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Introduction

This article aims to elucidate the educational significance of the traditional communitarian theories of the East and the West. For this purpose, it will set out to compare the moral and educational theories of Confucius found in the *Analects* and of Aristotle brought forward in the *Nicomachean Ethics*¹. The comparison does not simply consist of drawing the table of similarities and differences of both thinkers. Rather, it intends to dig deeper by showing how both thinkers tried to respond to the problem of establishing a community that retains the power of effective education.

Both Confucius and Aristotle have the history of scholarship that extends more than two thousand years. Confucianism was studied intensively not only in China but also in Japan and Korea. Aristotelianism greatly influenced the philosophy of Europe and Arabia. As a result, the amount of literature pertaining to Confucianism and Aristotelianism is astronomical. Even today both Confucius and Aristotle are favorite topics of scholars. Philosophy of education is no exception. *EPAT* contains many insightful articles relating to each topic, including a special issue on Confucian learning (Kwak, Kato, & Hung, 2016). On the specific theme of comparing both thinkers, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle* by Jiyuan Yu (2007) is a must-read. This book is a work of rare scholarship that contains a meticulous examination of both thinkers. But there is a caveat, too. In order to elucidate the thought of Confucius, the author uses not only the *Analects* but also the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Means*. These selections suggest that the author seems to follow the method of Zhu Xi, who considered these Four Books as the basic texts of Confucianism. But these books were written in different ages. The *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Means* have metaphysical elements that indicate influences from Buddhism and Daoism. Interpreting the thoughts of Confucius expressed in the *Analects* through these later texts is something like interpreting Plato through Plotinus or to interpret Aristotle through Averroes or Thomas. As a result, the philosophy of Confucius sketched by Yu is much more metaphysical and systematic than the original one incorporated in the *Analects*. My interpretation, which is limited to the *Analects*, will show the thought of Confucius in a less metaphysical light.

Swan songs

The ancient belief that swans sing most beautifully before their death applies perfectly to both thinkers. Confucius lived in the age when the Zhou Dynasty lost its power. This was accompanied by the decline of the ancient cultural heritage — a decline that Confucius interpreted as a crisis of his age (3, 1; 3, 2; 3, 6; 3, 9; 3, 10; 3, 14; 7, 5).

Aristotle, on the other hand, witnessed the death of the Greek polis under the hegemony of Macedonia. Aristotle himself was a Macedonian and was a teacher of Alexander the Great. And yet, his ethical and political theories reflect the practice of a Greek polis, such as Athens. For him, a life in a polis was a necessary condition of a good life. The theory that reflects and defends the life in a Greek polis most eloquently was written by a foreigner. This may sound

strange. But it is not. Hermeneutics asserts that foreigners are often better observers than natives.

Time separated Confucius from the heyday of the Zhou Dynasty and Aristotle from the golden age of the Athenian polis. The same distance made them better observers and at the same time eager devotees of the past tradition. Very often, we appreciate what we have lost or are about to lose.

Both Confucius and Aristotle were communitarian in the sense that they valued the moral educational power of a community. But for them, the ideal community existed in the past. They were witnesses who were keenly aware of what happens when a community loses its moral and educational function.

Virtues and community

That virtues play a great role in Confucius and Aristotle's ethics comes from their communitarian aspiration. Virtues are cultivated in a community that share the similar way of life and values. Virtues are not something that can be taught primarily at school. They should be taught at home and in a local community. As Aristotle emphasized, we become virtuous by repeatedly doing virtuous acts. For example, there is a Greek virtue called *sophrosyne*, temperance, which consists of avoiding excessive food, drink and so on. Children learn to be temperate by avoiding excessive food and drink, which they learn by living with temperate people.

Virtues need a community, but a community also needs virtuous members. Aristotelian and Confucian virtues were important components that supported the structure of a community. Virtues bind people together. Even in a highly multicultural society there should be some shared understanding of virtues. The relationship between virtues and a community is reciprocal.

Confucius and Aristotle had separate sets of virtues they espoused as their philosophies. The most representative Confucian virtues are benevolence (*ren*, 仁), righteousness (*ji*, 義), ritual (*li*, 禮), wisdom (*zhi*, 知), trustworthiness in word (*xing*, 信), filial piety (*xiao*, 孝), loyalty (*zhong*, 忠), and courage (*yong*, 勇)

The Aristotelian virtues are ethical virtues (courage, temperance, justice, liberality, magnificence, proper pride, proper ambition, good temper, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation) and intellectual virtues (craft, science, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, and intuitive reason).

These virtues offer interesting insight into the cultures of the East and the West. This does not mean, of course, that the East and the West are monolithic. The understanding of each virtue and the relationship between virtues vary in each country and in each age. Virtues offer a rich field for a comparative study of education that is now mainly inclined to compare institutions. A comparative study of virtues can foster mutual understanding in a multicultural world.

The comparative studies of virtues do not exhaust themselves in comparing individual virtues, such as comparing the Eastern and the Western understanding of filial piety or comparing the Confucian benevolence with Christian love. It is important to obtain the broad view of their constellation. This requires, in turn, to find out the virtue that plays the key role for the constellation.

The virtue that plays the key role in the system of virtues for Confucius is *li*, that is translated as ritual here. There are other translations such as rites and ritual propriety. For Aristotle it is *phronesis*, practical wisdom or prudence.

Ritual

That ritual is an important virtue for Confucianism is acknowledged by all. But as to its ranking, there are debates. More often, benevolence is mentioned as the most important virtue (Tu, 1985,

pp. 91–92; Woo, 2019, pp. 1094–1095). The orthodox interpretation of Confucianism that has its origin in Mencius regards benevolence as the central virtue. There are many references of benevolence in the *Analects*, some of which testify its central role (3, 3; 4, 1; 4, 4; 4, 5; 4, 6; 5, 8). Another interpretation considers filial piety as the virtue most representative of Confucianism (Kaji, 2015). These interpretations are also based on the text (1, 2; 1, 9; 1, 11; 2, 21; 4, 19; 4, 20; 4, 21).

However, there is evidence for the high place of ritual in the constellation of Confucian virtues (Fingarette, 1972). Xunzi, a contemporary of Mencius, recognized and emphasized this, but unfortunately, Xunzi was regarded as heterodox by Zhu Xi and his teaching was put aside and repressed.

In the period of modernization, ritual was considered to be a negative feature of Confucianism. Lu Xun, one of the leading figures of modern Chinese literature, wrote in the *Diary of a Madman* Lu, 2010, 21–31 that ritual eats man (礼教吃人).

Indeed, ritual can be very oppressive. Confucius himself warned of the ritual without heart. Ritual cannot stand alone. It must be accompanied by benevolence.

The Master said, 'What can a man do with the rites who is not benevolent? What can a man do with music who is not benevolent?' (3, 3)

This can also be said with regard to other virtues such as filial piety. In a sense, ritual must hide itself behind other virtues. Being hidden, ritual exerts great influence.

The Master said, 'Unless a man has the spirit of the rites, in being respectful he will wear himself out, in being careful he will be timid, in having courage he will become unruly, and being forthright he will become intolerant,' (8, 2)

When ritual plays the role of a protagonist it becomes oppressive.

Ritual is a central virtue not because it stands in the center but because by accompanying other virtues it brings them into light.

Ritual permeates and gives orientation to other virtues. Benevolence, filial piety and other virtues must express themselves and must take a definite form in order to be communicated and shared. This form is provided by ritual (2, 3; 2,5). Without ritual they are not shared. They may exist in the depth of the heart as formless and wordless feeling, but they are socially nonexistent. This is why the observance of ritual is so essential for benevolence. Confucius once said: "to return to the observance of rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence" (12. 1).

Ritual occupies the main role in Confucian learning. His son, Po-yu, says that his father's only request was that he study the *Odes* and ritual (16. 13). Interestingly, this passage shows that the disciples of Confucius were suspecting that Confucius offered a secret lesson to his own son. Maybe they wanted to hear profound teaching on the mandate of the Heaven. But there is no such teaching because one learns benevolence, filial piety and other virtues by ritual practice.

Aristotle and practical wisdom

Now, let us look at the Aristotelian system of virtues. How are they organized? And what virtue plays the key role?

The manifest difference of the Aristotelian system of virtues from its Confucian counterpart is that it is divided into two categories: ethical and intellectual virtues. Ethical virtues are: courage, temperance and justice, to name the most important ones. There are also other virtues such as generosity, truthfulness, and wittiness. They are called ethical because they are learned through repeated practice that has become an *ethos*, a Greek word which means habit. It is by repeating courageous acts that one becomes a courageous person. For this, education at an early age is fundamental.

The intellectual virtues, on the other hand, are craft, science, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom and intuitive reason. Of these, practical wisdom is relevant to ethical consideration. How is it related to virtues?

Practical wisdom plays the central role for the whole system of ethical virtues according to Aristotle, who says:

“(…) with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues.” (1145a1–2)

This is a strong statement that requires explanation. There are virtues that are naturally born and do not require practical wisdom. They are called natural virtues. For example, there are people who have the natural virtue of courage. They are born to be bold and fearless. But such boldness can be harmful if it is not accompanied by knowledge.

“(…) as a strong body which moves without sight may stumble badly because of its lack of sight, still, if a man once acquires reason, that makes a difference in action; and his state, while still like what it was, will then be virtue in the strict sense. (1144b10–14)

Practical wisdom gives ethical virtues sight. It gives orientation to ethical virtues. What kind of orientation does it provide?

Ethical virtues are located between two vices, excess and defect. For example, courage lies between fearlessness and cowardice, liberality between prodigality and avarice, and so on. Practical wisdom determines this middle state (Sorabji, 1980, 206):

“Virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.” (1106b36–1107a2)

Ethical virtues also require appropriateness of time, place, person, motive and way.

“to feel fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, pleasure and pain at right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue.” (1106b18–23)

Children need to be directed by practically wise people in their education. Laws can overtake this role in a well-ordered polis (1103b2–b6) and can play a decisive role in education, provided that they are guided by practical wisdom. But in reality, a polis structured with such laws is hard to find. Actual laws cannot replace practical wisdom (1179b28–1180a18). Practically wise people are by definition old. Practical wisdom is cultivated through particular experiences that require time, unlike mathematics that works with general principles. In a well-ordered community, there are always such wise people who guide children. In ancient Greece, they were not schoolteachers. They were parents, relatives and respected members of a polis. They did not teach moral lessons in a class; they taught it at home and on the street by praising good acts and reprimanding bad ones.

Comparison of ritual and practical wisdom

Confucian ritual and Aristotelian practical wisdom have a similar role. They give orientation to virtues. While they look so different, we have to avoid falling into the temptation of asking which is better. It would be more fruitful that we learn from both traditions by acknowledging their relative strength and weakness.

Confucian ritual has the merit of providing specific instructions for a virtuous act. It can tell specifically when, where, to whom, with what motive and how an act should be performed. This is a great merit not only in an occasion like a funeral ceremony but also in the everyday practice of human communication, such as greeting, addressing to people, and writing a letter. But ritual cannot determine everything. Our life is full of contingencies and there are always cases that demand individual judgment. Without the advice of an experienced person whom Aristotle

would call practically wise, ritual can easily become stiff and heartless. Confucius was aware of this danger and partly to avoid it, he stressed the virtue of benevolence. Confucius also acknowledged wisdom as a virtue. But compared with the intellectual virtues of Aristotle, it is undifferentiated and remains vague. As a result, in the course of history, Confucian ritual was exposed to the risk of becoming a mere ceremony or, even worse, a kind of discipline used by a government. This is the reason why modern thinkers of East Asia such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Lu Xun were critics of Confucianism.

Aristotelian practical wisdom avoids the risk of becoming a set of inflexible rules. It is more flexible and humane and gives much more space for individual judgment. Instead of being formal, it is intellectual. If we adopt some sort of evolutionary view, it may seem that practical wisdom succeeded and superseded ritual. Indeed, ritual played a massive role to bind together a primitive society. Seen from such a point of view, Confucianism would look like a kind of atavism. But this view is too much biased by enlightenment mentality. In reality, the Aristotelian theory of practical wisdom has weakness too.

Its weakness lies in its apparent strength, flexibility. Flexibility can easily become a fluid that evaporates. The existence of a prudent person is the absolute condition but who is prudent? This is not an easy question. In Athens before Aristotle, there was already a heated debate concerning the old and new education, each of which promoted a different way of life. This is the theme of the *Clouds*, a famous comedy of Aristophanes. The *Histories* of Thucydides depicts Athenians as always fighting among each other. It is against this sad reality that Plato wrote the *Republic*. Even Pericles, the man whom Aristotle named as an example of practical wisdom (1141b7–10), was accused by Plato of corrupting the Athenians (*Gorgias*, 515C–517A). Athens after the Persian War was never monolithic. In such a situation, it is not easy to obtain a concrete idea of practical wisdom. Scholars noted that very little has been said about the actual procedure of teaching and learning of practical wisdom (Kristjánsson, 2015, pp. 85–86; Harðarson, 2019). Aristotle wanted to replace the Platonic Idea of the Good by the practically wise person. But as the society became more and more complex, such a person became a myth, almost as unreal as the Idea of the Good.

Aristotelian understanding of laws as a necessary instrument of education (1103b1–6) seems to repair this defect to a certain degree. This idea reflects the Greek understanding of laws as statutes established by a wise person such as Lycurgus or Solon. But laws can never obtain the subtle concreteness of rituals. Compared with rituals, laws are more abstract and tend to be harsh. Confucius was aware of this difference (2, 3). This is why in China, Legalism was clearly distinguished from, or even opposed to, Confucianism, even though Han Feizi, the founder of the Legalist tradition, was a disciple of Xunzi.

Another problem of Aristotelian ethics is that it is almost devoid of the body. It does not tell how to comport the body. It is not because Aristotle neglected the body in his philosophy. Aristotle had rich knowledge of bodily communication such as gestures. He treated it in the *Rhetoric* but the theory found no application in his ethics. Aristotle also considered physical training as a necessary part of moral education in his *Politics* (MacAllister, 2013; Surprenant, 2014). In this he followed Plato who assigned the role to foster the spirited part (*thymos*) of the soul (*Republic*, 410B–D) to physical education. However physical training cannot teach the elaborate comportment of the body that can be acquired through rituals. The absence of the bodily comportment as an important element of interpersonal communication makes Aristotelian ethics less practical.

The examination of strength and weakness of ritual and practical wisdom opens the possibility of mutual learning. The recognition of one's own weakness is the necessary condition of such learning.

Confucians can learn from Aristotle the passion to rationalize and the readiness for critical examination, the heritage that Aristotle inherited from Socrates and Plato. This would make ritual more flexible and humane.

The admirers of Aristotle can learn to appreciate ritual for its attentiveness to the body and the concreteness of instruction. By paying respect to ritual, Aristotelian ethics can become more down to earth. This not only opens the way to fruitful conversation with East Asians but also helps to understand the different cultures of the world in which ritual plays a significant role. The sensitivity toward ritual is a must in a multicultural society.

Note

1. All quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from Aristotle. (2009). *Nicomachean Ethics*. (D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. All quotations and numbering from Confucius. (1979). *The Analects*. (D. C. Lau, Trans.). London: Penguin Classics.

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