

The Foundation of Morality-- A Comparison Between Mencius and Aristotle

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ABSTRACT

Mencius and Aristotle raised up two totally different ethical theory systems around the same era (B.C 384-B.C 289), among which Mencius' is based on the idea of human's original goodness and Aristotle's is from human nature's randomness. Besides that, we can see rich diversity of the procedures on how morality gets cultivated and completed from the two philosophers' respective views. This essay takes Mencius' ethics as "inside" and Aristotle's ethics as "outside", and compares and summarizes these different characteristics. Moreover, we try to find a metaphysical explanation for the speciality of each one according to their own theories and other philosophers' works.

Keywords: *Mencius, Aristotle, ethics, human nature, virtue, practicability, Neo-Confucianism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Mencius' ethics in the book of his name posed profound influence on Confucianism moral rules of later ages. At around the same era, Aristotle built a system in which the doctrine of morality were demonstrated intensively in the book *Nicomachean ethics*. Both philosophers mentioned practicality of morality, but the ideas varied when it comes to the foundation of morality, in other words, how morality becomes possible in human beings. Mencius' Four Sense Theory, "the sense of concern for others is the starting point of Humaneness. The sense of shame and disgust is the starting point of Rightness. The sense of humility and deference is the starting point of Propriety and the sense of right and wrong is the starting point of Wisdom... People get these four senses like having their four limbs", asserted that human require ethical senses as their innate ability which is based on emotions. [1] However, Aristotle, held a different stand that the virtues of human beings are required by culture, political institutions and education. He also said that happiness is practical actions matching virtues. The most inherent is purely thinking; which can reach the ultimate happiness. [2]

As has been seen above, Mencius' moral basic seems "internal", which planted deeply in human nature itself; but Aristotle's ethical foundation is constructed more "externally" with a path of rational thinking. To examine the idea, the text will include three parts. Firstly, divergences and connections will be clearly spoken by showing and making comparison between two distinguished representations of human nature and by discussing the two philosophers' respective procedures a person can adopt to cultivate moral character, to "complete morality". Secondly, diversity occurred in the former context will be reasoned by a transition from ethics to metaphysics according to my own understanding in a view

that Mencius' metaphysical system differs a lot from Aristotle's. Thirdly, the essay tries to build the connecting bridge between two ethical system by referring to Neo-confucianism. And then there will be a brief conclusion replying to the intro paragraph's opposition.

2. DIFFERENT REPRESENTATIONS OF HUMAN NATURE AND TWO CASES OF VIRTUES

2.1. The Divergence of Human Nature's Representations

Human nature, for Mencius, is so inherent that everyone has. But for Aristotle, it is acquired randomly.

"All men are capable of becoming a Yao or a Shun." [3] Yao and Shun were most outstanding politicians in the ancient time; meanwhile, they were considered to be immortal people. Mencius thought that each mortal person maintains, in other words, shares the opportunity to become Yao and Shun. So he says in Four Sense Theory: the sense of concern for others, the sense of humility and deference, the sense of right and wrong and so on were innately contained in human nature which have a potential tendency to become true virtues of humaneness, rightness, wisdom, etc.

We can get at least two apparent special traits from these theories. Firstly, they demonstrate a positive attitude toward human nature. Never did Mencius deny the affect of postnatal education. But what he focused on is the human beings' "inner motivation and will", a start line of reaching morality. If one gives up himself on being good and polite, then there is nothing that can be taught, because his heart would not listen anyway. [4] Secondly, Mencius'

four senses are more like initiate, general tendencies to become good, rather than prior principles or essences that determine what a person should be morally like. [5]

On the contrast, Aristotle wrote in *Nicomachean ethics* that human nature is out of human's control. It was gave by God to those lucky ones. Just like a gift which depends on gift-givers and is unpredictable and uncontrollable for receivers. Reasoning and teaching, take their places in the framework of Aristotle's human nature theory, but neither of them are the most important factors. Besides, some people are motivated by emotions (the author would rather say desires). Compared to the way of education, these people need regulating by compelling force (politics and laws).[6] In this way, Aristotle's theory overturns Mencius' idealistic views of human nature. Not everyone can be Yao and Shun: only those who have good gifts can. Aristotle's human nature question is not a problem about whether a human held a strong will or give up himself to become good; these factors do not matter. Human nature are decided externally by the relationship between God and human's coming into being in a random procedure. Referring to the varied outcomes of the procedure – uneven human nature of different people , one has to adopt either education /reasoning or compelling force to be moral.

Some scholars will argue that Mencius' over-positive attitudes towards human nature is not consistent with other Confucionists . Xunzi held an opposite view that human nature is evil. [7] Another representative argument was also raised up that the quality of human nature can be classified as three different levels: the good, the bad and the mean, confirmed by Hanyu. [8] These theories seem to held a similar stand with Aristotle's. However, I think that there exists intrinsical difference. Zhuxi's theory helps us explain it. He said that human nature obtains two aspects: one is form nature(literally is Nature of fate), which is the reasoning of the universe, innately born in human himself, leading people to being good; another is material nature(Nature of temperament), which is dominated by human's body, emotions and private desires. Thus the nature to be good is universal among human beings; the material nature with bad trends is indefinite and artificial, hiding the true nature of mankind. Once a man is misled by his material nature, the form nature still exists but cannot fully develop. From Zhuxi's context, it can be inferred that Xunzi and Hanyu's theories emphasize more on the material nature; by the contrary, Mencius attached more importance to the form nature. Therefore, his standpoint is of much difference from Aristotle's. [9]The whole picture of Mencius's human nature sees consistence with what modern Chinese philosophers agree with, which is combined with posteriori form and physical materials, what we naturally-born are and what we can possibly be.[10]

2.2. The Divergence of Practicability

To cultivate morality, both Aristotle and Mencius highlighted the effectiveness of practice from their particular perspective.

But if one gives a closer look to the great distinctions, taking two classic virtues in the ancient time as examples , he or she will find that Mencius' bravery and wisdom, which, are not like what Aristotle considered, do not contain a tendency of conceptualization and intellectualization, in other words, a trend of externalization. That is to say, Aristotle has made two laws for the virtues of bravery and wisdom; On the other side, Mencius' bravery and wisdom cannot be extracted from a specific situation. Thus it is cannot be abstracted from individual's experience. The distinctive character of Mencius' ethics is a personalized morality-cultivating procedure that is not much about construction of laws, but a promotion of individuals' mentality, willingness, emotion on fitting to the requirements that virtual regimes require. [11].

In Mencius' context, the virtue of bravery is with at least two implications:

- (1)The capability of controlling one's own body in a long period of time. That is, the great mental tolerance when the body suffers.[12]
- (2)The courage and strong determination to stand still and fearless when encountering setbacks no matter how big they are.[13]

We can see that Mencius' understanding of bravery is with both physical-mental aspect (1) and spiritual side (2). On the method to cultivate the virtue, he said: “hold on to your will; do not scatter your chi'(like breath)”. Here, will is about spirit. Chi', as breath, represents physical issues. Mencius believed the bravery of will is supposed to build connection with the bravery of body in order to complete the virtue of bravery. [14] In this way, the procedure of requiring bravery virtue is the virtue of bravery itself. Reversely speaking, the two implied meanings of bravery virtue containing specified, practical bravery-cultivating actions and changes of one's will as well, form a whole picture of what bravery is.

A similar situation occurs when it comes to the virtue of wisdom. Wisdom, in Mencius, covers a wide range of meaning; it depicts three implications in different chapters:

- (1) the awareness of morality (humaneness and rightness). The awareness is not purely intellectual but it should have the motivation of the subject and the true actions to realize the awareness; otherwise it is not true wisdom.1[15]
- (2) the ability to observe the current situation, which is, the trends of times, and to grab the opportunity to put decent policies into practice.[16]
- (3) To understand the language. That is, to learn the drawbacks of deceptive, licentious, crooked and evasive speeches made by others. Because theses languages do harm to politics. [17]

The author thinks (1) is a general schema of what Mencius regards as wisdom; meanwhile, (2) and (3) is the wisdom that is applied to the field of politics. How can one cultivate the wisdom of (2) and (3)? Mencius said : to

keep studying without getting tired.[18] This diligent attitude towards study, is considered to be the virtue of wisdom itself. (2) and (3) plus (4) constructing the whole appearance of Mencius' wisdom (1). It is a combination of intellect/mentality and practice that consists of a general character, two political applications and one hardworking mind. The different proceeding stages of becoming wise, the wise mental and strategic actions, are wisdom itself, as the same as our discussion on bravery.

On account to Aristotle, he drew a clear line to distinguish what a virtue is and what virtual behaviors are. It is known to all that he insisted Mean character theory: Mean character is ethical virtues, which is led by ration; the characters of "excessive" and "insufficient" are evil properties. [19]For the virtue of bravery, it can be defined as the mean character between fear and reckless. Brave people do the things that he must do, not afraid of what seems fearful but actually not; at the same time, they get rid of true danger. [20] For the virtue of wisdom, the meaning of it is considering himself and others' sake as a whole and according to the public interests.[21] After constructing some general principles, further speaking, laws of the two virtues, Aristotle turned his attention to practice. He held the point that knowing virtues by thinking is not enough; a virtue becomes true when one practice it.

A possible argument would be that Aristotle did emphasize that the mean character depends on contexts in real situations. There seems no "absolute mean way" for everybody. Not feared of death is bravery for a dying person but crudity for a man under lots of life responsibility. To take this as an example, Aristotle discussed five different kinds of situations produces various judgement on bravery.[22] Nevertheless, the author would say that the key point that Aristotle cared about or the stand he held is still lying on the foundation of the laws he made. The five kinds of contexts, seeming "specific", are still come out of Aristotle's personal classification; therefore they are merely abstract pictures brainstormed by himself. There is another opposition: in Aristotle view-point, a person with virtues knowledge will naturally be inclined to do virtuous actions. He ignored the bad desires or appetites that in Hume's eyes are really impelling people's behaviors, only admitting the impulse of rationalizing inside human, which he called "practically wise". Human is naturally driven by ration to complete morality in their each actions. In this way, it seems like Mencius's ethics. But this does not mean Aristotle confounded virtue principles' border with practice's. Instead, philosophers have offered a promoted version of explanation: it is because human actually have those bad appetites and good inclinations at the same time; a well-self-control person with good inclinations as the mainstream, appropriately handling with those bad desires, should match Aristotle's requirement of both "virtuous" and "practically wise."In this way, virtues in the intellectual world become an origin of the good inclinations in practical world, which, in other words, become a guideline for moral behaviors. Through this, we avoid getting trapped in an ignorance of either rational aspect or desire aspect

while distinguishing them very clearly. Furthermore, it shows the benefits of virtues as principles in Aristotle's way.[23] [24]

It can be concluded that Mencius' virtues has process-oriented sense and they emerge around subjectivity, presenting in specified events while Aristotle's virtues are principle-oriented and they take defined objects as their purpose, taking them as principles for practices. According to their distinctive theoretical intentions and characteristics, practicability owns different meanings in two contexts.

3. METAPHYSICAL BASIC FOR THE TWO DIFFERENCES

As the differences of human nature representations and practicability of moral cultivation existing, they could be explained by several parts of the two philosophers' descriptions beyond the range of their ethical and practical frameworks, which is, an immanent and an external transcendental metaphysics.

Mencius' cosmology, though may be not as apparent as some western philosophers', was illustrated in his article, pertaining strong connections with his ethics. He thought that the universe is filled with vast' chi (浩然之气), which, possesses the duality of material and spirits. Vast chi' is primitively produced and progressed internally by each individual when he or she does moral behaviors. At this state, human's strength requiring cultivation and accumulation through ethical practicability. The process keeping going on and on, ultimately, vast' chi will expand to the cosmos : the greatness of one's spiritual figure will break the limitation of self-consciousness and co-exist with the universe. Admittedly, vast' chi is born out of an individualized human; it hardly upgrades to an abstract universality. However, after getting breakthrough, the one with vast' chi is in an deep and profound interaction relationship with everything in the universe. He or she may obtain the ability to share the feeling of any other human, lives, and things. [25]

As for Aristotle, his motto is renowned that the most complete happiness is a practical activity according to virtues that can reach ultimate goodness. It is purely thinking. The activity is self-dependent thus is greater than any other actions, which reflects Aristotle's consideration: the true moral actions needs consistency to wisdom.[26]Wisdom is the character that fits to right axioms; wisdom usually comes with true virtues; wisdom helps construct concepts of virtues. [27]In this sense, the term "wisdom" here is not a virtue that is made use of in political operations as is mentioned in the former paragraph (the practical principle that consider others' interests). It is more like an rationalized achievement or object that only through purely thinking can one realize, which might take a more fundamentally essential position in the framework of his ethics. Because without the wisdom that forms virtues, people's actions will lose the laws accorded to. That is why the activity of purely

thinking is regarded as a goal with more ultimacy of goodness in his ethical works. The inference can be proved by other his statements. He proposed that the life of a philosopher(a thinker) is the most respectable; and the life of a king is respectable, too. The former career can provide people with virtual ideas and the latter one enforce the ideas and put them into practice (laws and educations, ect.) Thinkers stand in a higher position.[28]

In Mu ZongSan's view, Mencius' vast chi' was described as a unique Chinese philosophical phenomenon named "Immanent transcendence." Vast chi' is not like idea, concept, god or reason. It cannot be prior to an individual. Only through the way that it is grown in and applied to a specific human being by his moral actions, can vast chi' itself come into being. In this sense, vast chi' is individualized and immanent. But as everybody shares the equal possibility to cultivate vast chi', it has special "universality". Moreover, when an individual's vast chi' accumulate to some extent, it will expand to everything in the cosmos; thus the special "universality" maintains a transcendental character. On the contrast, Aristotle's virtues are considered to be a state of "external transcendence" according to Mu. The activity of purely thinking comes from a specific human. However, once the contents, the objects of thinking are emerged, they become reasoned substances beyond one's mind boundary. The conceptualized virtues of justice, bravery and wisdom... (in other words, knowledge of morality) are independent from one single man at this point. And then these independent products of purely thinking conversely regulates people to enforcing moral practice, becoming external laws people obey when they act. The whole process can be regarded as "individualized--universalized--practical"; its character of transcendence lies within the importance of external abstract universality, the reasoned entities.[29][30] Yu Yingshi, explained the two typical classes of "transcendence" from a perspective of value sources: a quite large part of Chinese culture is the strong concern about people's secular life, and human's subjectivity ; rather differently, the western tradition is planted in the soil of ancient Greek and Christianity, both of which have an impulse to a transcendental world, making a wide gap to a normal person, no matter either it is a reasoning world or it is a City of God., By breaking the limitations that an individual is born with, one has a seemingly impossible opportunity to reach that immortality lying somewhere beyond human's boundary.[31]

Metaphysical basics construct ethics. Human nature, for Mencius, is formed by an attempt to searching immanent values. That is, human beings' subjectivity in the secular life. It does has universalized aspect; otherwise, he would not regard Four Sense as each human's equal naturally-born moral abilities with the possibility of being developed by vast chi', thus it is at the same time transcendental in Mencius' understanding. In concert with Mencius' view, human nature sources totally from an external substance-God; owing to its external character, the sourcing procedure is random, not self-dependent. At the mean time, the divergences of virtues' cultivating procedures in

different cultures can be explained in this theoretical frame. Mencius focused more on the actual contents a virtue represents immanently in an moral event, which, of course, includes the internalization and confirmation process of subjectivity; conversely, Aristotle, tended to chase the ultimate bravery, wisdom or even goodness as external substances that originally do not belong to human beings but can be approached by thinking on and practicing transcendental objects in a reverse direction that Mencius picked.

Briefly speaking, the divergence, between Mencius' and Aristotle's ethics, innately, is not just from their views about morality but may originate from their thoughts and theories with metaphysical inclinations.

4. CONCLUSION: UNIVERSALITY IN DIVERSITY--BENEFITS TO THE MODERN WORLD

From what has been discussed above, it can be concluded that on the one hand, Mencius' ethics is based a stand of positive attitude toward human nature. It starts from a concrete individual's internal world but at the same time maintains special universality once progressing to a cosmic extent; thus it obeys the form "internal--external". On the other hand, Aristotle's ethics begins at a human nature randomly gave by God and the nature requires external reason entities' guideline produced by thinking, then a specified individual can act morally; therefore it reflects the form "external--internal".

Though distinguished a lot , they are still virtue ethics in the ancient time. And both of the theories pertains metaphysical trying which is the core characteristic of virtue ethics that could benefit the modern world.[32] [33]Because with normative ethics' effectiveness for the modern society's running, I, however believe that, managing and restricting people by rules may be an efficient and expedient method but never is it the best. To make people moral ones, the ideal way is to correct inherent humanity, to plant ethical self-awareness naturally springing out from each one's mind, and to let everybody possess the impulse of chasing the happiest way of life. Virtue ethics with its metaphysical inclinations hidden behind compensates for modern normative ethics' shortages in this way. Though their assertiveness and simplicity are often challenged by modern philosophers, they are still precious theoretical and spiritual heritages worth researching.

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