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Converging Accounts of Virtue: Aristotle and Mencius on the Value of External Goods

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If there is a universal standard of virtue, we should expect it to be recognizable, in principle, across widely diverging cultures. The best evidence of this recognizability, in turn, would be examples where it is actually recognized, independently, in widely different cultural contexts. In other words, if there is a standard of virtue that we can appeal to independent of culture, we should expect to see at least some cases of people in different cultures appealing to it. Identifying such cases can be quite challenging. While there is much that is common to human beings everywhere, these common traits manifest themselves in a dazzling variety of ways. Recognizing the commonality behind this variety can require considerable sensitivity and insight into both the virtues themselves and the diverse cultures in question. I argue, however, that early Confucian thought on the virtues takes a strikingly similar form to that of Aristotle, and to a remarkable level of detail. It is expressed in a thoroughly distinctive manner, reflecting the great cultural and linguistic differences between ancient Greece and ancient China, but when we understand them properly, we can see that they agree on a great deal.

In this paper I focus on one feature of these converging accounts: the value of virtue in relation to external goods. Like Aristotle, the early Confucians are all eudaimonists—I particularly have in mind Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi,. They all

maintain that virtue is the best path to happiness, and like Aristotle they have certain challenges to overcome in sustaining this claim.[1] One of these is the question of how far external goods such as wealth, good looks, and social status contribute to happiness. External goods are sometimes called *goods of fortune* because they can be gained or lost by luck, regardless of one's virtue. They may even be gained through vicious actions. Hence if they are important for happiness, they may seem to undermine the core claim of eudaimonism.

Socrates at times seems to respond to this concern by simply maintaining that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness, while external goods are more or less irrelevant. The Stoics offer a slightly more subtle account, but similarly maintain that happiness is not increased or decreased at all by having more or less of the goods of fortune. Rather, the goods of fortune are merely things that one uses and navigates among in acting virtuously. They are like the leather and tools a cobbler uses to make shoes, but happiness lies in good action, not in the things one acts upon.

Aristotle and the early Confucians find the stark position of Socrates and the Stoics quite implausible. It is the kind of position that may seem advantageous to someone bent on defending the eudaimonist thesis, but is not true to reality. Humans are not self-sufficient gods, but vulnerable, rational animals. Hence our theories must acknowledge the fact that external goods can increase or diminish happiness. At the

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[1] For more on this point, see Huff, "Eudaimonism in the *Mencius*: Fulfilling the Heart," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 14:3 (September 2015), 403-431.

same time, as strict eudaimonists these philosophers must maintain that no amount of external goods can contribute enough to happiness to make vice a better choice than virtue.

Aristotle's key difference from Socrates on this point is represented by his contention that while virtue is essential to happiness, it is not virtue itself that constitutes happiness, but virtuous *activity*. Thus virtue is absolutely essential to happiness, but one's ability to manifest one's virtue in action also depends on one's resources, equipment, friends, and so on (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.8-10). While Aristotle embraces the thought that external goods are like the material one works on in action, he also observes that what actions we are able to take depends in part on what material we have to work with—our resources and circumstances.

A good cobbler will make the best shoes he can with the leather available, but to do his best work he must have quality tools and materials (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.10 1101a4-5). A general who dies valiantly fighting in defense of his city with an outnumbered army may be perfectly courageous, but the general who combines true courage with an army strong enough to *succeed* in defending the city will be much happier. "For actions many things are needed, and the greater and nobler the actions, the greater the number of things needed" (X.8 1178b1-3, Crisp trans.). In this way external goods can have a very large impact on happiness, for better or worse. However, they can never make a person happy without virtue, because the substance of

happiness is the virtuous action one uses them to perform. Aristotle's conception of happiness as virtuous activity thus accounts for the important role of external goods in happiness without allowing that the pursuit of external goods could ever rationally justify leaving virtue behind.

Fascinatingly, an essentially equivalent solution appears in early Confucianism, particularly in the work of Mencius. Mencius faces the same basic challenge that the Greek eudaimonists faced. On the one hand, he is strictly committed to virtue as the key to human flourishing, so much so that he rebukes a king during his first audience, for suggesting that the purpose of Mencius' visit might be "profiting [the king's] state" (*Mencius* 1A1, Lau trans.). If the desire for profit comes to dominate, Mencius says, then "the state will be imperiled." On the other hand, one of the more noticeable themes of his conversations with kings is a concern for securing the material prosperity of the people. He goes so far as to say, "When those who are seventy wear silk and eat meat and the masses are neither cold nor hungry, it is impossible for their prince not to be a true King" (1A3).

A closer look reveals, however, that as for Aristotle, for Mencius the interest in external goods is governed by the critical importance of ethical action. Although he is eager to arrange that "the people have more grain, more fish and turtles than they can eat, and more timber than they can use," the value he puts on this goal can only be properly appreciated through its contribution to ethical concerns. When the people

enjoy this material abundance, he says, then "in the support of their parents when alive and in the mourning of them when dead, they will be able to have no regrets over anything left undone." It is this ethical result of people being able to fulfill their obligations to one another that he identifies as "the first step along the kingly way" (1A3). Just as important as the availability of silk and meat, mentioned above, is the concern that "those whose heads have turned hoary [or grey-haired] will not be carrying loads on the roads" (1A3). Indeed, in this light even the comment above about silk and meat can be read as describing a fundamentally ethical achievement: that the strong look out for the needs of the weak. For the more capable middle-aged to provide the elderly the means to live in comfort and dignity, even as their bodies decline, is a deeply ethical achievement, as is the ruler's commitment to provide for the common people. One passage makes the implicit meaning of the above explicit:

> When determining what means of support the people should have, a clear-sighted ruler ensures that these are sufficient, on the one hand, for the care of parents, and, on the other, for the support of wife and children, so that the people always have sufficient food in good years and escape starvation in bad; only then does he drive them toward goodness. (1A7)

Thus material goods are to be evaluated according to what is needed for ethical action.

The role of external goods in happiness for Aristotle is captured in his conception of happiness as *virtuous activity*. A similar concept appears in early Confucian thought:

the concept of *putting the Way into effect* (*xing dao* 行道). Aristotle remarks that we have a special need for friends when we are prospering, "For what use is such prosperity if there is no opportunity for beneficence?" (*NE* VIII.1 1155a7). Similarly, Mencius says that the value of holding a position of political influence is in the ability to improve conditions for one's fellow citizens: it is "shameful to take one's place at the court of a prince without putting the Way into effect (*dào bù xíng* 道不行)" (*Mencius* 5B5). The Way in Confucian thought is a pattern for human flourishing, implicit in the cosmic order. Naturally, the major Confucian virtues of benevolence, justice, ritual propriety, and wisdom are central to the Way, and for present purposes we may treat virtue and the Way as nearly equivalent. One important distinction, however, is that the virtues highlight adherence to the Way for an individual, whereas the Way also sets a standard for achieving the flourishing of society as a whole, and indeed ultimately for achieving world peace.

With this in mind, perhaps the most complete picture of the importance of external goods in Mencius' account appears in *Mencius* 7A21:

> An extensive territory and a huge population are things a gentleman desires (*yù* 欲), but what he delights in lies elsewhere. To stand at the centre of the Empire and bring peace (*dìng* 定) to the people within the Four Seas is what a gentleman delights in (*lè* 樂), but that which he follows as his nature lies elsewhere. That which a gentleman follows as his nature (*xìng* 性) is not added to when he holds sway over the Empire, nor is it detracted from when he is reduced to straitened circumstances. This is because he knows his allotted station. That which a gentleman follows as his nature,

> that is to say, benevolence, rightness, the rites and wisdom, is rooted in his heart, and manifests itself in his face, giving it a sleek appearance. It also shows in his back and extends to his limbs, rendering their message intelligible without words.

Mencius here offers quite deliberately three different ways of expressing the kind of interest a gentleman feels for three quite different types of goods: goods he desires, goods he delights in, and that which he follows as his nature. Of course, he does not offer a theoretically explicit statement just here of the principles behind these distinctions; what he identifies as the targets of these kinds of concern are three specific goods. However, if we examine them closely in comparison with one another and in light of other principles from the *Mencius*, we see that this passage corroborates and gives further definition to the pattern we have been exploring.

Land and population are two of the three items Mencius names in 7B28 as "treasures" for the feudal lords, criticizing those who treasure pearls and jade instead. Thus he puts them forward as authentic goods, but the fact that they are treasured by the feudal lords, and not distinctively by the "gentleman," or the morally cultivated person, indicates that they are not a mark of high refinement. *Analects* 4.5 uses the same word, 'desire (*yù* 欲),' to refer to an essentially universal interest in wealth and honor, but clarifies that these are not to be sought to the detriment of one's integrity. *Analects* 4.11 similarly contrasts those petty people who cherish land with the gentleman, who cherishes virtue (*dé* 德). I suggest, then, that for Mencius land, population, wealth, and honor are authentic goods, but of the lowest category, distinguished by the fact that they have no specifically moral content.

The word 'delight' (*lè* 樂) suggests the next category of goods is much more precious, in a way perhaps the most precious. The use of this word in other passages describing how the cultivated person feels about the Way, Heaven, and the virtues reinforce the sense that Mencius is here describing some of his highest sentiments. This word is also used in 7A20 to identify what a gentleman delights in, and to emphasize that "being ruler over the Empire is not amongst them." If there were a higher category of value, to say that ruling the Empire is not a delight would not be saying much.

What Mencius says here may seem puzzling, however, because right next to this claim in 7.20, we read that what a gentleman delights in is "To stand at the centre of the Empire and bring peace to the people within the Four Seas." At first glance this sounds rather like ruling. To bring peace to the Empire, though, it would suffice to be in a position to influence the ruler(s), such as the legendary Yi Yin did with Tang. The point, then, is to be an effective influence for good, putting the Way into effect, not the power or status associated with ruling. Jie and Zhou also ruled over the Empire, enjoying power and status, but they were villains to be despised. What a gentleman delights in is not merely *having* a large territory and population, but *accomplishing good* in that context, which is incomparably greater.

It is important to note, however, that in order to bring peace to the Empire, one must have influence over an "extensive territory and a huge population"—indeed the most extensive territory and the greatest population that there is. It certainly wouldn't hurt to be the ruler, either: as much as King Wen was limited by his initial position as ruler of a small state, Confucius and Mencius are much more limited by not being rulers

of anything. Thus the things that a gentleman desires are actually *prerequisites* to that which he delights in. Without the lesser goods, the greater cannot be achieved.

The difference between Yu and Jie, between Tang and the tyrant Zhou, of course, is virtue, which appears as the third category of goods in this passage. Virtue is an even more vital prerequisite for establishing peace than land and people. As Mencius says, "When the Empire is drowning, one helps it with the Way . . . Would you have me help the Empire with my hand?" (4A17). The Empire needs virtuous guidance like a drowning man needs an outstretched hand. The gentleman therefore clings to virtue as though to life, or the source of life—he "follows" it "as his nature." For purposes of this passage, it is not so much that the gentleman desires or enjoys virtue, as that he follows it implicitly, whatever storms may swirl about him. He does not set it aside to pursue wealth or position; rather he regards it as essential to every worthwhile pursuit. For the gentleman, his commitment to virtue is as essential as breath, and even more so.

It is also worth noting that Mencius mentions in this passage something reminiscent of the attitude of Socrates and the Stoics: "That which a gentleman follows as his nature is not added to when he holds sway over the Empire, nor is it detracted from when he is reduced to straitened circumstances." Virtue has great value in itself, and the gentleman feels its importance regardless of circumstances. However, the passage clearly situates this value in the context of other matters that the gentleman is deeply concerned with. His commitment to the unchanging value of virtue is one aspect of a more complex posture. In particular, he also wants to put this virtue into action. The Stoics suggest that our concern with other things is something we should overcome, that will dissipate as we approach a high state of cultivation. By contrast, I

argue that our concern with things other than our own virtue, especially the well-being of others, and the institutions and arrangements that secure that well-being, actually expands dramatically as we reach the high stages of moral cultivation.

For both Aristotle and the early Confucians, then, the value of external goods comes from the fact that they enable us to perform worthwhile actions, especially actions that express the virtues, "For how else will [the virtuous person] . . . make manifest what he [or she] is?" (*NE* X.8 1178a34). This close convergence between philosophers working independently, on opposite sides of the world, in dramatically different cultures, suggests that they are responding to facts about the human condition, human flourishing, and in particular about human virtue, that transcend their cultural differences.