognostication in Hippocratic texts and the case records of Chunyu Yi stress pragmatic considerations, but elsewhere we find glimpses of the ethical requirements of their arts: in the Hippocratic oath and in brief references to Chunyu’s long process of education. (He eventually becomes the student of a teacher who has no sons, who agrees to take him on, but who requires him to give up his previous methods.)

Debates about divination proceed along different lines. The distinguish between valid and authentic divination and its opposites. Nor were their accounts of divinatory hermeneutics value neutral. A “right” reading of the text of the cosmos, or of nature arises in some sense from the sagacity or virtue of the diviner.

In summary, I think we can argue that for the Greek and Chinese advocates of prediction, it was never understood to be value-neutral, and these attitudes contrast strongly with contemporary debates about prediction, which often struggle to reconcile normative and purely descriptive aspects of prediction.
Both Aristotle and Liezi propose a certain way of life that is reachable only after years of training. Both thinkers hold that human desires are to be tamed in order live the proper life. Knowledge or wisdom is also intimately bound up with the ultimate way of life since Aristotle and Liezi would agree that such knowledge or wisdom has implications for the ethical life. Despite these apparent similarities between them, disagreements about the kind of training, the desires that are appropriate, the kind of wisdom to be pursued and what is ethical would be rife. I suggest that the differences between the two are traceable to their different views regarding metaphysics or ultimate reality. I examine how each philosopher’s view of the unity of the first principle or cause affects his conception of the unity of the things that are caused by this first principle. I show that a strong unity in one’s first principle leads to a well-defined individuality or unity in each of the myriad things caused by this principle, which unity then also becomes the norm for what makes an individual thing a good one. What makes human actions ethical will also be traced to this unity. On the other hand, a weak unity in one’s conception of the first principle leads to a correspondingly weak conception of individuality or unity in each of the things caused. That kind of unity or harmony, or togetherness or what have you then becomes the norm of goodness, including ethics. Aristotle’s metaphysics of primary substance exemplifies a strong unity conception of first principle whereas Liezi’s metaphysics of the Way (Dao) exemplifies a weak unity conception of first principle.

Even though both Aristotle and Liezi talk about training human desires such that they are agreed that untutored desires are undesirable, they differ quite a bit on the details of what the proper desires are. On Liezi’s view, we should recognize that things in the world are destined by heaven or dictated by the Way such that they are beyond human control. Thus we should not desire that they be otherwise. Liezi asserts, “(l)ong life and short, failure and success, high rank and low, wealth and poverty, come about of themselves”
In the *Liezi*, Master Tung-Kuo addresses the ever honorable and successful Hsi-men-tzu and his opposite, Pei-kung-tzu as follows: “Your success is not due to wisdom, nor is his failure due to foolishness. Both are from heaven and not from man ... Neither of you perceives the principle that things must be as they are” (123). Due to what heaven has destined, it is not possible for human beings to change the way things are. To illustrate man’s impotence and heaven’s Way, Liezi says:

Inscrutably, in endless sequence,
They come to pass of themselves by the Way of Heaven.
Indifferently, the unbroken circle
Turns of itself by the Way of Heaven.
Heaven and earth cannot offend against this,
The wisdom of sages cannot defy this, ....
Being of themselves as they are
Silently brings them about,
Gives them serenity, gives them peace,
Escorts them as they go and welcomes them as they come. (127–8)

Since man’s life and death, success and failure, wealth and poverty are dictated by the Way so that some men live longer, are more honored, successful and wealthier than others, there is no point in trying to pursue one of these alternatives rather than another because all are equal manifestations of the Way for Liezi. For Liezi, we are to accord with what the Way dictates instead of desiring one of the alternatives that we mistakenly take to be better. As Angus C. Graham puts Liezi’s view: “(i)n thought we distinguish alternatives, joy and sorrow, life and death, liking and dislike, and we mistake the principles which guide us to the preferred alternative for the Way itself. But the alternation of joy and sorrow, life and death, is itself the Way, and we run counter to it when we strive to perpetuate joy and life.”2 Similarly, Tang Yi explains the *Daoist* sage’s self cultivation in Laozi’s *Daodejing* 10 as a state where he is not hindered by his personal desires:

In cultivating this virtue it is necessary for the sage to sharpen his mind’s eye to the utmost, in order to observe the subtle workings of [Dao] without being handicapped by any petty desires. Elsewhere he refers to desirelessness (1), ultimate vacuity and true tranquility (16) as the correct state of mind for the observations of the manifestations of [Dao]. (404)3

For Liezi, accepting what the Way has decreed for us instead of desiring things that we cannot change is the proper way to live. Liezi has a man explain to his wife why he did not grieve when his son died by saying: “‘I used to have no son,’ . . . ‘and when I had no son I did not grieve. Now that he is dead, it is the same as it was before when I had no son. Why should I grieve over him?’” (133).

Whereas Aristotle would agree with Liezi that we ought not to desire to change things that are beyond our control, he would disagree with Liezi about the class of things that is beyond our control. Instead of everything in the world, Aristotle believes that only the unchangeable objects of scientific knowledge (epistêmê), such as truths about mathematics and the heavenly bodies are beyond our ability to change. Thus, it would not be appropriate for us to desire to change these things. However, conditions such as our success and failure, honor and dishonor, and in certain situations, poverty and wealth, and even life and death, are changeable by human actions and we should desire and pursue the better of these alternatives. Even when something like the death of a loved one isn’t changeable, Aristotle would say that grief would be the appropriate emotion because it is a loved one, rather than the lack thereof as in Liezi’s example of the father who did not grieve. Aristotle, unlike Liezi, believes that one of these opposites is better than the other. Frequently, one of these opposites is either a moral virtue, such as honor, or a requirement for the exercise of a moral virtue, such as wealth which is required for the exercise of generosity. So the virtuous person, for Aristotle, is one who desires to exercise such virtues and has the proper experiences of pleasure and pain. Ultimately, he should also desire to reach the highest good of eudaimonia. Instead of seeing the opposites of honor and dishonor, wealth and poverty, and success and failure as equal manifestations of the Way (Dao) so that human beings cannot and should not desire to change them, Aristotle’s metaphysical understanding of primary substance leads him to value one of these opposites and maintain the potency of human action as well as the appropriateness of our desires to pursue the better extreme.

More elaborately, for Aristotle, the conditions which primary substance must satisfy are as follows: it must be primary in definition, in knowledge and in time; it must be separate and a ‘this such’ (tode ti) (Met. 1028a31 & 1029a 28). Since it is the cause of unity, it must be most ‘one’. If there is a substance that causes other substances, the beings which it causes are more or less one depending on their proximity to it. Unenmattered beings, for instance, are more united than composite beings which are made of matter and form. This is because an unenmattered thing, such as circularity, is the same as its form, which form is indestructible and hence is knowable and definable for Aristotle (Met. 1036a1–2). On the other hand, a concrete
Being and unity in the metaphysics and ethics of Aristotle and Liezi

bronze sphere is composed of the form of sphericity and bronze matter. Such a combination of form and matter in a concrete thing makes it destructible and less a ‘one’. Strictly speaking, destructible things are accordingly neither knowable nor definable for Aristotle (Met. 1036a5–7). Furthermore, a concrete individual such as the bronze sphere is neither prior in time nor separate – not in the primary sense – because of its dependence on matter.

From this preliminary comparison between an unenmattered object that is a pure form, and an enmattered object that is a combination of form and matter, it is clear that even though both objects are united in their own ways, an unenmattered object is more united than an enmattered object and the cause of its unity is more ‘one’ than the enmattered thing (Met. 1075a7). Thus an object that is pure form is closer to primary substance than an object that is a combination of form and matter.

Notice how Aristotle’s first principle, or God, or primary substance, satisfies the criteria of being separate and individual (tode ti, i.e., a this such). Because of God’s independence, self-sufficiency and completeness, He is the primary one to which other things by reference are also one (Met. XII, 1074a33–38, 1074b34–35).4 The more akin something is to the first principle, the more united and substantial it is since the first principle is most united and substantial. This is also why Aristotle prioritizes the contemplative over the practical life in his Nicomachean Ethics. Because the life of contemplation is undertaken by a separate nous that is totally unenmattered and indestructible, this is also the kind of life that satisfies the criteria Aristotle attributes to primary substance. More specifically, contemplation satisfies the criteria of unity, self-sufficiency and separability because nous is not dependent on the changeable material objects for its activity, in the same way that the life of practical wisdom depends on external goods such as money and influential friends for its activity (NE X.7, 1177a27–1177b2, 1178a2–4). Contemplation is also a more continuous activity than practical wisdom because of the stability of its objects, unlike the objects of practical wisdom that change with different situations (NE X.7, 1177a20–24, 1177b17–25).

In contrast to Aristotle’s primary substance which exemplifies being most of all, Liezi’s Daoist source or Way is a Nothing.5 This Way has the

---

4 “... the primary essence has no matter, because it is complete (entelecheia) reality. Therefore the prime mover, which is immovable, is one (hen) both in formula (logô) and in number (arithmô)” (Met. 1074a36–37). See also “Mind thinks itself, if it is that which is best; and its thinking is a thinking (noêsis) of thinking (noêseôs)” (Met. 1074b34–35), and “everything which contains no matter is indivisible (adiaireton)” (Met. 1075a7).

characteristics of being intangible, simple (19), unborn, boundless and shapeless (19). Additionally, Liezi’s Way has the paradoxical nature of changing (19) and being unchanging (18), of doing nothing and yet being capable of doing everything, of knowing nothing and yet knowing everything (20), of being a Nothing and yet begetting something when it stirs (22). Far from an absolute nothing, the Nothing that is Liezi’s Daoist source is capable of stirring and begetting things: “when Nothing stirs, it begets not nothing but something” (22). Liezi’s Nothing is a primal simplicity which is characterized paradoxically when he says that it “is capable of nothing; yet there is nothing which it does not know, nothing of which it is incapable” (20). We can make sense of these paradoxes by distinguishing between two types of causes for Liezi: the first cause of everything and the proximate causes of particulars. I suggest that we understand Liezi’s primal simplicity as the first cause of all things, but not as the proximate causes of particular things.6 Liezi’s first cause or primal simplicity precedes breath which has a beginning, takes shape, becomes substance and eventually separates to create the myriad things (19). Doing, knowing and being capable of no particular thing, Liezi’s primal simplicity is not the proximate cause of particular things. Rather, heaven and earth are respectively created by the separation of breath into pure and light, and muddy and heavy (19). More specifically, breath, for Liezi, is issued by the simple which is shapeless. Breath is then altered and ultimately unites, which unity is the initiation of shape forming heaven and earth, giving rise to the myriad things. Rather than primal simplicity being the proximate causes of particular things, it is heaven and earth that perform this function. Nevertheless, since primal simplicity is the first cause, for without it there would not have been a heaven and an earth,

6 Tang Yi, “Taoism as a Living Philosophy,” Journal of Chinese Philosophy, vol. 12 (1983): 397–417, explains that both Zhuangzi and Laozi distinguish the specific principles that cause the myriad things from the Dao as the origin of all things:

For [Laozi] the reason why [Dao] is unnameable is simply that he believes it to be the origin of the cosmos and as such it is not cognizable through the senses . . . [Zhuangzi] puts this view in a more direct statement: ‘The myriad things have specific principles, whereas [Dao] is not confined to any; therefore it is not nameable.’ Wang Pi interprets [Laozi] in the same light. [Dao], unlike the specific principles, is not ‘tied up with’ any of the limited objects, and thus is styled the Great for lack of a name. (402)

On my reading, such a distinction by Zhuangzi and Laozi is applicable to Liezi too.

Similarly, Zhu Bokun, “Daoist Patterns of Thought and the Tradition of Chinese Metaphysics,” Contemporary Chinese Thought, vol. 29, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 13–71, tells us that the Way is the “principle of metaphysics” for Daoists. He says, “The significance of this principle is that the thing which serves as the origin should be universal and eternal in character and it is not some given concrete or individual thing. Laozi simply called it nonbeing” (48).
as well as breath and its transformations, Liezi is not contradicting himself when he maintains that it knows everything and is capable of everything (20). Primal simplicity is boundless, shapeless and prior to everything that stems from it, hence Liezi proclaims, “will the Way end? At bottom it has had no beginning. Will there ever be no more of it? At bottom it does not exist” (22–23). As the source, primal simplicity does not begin. Because it is not any thing in particular, it also will never end. Without a beginning and an end, it does not exist in particular.

In spite of an initial similarity between Liezi’s Way of primal simplicity and Aristotle’s primary substance when we consider Liezi’s source of everything as simple, unborn, unchanging and intangible, these two thinkers part company rather radically and quickly when one looks at the indeterminateness of Liezi’s source as well as its paradoxical characteristics (which follow directly from its indeterminacy). The fact that Liezi’s Way is indeterminate makes it unknowable by reason/thought and indefinable by speech, unlike Aristotle’s primary substance that is most definable in logos and knowable by nous. As Liezi puts it, “in perfect contemplation we do not know what we are looking at” (82), and “[t]he utmost in speech is to be rid of speech” (46, see also top of 167). Liezi’s Nothing also contrasts sharply with Aristotle’s primary substance’s being most fully being. In other words, Liezi’s Dao is Nothing because it is not anything in particular, nor does it have any determinate characteristics. In contrast, Aristotle’s primary substance is a very definite individual that is characterized by its oneness, separateness, substantiality and activity of self-thinking thought. Finally, Liezi’s source is a simple that is itself altered in the process of generating heaven, earth and the myriad things by changing from being shapeless and boundless into a one, and from this one into a manifold and then back to one again so that it is somehow continuous with the myriad things despite its priority as cause. “Confusion” is even one of the features of Liezi’s source prior to the myriad things existence. Order only emerges subsequently through the agencies of heaven and earth. Such changes of Liezi’s principle to and from a unity so that it is quite continuous with the creation and destruction of the myriad things strongly contrast with Aristotle’s unchangeable primary substance which remains separate and complete. Far from traversing a state of confusion in causing things to

7 Compare this confusion in Liezi’s source to Laozi’s account of the Way when he says,

“There is a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before Heaven and Earth”
(Daodejing, Philip J. Ivanhoe, trans., op cit, 25).

Zhu Bokun, “Daoist Patterns of Thought and the Tradition of Chinese Metaphysics,” explains the inchoateness of the Way as follows: “According to this way of speaking, the “Way” considered in terms of an inchoately formed thing, is a substance without shape or form that transcends sensibility, but this is not to say it is an empty nothing” (47).
be what they are, Aristotle’s primary substance will never be associated with confusion because of its unity, separateness and self-sufficient activity.

As a result of these metaphysical differences between Liezi and Aristotle, they differ, as we have already seen, in their respective views of human desires, the potency of human action for changing one’s circumstances, and even the desirability of such change. Because Liezi’s source is indeterminate and not united in a strong sense, given its shapelessness, boundlessness, lack of substantiality and changeability, the myriad things which issue from it are also not strongly united or individuated. This is evident in that the same breath that issues from Liezi’s Nothing is itself altered before uniting to create heaven and earth, which in turn create the myriad things. Since everything is generated from the same breath by separating from each other by the agency of heaven and earth, things in the world are held together by a weak unity for they are made of the same stuff and come from the same proximate causes. Things in this world then, are not strongly individuated and hence are not radically distinct from each other. Accordingly, it seems natural for Liezi to propose that opposites like honor and dishonor, wealth and poverty, success and failure are what they are independently of human agency, and there is no point in thinking that one of these alternatives is superior than another, or in pursuing one of these alternatives rather than another. Since everything comes from the same source of Nothing, and each thing is not radically distinct from another, there is no sense in trying to alter anything. Nor are we warranted in thinking that human beings are somehow more powerful than other things that surround them, or that human beings are as powerful as the source that generated everything so that changing the world is up to them. For Liezi, everything that happens to one is already destined: “When we say that a thing is destined, how can there be anyone who directs it?” (122) and “there is no point in trying to accord with the will of heaven, and measuring the benefit or harm of what we do” (130). Since the opposites of happiness, the good, and the beneficial equally manifest the Way for Liezi, our goals cannot be the pursuit of one of these opposites. To do so would be a mistake. To the extent that Liezi presents a world that is what it is, or “is so of itself” (ziran), rather than one that moves toward a specific goal that is the good (such as that found in Aristotle), his view of causation and what is caused is non-teleological.8

8  Note the similarity between Liezi’s and Laozi’s view as interpreted by Zhu Bokun, “Daoist Patterns of Thought and the Tradition of Chinese Metaphysics,” Contemporary Chinese Thought, vol. 29, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 13–71. Zhu Bokun points out that Laozi challenges the traditional view that the natural world is decreed by heaven, saying that “heaven and earth are not benevolent,” and they don’t give rise to themselves, but rather, they imitate
On the contrary, we have seen that Aristotle disagrees with Liezi in maintaining that human actions can change the changeable things in the world, that we ought to desire such change in order to achieve what is better, and ultimately, achieve our highest good of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle’s view is due to his strong unity of first principle such that the things that are caused by his first principle too are more united and better to the extent that they are more like the primary substance. As mentioned earlier, unenmattered things for Aristotle, are more united than enmattered ones due to their indestructibility and stability. Likewise, with respect to enmattered entities like human beings, to the extent that they are capable of activities like the primary substance’s, which are characterized by self-sufficiency, continuity and completeness, they too are more united, higher and better substances than others who are removed from such activities. For human beings then, activities such as contemplation is most akin to God’s self-thinking thought given that they are the most self-sufficient, complete and continuous of all intellectual acts.\(^9\) Since Aristotle holds that the activity of contemplation is our highest activity which contributes to our ultimate end of *eudaimonia*, his view of human beings differs from Liezi’s by being oriented toward an end that is our highest good, i.e., by being teleological. Moreover, to the extent that Aristotle also distinguishes enmattered from unenmattered things, human beings from the non-human, good human activities from those that are not as good, his view is founded upon clear distinctions between the things that have been caused by the primary substance. These distinctions amongst the created things are based on the degree of each thing’s unity, which standard of measure is the Way, which in turn proceeds by *wu-wei*, or spontaneity – i.e., non-purposive activity. As Bokun puts it,

Thus the way takes as its rule “what is so of itself.” This means the Way – as the supreme principle of the universe – is inaction which is so of itself. Heaven and earth take the way as their rule, which means that the changes in the natural world are also spontaneous and are lacking in purposive activity … This theory of spontaneous inactivity rejects human intentionality, feelings, desires, and comparable psychological aspects. (24)

Thus the Daoist view of the creation of the world and man’s role in it is non-teleological. See also Xiao Jiefu, “A Sketch of the Daoist Character,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 58–74, where he says, “Daoism exerts its strength in the study of the principle of “naturally being so without purposive action” (69).\(^9\)

\(^9\) *Met.* 1072b25–27: “If, then, the happiness which God always enjoys is as great as that which we enjoy sometimes, it is marvelous: and if it is greater, this is still more marvelous.” See also *NE* 1178b22–24: “Hence the gods’ activity that is superior in blessedness will be an activity of study. And so the human activity that is most akin to the gods’ activity will, more than any others, have the character of happiness.”
strong unity and individuality of the primary substance itself. We have seen that Liezi lacks such a strong unity and individuality in his conception of the Way of Nothing. He also lacks clear distinctions between the things that issued from the Nothing, as well as a fixed standard of goodness for measuring goodness or badness in human and nonhuman things.

In spite of the fact that Liezi’s view of the world is non-teleological, it does not mean that anyone who is untrained can live a life of the Dao. Even though Liezi’s sage is not out to pursue his own happiness, he too has a certain function just as heaven and earth have their proper functions. As he puts it:

It is the office of heaven to beget and to shelter,
The office of earth to shape and to support,
The office of the sage to teach and reform,
The office of each thing to perform its function. (19)

What qualities does Liezi’s sage need to have in order to perform his function of teaching and reforming? Unlike Aristotle’s norm of a life which includes practical wisdom (phronēsis) and contemplation (theōria), where both activities contribute to man’s happiness and rely on the proper use of reason, Liezi eschews the use of reason to know the Way. No general principles can be reached by comparing one’s life with another and using reason for Liezi. This is because even though the Way governs everything in the world, it manifests itself differently in different people and circumstances. Before discussing in detail Liezi’s skepticism about using reason to access the Way, let me elaborate on the Nothing and what Liezi thinks is knowledge.

---

10 See Met. 1075a12–23 for how different things are ordered differently and hierarchically in the universe for Aristotle, and yet everything is ordered to one end.

11 For example, Liezi speaks of the different roles people play, which roles are determined for them in his descriptions of four men who exemplify diverse, contrasting characters and behaviors in their dealings with the world; each believing that his is the right response. Here are three out of five sets of different characters and attitudes Liezi mentions:

Four men, Tricky and Simple, Tactless and Fawning, went about together in the world, each following his own bent. To the end of their lives they never discussed their methods, for each was assured of the subtlety of his own skill.

Four men, Underhand and Frank, Tongue-tied and Brow-beater, went about together in the world, each following his own bent. To the end of their lives they never explained themselves to each other, for each was convinced that his talents would win him success.

Four men, Cheeky and Stolid, Daring and Timid, went about together in the world, each following his own bent. To the end of their lives they never pointed out each other’s faults, for each of them supposed that his conduct was irreproachable. (131)

For Liezi, each of these men assumed that his attitude and way of behaving is the correct one and each doesn’t think that he needs to explain or justify his way to another. Liezi claims that despite their differences, all of these men “traveled on the Way in the direction destined for them” (131).
As we have seen earlier, Liezi’s Nothing neither has knowledge nor is it capable of anything in particular. Yet it is asserted to know and be capable of everything. Liezi’s Nothing can be more clearly interpreted if we were to distinguish two kinds of knowledge and skill: namely, between a genuine and a conventional knowledge and skill. Whereas only the sage can access genuine knowledge and skill, conventional knowledge and skill are accessible to the ordinary person. The genuine is valued whilst the conventional is deprecated by Liezi: “What common knowledge knows is shallow” (46, see also top of 167). Instead of praising the man who took three years to make a jade mulberry leaf, Liezi deprecates him, saying: “If heaven and earth grew things so slowly . . . there would not be many things with leaves.” Despite a society’s regard for conventional skill, it is inferior to the power of the Way, and to one’s genuine knowledge and practice of the Way. Liezi maintains, “Therefore the sage trusts the transforming process of the Way, and puts no trust in cunning and skill” (161).

Genuine knowledge for Liezi, in opposition to conventional skill, is exemplified in one’s ability to walk under water without suffocating. More specifically, genuine skill occurs when one holds fast “to his purest energies; it has nothing to do with skill and daring” (37). This pure energy is likened to the infant’s energy, which for Liezi, is totally concentrated. Add to this the oneness of the infant’s inclinations, this stage of infancy is praised for its harmony and virtue by Liezi (23). Moreover, such a concentration of pure energy seems to be shared between the sage and the infant. It is also like the pure energy or breath issuing from the Nothing upon stirring, prior to its transformation into the heaven, the earth and the myriad things (18–9).  

As opposed to the infant, Liezi’s view is that man would need years of discipline and training to attain genuine knowledge and skill. Moreover, to attain the Way takes concentration of pure energy or breath which cannot be communicated by speech. This is consistent with his belief that pure energy or breath is close to the Nothing, preceding particular things, hence preceding the distinctions speech needs too. Liezi asserts, “The utmost in speech is to be rid of speech, the utmost doing is doing Nothing” (46, see also top of 167). When Liezi was asked about what his master said to him, he responded: “what did Hu-tzu ever say?” (17). Genuine knowledge is beyond speech and communication for Liezi.

Unlike Aristotle who stresses the rational faculty in human beings for both speculative and practical wisdom, Liezi seems quite skeptical about using reason in general as is clear in the aforementioned discussion of how genuine knowledge relies on the concentration of pure energy or breath rather than skill or common knowledge that can be communicated by speech. Liezi’s skepticism about reasoning is manifest when he uses Confucius to criticize two elderly men who were joyful about their closeness to death. Jung Ch’i-ch’i, a ninety year old, professes to have many joys. Professing joy about being human, being a man instead of a woman, and about his old age, he asserts: “poverty is the norm and death is the end.” Thus, Jung is not disturbed by his approaching death (24). Liezi has Confucius respond by saying that Jung knows how to console himself.

Lin Lei, nearly a hundred, evoked a similar attitude from Confucius. Lin Lei characterized his happiness as follows: not bothering to learn when he was young, nor striving to make his mark when he was older, having neither wife nor sons at his old age, he does not fear death because he does not know about his afterlife. For all he knows, it might even be better than his present life. Confucius is reported to say that Lin Lei “has found it, yet not found all of it” (25). So Liezi is against the use of reason for any kind of rationalization or consolation about one’s death. To rationalize about death is to remain caught up with its negativity. Reasoning thus neither provides knowledge of the Nothing, nor knowledge of the proper way to live. Genuine wisdom is not attainable by reasoning for Liezi.

Just as genuine knowledge for Liezi is intimately bound up with the ultimate source of Nothing, the highest knowledge for Aristotle is most akin to the primary substance. Unlike Liezi’s genuine knowledge that is a pure energy like the breath that issues from Nothing preceding all distinctions such that both knowledge and the Nothing are incommunicable through speech, Aristotle’s ultimate wisdom is most like the self-sufficient, continuous and complete activity of God who is most individual and distinct (being the norm of all distinctions) such that both ultimate wisdom and God are most accessible to logos or definition. Whereas one and the same knowledge for Liezi is knowledge of the Way and practice, exemplified by the highest man’s ability to walk under water without suffocating, Aristotle requires two types of knowledge, speculative and practical, to deal with the unchanging objects of scientific knowledge and the changing objects of action, respectively. Again, both thinkers’ views are attributable to their respective principles of unity and individuation. Since things are not as individuated and distinct for Liezi, he also does not require distinct faculties for knowledge. Aristotle on the other hand, has a strong conception of unity and individuation and hence requires different faculties for knowing different things.
More elaborately, notice how Aristotle would distinguish the human soul into the rational and non-rational parts. Each part is in turn divided. The rational part is divided into the speculative part which is directed at the unchanging objects and is perfected by the virtue of *sophia*, and the deliberative part which is directed at the changing objects and is perfected by the virtue of *phronēsis*. The non-rational part is divided into the part that can listen to the deliberative part, consisting of our desires, emotions and appetites, which are perfected in the moral virtues, and the part which cannot listen to the deliberative part, namely, our vegetative functions. Aristotle defines the human function as the activity of that part of the soul that reasons (*NE* I, 7). Notice how our desires, emotions and appetites then are transformed into the moral virtues when they listen to the reasoning from our deliberative part. When we can perform actions virtuously, such as acting with courage, justice and temperance, etc., which entails that we do such actions with knowledge, for their own sakes, without regrets, and with pleasure, (*NE* II, 1105a 33–36, 1104b5–7) then we’ll also know what our ends are, namely, courage, justice and temperance, etc. These provide the goals at which deliberation aims. Hence the *phronimos* is also one with all of the moral virtues for Aristotle for only one with the right ends and disposition to pursue them can have practical wisdom. Insofar as we cannot lead the contemplative life if our lives with others in the community are in disarray, *phronēsis* contributes to our highest activity of contemplation. Training for our highest good or *eudaimonia* then, for Aristotle, involves our acquisition of the moral virtues and the intellectual virtues of *phronēsis* and *sophia* in a context where the external goods like friendship and political connections that make such cultivation possible exist. Yet all these virtues contribute to making the human life a united one insofar as they are hierarchically ordered so that the lower virtues, as defined by the criteria set by the primary substance, are for the sake of the highest one. What’s significant for our comparison with Liezi is that Aristotle distinguishes different parts of the human soul and gives us an account of their functions, objects and virtues, such that our good consists in perfecting our nature. Each individual has to undergo a process of habituating himself, deliberating and acting correctly, and acquiring wisdom about the eternal objects. But what guides this process is our rational soul, the most distinctive thing about human beings and also

---


14 For Aristotle’s discussion of the external goods which are instrumental and necessary for our happiness, see NE 8, 1099a31–1099b6 and 1099b27–28.
the part that is responsible for our most Godlike activity. This elaborate account of the parts and perfections of the human soul which is led by our rationality is radically different from Liezi’s focus on the concentration of breath which is neither accessible to reason nor speech.

In contrast to Aristotle’s strong focus on the individual’s cultivation of his own virtues and his emphasis on the individual’s rationality and distinction from other things in the universe, Liezi focuses on how the sage does not distinguish between himself and anything else in the world. While describing what happened to him after studying with his Master, Old Shang, for nine years, Liezi says that

[H]e thought without restraint whatever came into his mind and said without restraint whatever came into his mouth without knowing whether the right and wrong, benefit and harm, were his own or another’s. Only then, when he had come to the end of everything inside him and outside him, his eyes became like his ears, his ears like his nose, his nose like his mouth; everything was the same. His mind concentrated and his body relaxed, bones and flesh fused completely, he did not notice what his body leaned against and his feet trot, what his mind thought and his words contained. (81)

Additionally, he says, “(i)f you can be only like this, none of the principles of things will be hidden from you” (81). The passage illustrates that the aim of studying with his Master is to rid one of all distinctions – be they physical or mental so that there is not an inside and outside dualism to him.15 This unity is manifested in genuine knowledge as the knowledge of everything, i.e., of the Nothing that is everything’s source. More specifically, the mind’s concentration is like the concentration of the purest energy or breath. The concentration of his mind or pure energy also returns him to a harmonious state that is prior to distinctions. Thus, in such a state, he is closer to the Nothing than to the world of distinctions.16 Since the Nothing is the source of everything, and is genuine knowledge, Liezi’s being in such a state of concentrated energy enables him to know the Nothing, resulting in his knowledge of everything.

Another instance of how genuine knowledge transcends common knowledge and its distinction between the inside and outside of the individual,

---

15 To attain such a state where one no longer makes distinctions entails a sharpening of the Daoist’s mind so that he can be attuned to the manifestations of the Dao. Such a state also requires that the Daoist not be hindered by his personal desires. See Tang Yi’s, description of the sage’s cultivation of the “ultimate virtue” which will allow him to observe the Dao in Laozi’s Daodejing 10, cited earlier on p.3, “Taoism as a Living Philosophy.”

16 As Loreta Poškaite, “The Problem of Identity and Difference in Classical Chinese Philosophy,” op cit, puts it, “In Daoism the way of identity begins with the equalization of a human being with all other things, and ends with the extension of human identity into non-being, emptiness, in which the boundaries between identity and difference disappear” (197).
rendering knowledge a state where everything is the same shows up in Liezi’s discussion of traveling. Before his enlightenment, Liezi said that he liked to travel and contemplate the things which are constantly changing. But his master, Hu-tzu, told him that his contemplation of the ever changing outward things in traveling, is actually accompanied by his negligence of inward contemplation, which would have revealed that he is never the same too. Despite the apparent outward as opposed to an inward distinction here, Hu-tzu’s lesson is that the two states are exactly alike. Comparing traveling to contemplation, Hu-tzu says, “How perfect is travel! In perfect travel we do not know where we are going, in perfect contemplation we do not know what we are looking at. To travel over all things without exception, contemplate all things without exception, this is what I call travel and contemplation” (82). This comparison of the all-inclusiveness of travel with contemplation is like Liezi’s belief that ultimate knowledge is the knowledge of Nothing, since it is prior to all distinctions. How can someone contemplate all things and yet not know what he is contemplating? This is possible in the contemplation of Nothing for it is the source of all things which, for Liezi, is prior to all distinctions. Hence, for one to contemplate Nothing is to not know what he is contemplating; yet he would know everything for the Nothing is the source of everything.

Liezi’s stress on the lack of distinctions in his knowledge and contemplation is radically distinct from Aristotle’s clear distinctions between speculative and practical wisdom as well as their respective objects. Instead of such clear knowledge in practical wisdom enabling one to act correctly in the context of the others and the external world as in Aristotle’s thought, Liezi’s view is that man’s power to harmonize with the things around him does not rely on bodily or mental effort, use of his senses, or knowledge. He states,

The man who successfully accords with the way uses neither eyes nor ears, neither effort nor mind. If wishing to accord with the way, you seek it by means of sight and hearing, body and knowledge, you will not hit on it. (91)

Note that the knowledge at stake here is not genuine knowledge of Nothing, but rather, conventional knowledge. Neither conventional knowledge nor reliance on bodily senses suffices for acting according to the Way. Rather, such reliance distances us from things. One’s thoughts that sight is different from hearing, and both of these different from the mind, are distracting. Moreover, one can also be distracted by the differences between bodily and mental faculties, as well as the things of one’s actions. Harmony is impossible if one is caught up with such distractions. Rather, Liezi’s ideal is a state of sameness in everything; there are no distinctions between him and the world. Instead of Aristotle’s emphasis on the use of reason to
preserve his character and individual substance in the face of a changing world. Liezi’s Way is for the individual to lose himself entirely, abdicating his mind and bodily senses so that he fuses and becomes one with the thing. Liezi quotes Kuan-yin with approval:

If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves. Moving, be like water. Still, be like a mirror. Respond like an echo. (90)

However, just because Liezi tells us not to use our bodily and mental senses, it does not mean that we can attain the Way by ignoring or relinquishing such faculties. Rather, intense and disciplined training, like Liezi’s nine years with his master, Old Shang, is required to rid one of the distinctions in his bodily senses, thoughts and words. Our goal is to reach a state of concentration where he is the same as the things upon which he acts. Liezi offers numerous examples of an actor’s unity with the thing or situation. These examples consist in the agent’s attaining a kind of flexibility where he is completely adapted to the situation. Contrary to Aristotle’s understanding of action where one exerts power upon one’s self and hence is able to affect others and the world, Liezi’s Way is what the Daoists call non-action (wu-wei), or acting by not acting. It is a way of non-action or weakening of oneself in the face of the other that offers one the power to harmonize with the things around and accord with the Way. Let us examine some of Liezi’s illustrations of the Daoist’s adaptation and harmonization with his environment.

“Equalising the give and the pull is the ultimate principle of dealing with the world” (105). Examples of fishing and archery illustrate this principle. Equipments are made of the weakest materials: for fishing, a line from a silk thread and a rod of pygmy bamboo; the hook is made from “a beard of wheat” and the bait is “a split grain of rice” (105). Archery too employs

---


18 Loreta Poškaitė, “The Problem of Identity and Difference in Classical Chinese Philosophy,” op. cit. explains such a Daoist state when she says,

For Daoists, the center of the bodily and spiritual energy is the heart-mind (xin), which thus becomes the manifestative center of universal identity (“this”). It is not, however, definable by any characteristics (by goodness or compassion, for example, as in Confucianism) because of its emptiness (as an ideal condition). It means absolute receptivity, which makes one’s free communication with others (the identification of the object and subject, human and things) possible, in the same way as a window or a mirror. That is why Zhuangzi (Laozi and Mencius too) suggests purifying one’s heart, clearing it from doubt, making it calm in order to make it bright and limpid. (195)
a weak bow and an arrow attached to a thin line. The weakness of these equipments notwithstanding, the fisherman can catch a fish the size of a cart in seven hundred feet deep currents, and the archer can shoot down two black cranes on the edge of a dark cloud. These men's successes are attributed to their ability to equalize the give and the pull: not pulling too hard nor giving too much. Such equalization of the give and pull prevents the equipments from breaking in spite of the overwhelming surrounding forces of water and wind. It enables both men to harmonize so well with the environment that they can approach their preys without startling them.\(^{19}\)

Liezi reports the fisherman, Chan Ho, describing how he fished after five years of learning as follows:

> When I overlook the river holding my rod, there are no distracting thoughts in my mind. I contemplate nothing but the fish. When I cast the line and sink the hook, my hand does not pull too hard nor give too easily, so that nothing can disturb it. When the fish see the bait on my hook, it is like sinking dust or gathered foam, and they swallow it without suspecting. This is how I am able to use weak things to control strong ones, light things to bring in heavy ones. (106)

Chan Ho’s description reveals the Daoist Way of \(\text{wu-wei}\), or acting by not acting. \(\text{Wu-wei}\) or not acting does not mean that the Daoist does nothing at all.\(^ {20}\) Rather, it means not over-acting or over-powering the fish. Over action would startle the fish and send it fleeing. Instead of exerting strength, \(\text{wu-wei}\) negates strength, evident in the weakness of the fishing equipment and bait, as well as the balancing act in dealing with the flimsy equipment and the changes in the environment. The Daoist’s mind is completely focused on the

\(^{19}\) The principle of equilibrium and harmony in \(\text{wu-wei}\) is also applicable to traditional Chinese medicine. Tang Yi, “Taoism as a Living Philosophy,” op cit, puts it as follows:

> Health in the human body is viewed as a dynamic equilibrium between the negative force \(\text{yin}\) and the positive force \(\text{yang}\). Tip the balance, and you have disease and even death. The business it is of medicine, as well as the hygienics, to prevent this and failing that, to help recover, the balance by harmonizing \(\text{yin}\) and \(\text{yang}\)… Although this theory is somewhat touched by the dynamic philosophy of the Yin Yang school, its tone is undoubtedly [Daoistic], the implication being that it is the natural course of nonaction that keeps the balance of \(\text{yin}\) and \(\text{yang}\). (401)

\(^{20}\) Compare this with Tang Yi’s, “Taoism as a Living Philosophy,” op cit, account of \(\text{wu-wei}\) in Laozi’s politics. He says:

> In so far as [Laozi’s] politics is concerned, Non-action does not mean no action or no government, but governing wisely, without overtaxation, without cunning knowledge, without unnecessary property, … without expansion and aggressive war, … so that the people can be happy in the development of their natural propensities. (410)
fish, being one with it. Oneness with one’s surrounding calls for weaknesses in dealing with the equipment, environment and thoughts, accomplishments requiring years of training for the Daoist.

Several differences arise when we compare Liezi’s Way of acting through _wu-wei_ with Aristotle’s way of action. First, whereas Aristotle believes that one should attempt to change or control things in the world such as one’s honor and dishonor, success and failure, for these are to be ordered in a certain way for our good, Liezi endorses accepting the Way’s decrees and harmonizing with the world by using _wu-wei_. This could lead to effective action too as shown when Liezi has Chan Ho recommend his Daoist Way of _wu-wei_ to the king of Ch’u at the end of his description of fishing. He says, “[i]f your majesty is really able to rule his state in the same way, he can turn the empire within the span of his hand; what can give you trouble?” (106).²¹ Note that this does not contradict Liezi’s acceptance of the Way’s decree. The Way is ultimately responsible for all these aspects of our lives, i.e., longevity, success, rank and wealth. People who possess genuine knowledge of the Way, however, are also those who have spent years perfecting the Way of _wu-wei_. Hence they are able to let the Way work through them and in their particular situations. In these cases, they are also working with destiny and hence accomplishing what is destined for them. _Wu-wei_ then, need not be inconsistent with effective action.

Second, change for Aristotle takes place by strengthening one’s internal self. Such strengthening is achieved by cultivating a set of fixed virtues, such as the intellectual virtues and virtues of character. Change for Liezi, on the other hand, comes in the form of weakening one’s inner, distracting thoughts, and focusing on uniting with the external task, being one with the fish and its environment, or being one with the cranes and their environment. Whilst Aristotle concentrates on uniting human nature with the various virtues in order to act correctly in various situations, Liezi concentrates on what is outside man when change is called for. Again each thinker’s view results from his corresponding strong or weak conception of unity in his first principle.

Finally, these two thinkers also differ in their views of the good. Both thinkers aspire to a way of life, the way being virtue for Aristotle and according with the _Dao_ for Liezi, respectively. But the make up of the way is quite different for each. Aristotle would maintain that the primary substance, human nature and its virtues are fixed for all times whereas Liezi

²¹ Compare this practicality of the Way with Laozi’s account in the _Daodejing_. Philip J. Ivanhoe, trans. (Hackett Publishing Co., 2002) when he says, “Hold fast to the _Dao_ of old, in order to control what is here today” (14).
would deny such fixity with respect to the Way. Unlike Aristotle’s absolute view about nature, Liezi is relativistic about the Way. Even though the Way governs everything in this world, it manifests itself differently in different people and situations.\textsuperscript{22} That different people could follow the Way and yet behave radically differently has been touched on in my earlier discussion of three examples illustrating the different characters and attitudes of four men. E.g., recall the four men, Tricky, Simple, Tactless and Fawning, and how they are all said to have traveled the Way for Liezi. That the Way can be manifested in completely opposite actions or states is also evident in Liezi’s account of the completely different endings of two families’ sons who followed the exact same professions and actions. Whereas the sons in the first family succeeded, the sons in the second family failed when they pursued the same actions as the first family to be as successful as they. The father, Mr. Shih of Lu, from the first family that succeeded concludes as follows when approached by the father and sons of the second family:

\begin{quote}
[N]owhere is there a principle which is right in all circumstances, or an action that is wrong in all circumstances. The method we used yesterday we may discard today and use again in the future; there are no fixed right and wrong to decide whether we use it or not. (163, see also p. 72)
\end{quote}

Unlike Aristotle’s absolute certainty about the morality of certain actions as well as one’s ability to know their principles through reason, Liezi eschews certitude about moral actions and one’s ability to know their principles through reason. Even though Aristotle’s \textit{phronimos} is one who acts according to means that are relative to him so that he always does what’s best in various situations without following a fixed set of rules, nevertheless, his actions are still governed by the moral virtues which are means between very definite extremes. Hence Aristotle’s \textit{phronimos} will always act courageously, justly, etc. To do the opposite would be vicious. So contrary to Liezi, there are principles of action that are right in all practical circumstances for Aristotle, namely, the moral virtues.

In conclusion, I have shown that the differences in Aristotle’s and Liezi’s ethical views are based on their differences with respect to the first principle

\textsuperscript{22} This point about the Way is expressed quite well by Xiao Jiefu, “A Sketch of the Daoist Character,” op cit. Xiao explains the \textit{Zhuangzi} as follows:

\begin{quote}
The lively fables of “the frog in the well,” “the Earl of the River,” and “the Overlord of the Sea” show that “from the point of view of the Way, there is no distinction of noble and common applicable to things; from the point of view of things, each thing considers itself valuable and other things mean.” (71)
\end{quote}
or source of all things. The strong unity in Aristotle’s conception of first principle leads to a well-defined individuality of the things and human beings caused by it, which unity also becomes the very definite norm of goodness for things and human beings. In contrast, the weak unity in Liezi’s conception of the Dao leads to a correspondingly weak conception of unity or individuality in the human beings and things it caused. Consequently, Liezi’s conception of goodness is as indeterminate as the Way itself.
Ability 102, 108, 141f., 146 (inability), 199, 261, 264, 278, 280 (political), 282 (strategic), 284, 286f. (prognostic)
– néng 45, 51, 83, 93f. 123f.
Activity, actuality 13, 261
Administrators/administration 51, 69, 89, 115f., 302
Advisers, advice 7, 10, 15, 20, 114, 162, 172f.
Agent, agency 129, 132, 141, 177, 179, 185, 193f., 196, 198, 206, 221, 253, 267, 269, 299f., 302, 318
Aggression 253
Ambiguity 93, 100, 102, 143, 256, 278
Ambition 86f., 271
Ancestors 10, 90, 114, 125, 254, 280, 302
Anger 9, 39f., 48, 52, 55ff., 59, 113, 245, 248, 250, 254, 268
Anthropology 241f., 245, 254–257
Aporia 165
Appetite 194, 245ff., 250, 252, 315
Argument, reason 275
Aristocracy 11, 214, 230, 295f.
Astronomy 289f., 296, 302
Ataraxia 247, 251
Attitude 130 (pathological), 169 (modern), 185, 188, 193 (intentional), 197, 215, 217–224, 231–234, 248f., 252, 312, 314, 321
– permanent attitude (hexis) 210, 222–227
– propositional attitudes 241
Balance 7, 42ff., 48, 51, 109
– equilibrium 43, 319
Beauty 130, 215, 230, 248
Being, is/is not. See also existence, truth 53, 191, 304
Belief 18, 20, 26, 27 (moral), 28, 65, 80ff., 87–90, 136, 142, 145, 148, 170, 186, 197, 199, 249, 277, 288, 292, 317
Beneficiary 106, 185, 222, 228, 278, 310

Benevolence (rén 仁) 3, 10ff., 42f., 48f., 52f., 55, 59ff., 88, 107ff., 137, 163, 212, 218, 268f., 283, 290, 293, 311

Bioethics 279, 288

Biology, biological 6, 56, 106, 136, 145, 229, 241, 246, 256f.

Birth 64, 221, 269, 272, 295


Brain 242, 253, 256, 267, 270

Breathing, breath 58, 246, 270, 273, 285, 308ff., 313f., 316

Bribery 112


Career 47, 279

Causes, causality 301f.


Citizens 162, 168, 171, 199, 216, 244, 253

Colours 87, 182, 286, 290

Communication, direct, indirect 156–161, 164–168, 288f., 313f., 318

Community 10, 67f., 137, 160, 163, 168, 196, 200f., 203f., 228, 242, 289, 315

Comparison, comparativist 3–6, 9–12, 15f., 18f., 39, 93, 126f., 136, 138, 158, 246

– comparative ethics 8, 12ff., 18, 20

Compassion. See also benevolence (rén) 43, 127, 242, 268, 318

Competition 254, 268ff., 289, 295

Complexity 259–268, 270ff., 274, 276

Conceptual schema, 3, 10, 15f., 18, 20, 30, 32f. (truth, necessity), 135f. (tools), 195–199, 201–206., 218, 220 (unity), 244, 255, 274

– schemata/concepts 4, 6, 8–13, 37, 39, 41ff., 46, 49f., 55, 57, 60ff., 64, 66, 132, 141ff. (of disposition), 156–159 (of parrhésia), 161ff. (political, traditional), 167 (democratic, educational), 171, 186 (Socrates), 191ff. (of ethics), 209, 212–216, 224ff., 228 (of leisure), 230, 232 (virtue), 235, 242 (universal), 247, 257, 260 (misconceptions), 264 (of the good), 267 (preconceptions), 277, 298f. (of good life), 304, 312 (of the Way), 314 (of unity), 320 (of unity), 322 (Aristotle)

Conflict 252 (philosophical)

– psychic 208, 245 (soul), 248f. (soul)

– social 144, 149, 245, 271, 282

Conquest, military/militarist 48, 262, 278, 280f., 283, 288, 291, 295, 303

Consciousness 8, 60f., 98, 108, 266–270, 276

Consolation 130, 134, 144, 273, 314


Contentment 250

Conversations 223
Corruption 81, 205, 268
Courage 11, 38, 141, 170–188, 193, 220, 227f., 246, 283, 315, 321
Craft, skill 68, 76, 108f., 138f., 148 (skillful), 176, 253, 261, 287
– shù 术 265ff., 273, 281f., 312ff.
– technê 176, 284f., 295
Crisis 214, 283, 285
Culture 3f., 8, 10, 14f., 18 ff., 26–29, 32f., 42ff., 46, 62, 65 (chauvinism), 71, 81, 91, 107f., 111, 125 f., 130, 135, 141, 158, 169, 193, 197, 199f., 203, 211–214, 224, 230f., 241ff., 269, 302
– culture specific 254ff.
Dào 道 8, 52, 55, 61, 64, 88f., 95, 99, 103, 116f., 119, 268f., 272, 282f., 294
Death 56, 64, 70, 140, 233f., 249, 251, 272f., 282, 286, 288, 293, 305f., 314, 319
Deception 281, 295
Democracy 156ff., 162, 167, 214
Desert 228
Desire. See also under Thumos, Spirit 6, 8, 13, 27, 67, 88, 107, 173, 185ff., 191, 193f., 197, 213, 215, 217, 219, 224 (desirable), 243, 246ff., 262, 276, 281f. (un/ desirability), 284f., 310 (desirability), 315
Descriptive, description 26, 28 (relativism), 129, 137, 140, 148, 164, 247, 288, 303
Destiny (ming 命) 6, 51f., 56, 86, 251, 291f., 297, 301
Discipline 5, 16, 28, 99, 136, 283, 313, 318
Disease 89, 198, 244f., 247, 278f., 284ff., 293, 319
Disputation 81, 158, 161, 187, 251f. (philosophical)
– dialectic 5, 9, 216, 275f.
Doctrine, doctrines 16, 26, 37, 49, 68, 73, 77–80, 82, 86, 90, 155, 159f., 189, 199, 247, 251
Dreams 285, 292, 297
Duty. See also under Righteousness 12, 14, 58ff., 122, 124, 156, 288 (moral)
Education. See also under Rites and Behaviour 4, 27, 43, 91, 146, 160, 162, 166f., 172, 197 (moral), 200ff., 205, 214, 216, 224, 230f., 249, 257, 288, 303
Efficacy 41, 201f., 265, 270f., 274, 276, 281, 291f., 297
Element(s) 171, 178f., 181f., 197, 199, 202, 208, 219, 241, 243, 248, 256, 261, 285, 293
Elenchus 157, 161, 293
Empire (tiān xià 天下). See also under World 14, 64, 90, 94, 108, 114, 120ff., 320
Ends, goals 80, 107, 113ff., 130, 136, 203ff., 264
Engagement 224, 274f.
Enlightenment 71f., 103, 111, 119, 130, 158, 168ff., 317
Epistemology 5, 26
Equality 156 (social), 199, 213, 217f.
Error 31, 159, 163, 187f., 245, 256, 279, 288, 293
– applied 5
– normative 5, 7ff., 28ff., 32–34, 193, 199
– metaethics 5, 8f., 25f., 29f., 33f.
– ethical virtue (arête) 9, 193, 203, 209f., 213, 215, 218, 221f., 227, 230f. 235
Ethos 215, 217, 221, 226f., 229f.
Evaluative, evaluation 191f., 196f., 201, 204, 206, 225, 233, 255
Examination, self-examination, cross-examination 138, 163, 170
Excess 42, 48, 194, 234, 249f., 278f., 285
Examples 227, 229f., 291, 302, 306, 318
Existence 27, 47, 82, 118, 148, 229, 233, 281, 292
Expertise 176f., 179, 201, 289, 302
Family 14f., 68f., 81, 196, 203, 209, 211ff., 218, 243, 278, 280ff., 289, 321
Fatalism, determinism 78f., 82, 299–302
Fate 8, 297, 299–302
Fear 55, 88, 102, 114, 141, 173, 179, 181, 185–188, 197, 245, 248, 250, 253ff., 274, 288, 314
Feeling. See also under Emotion 42, 108ff., 112, 114, 124, 128, 191, 197, 209, 218, 242, 244, 247–254, 256, 272, 274
Filial piety (xiào 孝) 11, 40, 66, 72, 69, 224, 268
Fine (kalon) 14, 193
Flourishing 128, 131, 135, 137, 146, 148
Food 6, 122, 247, 271
Food, culinary 37, 42, 44, 46ff., 51
Formulae 286f.
Frankness, frank speaking 155–163, 165–168
Function 11, 39, 117, 199, 202f., 214, 216, 218, 221, 226, 246, 263, 288, 290, 308, 312, 315
Funerals, expenses 68
Game 122, 269
Generosity 66, 114, 128, 131f., 140, 220, 228f., 306
Gentleman (jūn zì 君子) 10, 42ff., 46ff., 53, 55, 61, 70, 74, 290
Genuineness, genuine 204, 208–211, 218–222, 225, 227, 231–234, 262, 264, 268, 275, 290, 313
Goal, ends, purpose 140, 145, 158, 170f., 176f., 203f., 209f., 221, 225, 228, 230, 247, 263f., 310, 315
God, divinity 64, 261ff., 300, 307, 311, 314
God, Gods. See also Heaven, Godlike 8, 16, 73, 76, 86, 155, 171, 184f., 236, 260, 265, 280, 285, 292f., 299, 302, 316
Good (kalon) 14, 166, 193f., 251f.
– good(s) 3–8, 11, 33, 129f., 163, 171, 206, 209, 228, 270, 307, 315
General index

– good vs. bad 40, 67, 73, 80, 83, 132f., 172f., 180–189, 196–204 (good life), 209f., 220, 233f., 247f. (life), 264 (conception of the good), 310f., 320

Good person criterion 8, 12, 15, 78, 89, 131, 134, 163, 178

Goodness 4, 16, 48, 53, 60 f., 81, 132, 217, 253, 277, 304, 312, 318, 321

Goodwill (eunoia). See also Benevolence 161, 163, 218ff., 222, 232, 280

Government 7, 37, 40, 44, 46f., 50, 69, 72, 74f., 85, 89, 107, 109, 112, 116, 251, 282, 302, 319, 321

Grief 39, 233f., 248, 250, 273, 306

Guest, host 127

Happiness 67, 132, 189, 201, 242f., 247, 261, 314f.


Harmony 165 (harmonise), 183 (harmonize), 197

– hé 和 37–55, 60ff., 71f., 98 (harmonious), 120, 268, 282, 290, 304, 313, 316–320

Health 175, 201, 209f., 243, 245, 280, 302

Heart, hearts 246f.

– xīn 心, or heart-mind 6f., 13f. (heart-mind), 42, 46f., 49, 53–61, 98 (as element in the character dé 德), 108, 121, 232, 295, 318

Heaven 6, 8, 37, 43, 53f., 56, 65, 91, 98, 118, 120, 125, 137, 273f., 285, 291, 296, 301, 304ff.

– Son of Heaven 74ff., 78, 112ff., 249

– Heaven and Earth 249f., 282f., 308–313

– Will of Heaven 70–78, 82–88

Heroes, heroism 61, 131, 133f., 147, 280

Hierarchy 41, 74f., 88, 107, 129, 134, 145, 263, 277, 315

History/historical 3, 9, 11f., 15, 27 f., 82, 84, 87, 97, 99, 111, 125f., 146

(human), 156, 168, 229, 241, 257, 278, 289, 302


– Humane 66f., 71, 85, 88, 93f., 118

– Human nature. See under Nature

Identity/identification 4, 37 (national), 73, 135, 264, 272ff., 286, 316, 318

Idleness 128

Illness, see disease 173, 175, 283, 287f.

Impulse 245


Industry 128

Innocence 192f., 197, 270

Institutions, institutional 5, 64, 89, 149, 162f., 212ff., 224, 280

Integrity 132, 156

Intellectualism, intellectual 45, 55, 58, 91, 127f., 171f., 193f., 201, 204, 216, 221, 225f., 231, 262, 273, 281f., 289, 311, 315, 320

Irony 155, 157, 164f.

Irrational, irrationality 245f.

Jade 40, 72, 85f.

Judgement, judge 7, 18, 106, 70, 128–131, 148, 186ff. (akrasia), 195, 197, 220, 224, 245, 247, 283
(In)Justice. See also Righteousness, rightness 10 f., 25, 51, 72, 76, 78, 82, 84 f., 88, 90, 134, 196 (general), 211, 224, 231, 259 f., 264, 268, 283, 287 f., 315, 321 Justification 11, 61, 79, 130, 209, 223, 226, 261, 280 f., 285, 287, 303, 312

King, kings, monarchy 74, 78 f., 80, 101, 112 f., 115 f., 291, 297, 301 f., 320

Knowledge 8 (ethical), 26 (moral), 27 f., 74, 112 (lexicographical), 163, 167 f., 176 f. (technical), 205 (theoretical), 210 (intellectual), 215 (social), 224, 227, 229, 284, 289, 291–294, 297 (divine), 299, 302 (inferior), 306 (scientific)

Language 20, 26 (philosophy of), 89 (philosophy of), 92–94, 139 (theory of), 140 (normal), 148 f. (figurative), 155 (oracular), 251 (ordinary), 253, 256 (metalinguage), 285
– natural languages 100, 241, 243, 246, 254 ff.

Law, laws 15 (moral), 16 (universal), 41, 67, 69, 72, 79, 88, 124 f., 191 f., 195, 210, 282 f., 286

Leadership, leader 42, 119 f., 271, 282

Learning, instruction 6, 20, 57–60, 115 f., 137, 216, 224, 256, 319

Leisure 227 f.

Liberal, liberalism 260, 264

Liberty, freedom, liberation 5, 11, 105, 156, 158 f., 210, 228, 247, 250 f., 261, 272, 277, 298, 315

Life 10, 12 f., 19, 42 (ethical), 52, 54, 56 f., 59 f. (ethical), 70, 79, 85 f., 115, 119, 128 f., 132 f., 137 f., 140–144, 146, 148 (ordinary), 156, 170 f., 185, 208 ff., 216 (philosophical), 223 f., 229 (aristocratic), 246, 250 f., 263 (complex), 272, 277, 279 (expectancy), 282, 286 f. (Chunyu’s life), 301, 304 f. (ethical), 307 (practical), 312, 315
– the good life 170 f., 194, 196 f., 201–204, 209 f., 228 f., 247, 259 f., 298
– the examined life 170
– the shared life 212 f.
– political life 6 f., 156
– way of life 320

Literature, literary 63, 66, 73, 87, 91, 126, 129, 133, 135, 138 f., 141 f., 147, 149

Logic 37, 42, 45, 54, 60, 65, 82, 105, 297 f.

Longevity 302, 320

Love 41, 51 f., 125, 157, 242, 246, 248
– impartial/universal love, care without gradations 14, 63, 66, 71 f., 74, 76
– homoerotic love 211, 213–216, 218, 222, 225, 232 f., 235

Loyalty 50, 66, 72, 118, 123, 137, 268

Marriage 31, 40 (husband & wife), 123 f. (husband & wife), 211–214, 280

Matter 26 f., 51, 55, 93, 131, 142–146, 149, 155, 195, 198, 202, 280, 306 f.

Mean, the 12, 16, 37, 107, 160


Medicine, medical practice/treatment, medical practitioners 198, 248, 280 f., 285 f., 289, 295, 303, 319

Metaethics 25–34

Metalanguage 242, 256

Metamorphosis 139 f., 143, 149

Metaphor 37–43, 45–48, 53, 61 f., 121 f., 137 f., 271
Method 18, 51, 85f., 95–99, 106f.,
125, 159, 161–167, 173, 282,
285, 291, 295f., 302f., 312
Money, expenditure 307
Moral (psychology), morality 4, 6ff.,
11–15, 25–29, 31ff., 40ff., 47–50,
53f., 57, 60, 64, 68–71, 73, 76, 79,
84, 88f., 92, 96f., 100, 103, 107,
109, 111, 130, 157ff., 168, 191f.,
196f., 199, 206, 208–211, 224f.,
228f., 247, 252, 257, 259, 268f.,
282, 287f., 290f., 293, 295–302,
306, 315, 318, 321
Motivation/motives. See also under
Will 12, 27, 54f., 59, 91, 127f., 131f.,
171f., 179, 184f., 188, 194, 218,
229
Music 37, 39–48, 50f., 53f., 61, 68f.,
70, 124, 145, 230, 243f., 249,
266f.
Myth, myths, mythology 224f.
Naturalism/natural 19, 27f., 30f., 33,
43, 107, 122, 128, 139, 146, 208,
247, 256, 278, 300, 319
Nature 19, 26 (moral)
– in Chinese ethics 8, 54–62 (xing 性), 96, 98
– in Greek ethics 7f., 179, 192, 201,
203, 211, 224, 243ff., 257, 261ff.,
292f. 299, 303, 321
– essential nature (qing 情) 149–252
– Human nature. See also under
Human 13, 19f., 48, 59, 62, 202f.,
227, 320
– xing 性 55f., 136ff., 248–252
Necessity, conceptual necessity 33
(ethical)
Noble (and base) 192f., 197f., 221,
228f., 250
Non-action. See under wú wéi 無為
Norms, normative, normativity 4–9,
11–14, 25, 28–34, 40, 43, 45f.,
71, 123, 130 (moral), 191ff.,
198, 199 (universal), 200, 203,
206, 208, 212, 214, 216, 224f.,
242, 247, 256, 288, 303f., 312,
314
Obligation, to obligate 4, 7, 10, 12,
51f., 54, 102f., 105ff., 108f.,
112ff., 116–125, 130, 134, 191ff.,
198, 206, 213
Officials 40, 51, 69, 74, 81, 110, 121,
302
– officers 283
– office 5, 11, 88, 312
Old age 82, 272, 314
Ontology 5, 298
Opinion, opinions, belief 255
Opportunity 21, 65, 104, 115, 158
Oracles 81, 111, 155, 292f., 297, 299
Ought, what is required 6f., 29–33, 67,
259
– should (dei, kˇe 可) 192–201
– ought vs. is 19, 29–33
Pain, distress 67, 72f., 173, 187, 194,
205, 244ff., 261, 283, 306
Partiality 67
Passions. See under Emotions
Pathos, pl. pathê. See also under
Emotions 244f., 247f., 255
Patients 283ff., 287f.
Patronage 289, 291, 297
Peace, pacify, peaceful 37, 39, 43, 45,
50, 72, 77, 98, 228, 251, 274 (of
mind), 305
People, the, common people 40, 44ff.,
48, 50f., 54f., 66, 68–76, 79, 81f.,
84, 86, 88, 90f., 108, 113, 119,
125, 128–131, 144ff., 148, 157,
163f., 168, 194f., 197, 205ff., 268,
270f., 274, 278, 282, 312, 319,
321
Perception 138, 235f., 246, 253, 263,
266, 269, 274f., 297
Perseverance 172–178, 181, 184f.
Person, personality 53, 57 (personal
identity), 66f., 78, 90, 96,
103–108, 114, 124, 134, 137,
139, 167, 170, 172, 180, 182,
185, 188, 191f., 194ff., 198ff.,
204f., 210, 220, 227, 232–236,
265, 269f., 290, 306, 313
Persuasion 295
Phantasia 205


Physiognomy 20, 86, 290f., 295

Plan, celestial, life plan 77 (celestial), 84, 128 (life), 131f. (life), 137, 204, 292, 299f.

Plants, vegetative soul 60f., 88, 93f., 202

Pleasure 8, 202, 217f., 220, 230, 242, 245f., 250 (and anger), 260–264, 268 (and anger), 271, 315
– Pleasure and pain 194, 205, 306

Pluralism 259f., 264

Poetry, Poet 39, 143, 147, 164, 216, 230, 261, 292

Polis 15, 162f., 216


Possession, possessions 10, 105, 117ff., 148, 179, 188, 279

Poverty 173, 304ff., 310, 314

Power. See also under Obligation 279 (Knowledge), 285 (prognostic), 310 (powerful)
– political 5, 15, 100–107, 110f., 113f., 116–124, 159, 173 (human), 186, 193, 282 (warfare), 291


Praise and blame (praiseworthy) 174–178, 186ff.

Prayer/pray, preaching 74, 268f., 285, 301


Principles, ethical/moral 20, 28, 40, 64f., 67, 73ff., 81, 86, 100, 107, 118–120, 147, 163, 196, 201, 203, 205ff., 216, 225, 249, 260ff., 264, 281f., 299, 304f., 308, 311f., 316, 318–322

Profit (利) 4, 41, 50, 54f., 59–62, 67–70, 84

Propriety 53, 59, 224, 290

Prudence, prudential 132f.

Psychology 4, 13, 205f., 246f., 256f., 269, 311

Punishment, 5, 11, 163, 193 (blame and punishment), 198 (kolasis)
– by Heaven 75ff. (罰), 88 (罰), 89
– by ghosts and spirits 81, 83 (罰), 89
– for the sins of the ancestors 90

Qi 氣 ("breath" i.e. vital breath, vital energy) 56–61, 85f., 89, 94, 121, 251, 266, 290, 294, 296

Questioning 170, 185, 274f.

Rage 242


Realisation, actuality 12, 41, 43, 106, 209f., 222, 225f., 231, 264

Realism 8
– political 109
– ethical 8
– cultural 241, 257

Reality 8, 133, 138, 215, 225, 304, 307

Substance, primary 306–320
Reason, nous 7, 12ff., 145f., 194, 197, 
202, 204, 206, 245–248, 251f., 
292, 307, 309, 312, 314–318, 321 
Reasoning, argumentation 8, 205 
Reciprocity (shù 恕) 10 
Relativism 4f., 15, 25 (moral) 
– ethical 193f. 
– metaethical 26–33, 257 
– cultural 4f., 15, 19, 26–33, 241, 
255ff. 
Religion, religious 18, 64f., 68, 71, 77, 
85, 87ff., 91, 111, 126, 129f., 135, 
144, 147ff., 155, 198f., 216, 224f., 
277, 280, 292f., 302f. 
Responsibility, responsibilities 43, 50f., 
54, 64, 90, 124, 159, 193, 229, 
296–300 
Reward 87ff., 101–104, 106, 114, 116 
Rhetoric 50, 83, 163, 286 
Right and wrong 26–29, 31ff., 51, 55, 
67, 73, 79, 158, 191f., 195–199, 
206 
Righteousness, Rightness. See also 
under Duty 171, 181f., 184, 186, 
188 
– yì 義 10, 37, 43, 47–55, 59–62, 
70f., 74ff., 84f., 87ff., 107, 117f., 
137, 251f., 268f., 290 
Rites, ritual behaviour, lǐ 礼 6, 10f., 19, 
38f., 41f., 46f., 49–54, 59ff., 109, 
115f., 118, 124, 136–140, 145, 
224, 253, 289, 292, 295, 302 
Roles, role-models 15, 20, 42 f., 48, 
50f., 54, 58 (social), 62, 83f., 89, 
107 (social), 124 (social), 126, 
129ff., 133ff., 137f., 141, 146, 
149, 156ff., 161f., 166, 194, 197, 
199, 203, 208 (models), 214ff., 
223ff., 227f., 231, 241, 244, 282, 
288, 299, 311f. 
Rulership/ruler/ruling class 7f., 10f., 
14f., 18, 38, 41, 44, 50–53, 55, 
68f., 73f., 88, 104–109, 112, 
115ff., 119, 122, 125, 173, 192, 
199f., 260–272, 282, 291, 295, 
298, 320 
Rules 14 f., 20, 94, 115, 117, 125, 130 
(moral), 160, 164f., 194, 196, 201, 
203, 311, 321 
Sacrifice 51, 61, 72–75, 86, 130, 222, 
293, 302 
Sage, the (shèng rén 圣人) 42, 48f., 53, 
55, 64f., 74, 78ff., 82, 85, 87, 115, 
120, 123 f., 137, 245, 248f., 251, 
268–271, 291, 295, 305, 312f., 
316 
Sameness, unison. See also under Unity 
46f., 53 
Scholars 49, 55f., 62f., 73, 83, 101, 
110, 115, 126, 172, 219, 226, 289 
Seasons 251 
Self-interest, selfish 84, 130, 213, 225 
Self, the 96, 108f., 121, 163, 192f., 
221, 299, 320 
Self-conception 84 
Self-cultivation 40, 60, 89, 269, 300f., 
305 
Self-love 208f., 212f. 
Self-respect 197 
Self-sufficiency 210f., 262, 307, 310f., 
314 
Shamans (wū 巫) 290 
Shame 54, 61, 70, 108f., 121, 163, 192f., 
197f., 246, 251f., 254, 272 
Signs, divine 276, 296f., 299 
Simplicity 141, 259f., 263, 265–272, 
274, 276f., 308f. 
Singing, songs 251, 254, 272f. 
Skepticism 274f., 277, 296, 302 
Slaves 18, 146 (natural), 158, 253 
Sleep 251, 269, 272, 285 
Society, social 5, 7, 11, 18f., 26ff., 37, 
39, 44, 50ff., 54, 60 f., 72, 74, 80, 
82, 84, 88f., 93f., 100, 106f., 109, 
115, 123f., 125, 134, 137, 145f., 
149, 193, 196, 203, 208–216, 221, 
223ff., 230, 242, 253–257, 261, 
264, 272, 275, 280, 288f., 299, 
313 
Socratic question 6 
Sorrow 213, 233, 248, 250, 273, 277, 
304 
Soul, parts of soul 13, 156f., 160, 
163f., 168, 170, 173f., 183, 186, 
193f., 203ff., 209f., 225, 230, 
244–249, 252, 263, 315f. 
Sounds 37f., 40, 43, 47, 54, 250, 273 
Spectators 230
Spirit, spiritual 105, 129f., 249, 277, 318
– spirited-part (thumos, thumoeides) 13, 246ff.
– spirit immortals (shén xiān 神仙) 85–87
– spirit man (shén rén 神人). See also under Shamans 86f.,
– Spirits, ghosts 65, 74, 81ff., 88–91, 249, 290f., 300

Spontaneity 243, 311

Statesmen/state 11, 15f., 38f., 42, 44,
54, 66, 68ff., 72, 74f., 79, 81, 84f.,
88, 110f., 173, 195, 197, 199, 268,
271, 282, 289, 295

Strategy 157

Sympathy 127, 157, 244, 252

Tastes 45ff., 51, 62, 82, 120

Temperance 11, 13

Theory 8 (philosophic), 30 (ethical), 49,
56, 60 (of qi 氣), 69, 71, 78ff., 83,
99, 135 (virtue), 139 (of language),
192, 206 (moral); 198, 208–211,
215f., 221 (ethical), 223, 233f.,
225, 247, 249, 252, 255, 260, 264,
275, 281, 287f., 290, 292, 298f.,
319

Therapy 163, 175, 286, 288

Time – past – present – future 18, 21,
66, 79, 82, 125, 127, 129, 135,
141f., 179, 232f., 289, 292, 306

Tradition, traditions 3, 5–7, 9, 11f.,
14ff., 19, 21, 41, 44, 46, 54, 61,
65, 89, 91, 95, 117, 127, 129, 132,
137, 145, 148 f., 155ff., 162ff.,
169, 203 f., 211, 213 f., 219, 221,
224 f., 227, 230, 248, 259 f., 281,
289 f., 292, 295, 299, 303, 310,
319

Tragedy 130, 230

Translation 9, 11, 68, 92f., 95f., 99,
102f., 105f., 108, 111f., 114, 120,
122–125

Trustworthiness, trust 93, 160, 222,
227, 283, 293

Truth 8 (realism), 26ff. (relativism),
32f. (conceptual), 78ff. (theory of,

nature of, definitions of), 82, 133
(of life), 161 (in communication),
164, 293 (divination)
– practical 195, 201f.
– eternal 226, 261f.

Unity 4, 10, 37, 48, 74, 170, 172f.,
181–184, 186, 189, 220, 256, 304,
306 ff., 310 ff., 314 ff., 318, 320,
322

Universality 4f., 13–16 (of ethics),
191ff. (norms), 198–203, 225
(principle), 253–256 (emotions),
285, 294f. (Knowledge), 308
– universal concepts 28f., 103
– cross-cultural universals 19f., 241f.,
254f.

Universe 47, 61, 71, 76, 88, 292, 312,
316

Upbringing, ethical training, education
20, 145

Uselessness/use (yòng 用) 39

Utility, utilitarian 4, 12, 15, 63, 65–69,
71, 76, 79f., 91, 217–220, 223,
225f.

Value 15, 18ff., 37, 46, 49, 58, 60, 62,
109, 125, 140f., 196, 208, 211f.,
214, 216f., 220–225, 229, 236,
256, 259f., 262ff., 268, 270,
274, 276f., 281, 291, 295, 300,
302f.

Victory and defeat 280–283, 296, 303

Virtue, dé 德. See also under the
particular virtues. Also under
obligation 4, 12f., 37, 44, 49f.,
52f., 60, 65, 78, 81f., 85, 92,
95–107, 109ff., 114, 117, 119,
156, 159, 193–197, 199–206,
209–212 (aretê), 218, 220, 222
(ethical), 225 (character, ethical,
227f. (ethical), 232f. (character),
250f., 266, 269 (ideals), 278 (of
prediction), 290, 293 (nature of),
295f., 303, 306 (moral), 313,
315f. (intellectual, moral), 320f.
(intellectual, moral)
– discovery model of 138f.
General index

– excellence 9, 50 (ethical), 60f. (ethical), 128ff., 131, 134, 171, 182, 194ff., 201 (intellectual), 203f., 209, 215, 221, 225ff., 230ff., 296 (moral)
– list of virtues 9ff., 15ff., 123, 128f.
– organic model of 126, 135–144, 149
– unity of 10, 170–173, 179–189
– Virtue ethics 12, 14ff., 126f., 129, 131, 134ff., 144f., 149, 191, 225, 229
Virtuosity 260, 264, 276

– zhi 智. See under Knowledge

Women, female 15, 21, 121f., 146, 199, 213, 245, 269, 314

Words 9, 92–103, 105ff., 109–115, 117, 122, 125, 275 (power of), 318 (thoughts)
– word classes 93

World. See also under Empire, Universe 39, 134, 285, 306, 310ff., 316ff., 321
– ti -an xià 天下 14, 46f., 59, 66f., 71–77, 79–82, 84ff., 88
– Cosmos 262, 273ff., 303, 308
Worry 235, 248
Writing system, Chinese 92ff.

Wú wéi 無為. 105, 117f., 251, 265, 311, 318ff.

Yín-Yáng 陰陽 49, 272, 282, 287, 319
Index of names

Adeimantos 166
Anscombe, Elizabeth 5f., 16, 191
Aquinas, Thomas 142, 144
Aristotle 3–16, 18, 20, 145ff., 156ff.,
162, 164, 191ff., 195–206, 208ff.,
211–235, 246ff., 259–264, 276, 283,
294, 297ff., 304, 306ff.,

Bentham, Jeremy 67f.

Cheng Yi 程頤 46ff.
Chrysippus 244ff., 297ff.
Chunyu Yi 淳于意 286ff., 303
Cimon 162
Clement of Alexandria 159
Confucius (Kongzi 孔子) 3, 6ff., 11, 15,
18ff., 37ff., 41–44, 46–50, 52f., 55,
59, 61ff., 69ff., 78, 107, 109, 137ff.,
143ff., 147, 268ff., 271, 290f., 295,
301f., 314, 318

Dante Alighieri 142, 144
Democritus 167, 297
Diogenes Laertius 244, 292, 298
Diogenes of Oenoanda 167f.

Eliot, T.S. 142
Epicurus 8, 20, 155–162, 164–169,
247, 251, 297, 299
Euripides 158

Ficino, Marsilio 166
Foucault, Michel 156, 159
Gaozi 告子 6, 53, 56, 58f., 251
Ge Hong 葛洪 85f.
Glaukon 166
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 95
Guanzi 管子 (Guan Zhong 管仲) 52,
291, 294

Han Fei 韓非 9, 100–104, 106, 108f.,
111, 114ff., 117f., 121
Han Wudi 漢武帝 86
Heraclitus 292
Hobbes, Thomas 191
Homer 197, 245ff., 292
Horowitz, Vladimir 267
Huizi 惠子 (Hui Shi 惠施) 144, 251,
267, 272
Hume, David 204

Isocrates 156, 159, 162

James, William 133, 241
Ji Kang 積康 45, 48

Kant, Immanuel 8, 14, 191
Korsgaard, Christine 15

La Boétie, Étienne 232
Laozi 老子 8f., 14, 20, 87ff., 104ff.,
111, 114ff., 117f., 259, 271,
308ff., 319
Liezi 列子 141, 304–322

MacIntyre, Alasdair 16
Melville, Herman 143
Index of names

Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) 3, 6, 8f., 11, 13f., 19f., 37, 47–50, 54f., 58–62, 108f., 123f., 133, 137f., 251f., 290f., 302
Mill, John Stuart 191
Mozi (Mo Di 墨翟) 4, 9, 14, 19, 52f., 63–91, 291, 301
Montaigne, Michel de 232

Nicias 170ff., 178–183
Nietzsche, Friedrich 191
Nussbaum, Martha 13, 16, 284

Ovid 140

Paley, William 76
Pericles 162
Philodemus of Gadara 159–162, 164, 166
Plutarch 159, 214, 297, 299
Posidonius 299
Prichard, Herold Arthur 11f.
Protagoras 182, 186ff.
Pythagoras 292

Rubenstein, Artur 267

Seneca 233
Sima Qian 司馬遷 286

Sophocles 133
Sunzi 孫子 281f.

Thrasymachos 165, 167
Tolstoy, Leo 68
Watson, John 241
Wittgenstein, Ludwig 133

Xenophanes 292
Xenophon 162, 216, 293
Xunzi 荀子 6–9, 14, 19, 40, 42, 49, 93f., 115f., 138ff., 145, 249, 251f., 295, 301
Yang Zhu 楊朱 6
You Ruo 有若 46

Zenon 160
Zhang Daoling 張道陵 64
Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 57
Zhu Xi 朱熹 44, 46f.
Zhuangzi 莊子 8f., 87, 133, 139, 144, 249, 251, 259, 267, 272–277, 294, 308
Zi Gong 子貢 46
Zi Si 子思 47ff., 61
Index locorum – Chinese authors

Chen Shou
_Sangou zhi_ 9.297 p45

Confucius

Fan Ye
_Hou Hanshu_ 28A p57

Guan Zhong

Guodian Bamboo Texts (Guodian Chu mu zhujian)
_Liu de_ p. 187 p49
_Lu Mugong wen Zi Si_ p. 141 p50, p61
_Wuxing, see separate entry
_Yucong yi_ p. 193 p60
_Yucong er_ p. 204 p55
_Zun de yi_ p. 174 p49
_Guoyu_ 16 p47

Han Fei

Huan Kuan
_Yantielun_ 29.204 p295fn50

Laozi

Li (Li ji zhengyi) 1.8 p116fn65, 26.20a p61, 26.21b p52fn41, 37.1b p40, 37.2b p61, 37.16a p41fn14, 38.7a-9a p44fn17, 43 p125, 61.9a p39

Liezi
Liu An  
*Huainanzi* ch. 1, Yuan dao xun p250, ch. 6, Lan ming xun p295fn50, ch. 8, Ben jing xun p295fn50, ch. 21, Yao lue p53

Liu Xiang  
*Lienizhuan* (Sibu beiyao ed.) 6.16 p286fn19

Lü Buwei  
*Lüshi Chunqiu* 1/2.3 p250, 2/3.1 p250, 3/2.1 p250, 14/2.3 p44f., 19/3.4 p68fn16, p250, 19/6.2 p250, 21/2.2 p291fn34

Mencius  

Mozi  

Shijing  
Mao#220 p39, Mao#302 p42, Mao#304 p43

Sima Rangju  
*Simafa* 3.58 p296

Sima Qian  

Sunzi  
*Sunzi bingfa* 1.1 p282, 1.8 p283, 1.19-20 p282, 11.195 p295

Taiyong liutao 1:1a p296, 3:9b p296, 3:11a p296

Wuxing  

Xunzi  
*Zhu Xi*  
Sishu jizhu, Zhongyong Zhangju ch.1, p. 2b p48fn27


Zhu Xi  
*Sishu jizhu, Zhongyong Zhangju* ch.1, p. 2b p48fn27

Zhuangzi  
*Zhuangzi* ch. 1 p57fn65, ch. 2 p57, p14, p249
p274, ch. 6 p272, ch. 18 p251, p272, ch. 19 p57fn65, ch. 20 p265, ch. 22 p56, ch. 23 p56fn60, p273, p294, ch. 31 p268

Index locorum – Greek and Roman authors

Andronicus
*On Passions* I (Long/Sedley [LS] 65 B) p245

Antipater of Tarsos
Stoicorum veterum fragmenta (SVF) III, l. 11 ff. p214fn8

Aristotle
*Categories (Cat.)* 10b7 p193fn8
*De anima (De an.)* 433a26–7 193fn8, 434a5–10 p205fn68
*Parts of Animals (PA)* 645a7–11 p263
Nicomachean Ethics (EN) (Continued)
1129b19–25 p195fn23,
1129b25–1130a13 p196fn28,
1129b27 p196fn27, 1129b27ff p10,
1129b29–31 p196fn24, 1130a4
p196fn27, 1130b22–24 p195fn23,
V 7 p 16, V 10 p 15, VI p 201,
1139a22–31 p202fn52, 1139a24–5
p193fn8, 1139a25 p193fn8,
1139a36 p205fn67, 1139b5
p221fn27, 1140a25–28 p201fn50,
1140a28 p194fn15, 1140b5–6
p201fn48, 1140b9 p201fn50,
1140b11–21 p205fn66, 1140b15–19
p196fn25, 1140b21 p201fn50,
1141a9–b8 p225fn36, 1141b13
p201fn50, 1141b14–16 p202fn53,
1142a11–16 p202fn55, 1143a32
p196fn27, 1143a35–b5, p202fn54,
1143b14 p202fn55, VI 12 p 203–205,
1144a7–8 p204fn64, 1144a8–9
p203fn60, 1144a11–23 p218fn22,
1144a17 p194fn12, 1144a20–22
p203fn60, 1144a23–b1 p203fn59,
1140a30–36 p205fn65, 1144a31–6
p196fn25, VI 13 p206fn69, 1144b14
p206fn69, 1144b19–20 p195fn20,
1144b25–30 p218fn22, 1144b27–8
p201fn46, 1144b30–36 p205fn65,
1144b31–2 p203fn58, 1145a2–6
p203fn60, 1145a6 p204fn64,
p225fn36, 1145a6–11 p226fn39,
1145b2–7 p9, 1145b12–3, 1146a10–6,
1148a23, 1150a28 p193fn8,
1150b28 p205fn68, 1151a14–19
p205, 1151a15–19 p203fn60,
VIII 11–14 p261, 1153a14 f p218fn22,
1154b22–1154b32 p261, VIII–IX
p216, 1153a4–9 p228, 1153a6–9
p223fn32, 1153a21–22 p3, VIII 2–3
p219fn24, 1155b17 ff. 217fn19,
1155b27–34 p218, 1155b31 p221,
1155b34 – 1156a5 p218, 1156a3–5
p219fn24, p220fn24, 1156a6–9
p219fn24, 1156a9–24 p219fn24,
1156a10–19 p220fn25, p221,
1156a11 p221, 1156a17 f p221,
1156b7–11 p219fn24, 1156b7–12
p221, 1156b10 f p220fn25,
1156b24–32 p222fn30, p232fn48,
1157a1 p218, p219fn24, 1157a6–14
p214fn11, 1157a14–16 p219fn24,
1157a16–33 p218, 1157a24
p221, 1157a31 f. p218, p219fn24,
1157b3 p221, 1157b5 p218,
p219fn24, 1157b5–24 p223fn33,
1157b11–3, 17–9: p222fn28,
1157b28–31 p222fn29, 1157b32
p221, 1158a14 f. p222fn30, VIII 7
p217fn20, 1158b29–33 p218,
1158b33–36 p236, 1159b1–2
p218fn21, 1159b15–9 p214fn11,
1160b33–1161a3 p213fn7,
1162a16–33 p213fn7, 1162a18
p196fn26, 1162a25–27 p213fn7,
1162a34–b4 p217fn20, p218,
1162b6–8 p223fn32, 1164a1–13
p219fn24, 1164a2–11 p214fn11,
1164a10–13 p220fn25, 1165b1–4
p219fn24, 1165b10 p221, IX 4
p213, 1166a2–10 p212, 1166a3f.
p222fn28, 1166a7–8 p234fn52,
1166a11–3 p199fn44, 1166a13–9
p197fn34, 1166a29–32 p233fn51,
1166b28 p193fn8 1166b30–1167a12
p222fn28, 1167a15–17 p220,
1167a16 f. p220fn25, IX 7 p219fn24,
1167b28 ff. p223fn32, 1169a13
p193fn8, 1169a16–20 p198fn35,
1169a18–b2 p223fn32, 1169b10–13
p228, 1169b10–22 p223fn32,
1169b16–22 p226fn38, p227,
1169b18–9 p196fn26, 1170a4–8
p226fn38, 1170b10–14 p223fn34,
1170b29–71a20 p232fn48, 1171a1f.
p222fn30, 1171a6–8 p234fn52,
1171a22–7 p228, 1171a27–33
p234fn52, 1171b6–12 p234fn52,
1171b12–6 p228, 1171b12–25
p223fn32, IX 12 p226, p229,
1171b29–1172a8 p226fn38,
1171b29–1172a14 p223fn33,


Chrysippus

On Law (Long/Sedley [LS] 67 R; Stoicorum veterum fragmenta [SVF] 3.314) p192fn4

Cicero

De divinatione (Div.) I 5 p292fn41, 1 10, II 101 p299fn63

De fato (Fat.) 20 p298fn62

Democritus


Demosthenes

3. Olynth. 32 p158fn9

Diogenes Laertius

Vit. 7, 116 p244, 7, 149 p298fn62, 8, 21, 32 p292, 10, 13 p155fn3

Diogenes of Oinoanda

fr. 3 I 4ff (Smith) p168
Euripides
Bacchae (Bacc.) 668–671 p158fn11
Hippolytos (Hipp.) 421–23 p158fn10,
421ff. p158fn11
Ion 670–675 p158fn10

Eusebius
Praep. ev. 6.8.1, 2, 6 p298fn62

Heraclitus
Diels/Kranz (DK) 12 fr. B92, 93 p292

Herodotus
1.46–55 p297fn56, 2.174, 8.133–36
p297fn56, 57

Hippocrates
On Ancient Medicine, Littré I 570–637
p284fn14
Prognostics 1, Littré II 110–111
p284fn12, 1, Littré II 112–113
284n13
Epidemics 3, Littré III 56–57 p283fn11
Articulations 9.3–4, Littré IV 100
p283fn9
Lex, Littré IV 630–631 p283fn10
On the Art, Littré VI 2–26 p284fn14
On Regimen 4.87, Littré VI 640–642
p285fn18

Homer
Iliad (Il.) 1.193, 7.189 p246
Odyssey (Od.) 20.17f. p245

Philodemus
De lib. dic. col. IV–VII (Olivieri)
p161fn17, fr. 60 (Olivieri) p161fn18,
fr. 60, 1–7 p161, fr. 88 (Olivieri);
PHerc. 1082 Col. II 1–3 p160fn15

Plato
Apology (Apol.) 20e, 22c p293, 28a
p170, 28d–e p185, 31d p293,
37e–38a p170, 38a5f. p170, 40a–b
p293, 40cff p165fn29, 41b–c p170

Charides (Charm.) 174c1–2 p171
Crito (Crit.) 48b4–10 p170
Euthyphro (Euthyphr.) 10a p73fn36

Gorgias (Gorg.) 467c–e, 72 c–d
p170, 482a p164fn26, 482e p163,
486e–487a p163fn25, 499e, 500c
p170, 521d p163fn22

Laches (Lach.) 180a–d p172, 184e
p173, 186a5–6 p170, p173,
187e–188a p171, 187e6–188a3
p170, 189a p162fn21, 190b p173,
190b–d p181, 190b8–c, 4–6 p173,
190c8–10, d7–8 p181, 190e5–6
p173, 191d, d6–7 p173, 191d–e
p173, p179, 192b5–8 p173, 192b9
p173f., 192b9–d12 p175fn4, 192c–d
p173, 192c3–6 p174f., 192c–5
p174, 192c8 p173, 192c8–10 p174f.,
192d1–3 p174, 192d4–6, 7–9 p174f.,
192d10–11 p173, p175, 192d10–12
p174f., 192e–193d p175, 193e1–4,
193e8–194a5, 194a2–4 p178,
194c–196a p179, 194d4–e1 p178,
194d4–e2 p185, 194e–199e p11,
194e11–195a1 p171, p179f., 195b–c,
196c–196e p179, 196d1–2, 198a1–6
p180, 198a1–b2 p181f., 198a4–5
p182, 198a4–b1 p180, 198a7–9
p182, 198b–199e p171, 1980,
198b6–7 p180, 198b6–9, c2–4, 6–7
p179f., 198d1–199a9 p180, p184,
198d2–5 p179, 199a6–8 p179f.,
199a10–b2 p180, 199b6–8 p184,
199b9–c1 p179, 199b9–c2, c4–d3
p180, 199c5–d1 p179, 199d4–e1
p172fn2, p179, 181fn., 184fn.,
199d4–e2 p171f., p180, 183–186,
199d5–6, d7–e1 p171, 184, 199d7–e2
p185, 199d9–e1 p184, 199e3–4, 3–5,
3–11, 6–9 p180, 200d–201c p185
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laws (Leg.)</td>
<td>738b–d p293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lysis (Lys.)</td>
<td>210e p164fn27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meno (Men.)</td>
<td>83d p157fn7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaedrus (Phaed.)</td>
<td>244a–e, b p293, 244c–e p294, 252e–53a p216fn13, 253c p248, 253d–55e p215, 254c, e p248, 275d–76a, 76e–77a, 77e–78b p216fn13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophist (Soph.)</td>
<td>251a7–b4 p182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symposium (Symp.)</td>
<td>178d p197fn30, 203a p170, 209e p166fn37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theaetetus (Tht.)</td>
<td>172c–77c p216fn14, 184a p165fn31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timaeus (Tim.)</td>
<td>71b–e p294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plutarch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amatorius (Amat.)</td>
<td>767c ff., 69a–70a p214fn8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coniugalia praecpepta (Coniug. praecpt.)</td>
<td>142e ff. p214fn8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Alexandri fortuna aut virtute (De Alex.)</td>
<td>329a–b (Long/Sedley [LS] 67 A1; Stoicorum veterum fragmenta [SVF] 1.262, part) p244fn4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Septem sapientium convivium (Conv. sept. sap.)</td>
<td>3.2 p292fn40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quaestiones convivales (Quaest. conv.)</td>
<td>735a–b p292fn41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seneca</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ep. mor.</td>
<td>9.5 p233fn50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stobaeus</td>
<td>2.88, 88-90, 96 (Long/Sedley [LS] 65A; Stoicorum veterum fragmenta [SVF] 3.378, 389) p245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thucydides</td>
<td>7, 63, 3 p163fn22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xenophanes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diels/Kranz (DK)</td>
<td>11 fr. B11, 12, 14–16 p292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xenophon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anabasis (Anab.)</td>
<td>11 p293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorabilia (Mem.)</td>
<td>II 4–6 p216fn16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>