

Virtues in Aristotelian and Confucian Ethics

Wong Wai-ying

One central theme of debates in the field of ethics in the Western world over the past two decades has been related to two ethical systems, namely, principled ethics and virtue ethics. The areas of discussions range from the interpretation of original texts of philosophers, and the historical review of the development and shift of ethical systems from one sort to another, to the identification of the nature of particular ethical thought and the philosophical evaluation of the two systems in question. In recent years, these discussions have extended to the Chinese philosophy and the question "Whether Confucianism is, in one way or another, a kind of virtue ethics?" has aroused great interest in the field. Besides, comparisons between Western and Chinese ethical systems have been made under the presupposition of the division of the two systems. In this paper, I am less ambitious than attempting to make a comprehensive comparison between Aristotelian ethics and Confucian ethics; rather, I am going to investigate several important problems related to the notion of virtue in these two ethical systems, hoping that this will deepen the understanding of both of them and hence reveal the possibility of any comparisons.

The Exposition of Virtue in Confucianism and Aristotelian Ethics

The central question in Aristotle's ethics concerns what the best life for human beings is. The task of ethics, as Aristotle conceives it, is to seek a systematic answer to this question.¹ According to Aristotle, the supreme good for man is nothing other than "activity in accordance with virtue," therefore virtue becomes the main concern of his ethics. As Broadie points out, "Aristotle's *Ethics* is concerned with virtue and the virtues and would not be what we know as Aristotle's *Ethics* otherwise."² However, the contribution that Aristotle has made is not simply his emphasis on virtues to a greater degree than his predecessors such as Homer, who only considers bravery and honor as the two important components of the ideal life of a hero. What makes Aristotle's contribution distinctive is that he gives an account of the traditional virtues in relation to the supreme good and also to human beings as rational beings. In pursuing this task, Aristotle modifies these virtues while providing definitions and detailed expositions.³

In ancient Chinese thoughts, *jen*, *li*, fortitude, trustworthiness, *chih* (wisdom) and the like are commended by nobility as early as Ch'un Ch'iu period (769-476 B.C.). They are known as "*te*," which signifies admirable traits as well as inner character. "*Te*," with these two aspects of meaning, is generally translated as "virtues." While being aware of the possible distinctions between "*te*" and virtues, I shall hereafter use "virtue" to denote both *te* and the Aristotelian *arete*.⁴ In Ch'un Ch'iu period, virtues play an important role in the evaluation of people and their behavior. In one of the passages of *Kuo Yu*, as many as sixteen different virtues are listed and discussed,⁵ which are either individual virtues or social virtues. While some of these virtues are supererogative, the breach of some others is nevertheless considered immoral. However, they all represent the norms of that period. The innovative move made by Confucius is to elevate the status of *jen* over that of *li*, which is the most important virtue in Ch'un Ch'iu period. Although *jen* has been regarded as one of the important virtues before Confucius, as seen in *The Analects*, it is elevated to the synthesis of all individual virtues. Above all, the greatest contribution made by Confucius is attributing a transcendental meaning (i.e. the moral mind) to *jen*. By so doing he offers a ground for an autonomous moral system.⁶ In this sense, *jen* does not merely represent a social norm governing a certain class at a certain time, but also signifies the ability universally possessed by human beings, which makes (autonomous) morality possible. Besides, though Confucius upholds Chou *li* as a whole, he, like Aristotle, has modified some of the ways of practicing the existing *li*. He, and particularly his follower Mencius, also give new interpretations and critical comments to the popular virtues and rites of their time.⁷ The justification for these modifications and interpretations is based on *jen*, the meaning of which will be elaborated later.

As mentioned above, unlike their predecessors, Aristotle and Confucius do not take the existing virtues for

granted. They both delineate those virtues in relation to their central problems of ethics.⁸ Granted this similarity, however, they discuss virtues in quite different ways. In *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)* and *Eudemian Ethics (EE)*, Aristotle investigates virtues by ways of explanation, definition, differentiation, and classification. Therefore it can be regarded as an analysis of different virtues. Confucius, on the other hand, has little interest in the virtues themselves; he always discusses virtues in association with what a gentleman should perform.⁹ Being a gentleman is the primary aim for Confucian learners who are concerned with good character, good performance and inner transformation.¹⁰ Obviously Confucius and his followers care about a “how” question — how to achieve the ideal of being a gentleman or a sage — more than a “what” question. The answer to the latter is only a partial condition for the solution of the former. This relationship between truth and morality leads us to another discussion in the following sections.

Knowledge and Morality

Aristotle divides the soul of human beings into two parts: rational and non-rational. The rational soul has two types of function, both unique to human beings. One of these is rational in a strict sense (i.e. ratiocinative), whereas the other is “listening to reason” (i.e. the reason-responsive part). Corresponding to these two aspects of the rational soul, virtues are also divided into two types: intellectual virtues, and virtues of character or moral virtues. They are, by definition, qualities whereby each of these aspects of the rational soul should function. With regard to moral virtues, courage, temperance, justice and the like are their instances. However, it should be noted that the prescription in the soul is not only from intellectual virtues, but also from the virtues of character. Since the virtues of character are virtues of the desiderative (*orektikon*)¹¹ part of the soul, the rational prescriber is not entirely rational in the strict sense but also consists in the desiderative part. As Broadie perceptively points out, the distinction between the two aspects of the rational soul and that between the two types of virtues do not coincide. “Consequently, any strictly distinct and contrasting virtues of mind or intellect would have to do with the latter’s ratiocinative and cognitive aspects only. They would not belong to the prescriptive part as a whole, so to speak, and virtues of character do not belong only to the responsive part.”¹²

According to Aristotle, human beings as rational beings are to make rational choice (*prohairesis*) if any choice is to be made. In making rational choice, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) plays an important role. Practical wisdom is a kind of virtue, as defined by Aristotle, by which one deliberates well in a practical way (1140 24ff.) An agent can reach a rational decision through deliberation when exercising his/her practical reason. In deliberation, the means to an end are revealed. Hence it seems that for Aristotle, to deliberate is to deliberate only about the means (*ta pros ta tele*) and not about the end. But in asking how to pursue an object O, Broadie argues, is asking how to pursue O so that pursuing it is the best in the situation. Carrying further the previous argument, Broadie says, “The deliberative discovery that there is such a How, or that there is not, is the same as discovering that O is or is not to *be* pursued in this situation. In this way, deliberation yields an answer to the question ‘Should I pursue O?’”¹³ This means that the deliberation about the means contains that about the end. Moreover, Aristotle holds that though the abilities that one uses for making the end right and making the means right can be referred to different virtues (namely, moral excellence and intelligence respectively), they are qualities comprising practical wisdom. However, no matter whether the end or the means is deliberated, the situation in general and one’s position in particular have to be grasped. This introduces the question as to what weight of knowledge, if any, Aristotle puts on deliberation.

In NE (1105b 1f.), Aristotle says that knowledge (*episteme*) counts for everything in relation to a craft but has little or no count in the case of virtues. In EE VIII, Aristotle rejects the Socratic view that virtues identify with forms of knowledge (1246a). He then proceeds to argue against the Socratic identification of *phronesis* (wisdom) with knowledge, where *phronesis* refers to the practical intelligence that guides a person’s conduct (1246b).¹⁴ According to Socrates, knowledge is supreme and vice is a result of the lack of knowledge. On the contrary, Aristotle holds that wisdom is supreme, and it is subordinate to virtues of character only. The knowledge one needs for deliberation has to be practical, which is about particulars

and contingent details of a specific circumstance. Nevertheless, knowledge of this kind is not acquired by a faculty of cognition; rather, it is from wisdom itself. Nor can theoretical knowledge provide the necessary knowledge for the deliberation. According to the Aristotelian doctrine, theoretical knowledge is about the eternal and necessary, and so it is not in our power to affect anything thus known.¹⁵ On the other hand, with wisdom one can have the knowledge of a particular position and hence at the same time know what to do about it. If one does not know what to do, this only means that the agent does not yet know the facts of his/her position.

In Confucian doctrine, it is held that knowledge of the external world is of little importance for acting and behaving morally. For Confucius, the purpose of extending the scope of knowledge is to select good examples to follow, hence the major, if not the whole, meaning of knowledge lies in assisting one to become a good person.

The Master said, "... I use my ears widely and follow what is good in what I have heard; I use my eyes widely and retain what I have seen in my mind. This constitutes a lower level of knowledge."¹⁶

As illustrated in this passage, for Confucius, pure knowledge with no moral implications has only a secondary status. What Confucius teaches his students is not theoretical knowledge but how to behave properly and to become a gentleman and eventually a sage.¹⁷ Besides, the qualities needed for being a gentleman have almost nothing to do with knowledge.¹⁸ By the same token, the subject matter of learning is the practical knowledge of how to perform appropriately in every respect of life.¹⁹ In *Mencius*, we are told that the goal of education provided by village schools is to teach people the duties proper to sons and younger brothers.²⁰ Even for Hsün Tzu, a Confucian who particularly emphasizes the importance of learning, the essential purpose of learning does not lie in the acquisition of knowledge of the external world. Its ultimate aim is to become a sage.²¹ Even though he holds that a learner should study *The Book of Rites, The Book of Music, The Book of Odes, The Book of History, and Spring and Autumn Annals*, he claims that if one becomes a widely learned person but does not exalt *li*, then one will only become an imperfect Confucian. Therefore he says, "Thus, one who exalts ritual principles, though he may never gain a clear understanding of them, will be a model scholar, whereas one who does not exalt them, though he undertakes investigations and makes discriminations, will remain only an undisciplined Confucian."²²

Chih (wisdom) has been a virtue since Ch'un Ch'iu period and is commended by Confucius as a contrasting as well as supplementary virtue to *jen*. Though *chih* means intelligence, the focus of its employment is on the practical rather than theoretical aspect of human life. For Mencius, *chih* represents one of the four virtues rooted in human nature and manifests itself in the heart-mind (*hsin*) of right and wrong. Remarkably the right and wrong lie in the realm of morality. Therefore the virtue of wisdom that Mencius upholds is the ability in human nature which enables human beings to discriminate the morally right from the morally wrong, not only in the observance of general principles but also in making judgments in particular situations. The most noteworthy idea is that the criteria of right and wrong do not depend on the facts of the external world; neither are they defined by or reduced to those facts. Therefore the virtue of wisdom does not refer to the excellence of the faculty of cognition. To this last claim we shall come back later.

It is worth mentioning that there is a commonly accepted division of two sorts of knowledge among the neo-Confucians, namely, experiential knowledge and knowledge of virtue. Only the latter is deemed relevant to the moral aim. Moreover, even the knowledge of virtue is not a kind of factual knowledge of moral truth, but is merely practical knowledge consisting of hints of cultivating the moral mind, and instructions of acting properly, etc. Since Ch'eng I re-introduces the two notions of Ko Wu and Chih Chih, all their interpretations echo the traditional view of the significance of knowledge in morality: the significance of knowledge of any kind depends on its contribution to morality.²³

The Moral Truth

The answer to the question “Whether an assertion that something is morally good or evil is a moral truth? If so, what kind of truth it is?” is vital to the determination of what mode an ethical system belongs to. It is asserted by some ethicists that there are natural properties in the moral values (i.e. moral values can be defined in terms of natural properties), or, that there are objective reasons for a moral judgment (moral judgments can be, and can only be, justified by facts). No matter in which way they are presented, all of these assertions reflect a belief that making value judgments is equivalent to describing a fact, the truth value of which can be identified. To decide whether both of the Aristotelian and Confucian ethics are of the same mode or not will be fruitful for the understanding of their characteristics, and also helpful for the comparison between them.

In answering what is the supreme good for human beings, Aristotle is thought to employ his famous function argument. For Aristotle, the good life for a human being (the life of *eudaimonia*) consists in an optimal combination of component goods that makes him/her perform his/her function (*ergon*) well. He also holds that *eudaimonia* consists in activities in accordance with virtue (1098a 16-18). It follows that a virtuous act is the act which can bring about component goods to make up the good life. Therefore, whether an action is virtuous depends on the component goods it brings about. If these component goods are recognizable, then this leads to a view that there is an objectively right or wrong answer to the question as to whether a specific action can be counted as a virtuous one. It seems evident that in Aristotle’s ethics, moral values are composed of natural properties and the correctness of moral judgments is determined by certain facts.

A parallel issue can be found in Confucianism: if a moral action is judged or determined by the fact of observing the rules of *li* or not, which in turn can be characterized by certain recognizable facts, then it can be said that Confucian value judgments are entailed by factual statements. We may take *jen* as an example to facilitate our discussion. There are two remarks characterizing *jen*, which are thought to be fundamental: “to love man” and “to return to *li*”.²⁴ Details about “how to love man” and “how to return to *li*” are made explicit in *The Analects*. Apart from these “fundamental” meanings, *jen* has also been defined in terms of psychological feelings or emotions. In whatever ways, provided that an act of *jen* can be identified by certain recognizable criteria or characteristics, value judgments can be defined in terms of natural properties or by factual statements.

Another way of defining moral values that yields the same result is to make them part of the human nature. For example, it is held that Confucianism views filial piety as part of the human nature and the practice of the former is a manifestation of the latter. Besides, it is thought that in Mencius’ philosophy, *jen*, *i*, *li* and *chih* are four basic virtues rooted in human nature. Moreover, they constitute the essence of human beings. Therefore, it is supposed that moral properties are defined by metaphysical assertions. In the beginning of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, the statement “What Heaven confers (*ming*) is called the nature (*hsing*). The following of this nature is called the Way” has also been considered as an evidence of this Confucian idea. Similar views can be found in the doctrines of neo-Confucians like Ch’eng I and Chu Hsi, who discuss the relationship between human nature and *li* (reason)²⁵. All in all, if moral values can be realized by following certain natural dispositions or by manifesting certain metaphysical properties, then it is evident that moral judgments are determined by factual statements, no matter whether they are natural or metaphysical.

With regard to Aristotle’s function argument, since what is good for human beings is what can fulfill human function, the understanding of what constitutes human function is crucial to the perception of the good. Specifically, since Aristotle conceives that human beings are rational animals, the best life for them is the life of contemplation,²⁶ and the latter can be described in a value-neutral way.²⁷ However, such an understanding and the related assertion about human function and, in general, about human nature leads to a view that moral values lie in extra-ethical beliefs.

From the interpretation of the doctrines of Confucianism and Aristotle's ethics given above, it is suggested that there are moral truths, and the task of ethics is to reveal these truths and to use them to justify moral judgments and actions. However, there are other understandings of these doctrines, which will lead to different conclusions.

On one reading of *eudaimonia* moral values are explained in terms of non-moral values. Suppose that *eudaimonia* is constituted by the activities in accordance with virtue on the one hand, and activities that will bring about optimal combination of component goods fulfill human function on the other. Under this interpretation, in so far as the assessment of the optimal combination of goods is prior to, and independent of, ethical values, it is the case that what is judged morally good can be externally validated. However, this is just the result of a specific understanding of the conception of *eudaimonia* and Aristotle's function argument. On John McDowell's reading, *eudaimonia* is not something brought about by virtuous actions if all goes well; rather, *eudaimonia* consists in virtuous actions undertaken for their own sake.²⁸ This appears to be what Aristotle says in *NE* (1095a 18-20) where the conception of *eudaimonia* is a conception of doing well, and "well" is interpreted as "in accordance with virtue". McDowell argues, "Virtuous activity for its own sake is what *eudaimonia* is, not some supposed optimal result of filling one's life with such activity."²⁹ According to this reading, virtuous behavior has its intrinsic value, which manifests itself in one's own choice.

To interpret *eudaimonia* as doing well is to equate it with virtuous action. Nevertheless, as McDowell sees it, the motivational pull of an agent still lies in an optimal combination of component goods which are independently established. McDowell claims, "There is no suggestion that the distinctive point of doing well is rationally derivative from the motivational pull of goods that are independently recognizable as such."³⁰ This consequence comes from another conception of *eudaimonia* in which states of character are virtues. Those states of character that Aristotle identifies as virtues are worth cultivating, since a person with those characters is likely to secure a life that would come out best (by standards that are independent of a specific ethical outlook).

As mentioned above, it is thought that Aristotle's teleological view of human nature can validate his specific conception of the good life. However, McDowell thinks that there is no strong evidence for the view that Aristotle brings the first principles back into the ethical texts. A more fundamental question is: When Aristotle talks about the *ergon* of a human being, what is it in his mind? McDowell thinks that Aristotle should not be expected to validate his ethical outlook from the first principles, "If he were asked to tell us what it is that it befits a human being to do ... he would say that these things are the way a virtuous person, or a possessor of practical wisdom, takes them to be."³¹ In this view, Aristotle does not mean to offer an external validation for the ethical choice.

In Confucianism, central concepts such as *jen* can be understood in many senses. Each of these senses refers to different levels of thinking in Confucian thought.³² Apparently *jen* may be conceived as specific ways of behavior commended by Confucians; nevertheless, *jen* should not merely be understood under this definition. In fact, the fundamental meaning of *jen* signifies the ability of distinguishing between the good and the evil from a trans-personal standpoint. This is an ability generated from the empathetic feeling and the non-self-centered disposition. Remarkably these feeling and disposition are not contingent psychological inclinations, but are universally possessed by every human being and thus can serve as a transcendental ground for morality. The teachings of *jen* at the behavioral level are derived from this meaning and are therefore secondary. For instance, filial piety is only one of the innumerable ways in which *jen* manifests itself. Hence it is *jen* that determines what kinds of action should be taken, and not the other way round. A similar view is expounded by Aristotle, "But for actions expressing virtue to be done temperately or justly [and hence well] it does not suffice that they are themselves in the right state. Rather, the agent must also be in the right state when he does them." (*NE* 1105a 29-31)³³ Furthermore, *jen* (and even *li*) taken as a virtue should be performed out of the empathetic feeling and the non-self-centered disposition mentioned above. In this sense, *jen* itself contains the motivational pull, and

obviously it does not need, or even allow any non-ethical, external validation of ethical values.

It is evident that in Mencius' philosophy, both *jen* and *i* are considered as intrinsic values. Mencius argues that though *i* is generally understood as acting appropriately, the criteria of appropriateness are not dependent on either the natural properties of the situation or facts about the relationships among individuals or events.³⁴

Similarly, it is not human nature or the metaphysical being such as Heaven (*T'ien*) that defines or determines ethical values. On one reading, *jen* (and *i* as well) determines the moral good and since *jen* characterizes human nature, it may be thought that ethical judgments are derived from metaphysical assertions. But in the assertion concerning human nature, *jen* does not signify particular moral principles or criteria of values; rather, *jen* should be understood in its fundamental meaning described above. With this understanding, *jen* itself is the ability to determine values; therefore it is merely a truism to say that *jen* determines the moral good. Even in the above-quoted passage in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *T'ien* is shown to be an origin of human nature and yet this does not render the ethical values dependent. It has been argued convincingly by the contemporary neo-Confucianist Mou Tsung-san that a distinct tradition of autonomous morality has been established from Pre-Ch'in to Ming.

Virtuous Persons

If one does not adopt Aristotle's function argument as a way of defining virtues, one may still consider the definition in terms of virtuous persons. In this section, I shall examine in what way Aristotle relates virtuous persons to virtues, and what kinds of problems (if any) will arise from it. I shall also discuss what roles that virtuous persons play in the ethics of Confucianism.

According to Bernard Williams, the relationship between virtuous persons and virtues in Aristotle's philosophy is as follows: A (fully) virtuous act is what a virtuous person would do, but only if it is done as the virtuous person does such a thing.³⁵ The problem generated from this formulation is that virtuous acts are rendered dependent on virtuous persons. If it is added to this formulation that a virtuous person is characterized in terms of virtuous acts, i.e. a virtuous person is someone who always chooses virtuous acts for their own sake, then the conceptions of virtuous acts and virtuous persons will be mutually dependent. Williams remarks about this relationship of dependence that "There is no problem just in this, but there will be a problem if it leads to vacuity."³⁶ Then under what conditions will it constitute a problem? Williams proceeds, "This will be so, if we cannot distinguish one virtue from another, and/or the V [virtuous] agent is left with no determinate content to his thoughts."³⁷ Therefore, as seen by Williams, one possible way to escape from this vacuity is to give a specific content to the deliberation of a virtuous person. A reading on Aristotle's virtuous persons suggests such a content of deliberation: A virtuous person is one who possesses *phronesis*, by which s/he is able to understand what it is about the situation and the action that makes this particular action in this situation something that would seem to a virtuous person the appropriate thing to do. Since such a virtuous person can be regarded as deliberating in a particular way so as to view this action as appropriate, he can also be thought of as acting for X-reasons where type X is tied to the virtue in question. The X-reasons that are linked with particular virtues are reflected in the "thick" ethical concepts such as "inconsiderate," "disloyal" and the like. Thus a virtuous person is one who always applies these concepts appropriately. When understanding virtuous acts in this way, we presupposes that "A person with a particular V [virtuous] disposition will have a specific repertoire of considerations that operate for or against courses of action."³⁸ Although, virtuous acts and virtuous persons are still mutually dependent under this way of understanding, these two concepts are not vacuous since different virtues can be distinguished.

If we adopt X-reasons as the specific content of deliberation for a virtuous person who has special disposition to see the relevance of an act to the particular situation, then the content of this disposition is vital for the understanding of a virtuous person. In addition, whether this kind of disposition can be identified independently from the result of deliberations is also important. However, if the disposition in

question is to be explained in terms of *phronesis* that is essentially connected to virtues of character, then it seems that Aristotle faces a dilemma. One horn of the dilemma is that *phronesis* is admitted as an ability of applying the “thick” ethical concepts and hence the application is conceived of as involving a truth to which right or wrong can be assigned. The other horn is that *phronesis* is considered as an outcome of habits and the virtues judged by it merely reflect the specific thought of a person under certain upbringing. If we go for the latter, then “being virtuous” becomes arbitrary and contingent. On the other hand, if we go for the former, then it means we accept a definitive set of “thick” ethical concepts, which represents the best achievable human understanding of the ethical, to which Williams objects. However, according to Williams, Aristotle thinks that the virtuous life defined by these concepts is the most satisfying life accessible to a human being.³⁹ This understanding is supposed to be derived from Aristotle’s first principles which I have touched on earlier, and I shall not proceed further here with this discussion.

For a Confucian learner, the primary aim is to become a virtuous person, firstly a gentleman and finally a sage. Being a sage is the final stage of the process of ethical cultivation. Therefore, a sage is the most honourable and respectable figure who possesses the highest moral status. However, there are only a few agents in the history who are commonly agreed to be a sage. Confucius has been indisputably known as a sage by his followers since his time, though he modestly thinks himself not qualified for such a title.⁴⁰ Yao, Shun and King Wen are commended by Confucius as sages. Mencius adds T’ang, Yü, Kao Yao, Yi Yin, Lai Chu, T’ai Kung Wang and San-yi Sheng to the list.⁴¹ Mencius is considered as a sage only second to Confucius. To be a gentleman, according to Confucius, one has to start with “cultivating oneself with reverence” and end in “cultivating oneself and thereby bringing peace and security to others” (including one’s fellows and the people).⁴² The achievement of the latter is close to the goal of a sage. Nevertheless, since at his time bringing peace and security to the people is a duty which can only be fulfilled by an emperor, the fulfillment of this depends on those external opportunities and conditions that cannot be controlled by the agent. Besides, even an emperor may encounter various obstacles in fulfilling this duty. Confucius has made an exclamation on this that even Yao and Shun find this task taxing.⁴³ However, for one who devotes oneself to the Confucian ideal, one should do one’s best and ignore the external factors. What constitutes the quality of a sage and is also under the control of an agent is to act in accordance with *jen*. One who embodies *jen* will “help others to take their stand in that he himself wishes to take his stand, and get others there in that he himself wishes to get there.”⁴⁴ A sage is an agent who embodies *jen* and at the same time applies it to public affairs with great effect, e.g., “to give extensively to the common people and bring help to the multitude.”⁴⁵ Confucius claims that even Yao and Shun would have found it difficult to accomplish as much.⁴⁶

Granted that a sage is the highest model for Confucian learners, should the learners do as what the sage did? “Does the actual performance of the sage define the concrete contents of virtues?” As a matter of fact, when Confucius makes commendation of those sages by showing the appropriateness or the benevolence of their performance, he means to produce examples for his students to follow. Nevertheless, it is not those particular actions that he wants his students to imitate; rather, he would like them to grasp the spirit or principles embodied in such actions. The spirit or principles constitute the essential meanings of the virtues. The actual performance of a sage and the concrete contents of the virtue shown by a particular action merely reveal one of the ways of realizing the virtue. In this sense, virtues are not defined by the actual performance of virtuous persons.

Two questions about the account given above might be raised. First, how to choose the right one among the many possible ways of realizing virtues? Second, is it the case that only a virtuous person possesses the special ability of choosing rightly? The first question presupposes there is a right answer to an ought-question.⁴⁷ However, if the rightness of a choice or an action is based on some universal criteria or principles, then it is not the virtue itself but those principles by which the action is determined. Confucius does bring about *tao* for human beings — the way or principles one should act in accordance with. Therefore it seems that the principles or *tao* are theoretically prior to virtues. On the other hand, Confucius has once spelt out the principles for the gentleman which are explained in terms of virtues.⁴⁸ I have discussed this issue at length⁴⁹ and the conclusion is: though sometimes the principles seem to be

more primary than virtues (at one level of their meanings)⁵⁰ since the latter can be adjusted, amended or even dismissed if they violate the former, both the principles and the virtues are derivative. They are both the products of the moral mind which possesses, as mentioned above, the fundamental ability of distinguishing good from evil. It is noteworthy that the ability mentioned is not cognitive in the sense that the exercising of it will result in the grasping of the objective right and wrong. Rather, it is the ability to determine the good and the evil in a non-abstract way in a particular situation. Nor such a kind of determination an application of universal principles, it is only a kind of ability by which one “sees” the appropriate action to be taken in that situation even without any principles at all. Therefore the ability in question resembles that of creation.⁵¹ This is the answer to the first question.

As discussed above, it is clear that according to Confucianism there is no objective right or wrong.⁵² What should one do in a particular situation?⁵³ Is the realization of a specific virtue good in that situation? What specific action is prescribed under the general conception of a specific virtue? How to judge which one should override the others in case of conflict of virtues? All of these questions cannot be answered by the help of the conception of the specific virtue itself. Nor can they be answered by any substantive principles since these principles have the same problems as virtues. In Confucian ethical thought, it is believed that the ability of deciding a particular action and adopting the general principles and virtues originates from the same faculty, i.e. the moral mind. As such, Confucianism is not threatened by the dilemma described above.⁵⁴ It admits the ability of applying the “thick” ethical concepts but does not accept that there are general moral truths. This results from the fact that Confucian thought builds its whole thesis on the idea of subjectivity that is closely related to its autonomous nature.

Apparently for Confucianism, virtues are not defined in terms of virtuous persons. These two concepts are independent of each other: a virtuous person may do something that violates a particular virtue (for good or bad motivation), and a virtue can still be a virtue even if no one can fully realize it. Nevertheless, as argued above, neither of them have a determinate content that clearly presents to the agent whether certain actions are allowed or forbidden. In this sense they are vacuous concepts, but this does not prevent the agent from making ethical decision. On the other hand, virtues do have definite contents in that different virtues can be distinguished.

Though in the sense just introduced, virtues cannot be explained in terms of virtuous persons, it can be so explained in another sense. Since a virtuous person is someone who makes the decision of doing a particular act as a virtuous act, it may be said that it is this person who defines the good as well as that virtuous act because he decides the relevancy of the act to the virtue concerned. However, it should be noted that the relationship thus formed between the act and the virtue is not a conceptual relationship, but the relationship between an agent and his/her action. Therefore the definition in question is an act of choice rather than a conceptual act.

As regards the second question, the reply can be given on the basis of the Confucian doctrine that the same moral mind is possessed by every human being. A virtuous person is one who has been aware of this ability⁵⁵ and has been cultivating it throughout his/her life so that s/he can exercise it when needed. When Confucians hold that setting the performance of sages as examples is important for the cultivation of an agent, it is mainly because these examples shows that there are real possibilities for human beings to exercise the moral mind and act on its decision.

According to Confucian thought, a sage may present himself/herself in a specific mode that constitutes his/her character. The character of a particular sage may be different from, and sometimes even contrary to, that of the other. Mencius claims, "The conduct of sages is not always the same. Some live in retirement, others enter the world; some withdraw, others stay on; but it all comes to keeping their integrity intact."⁵⁶ "Keeping their integrity intact" means acting in accordance with *li i* which are common to everyone. Realizing *li i* in a specific way lies in choosing a specific virtue, and a certain set of chosen virtues forms the character of the agent or the sage. Mencius has classified different characters of the former sages by describing their performance into "the sage who was unsullied", "the sage who accepted

responsibility", and "the sage who was easy-going".⁵⁷ Then he proceeds to praise Confucius for being a sage of timeliness and concludes that "he was the one who gathered together all that was good [in the sages]". It is because Confucius, in contrast with the others who all held to a fixed and immovable rule for determining their acceptance or resignation of office, "would hasten his departure or delay it, would remain in a state, or would take office, all according to circumstances."⁵⁸ Admitting the difference in modes and characters between sages can be viewed as evidence supporting the assertion that virtues cannot be defined in terms of virtuous persons. The commendation of timeliness reveals that there are no fixed principles one should observe in a particular situation and no virtues is appropriate on every occasion.

Conclusion

We have discussed so far the problems of the relation between knowledge and virtue, the existence of the moral truth, and the possibility of defining virtues in terms of virtuous persons in Aristotelian and Confucian ethics. The understandings as well as the possible solutions of these problems rely on what readings of the text we are going to take. However, this will not lead to a relativist conclusion, since I believe that evidence of some specific readings is stronger. I hope the above discussion has given strong evidence and sound arguments to support specific views concerning the above problems. Certainly these views do not represent or constitute the whole ethical doctrines of the two schools of thought; rather, they only serve as a fundamental ground for further study and comparison. For example, one can pursue in much greater depth on the following theme: the comparison between the Aristotelian "practical wisdom" and the Confucian "moral mind;" the role of virtues as non-moral but ethical values in the two schools of thought; and the reasons for the cultivation of virtues. All of these have to be dealt with in other papers.⁵⁹

Notes

- ¹ Cf. Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.
- ² Broadie, 57.
- ³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Terence Irwin, trans. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985), Introduction, xvii.
- ⁴ In fact it is the aim of this paper to discuss the similarities and differences between "te" and "arete".
- ⁵ Kuo Yu, Ch. 3.
- ⁶ For details, see Wong Wai-ying, "Confucian Ethics: Universalistic or Particularistic?" *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 25.3 (1998).
- ⁷ Examples can be found in *The Analects* (e.g. 9.3) and *Mencius* (e.g. 4A:17; 4A:26; 4B:11).
- ⁸ The central problems of Confucian ethics are how to be a gentleman and in relation to this what is the ground for making this possible.
- ⁹ Chen-lai, "The Characteristics of Virtue Ethics in Ch'un Ch'iu Period and Early Confucian Ethics: The Similarities and Differences of Confucius' and Aristotle's Ethics" (in Chinese), in *The Thoughts and Culture in the Ancient World: The Religion, Ethics and Social Thoughts in Ch'un Ch'iu Period*, (Beijing: Joint Publishing Co., 2002)
- ¹⁰ In *The Analects*, there are numerous instances discussing about gentleman, here being some of them: 1.8, 1.14, 2.13, 2.14, 4.10, 4.11, 4.16, 4.24, 5.16, and 6.18.
- ¹¹ Aristotle uses "desiderative" to mark off the reason-responsive part from the prescriptive. Cf. Broadie, 69.
- ¹² Broadie, 71-72.
- ¹³ Broadie, 241. The italic is hers.
- ¹⁴ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, Books I, II, VIII, Micheal Woods, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 159-160.
- ¹⁵ Broadie, 249.
- ¹⁶ Confucius, *The Analects*, D.C. Lau, trans., (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1992).
- ¹⁷ *The Analects*, 7.25.

- 18 This idea is emphasized by a neo-Confucian Lu Chiu-yuan, who claims that one can be a man with
dignity even one does not know a single word.
- 19 The Analects, 1.7.
- 20 Mencius, Mencius, D.C. Lau trans., (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1984). V.1&2, 1A:3.
- 21 John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, V.1. (Stanford, California:
Stanford University Press, 1988) Ch. 1, 139. "Its [Learning's] real purpose is first to create a scholar
and in the end to create a sage."
- 22 Ibid. The translation is mainly from Knoblock, 141, with slight modification.
- 23 A full analysis and discussion on this topic can be found in Mou Tsung-san, *The Substance of Hsin and
the Substance of Hsing* (in Chinese), (Taipei: Ching Chung Book Co., 1968).
- 24 Yu Jiyuan, "Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle", *Philosophy East & West*, 48.2, (1998).
- 25 Although in English, li (reason 理) and li (principles of rites 禮) are the same, they are two different
words in Chinese.
- 26 Anthony Kenny argues that for Aristotle the exercise of *kalokagathia* is the supreme human good that
constitutes happiness, and this must include both contemplation and morally virtuous activity. Cf.
Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). ch. 7.
- 27 Robert Heinaman (ed.), *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, (Boulder, San Francisco: Westview Press, 1995), 2.
- 28 John McDowell, "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics", in Heinaman (ed.), *Aristotle and
Moral Realism*, 204.
- 29 McDowell, 205.
- 30 McDowell, 206.
- 31 McDowell, 208.
- 32 See Wong, "Confucian Ethics: Universalistic or Particularistic?"
- 33 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 39-40.
- 34 Mencius, 6A:4; 6A:5.
- 35 Bernard Williams, "Acting as the Virtuous Persons Acts," in Heinaman (ed.), *Aristotle and Moral
Realism*, 13.
- 36 Williams, 16.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Williams, 18.
- 39 Williams, 22.
- 40 The Analects, 7.34.
- 41 Mencius, 7B:38.
- 42 The Analects, 14.42.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 The Analects, 6.30.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Here the "ought" is not necessarily in a moral sense.
- 48 The Analects, 5.16. In another passage (15.18), Confucius attempts to give a characterization to the
gentleman where he uses some descriptions that are often understood as virtues, but they should not be
so interpreted.
- 49 Wong Wai-ying, "Confucian Ethics and Virtue Ethics", *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 28.3 (2001).
- 50 At least it should be admitted that the significance of principles is no less than that of the virtues in
Confucian thought.
- 51 There are cases in Mencius exhibiting such a kind of determination, especially in the cases of moral
conflict. For the discussion about moral decision as an act of creation, see Wong Wai-ying, "The
Meaning of Moral Creativity: Mou Tsung-san's Interpretation of Confucianism" (in Chinese) in
Confucian Ethics: Its Substance and Function, (Shanghai: Shanghai Joint Publishing Co., 2005).
- 52 One may worry that this renders ethical judgments subjective and arbitrary. Wong has argued that it is
not the case and indeed quite contrary to this view, ethical judgments thus made are universal. She has

- also discussed different meanings of universality, especially that attributing to ethical judgments. See Wong, "Confucian Ethics: Universalistic or Particularistic?"
- ⁵³ Aristotle would say that a virtuous person can see in a particular situation that a specific act is relevant to a particular virtue.
- ⁵⁴ See Wong Wai-ying, "Moral Dilemma: From the Confucian Perspective" presented at The American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting, 1999.
- ⁵⁵ "The sage is simply the man first to discover this common element [li i] in my heart." Mencius, 6A:7.
- ⁵⁶ Mencius, 5A:7.
- ⁵⁷ Mencius., 5B:1.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ See Wong Wai-ying, "The Moral and Non-Moral Virtues in Confucianism" presented at the Australasian Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy Conference in 2002 and "Aristotle's Practical Wisdom and Mencius' Xin" presented at the 14th International Society for Chinese Philosophy Conference in 2005.