

13 Confucian Worries about the Aristotelian *Sophos*

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Introduction

When examining Confucian and Aristotelian ethics, one is struck by their many points of similarity and connection. For both Confucius and Aristotle, virtue (Chinese: *de*; Greek: *aretê*) consists in an intermediacy between excess and deficiency. Both thinkers, in other words, accept something like a “doctrine of the mean” (*Analects* 6.29; 11.16; *Nicomachean Ethics* [EN] II.6).¹ A virtuous character—prone neither to excess nor deficiency—manifests a great deal of internal harmony (as opposed to internal faction and strife). For both Confucius and Aristotle, virtue is, in a way, its own reward (*Analects* 7.37; EN IX.4). A virtuous character, however, does not come to us automatically. Instead, for both Confucius and Aristotle, attaining virtue is an achievement that requires a good early upbringing and ongoing practice (*Analects* 1.2; 2.4; EN II.1).

When one considers Confucian and Aristotelian *models of human flourishing*, however, matters become more complex. Just as the sage (the *shengren*) stands as a model of flourishing humanity for Confucians, so too the theoretically wise person (the *sophos*) stands as a model of flourishing humanity for Aristotelians.² Yet within recent comparative ethics, Confucian discussions of the good life have articulated reasons for rejecting Aristotle’s *sophos* as a viable exemplar of human flourishing, or at least for viewing the Aristotelian *sophos* with some suspicion. In light of growing intellectual exchange between those who take the Confucian and Aristotelian traditions as their (respective) frames of reference, and in light of budding signs of interest in *sophia*, its nature, and its value on the part of contemporary virtue ethicists and epistemologists, these Confucian worries about Aristotle’s *sophos* possess more than historical interest.³

This chapter, then, examines key Confucian worries about the Aristotelian *sophos* as a model of human flourishing. How strong are these worries? Do Aristotelians have good replies to them? Could the Aristotelian *sophos*—and this figure’s distinguishing virtue, *sophia*—be more appealing to the Confucian than they initially appear? Exploring these issues will enable discussions between Confucians and Aristotelians—and thus cross-cultural virtue ethics and epistemology—to proceed on a better footing, with a sharper sense of shared commitments and real differences.

Before I continue, let me say a word about what I mean by “Confucian worries about the Aristotelian *sophos*.” No classical Confucians, of course, ever engaged with, or criticized, the views of Aristotle himself (and vice versa). When I speak of Confucian criticisms of Aristotle’s view, I refer to various worries about Aristotle’s *sophos* that contemporary Confucian, and Confucian-friendly, philosophers have recently suggested in historically informed cross-cultural virtue ethics. Moreover, I consider worries that would be reasonable to attribute to a classical Confucian in light of other Confucian commitments (including commitments identified by contemporary scholars). Therefore, I describe these worries as “Confucian” according to the broad perspective that informs them.

1

Who is the Aristotelian *sophos*? To answer this question, I consider the virtue that distinguishes this character. I offer a brief sketch of Aristotle’s views on the intellectual virtue of *sophia*.⁴

For Aristotle, the intellectual virtues are the excellences of the human soul’s authoritatively rational element (*EN* I.13). Aristotle ultimately divides this element into two components on the basis of their respective proper objects of cognition. Whereas the *practical* intellect cognizes contingent, variable matters, that is, matters about which agents engage in practical deliberation, the *theoretical* intellect cognizes eternal, unchanging objects (*EN* VI.1). Aristotle goes on to identify multiple virtues of the theoretical intellect. He defines intellectual insight (*nous*) as that excellence in virtue of which one is capable of an intuitive and non-demonstrative grasp of first principles (*EN* VI.6). He describes scientific understanding (*epistēmē*) as that excellence in virtue of which one is capable of systematically understanding the causes of things, namely, through explanatory demonstration (*EN* VI.3). Aristotle subsequently accounts for *sophia* as somehow constituted by these two virtues. He accounts for *sophia* as intellectual insight and scientific understanding of the “most honorable” matters, namely, the first principles and causes of nature (*EN* VI.7, 1141a17–20; 1141b2–3). For Aristotle, then, *sophia* is the intellectual virtue by which we comprehend the ultimate explanations of things (cf. *Metaphysics* A.2, 981b27–29, 982a1–2, 982b9–10).

So construed, Aristotle describes *sophia* as the virtue conducive to our understanding theology, which concerns the (divine) first cause and principle of the cosmos (*Metaphysics* A.2, 983a5–10; *EN* VI.7, 1141a35–b3) and metaphysics, which concerns the first causes and principles of being *qua* being (*Metaphysics* E.1, 1026a27–32). *Sophia* is also conducive to our understanding at least certain aspects of natural science and mathematics (*Metaphysics* B.1, 995b12–13; G.3, 1005b2; E.1, 1026a13–18; K.4, 1061b33). Whereas Aristotle ultimately designates *phronēsis* (or practical wisdom) as the ruling virtue of the practical intellect, he identifies *sophia* as the ruling virtue of the theoretical intellect (*EN* VI.11, 1143b14–17; VI.12, 1143b33–1144a3).

The *sophos*, of course, is the agent specially distinguished by his or her possession of *sophia*. Aristotle's *sophos*, however, does not simply possess the virtue of *sophia*. Instead, the Aristotelian *sophos* exercises this virtue, regularly, in leisure. Aristotle describes the *sophos* for his audience by reference to figures such as Thales and Anaxagoras. Those who possess *sophia*, Aristotle reports, are thought to "know things that are extraordinary and wonderful and difficult and divine, but useless" (EN VI.7, 1141b6–7). Such figures seek to understand the ultimate causes of things for its own sake.

Aristotle argues further that the *sophos*, in exercising *sophia*, leads an especially happy kind of life. Aristotle offers various considerations for this view. But to understand the core of Aristotle's position, it suffices to consider his views on the economy of human functional capacities. Aristotle's thought is that the various functions of the human *psuchê* (or soul) are hierarchically arranged. Our nutritive-reproductive functions subserve our perceptive-locomotive functions, which in turn subserve the intellect (DA II.2–3). Yet the intellect, as noted, itself contains two elements, practical and theoretical reason (EN VI.1). According to Aristotle, the former mode of intellect subserves the latter. Practical reason, when exercised well according to practical wisdom, arranges one's affairs and regulates one's passions so that one has the freedom to exercise theoretical reason (EN VI.13, 1145a6–11; *Eudemian Ethics* VIII.3, 1249b11–15; *Magna Moralia* I.34, 1198b9–16).⁵ Hence, theoretical reason stands as the end for both practical reason and for the other powers constitutive of the human *psuchê*.

On this basis, Aristotle identifies theoretical reason as our "best" and highest power (EN 1177a13–14; cf. *Politics* II.14, 1333a16–30). But *eudaimonia*, the good for human beings, is found in the activity of soul according to virtue (EN I.7, 1098a16–17). Hence, the exercise of theoretical reason according to its proper virtue—viz. *sophia* (1177a17)—would constitute the best and happiest of the many activities of the *psuchê* that human beings can exercise. Therefore, Aristotle claims, complete happiness (*teleia eudaimonia*) for a human being will consist in the *sophos*'s exercise of theoretical reason according to *sophia* (1177a24). On the Aristotelian picture, then, the *sophos* who takes care to cultivate and regularly to exercise this virtue leads the best kind of human life.

2

Having sketched Aristotle's reasons for endorsing the *sophos* as a model of human flourishing, I now examine why this model inspires Confucian uneasiness.

A key worry about Aristotle's *sophos* is what I call *the eliminability worry about sophia*. This is the concern that the putative virtue of *sophia* is simply optional to, and so eliminable from, the best way of life (or to a model of human flourishing). Thus some contemporary Confucian philosophers (e.g. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont) contend that there is no close

lexical equivalent to “rationality” or “logos” in classical Chinese; yet while deemphasizing rationality, they suggest, Confucian conceptions of the good life seem not thereby to be hindered.⁶ Nevertheless, Ames and Rosemont allow that there are “cognitive dimensions” to Confucian ethics.⁷ Indeed, Confucian ethics at least grants that a kind of *practical* intellectual activity and a kind of *practical* wisdom are partly constitutive of the human good.⁸ Thus, *Analects* 2.17, 6.22, and 15.8 portray wisdom (*zhi*) as primarily a kind of practically oriented attunement to, and good sense for, the particular situations in which one finds oneself. Such a cognitive disposition reveals itself in one’s knowing when to speak (and when to remain silent) and when to assert knowledge (and when to disavow it).

But the Confucian doubts that *theoretical* intellectual activity or wisdom possesses a key position in the human good—or indeed, any position at all. Thus, David Wong writes, when we turn from Aristotelian ethics to Confucian ethics, “we find no comparable intellectualist leanings.”⁹ As Jiyuan Yu observes, Confucius “never seems to think that there is a kind of knowledge that is higher than the knowledge of things that are of immediate human concern.”¹⁰ Similarly, May Sim writes: “Confucius does not seem to believe in—or at any rate is not interested in—a set of eternal verities” that would serve as the objects of theoretically wise understanding.¹¹ Support for such readings appears at *Analects* 11.12. In this passage, Confucius admonishes his student Zilu not to waste his time indulging in speculation about death and the afterlife—at least when Zilu does not yet understand how to engage in practical affairs. Further support for such readings appears at *Analects* 5.13. There, another student of Confucius, Zigong, notes, “The Master’s cultural brilliance is something that is readily heard about, whereas one does not get to hear the Master expounding upon the subjects of human nature or the Way of Heaven.”

Insofar as such passages reflect Confucius’s attitude, theoretical understanding, it seems, is simply not a big deal for Confucius. Yet for all that, the thought goes, Confucius seems not to have missed out on, or neglected, anything important. *Prima facie*, he appears to exhibit no misplaced priorities. On the contrary, Confucius seems to have lived an exemplary life. To that extent, theoretical wisdom of the sort that Aristotle praises is eliminable from human flourishing. We need not be *sophoi*, then, to lead the best way of life.

This eliminability worry about *sophia* is closely linked to another worry about *sophia*. As noted, in *EN* VI.7, Aristotle calls attention to *sophia*’s distinct uselessness. *Sophia*, on Aristotle’s account, does not concern the means for attaining human goods. According to what I call *the utility worry about sophia*, *sophia*’s apparent uselessness calls its value into question. As Sim observes, “Confucius emphasizes the practical applications of learning and regards impracticality as evidence of worthlessness—quite different from Aristotle, who celebrates *theōria* precisely because of its uselessness.”¹² More generally, as Christoph Harbsmeier writes:

There is little room in traditional Chinese culture for knowledge for its own sake. There was little enthusiasm for “academic knowledge” as cultivated by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who continued the heritage of Socrates. For the ancient Chinese what mattered was action, that is, personal action and political action. Insight was sacred, insofar as it led to successful action.¹³

From a Confucian perspective, then, theoretically wise understanding, *qua* useless, promises to be no more choiceworthy than, say, a broken chair, or any other useless item. Such understanding promises to waste precious time and resources that could be better spent on the difficult, and crucial, task of ethical self-cultivation. Thus, besides Confucius’s (already discussed) skittishness about theoretical discussion at *Analects* 11.12 and 5.14, Confucius insists at *Analects* 14.24 that one should learn for one’s own sake, not for the sake of others. As I follow Confucius, the thought is that one should learn neither *for the sake of impressing others* nor simply *for its own sake*. Instead, one should learn *in order to cultivate oneself*, that is, for the sake of becoming a good person (cf. *Analects* 15.21). For Confucius, a broadly practical knowledge and understanding—including the learning of ritual and the lessons contained in literary classics—are useful for self-cultivation. Confucians can allow that such knowledge and understanding is choiceworthy, and that the intellectual dispositions conducive to, and manifest in, such knowledge and understanding are virtues. But Confucians need not allow the same for the *sophia* that Aristotle valorizes.¹⁴

3

As I follow the eliminability and utility worries, the former gains much of its force from the latter. Therefore, in what follows, I focus especially on addressing the utility worry.

Aristotle is aware that his claims for *sophia*’s uselessness raise concerns. In recently authenticated fragments of the lost *Protrepticus*—a popular exhortation to philosophy—Aristotle responds to the worry that theoretical wisdom lacks choiceworthiness because of its uselessness.¹⁵ In replying, Aristotle appeals to non-philosophical activities that his audience should grant as choiceworthy, yet for non-instrumental reasons. As examples, he offers beholding athletic spectacles at the Olympics and viewing dramatic performances at the Dionysia. Such activities are eminently choiceworthy, yet such activities are not eminently useful (9, 53.15–26/B44). Accordingly, Aristotle argues, something’s uselessness need not imply its worthlessness.

Initially, Confucius seems open to Aristotle’s response from *Protrepticus* 9. In many passages, Confucius disavows a narrowly utilitarian attitude. In praising the *junzi*, for instance, Confucius insists that “the *junzi* is not a vessel” (*Analects* 2.12)—that is, not a narrow technician or specialist. Further, Confucius thinks that the pursuit of the cultural arts (*wen*)—which include ritual, music, archery,

charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics—has a special value (*Analects* 1.6; 7.6).¹⁶ Perhaps, then, Confucius thinks that such arts are non-instrumentally choiceworthy (either in part or in whole). Finally, Confucius holds that certain kinds of music are sublimely pleasant (*Analects* 7.14; 8.15)—and, so, perhaps choiceworthy just for their own sake. On such grounds, I take it, Bryan W. Van Norden holds that Confucians “see the contemplation of a wide range of beautiful things as having intrinsic value.”¹⁷ If so, then Confucians should not reject theoretical contemplation on the basis of its uselessness.

Yet perhaps the Confucian can resist conceding *Protrepticus* 9’s points. For Confucius tends to account for the value of the cultural arts simply by reference to their instrumentality for ethical self-cultivation. The cultural arts, Confucius often seems to suggest, are—simply—instrumentally valuable. They provide sites where we can discipline and perfect our characters by harmoniously adorning and shaping our native substance (*Analects* 3.8; 6.18; 13.3). True, Confucius does not hold that the cultural arts possess *narrow* instrumental value for some narrowly defined task. Nevertheless, he highlights their *broad* instrumental value for the open-ended task of self-cultivation. To be sure, Aristotle, like Confucius, also recognizes the broadly instrumental educational and ethical benefits of enjoying music (cf. *Analects* 8.8; 9.15; 14.2; 15.11 with *Politics* VIII.5–7).¹⁸ But Aristotle believes such performances are also choiceworthy for themselves. While Confucius *may* agree, it is not clear that he *must*.

In emphasizing self-cultivation’s value as an end, however, Confucians should be more receptive to another line of Aristotelian argument.¹⁹ In *EN* VI.12, Aristotle takes seriously the question of what use *sophia* possesses. After all, *sophia* does not concern itself with the means for attaining particular goods (1143b18–20). In responding, Aristotle makes two points: (a) even if *sophia* is not productive (at all), *sophia* is nevertheless choiceworthy for its own sake, *qua* virtue of the soul; and (b) even if *sophia* is not productive in the way that, say, carpentry is, *sophia* is still productive in a way. *Qua* virtue of the soul, *sophia* makes a useful *constitutive* contribution to the human good (1144a1–5). Hence, when the *sophos* develops and exercises this virtue, the *sophos* benefits by cultivating and exercising his perfected human nature.

This Aristotelian response, I take it, offers a stronger reply to the Confucian’s worries than *Protrepticus* 9’s appeal to the non-instrumental choiceworthiness of artistic and athletic contemplation. For Confucius allows that cultivated virtue, at least, is choiceworthy for its own sake. At *Analects* 4.2, Confucius suggests that virtuous people take pleasure in virtue for its own sake. They “feel at home in Goodness [*ren*],” unlike clever people who pursue virtue merely instrumentally, for the sake of profit. Similarly, in the early Confucian tradition, Mengzi consistently emphasizes the beneficial value of cultivating the sprouts of the heart, and of bringing innate human dispositions into a flourishing condition (*Mengzi* 2A2.16; 7A21.4; cf. *Analects* 9.22 for intimations of flourishing metaphors).²⁰ Like Aristotle, Mengzi emphasizes the beneficial value of cultivating the best components of human nature—for Mengzi, the dispositions of the

heart (Mengzi 6A14.2; 6A15.1). And like Aristotle, Mengzi distinguishes these higher parts of our nature from our “petty parts.” Yet Mengzi need not hold that cultivating the best parts of our nature properly serves any instrumental purpose for the sake of any higher end. On the contrary, one plausibly reads Mengzi (like Confucius) as holding that the cultivation of human nature is intrinsically beneficial for the virtuous person. Such fulfillment is, *by itself*, useful for the sage who does so. To this extent, the Confucian should be open to Aristotle’s claims for *sophia*’s usefulness from EN VI.12.

4

So far, I have sketched a preliminary response to the Confucian’s utility worry about *sophia*. This response, which appeals to *sophia*’s capacity as a virtue to contribute constitutively to the human good, also directly addresses the eliminability worry. For if *sophia* is a constituent of flourishing human nature, then *sophia* cannot be eliminated without loss from the best way of life.

In EN VI.12, Aristotle claims that *sophia* is intrinsically beneficial (and useful in some sense). Yet the Confucian can argue that *sophia* nevertheless risks being useless (and so, eliminable from the best way of life) in another, deeper sense. For the exercise of *sophia* apparently makes no contribution to other choiceworthy activities and goods within a human life. Instead, it seems simply to be subserved by them. Therefore, one can recast the Confucian worry about *sophia*’s utility. Unless the *sophos*’s distinguishing “virtue” is useful by offering some degree of mutual support to other human activities and goods, the thought goes, *sophia* remains problematic. That is, unless the exercise of *sophia* can *harmonize* with our other pursuits, and *reciprocally support them*, it promises to be a source of imbalance and conflict within a life. Insofar as *sophia* generates such incoherence, *sophia* cannot reliably and sustainably benefit the person who possesses it. To that extent, perhaps *sophia* is not really a virtue partly constitutive of the human good.

According to Stephen C. Angle, for instance, the love and pursuit of *sophia* promises to generate an alienating “rupture with everyday life,” a problematic break from ordinary human existence akin to that which certain religious adherents undertake in the pursuit of a monastic life.²¹ Similarly, in defending a Confucian account of the human good, Van Norden suggests that something like devotion to an Aristotelian “life of the mind” closes one off to the value of friends, family, and loving relationships in a good human life. According to Van Norden, the Confucian tradition, which emphasizes the value of such relations, usefully corrects the errors manifest in intellectualist views like Aristotle’s.²²

Now, Aristotle does, at times, suggest that *sophia* is useless in a way that precludes its harmonizing well with other activities. Aristotle sometimes seems to hold that other ends are strongly subordinate to *sophia*, such that (a) they subserve *sophia* but (b) *sophia* offers them no reciprocal benefit.²³ One gets this impression of *sophia* from Aristotle’s introductory description of the impractical *sophos*

in *EN VI.7*. Yet in *EN VI.7*, I suggest, Aristotle exaggerates the impracticality and uselessness of *sophia* for pedagogical purposes. That is, Aristotle aims simply to offer a preliminary, “quick-and-dirty” elucidation of his distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom. He thus appeals to conventional views about *sophia*, and to what people “say” about the *sophos* (1141b3–8). But this cannot be Aristotle’s whole story about *sophia*, for in his biological treatises, Aristotle adopts the methodological principle that “nature does nothing in vain.” To explain why a given living organism possesses the parts and powers that it does, Aristotle thinks that one must show how those parts and powers contribute to the overall way of life, or *bios*, of that organism. One must show, in other words, how the part or capacity is *useful* in that way of life.²⁴ According to Aristotle’s natural teleology, if a part or capacity is (altogether) useless in the life of an organism, nature will not supply that organism with that part or capacity. Since we do possess capacities for theoretical understanding, Aristotle should think that these capacities—and the virtue that perfects them, *sophia*—provide some benefit for other activities and goods.

Indeed, to focus on *EN VI.7*’s remarks in isolation is to overlook passages in which Aristotle allows that *sophia* possesses a certain usefulness—a usefulness that may lessen Confucian worries. At *Metaphysics A.2*, 982a20–982b10, for instance, Aristotle holds that *sophia* provides the *sophos* a knowledge of the good, in virtue of which the *sophos* has the most authoritative judgment about human affairs. Further, fragments from *Protrepticus* 10 explicitly address worries about the apparent uselessness of theoretical understanding. They argue that the exercise of *sophia* is actually useful, after all.²⁵ In these fragments, Aristotle insists that the exercise of *sophia* informs and guides the *sophos*’s practical reasoning and practical affairs. In doing so, the exercise of *sophia* does not *subserve* practice. Rather, as a wealthy benefactor can assist a struggling artist, the exercise of *sophia* *supports* practice. *Sophia*, on the *Protrepticus*’s account, provides an agent cognitive access to *horoi*, or standards, of human nature and the human good by reference to which the agent can judge well. Such standards, the *Protrepticus* suggests, are akin to the plumb-lines, rulers, compasses, and other tools for measurement that craftspeople use in the course of their craft-activity (54.22–55.7/B47). The practically wise agent, of course, is well attuned to the particularities of the situations in which he finds himself. Yet his judgment is enhanced by, and functions best when informed by, a broader theoretical perspective.

On the picture of *sophia* that *Metaphysics A.2* and (especially) *Protrepticus* 10 support, theoretically wise understanding possesses a robust uselessness. It is not properly instrumental to, or for the sake of, any activities higher than itself. Still, by informing and guiding subordinate activities, such understanding is capable of harmonizing with other human activities and goods. Hence, such understanding need not implicate the *sophos* in any deep rupture with ordinary human life. On the contrary, Aristotle can say, the *sophos* can engage actively in human affairs—including close relationships with friends, family,

and other loved ones—with a fuller perspective, deeper understanding, and more discerning eye. Thus, the exercise of *sophia* can enhance one's engagement with, and appreciation for, the goods and activities of that life. To this extent, the Confucian's utility worry promises to be assuaged.²⁶

5

Confucians may nevertheless wonder how useful the *sophos*'s theoretically wise understanding really is. Perhaps *theoretical* understanding is not required for fully grasping the Confucian's ethical commitments, or for informing Confucian practice. Instead, perhaps a deeply situated, practical, and *non-theoretical* grasp of such commitments suffices. On this view, fully grasping the Confucian way need not require anything like a dipping into metaphysics. As Yu describes the Confucian view, "The way of Heaven is not external, but is immanent in the classics, in the exemplary lives, and in one's daily life."²⁷ Perhaps, then, as Sim's account has it, grasping the Confucian way "is less a matter of reasoning and justification than of acquiring a taste for harmony, a sense of it, and a thirst for it."²⁸ Even if a theoretical understanding of the Confucian way is possible, the Confucian can say, it is unclear why it should be helpful.

In response, Aristotelians should grant that one *can* attain a certain—rich—grasp of the Confucian way through non-theoretical means. One can do this by participating in ritual, by growing up in a family, by enjoying certain exemplary characters, appreciating certain institutions, and so forth. Indeed, for their own part, Aristotelians concur that we attain a certain grasp of the good and the noble through practice and habituation (*EN* II.1).²⁹ Yet Aristotelians can argue that Confucians should not reject the value of theoretically informed understanding of the Confucian way.

Consider an analogy that Aristotle often uses, the analogy between practically wise, virtuous agency and the art of medicine.³⁰ Aristotle would grant that a doctor's apprentice can attain a non-theoretical grasp of health through practical experience. The apprentice can grasp *that* certain diets, regimens, and procedures are health-conducive. Yet the doctor's apprentice does not thereby yet possess medical expertise. Instead, to possess the art of medicine strictly speaking, the aspiring doctor requires a theoretical understanding of health, and this theoretical understanding requires the doctor to attain theoretical understanding of the parts of the body, their functions, and their proper ordering. In other words, the apprentice's cultivation of medical expertise requires the apprentice to situate her non-theoretical grasp of the "that" in the larger explanatory context of the "why"—that is, of *why* certain states of the body constitute health, and *why* certain regimens and procedures conduce to health. The same holds, Aristotle argues, for the good and practically wise agent with respect to practical choice (cf. *Eudemian Ethics* VIII.3, 1249a22–b5). Thus, Aristotle insists in *EN* I.13 that the practically wise politician's understanding of the human

good requires some theoretical understanding of human nature, and of the parts and powers of the soul. As I understand Aristotle, admittedly controversially, *sophia* is the intellectual virtue conducive to such understanding.³¹ Therefore, the Aristotelian can argue, *sophia* promises to have a special practical benefit. It informs and completes practical wisdom, and makes one's practical judgment most reliable.

The Aristotelian's appeal to such craft analogies to defend the value of theoretically wise understanding does not introduce considerations essentially alien to Confucian thought. For Confucians themselves draw similar analogies between craft and self-cultivation along the Confucian way. According to *Analects* 19.7, for instance, "The various artisans dwell in their workshops in order to perfect their crafts, just as the gentleman learns in order to reach the end of his Way." The *Analects* also invokes analogies involving chariot-guiding (1.5), carving and plastering (5.10), and maintaining tools (15.10). Aristotle can say that just as all these arts—*qua* arts—require something like (a certain sort of) theoretical understanding, fully developed practical wisdom requires theoretical wisdom. Further, in *Mengzi* 6A20.1—a passage that interestingly echoes *Protrepticus* 10—Mengzi says, "When a master carpenter instructs others, they must make use of the compass and the square. Those who learn must also make use of their 'compass and square'." In his gloss on this line, the neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi highlights the expert's need for awareness of standards of judgment: "[A]n activity can only be successful if it has some standard If this is true in lesser arts, how much more so in the Way of a sage?"³² The Aristotelian can argue that *sophia* is useful for providing cognitive access to, and enriching one's understanding of, standards of human perfection (viz., through a deep understanding of human nature and its place in the whole).

Hence, even if the Confucian can attain a non-theoretical grasp of the Confucian way, theoretically wise understanding is still beneficial. According to the Aristotelian, then, the Confucian stands to benefit not only from grasping *that* certain classics and certain lives accord with the Confucian way, but also from exercising theoretically wise understanding of *why* they do. In moving from a grasp of the "that" to an understanding of the "why," the Aristotelian can argue, we make a cognitive transition perhaps akin to the sort that Confucius recommends when he proposes that we start from below to get to what is up above (*Analects* 14.35).³³ In bringing *sophia* to bear on the Confucian way, we would understand Confucian rituals, practices, virtues, and commitments against their metaphysical background, including human nature, fate, and heaven. The exercise of *sophia* need not generate "rules" for guiding action. Still, it could provide cognitive access to an understanding of human nature and the place of humanity in the whole capable of informing, and enhancing, situational discernment at a dispositional level (just as, for example, the doctor's theoretical understanding broadly informs, and enhances, the doctor's perspective).

6

In this section, I briefly consider the thought of Confucius himself, developments in early Confucianism, and later neo-Confucian developments. Here, I suggest, one finds moments within the Confucian tradition where *sophia* could play the useful role I have suggested. To this extent, I contend, Confucians have good reason explicitly to recognize the virtue-status of *sophia* and to grant that the Confucian sage should also be something of a *sophos*.

6.1 Confucius

At *Analects* 2.4, Confucius suggests that Heaven's Mandate underlies the Confucian way, and that he benefitted from gradually coming to grasp (at the age of fifty) how the Confucian way harmonizes with Heaven's Mandate. At *Analects* 7.23, Confucius identifies Heaven as source of virtue. At *Analects* 17.2, Confucius says that human beings are similar by nature, but different on account of practice. And at 17.8, Confucius thinks that goodness of action and character requires a love of learning.

In these passages, Confucius hints that the Confucian way is not a free-floating set of practices. Instead, to understand and practice it most fully, one has to refer to Heaven and human nature. Confucius does not offer explicit accounts of Heaven and human nature. Moreover, Confucius apparently thinks that a kind of engaged, practical understanding should suffice. The Aristotelian can suggest, however, that theoretical understanding of these matters could be useful for fully grasping the metaphysical background of Confucius's ethical commitments.

As noted earlier, the Confucius of the *Analects* often seems reticent to engage in theoretical speculation (*Analects* 5.13 and 11.12). So, would a Confucius who did accept *sophia* as a virtue, and who valued theoretically wise understanding of Heaven and human nature, be too remote from the Confucius of the *Analects* to be recognizably Confucian? In response, one should be careful not to infer too much from Confucius's reticence to engage in theoretical inquiry with some of his students. In many cases, such reticence is consistent with Confucius's attuned responsiveness to the particular needs of his students (a responsiveness that shows the Confucian virtue of wisdom [*zhi*] in action). So, even if Confucius ultimately were to allow *sophia* some role in the flourishing life, Confucius could still have good pedagogical reason to avoid theoretical speculation with his students. After all, the likes of the headstrong Zilu, for instance, are not necessarily in a position to benefit from narrowly theoretical inquiry, at least before developing ethically in other ways (*Analects* 11.12).³⁴

6.2 Early Confucianism and Mengzi

Even if they do not emphasize the value of theoretical wisdom as such, later Confucian thinkers show greater appreciation for the practical value of an

explicit understanding of human nature and the place of humanity in the whole. For instance, in *Mengzi* 6A, Mengzi offers a detailed and articulate account of human nature and the structure of human flourishing. As I have argued elsewhere, Aristotle's own account of the soul, though importantly differing on particulars, invites comparison with *Mengzi* 6A's account of human nature as a hierarchically ordered system of mutually supportive dispositions.³⁵ By invoking and articulating a robust conception of human nature, the Aristotelian can say, Mengzi places particular Confucian ethical commitments within a more *encompassing explanatory context*. Mengzi's account of human nature enables one pursuing the Confucian way to sustain and fortify a commitment to the Confucian way. For by reference to this account, one pursuing the Confucian way can more fully understand *why* Confucian ethical commitments make sense.

6.3 Later Neo-Confucian Developments and Zhu Xi

Later *neo*-Confucians endorse intellectual activity inviting interesting comparison to the exercise of Aristotelian *sophia*. Zhu Xi, in particular, develops a sophisticated metaphysics with striking similarities to, and illuminating differences from, Aristotle's own.³⁶ At the same time, Zhu Xi endorses "inquiry and study" (*dao wenxue*) and the "investigation of things" (*gewu*).³⁷ For Zhu Xi, this broadly theoretical activity includes the study of the Confucian classics. Yet it also includes the search for understanding of the unity of the whole, and a grasp of its *li* (or "principle," "pattern," or "coherence").³⁸ On Zhu Xi's view, our pursuit of what Zhu Xi calls "greater learning" enables us to perfect the initial grasp of the Confucian way that we attain in our primary studies or "lesser learning." I take it that, for Zhu Xi, "lesser learning" provides a grasp of something akin to what Aristotle calls the "that." Greater learning, by contrast, provides access to something like what Aristotle calls the "why." Thus, Zhu Xi writes, "Lesser learning is the direct understanding of such-and-such an affair. Greater learning is the investigation of such-and-such a principle [li]—the reason why an affair is as it is" (*LBS* 1.4). Zhu Xi suggests the value of such full understanding for informing one's situational action and judgment (*LBS* 2.11; 3.16; 3.20). So, Zhu Xi writes, "[O]nce you understand what's right, your mind will have that which acts as a ruler. It's like studying archery. If your will fixes on the bull's-eye, soon you will occasionally hit the target" (*LBS* 3.18). Aristotle, I note, famously offers a similar archery metaphor in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1.2, 1094a22–24) to suggest the value of fully understanding one's ethical commitments—including by reference to a theoretical understanding of human nature and the human good.

I have only sketched a few tantalizing points of connection between Zhu Xi's views and those of Aristotle. I do not wish to efface potentially significant differences between Zhu Xi's *gewu* and the exercise of Aristotelian *sophia*. The Aristotelian, however, can appeal to the benefits that some neo-Confucians

believe that “the investigation of things” possesses to defend the exercise of *sophia* as more beneficial than it might initially seem to be.

7

Given the foregoing considerations, I contend that the Aristotelian has resources for responding to the Confucian’s eliminability and utility worries. To the extent that suspicion about the *sophos* depends on these core worries about *sophia*, the Aristotelian insists, it is unclear exactly what is objectionable about the *sophos* as a model of human flourishing.

At this point, the Confucian may reply that the Aristotelian *sophos* still misconceives the proper relation between practical and theoretical understanding, namely, by subordinating the former to the latter. Even the most “theory-friendly” Confucians appear to share this view. For instance, as Shuhsien Liu suggests, even Zhu Xi pursues theoretical understanding for the sake of calming the heart, rather than for its own sake.³⁹ So, even if the Aristotelian shows that Confucians should make room for *sophia*—as either part of the virtue of wisdom (*zhi*), or as a distinct virtue in its own right—perhaps Confucians have good reason to retain their worries about the *sophos* as a model of human flourishing.⁴⁰

The dispute between the Confucian and the Aristotelian thus moves from the field of ethics to the field of philosophical anthropology. It thus concerns whether the Confucian or the Aristotelian offers a more compelling account of human nature, its component elements, and their proper ordering. I bracket this further dispute for now. Regardless of how it turns out, I hope to have shown that there nevertheless remains an important insight in Aristotle’s endorsement of the *sophos* as a model of human flourishing. *Sophia*, often neglected in contemporary discussions of virtue, does have a place in the best way of life. At the same time, I do not wish to suggest that the Aristotelian has nothing to gain from engagement with Confucian ethics, or from the Confucian model of the *shengren*.⁴¹ On the contrary, Confucian accounts of ritual, ritual’s role in constituting harmonious social relations and expressing benevolence, the significance of filiality, and the importance of rectifying names, among other contributions, offer bountiful philosophical resources to Aristotelians. A longer, and wider-ranging, dialogue on virtue ethics and VE would address some of these positive reciprocal benefits.⁴²

Notes

- 1 Translations from the *Analects* come from Slingerland (2003). Translations from the *Mengzi* come from Van Norden (2008). Translations of the *EN* are my own, from the edition of Bywater (1898).
- 2 Angle (2009: 22–3) suggests the fruitfulness of comparing the Confucian *junzi* and *shengren* with the Aristotelian *phronimos* and *sophos*, respectively.

- 3 For recent comparative analyses of Confucian and Aristotelian ethical traditions, see for example Sim (2007), Yu (2007), Van Norden (2007), and many of the essays in Angle and Slote (2013). On the contemporary philosophical relevance of Aristotle's conception of *sophia*, see Conway (2000), Baehr (2012; 2014), and Walker (2013a). On the distinctive value of *understanding*, which suggests how Aristotle's discussion of *sophia* remains salient, see especially Riggs (2003), but also Zagzebski (1996: 45–51) and Kranvig (2003).
- 4 My discussion of *sophia* borrows from Walker (2013a: 765–6).
- 5 See for example Tuozzo (1992).
- 6 Ames and Rosemont (2011: 20).
- 7 Ames and Rosemont (2011: 29). They emphasize that the Confucian notion of the heart (*xin*) is the source of both cognition and emotion, “which dooms in advance any effort to sharply distinguish the cognitive and the affective.” Cf. Wong (1984: 155). For his part, Aristotle distinguishes practical reason from reason-responsive desire (*EN* 1.7, 1098a4–7; I.13, 1102b29–1103a3). Aristotle grants, however, that practical reason and reason-responsive desire will at least *harmonize* in the virtuous human being (*EN* I.13, 1102b27–28).
- 8 Wong (1984: 155).
- 9 Wong (1984: 155).
- 10 Yu (2007: 219).
- 11 Sim (2007: 210).
- 12 Sim (2007: 208).
- 13 Harbsmeier (2003: 14). Assuming that Harbsmeier's is a fair assessment of early Chinese thinkers, the Socratic tradition (with its emphasis on self-knowledge) also links knowledge and ethical improvement. Cf. *Apology of Socrates* 29d-e; 38a. In Plato, the knowledge of Forms is closely linked to self-cultivation and the proper authority to rule. See, for example, *Republic*. Hence, I suggest, we should not be surprised to see Aristotle also suggest that understanding and successful action are mutually supportive, even if Aristotle disagrees with certain key claims of Socrates and Plato.
- 14 My description of these worries should not suggest a misleading picture of Confucianism as thoroughly non-metaphysical. As Sim notes (2007: Chapter 4), the *Zhongyong* (*Doctrine of the Mean*) articulates a distinct metaphysical view, according to which *zhong* (the mean) regulates all things. Ni (2009: 312–14) points out other Confucian contributions to metaphysics. Still, as far as I understand the Confucian tradition in its early stages, this tradition tends to be suspicious of theoretical understanding as such, and for the reasons Confucius articulates. The worries I examine here, then, at least articulate concerns from a certain strand of the Confucian tradition, and one that has received voice in recent discussions of cross-cultural virtue ethics. This claim is consistent with the view that traditions speak in many voices, and that the Confucian tradition is more complex than I may present it here.
- 15 For the authentication, see Hutchinson and Johnson (2005). I examine *Protrepticus* 9's arguments in Walker (2010a: 136–40)—a discussion that informs my treatment of the Confucian worries here. I use Pistelli's (1888) edition of the *Protrepticus*, citing the text and line numbers in that edition, and then the “B” numbering used in Düring's popular (1962) reconstruction. As elsewhere (e.g. *Metaphysics* A.2, 982b24; *EN* I.6, 1096b24; V.9, 1137a10; *Eudemian Ethics* I.1, 1214a31–b6; I.4, 1215a34–b5;

- I.5, 1216a19–20), Aristotle does not always distinguish sharply between *sophia* and *phronēsis* in the *Protrepticus*, a popular work. I nevertheless take the arguments of the *Protrepticus* to offer an Aristotelian exhortation to theoretical wisdom.
- 16 On these arts, see Slingerland (2003: 3).
 - 17 Van Norden (2007: 358).
 - 18 Shankman and Durrant (2000: 213), Yu (2007: 107), and Van Norden (2007: 357) note the similarities between Confucius and Aristotle on this point.
 - 19 Ivanhoe (2000) emphasizes the primacy of self-cultivation as a persistent theme in the Confucian tradition.
 - 20 On “flourishing” in Mengzi, see Van Norden (2007: 38). I discuss Mengzi’s views on human nature and human flourishing in Walker (2013b).
 - 21 Angle (2009: 22).
 - 22 Van Norden (2007: 358). On the value of loving relationships in the good life, see *Analects* 1.1, 1.6, 11.26. On the value of filial piety and family life, see *Analects* 2.5, 2.6, 4.19. Ames and Rosemont (2011: 19) and Ivanhoe (2013: Chapter 5) emphasize the value of family relationships in Confucian conceptions of the good life.
 - 23 Or, as Nagel ([1972] 1980) and Wilkes ([1978] 1980) hold, *sophia* appears not to offer “feedback” to other ends and activities.
 - 24 For Aristotle’s use of the “nature does nothing in vain” principle, see *Parts of Animals* IV.11, 691b4; IV.12, 694a15ff; VI.13, 695b19; *Progression of Animals* VIII, 708a9–20; IX, 711a1–6; *Generation of Animals* II.4, 739b20; II.5, 741b2–5; II.6, 744a37; *On Youth and Old Age* XVI (X), 476a10–10; *De Anima* III.12; *Politics* I.2, 1253a8–15. For discussion of the principle, see Lennox (2001) and Johnson (2005: 80–2).
 - 25 I discuss these passages in more detail in Walker (2010a).
 - 26 Against the claim that the love and pursuit of *sophia* entails a break with ordinary life, the Aristotelian can also argue that exercising *sophia* can bolster one’s ties to others, including one’s friends: one contemplates better with colleagues than in isolation (*EN* X.7, 1177a34–b1; cf. *Metaphysics* a.1, 993a30–b5). Van Norden’s (2007: 358) worry that Aristotelian intellectualism requires a devaluation of friends seems rooted in the thought that, for Aristotle (and Plato), friends and loving relationships “are only means to some higher goal,” namely, theoretically wise understanding. Aristotle, however, does not hold this view. Aristotle holds that virtue-friends, at least, are lovable for their own sakes (*EN* IX.4, 1166a4; cf. VIII.3, 1156b7–10; VIII.7, 1159a9; IX.4, 1166a2–4). Further, to the extent that such friends (and our interactions with them) are choiceworthy for the sake of theoretically wise understanding, the relevant “for the sake of” relation need not be instrumental. For instance, our engagement with friends may be for the sake of theoretical contemplation by *approximating* it. On approximation as a teleological relationship, see Lear (2004: Chapter 4). On ways that engagement with friends approximates theoretical contemplation, see Walker (2010b: 191–2).
 - 27 Yu (2007: 220).
 - 28 Sim (2007: 211).
 - 29 For fuller discussion, see Burnyeat (1980).
 - 30 See Nussbaum (1994: Chapter 2).
 - 31 For further argument, see Owens (1987: 9, 11), Sherman (2002; 2006), and Walker (2013a).
 - 32 Quoted by Van Norden (2007: 157). *Mengzi* 4A1.5 also refers to the sage-king’s use of such instruments.

- 33 As Yao (2006: 357–8) comments on this passage: “In seeking knowledge, as Confucius teaches, all human individuals must begin their journeys with primary learning and practice (‘what is below’), then proceed to a higher view of human existence and affairs, and finally reach universal knowledge about the world and profound knowledge about human beings, equivalent to the knowledge of the Way (*Dao*), destiny (*ming*), and heaven (*tian*) (‘what is above’).” If this is how we should understand *Analects* 14.35, then the Aristotelian can argue that *sophia* promises to hold special value for offering such universal and profound understanding. Still, the meaning of *Analects* 14.35 is somewhat vexed.
- 34 On Confucius’s responsiveness to the particular needs of his students, see for example Van Norden (2007: 58).
- 35 Walker (2013b).
- 36 On Aristotle and Zhu Xi, see Chang (1957: 253–6), Clark (1975: 212–16), and Watson (1978). Translations from Zhu Xi are from Gardner’s (1990) *Learning to Be a Sage* [LBS] collection.
- 37 On *gewu*, see Angle (2009: Chapter 8).
- 38 Ivanhoe (2000: 49).
- 39 See Liu (2001: 143).
- 40 Van Norden (2007: 356) appears willing to grant that Confucians should hold that theoretical understanding is useful in some way. Yet on the view that Van Norden endorses, “theoretical understanding is a means to achieving other goods than an ultimate goal.”
- 41 Ames and Rosemont (2011: 18) helpfully point out the tendency for Western philosophers to see something “lacking” in Asian philosophical views, something for which Western philosophy can compensate. The interlocutors in cross-cultural philosophical discussion, I agree, should be open to the other side’s insights. On “constructive engagement” as a model for such dialogue, see Angle (2009: 7).
- 42 Versions of the paper on which this chapter is based were presented in a symposium for the International Society for Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy (organized by Brad Cokelet, at the Eastern APA) and at a conference on “The Virtue Turn” (organized by Chienkuo Mi, Ernest Sosa, and Michael Slote, at Soochow University, Taipei). I thank the audiences on those occasions for their helpful comments and engagement, and productive questions and challenges.

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