

Comparison of the Concept of Virtue between Chinese and Western Philosophy

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Abstract: Although Aristotle and Confucian ethics both fall in the category of virtue ethics, their understandings of virtues vary widely. Aristotle believed virtues came from a rational soul, which was closely related to his differentiation between people's souls and bodies. Thus the realization of virtues depends on carrying out concrete activities. In the *Great Learning*, illustrious virtues are endowed by heaven. Deeply rooted in humans' nature, they will remain unharmed. The most important thing about manifesting one's virtues lies in discovering the fact that illustrious virtues are complete in everyone. Such differences come from their different understandings of the essence of humans. Aristotle understood people from the dualistic perspective of body and soul, while the *Great Learning* interprets people from the perspective of life. Thus the ways of achieving virtues vary widely.

1. Introduction

Aristotle's concept of virtue and "illustrating illustrious virtues" in the *Great Learning*, a traditional Confucian classic of China, both refer to people's natural (essential) moral life. On the other hand, both are representative concepts conveying widely different philosophical thoughts. Taking prudence and "resting" as an example, prudence describes the ability to select a wonderful good activity. According to Aristotle, practicing virtues is embodied in the interactive relationship between the soul and the body, while prudence is a medium of communication between the body and the soul. For one thing, it pays attention to just and noble things. For another, it ensures people have the means of realizing virtues. Prudence has two characteristics. Firstly, it is a quality of one's soul based on the soul. Secondly, it regulates the way for people to achieve virtues. On the contrary, the *Great Learning* refers to the state of "realizing virtues" with "resting", namely "resting in ultimate peace". According to Zhu Xi's statement, it means reaching "the ultimate extreme of reason". Meanwhile, "resting" can be used to describe various specific virtues. For another example, "a gentleman should be benevolent; an official should be respectable; a son should be filial; a father should be kind; interacting with nationals should rest in honesty" (*Variorum of Chapters and Verses of Four Books*, p.6). Although the concepts of prudence and resting both introduce the proper limits of people's moral behaviors, prudence is the highest point of practical virtues. Above prudence, there is a higher contemplative virtue. Conversely, prudence is the highest requirement of virtues. It is not only the extreme of concrete practice (all principles are indispensable with learning) but also the extreme state of the abstract reason (respecting virtues)^①. It can be found that Aristotle's concept of virtue and the concept of illustrating virtue in *Great Learning* are widely different.

2. Virtue and Illustrating Virtue

Aristotle believed that "happiness is the activity for the soul to reach complete virtues" (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, 110.2a.5). Thus it can be seen that happiness and virtues are realized through the soul. Classifying the soul into different parts creates different and corresponding virtues. First of all, the soul is divided into parts with and without logic. The logos part corresponds to rational virtue. As was mentioned in the introduction, the logos thinks about different objects. The part thinking about permanent and unchanged things creates rational virtues, while the part thinking about changeable things produces practical and rational virtues. The non-logos part is divided into two parts. One part provides nutrients and is plant-based, commonly owned by all life. Aristotle

thought this part was irrelevant to people's virtues. Another part is about desires. This part does not create logos, but can abide by the logos in people with self-discipline. In this sense, this part has logos, and it produces virtuous morality, such as the commonly said bravery and abstinence. The following figure shows Aristotle's division of soul and virtue.

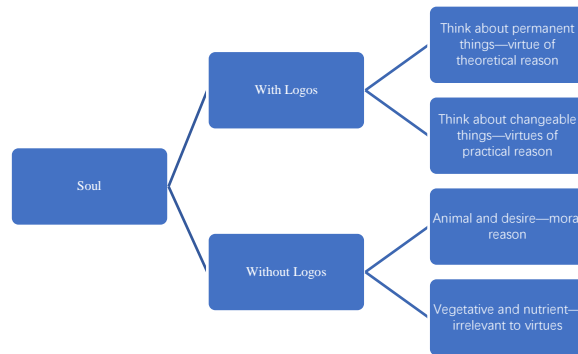


Figure 1

As the most core concept of the *Great Learning*, illustrating virtues lays the foundation for investigating things, completing knowledge, rectifying the heart, being sincere, cultivating the person, regulating the family, governing the country, and making the kingdom tranquil. Zheng Xuan noted: “Those who illustrate their virtues are truly manifesting their ultimate virtues”. Kong Yinda said: “By manifesting one’s illustrious virtues, one’s existing virtues are more radiant.” (*Rites Justice*). According to Zheng Xuan, illustrating virtue is the ultimate virtue. Kong Yinda, however, thinks the ultimate virtue is the bright virtue. Zhu Xi’s annotations of illuminating virtues have been widely accepted by annotation masters over the past generations. He said, “People who illustrate virtues come from heaven, have composed attitudes, and are clear about everything in the world.” (*Variorum of Chapters and Verses of Four Books*, p.4) He thought illuminating virtues came from heaven, was bright and not gloomy, knowing the principles of everything related to worldly conducts. Subsequently, scholars of the Song Dynasty fully interpreted this annotation. For example, Ni Si noted: “Only people are the wisest creatures of everything, who insist on their original intentions and are wise” (Collection of Rites, Volume No.149). It still emphasizes that illustrating virtues is the bright quality everyone is born with.

According to the investigations of virtues and illustrious virtues, both are natures (souls) of people. Aristotle’s virtues exist when people’s souls are realized, while illustrious virtues exist in everyone’s instinct. Secondly, both are divided into internal virtues and external virtues. Aristotle’s internal virtues are manifested as rational reason, such as wisdom and intelligence, while his external virtues are reflected as the moral virtues produced in the practical process, such as abstinence and generosity. The inner aspect of virtues is reflected as self-cultivation, namely investigating things, completing knowledge, rectifying the heart, and being sincere. The external virtues are mainly shown as cultivating the person, regulating the family, governing the country, and making the country peaceful. First of all, Aristotle thought people’s virtue is a part of people and irrelevant to people’s bodies. However, the virtues in souls need to be realized, which makes the body an indispensable part. As a result, it leads to the division between rational virtue and moral virtue. Illustrious virtue comes from heavenly principles yet exists in humanities. Also, it is closely related to people’s bodies. Secondly, Aristotle thought virtues would be ruined. What behaviors people have will determine their characters. Only by being just can one become a just man. If we did something unfair, it would ruin our virtues. As a complete quality in humanity, it may be covered yet not ruined. Zhu Xi commented: “(Illustrating virtues) It is restricted by the personality and covered by human desires. Sometimes, it is gloomy. However, the bright essence of virtues never stops for a second.” (*Variorum of Chapters and Verses of Four Books*, p.4) Master Zhu thought people’s “air” would hinder the manifestation of illustrious virtues, yet virtue would not be polluted itself. Wu Ruyu commented: “People are all born with virtues (illustrious virtues). It is either touched by things or covered”. Wu also thought illustrious virtues may be covered by things yet what people were born with.

The following table compares the differences between the two concepts of virtues

Table 1

	Concept	Realization Means	Ultimate Virtues
Aristotle: Prudence	Soul and Body	Internal path: morality External path: politics	Contemplative Virtue
<i>Great Learning</i> Illustrating virtue	Heavenly principles and covering	Internal path: Investigate things, complete knowledge, rectify the heart and be sincere (self-cultivation) External path: regulate the family, govern the country, make the country peaceful	Human extreme (status extreme)
Similarities	Belong to humans	Emphasize practice	Transcend limited life

3. Dualistic Approach and View of Life

Aristotle's concept of virtue differs from the concept of illuminating virtue in the *Great Learning*. It is mainly because people's understanding of humanities and their relationship with the world vary. Aristotle understands people, a natural being, according to his theory of four causes, thinking people are combinations of forms and materials. The *Great Learning* understands people from the perspective of life: A person's virtue, longevity, and death are all endowed by heaven.

Aristotle thought a person, as a natural being, consisted of the form and material. Respectively speaking, a person's form consists of souls, while the material consists of one's body. A person can lead a virtuous life just because of the logos in his soul. Such was Aristotle's unique understanding of the way of the world. In the dualistic opinion of the soul and body, a person aims to realize his soul. According to Aristotle, a soul is divided into plant soul, animal soul, and rational soul, which respectively correspond to the nutrients, movement, and ability of contemplation. A rational soul has logos, while the animal soul and plant soul have none. In the person, the animal soul corresponds to the desire part. Although the desire part contains no logos, it is still affected by the rational soul as if the father treats children. Virtues are produced because the soul is realized on different levels of humans' practical activities. Namely, desires are reasonably met. In the meantime, one's body and the environment outside the body constantly change, where the soul can create different virtues. Thus Aristotle thought people pursued a happy life because it was required by their souls and what their souls aim at. Taking the soul as the aim is a necessity for the precondition of theoretical ration. Meanwhile, the difference between the soul and body divides the theoretical virtue and moral virtue.

By comparison, the concept of virtues in the *Great Learning* is from the Chinese people's view of life. Illuminating the virtue exists in the sense that a person is the subject of life and belongs to the life-nature life structure. Destiny emphasizes that life is endowed by heaven and cares about the trajectory of life. Conversely, sex is a substantial component of life and the nature of living, which caress about the development inclination of life. The *Great Learning* said, "Often give considerations to the mandate of heaven". It proved that illustrious virtue is the most significant in humans' virtues and a quality endowed by heaven.

Aristotle thought, "Virtues would be cultivated and ruined by the same reason and approach" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b, 6-7). However, illustrious virtue will not be lost in humanities. Does the problem of virtue exist in the system of illustrious virtue? Of course, it does. Illustrating virtues refer to the ability to reflect on what is inherent in life. This reflective ability forms various concrete forms of virtues in people's life activities. The *Great Learning* mentioned benevolence, respect, filial piety, kindness, and trust, all of which are results of reflecting over life by humanities. For example, benevolence is the reflection and regulation of living, while justice is the regulation and judgment of the relationships between lives. Of course, people also reject reflecting over life when interacting with the outside world, which covers illustrious virtues. As virtues cannot be revealed, it may lead to immoral behaviors. However, it does not affect the fact that illustrious virtues exist in

humanities. Illustrious virtues are implemented on a wide range in one's life and have the significance of transcending morals. As the ultimate source of living virtues, it endows the significance of living not only to humans but also to all lives. Therefore, such virtues can be mutually identified in humans and other living organisms. As is said by Cheng Yi, "The vitality of everything is most spectacular." It cannot be understood from Aristotle's opinion that the soul and body are separated.

4. Realization of Souls and Self-Cultivation Basis

Regarding how to solve problems concerning virtues, Chinese philosophy and Aristotle's philosophy also uphold widely different thoughts. According to Aristotle, the virtue of souls inclined towards the body produces practical virtues, while orienting on oneself and other forms create contemplative virtues. Compared with practical virtues, contemplative virtue has the final goal. The soul is realized through the body step by step. It is also in this process that the virtues of souls shift from potential to reality. Secondly, Aristotle's happiness has a public nature. He also thought a happy life was based on city-states. "People are political animals", which means they inevitably belong to one political group, and the realization of virtues only exists in the political practice of city-states. In childhood, a person receives education in city-states and develops good habits. In youth, the person participates in the political life of city-states, which cultivates such morality as bravery, abstinence, justice, and friendliness. Eventually, people led a contemplative life in their advanced years and achieved the final contemplative morality. Lastly, the process of realizing the highest morality is natural and teleological. He thought the subjects of politics experienced the change from family to the village, from village to city-states, and eventually to contemplative holders. It is the change that naturally occurs. Aristotle said, "In every continuous process that has an ending, each stage aims to achieve the final ending." (Physics, p.63) In the continuous process where virtues are realized, the family, village, and city-states are all preparations for the final contemplative life. While living in the family and villages, one needed to engage in production activities. However, only the elderly people living in city-states had leisure, could afford a contemplative life, and achieve the highest contemplative virtues. It means the soul's virtues extend in the living world on different levels. Such an orderly living world consists of the process where the highest virtues are realized. Eventually, the soul completely realizes itself.

In the *Great Learning*, "investigating things, completing knowledge, rectifying the heart, being sincere, cultivating the person, regulating the family, governing the country, and making the kingdom tranquil" are methods for teaching a person to realize his virtues. The *Great Learning* emphasizes basing on self-cultivation. "Everyone from the emperor to the ordinary masses are based on self-cultivation" (*Variorum of Chapters and Verses of Four Books*, p.5) Although the emperor and the masses have different statuses, they make equal efforts for self-cultivation. It is because the cultivation refers to not the physical body but humanity. Thus self-cultivation is the root of illuminating virtues. By comparing Aristotle's rational virtue and moral virtue, self-cultivation (including investigating things, completing knowledge, rectifying the heart, and being sincere) can be understood as a way of knowing about virtues. All these efforts aim at discovering the illustrious virtue in humanity, which plays the same role as prudence and wisdom. They provide us with knowledge of illustrious virtues, such knowledge should be discovered and experienced in the process of "investigating things (dealing with everything). "Rectifying the heart and being sincere" means one affirms the moral knowledge in his heart and realizes the fact that such knowledge can be found in humanity. "Cultivating the person, regulating the family, and governing the country", the same as Aristotle's moral virtues, are oriented towards the practice dimension, including the requirements on participating in politics. Unlike Aristotle's opinion that regards city-states as places for virtue realization, the *Great Learning* thinks family, country, and the world are all places for realizing virtues. If a person realizes that virtues lie in himself, the place where he is in does not prevent him from manifesting his illustrious virtues. As a master of the family, he will make the family harmonious. As the governor of a country, he ensures that the country prospers, and common people live and work in content. As the ruler of the entire world, he is capable of bringing peace and

stability to the world.

In the *Great Learning*, virtues are achieved according to a given order step by step rather than developed naturally based on goals. The sequence places no strict requirements on abiding from the first link to the last link. In other words, people with the virtues of tranquilizing heaven do not necessarily need having the virtues of governing a country. Everyone has a different social status, which varies widely in different environments. The emperor of a country is also a husband or father in his family. Also, the virtues of an emperor and husband vary widely. Therefore, a person has different moral considerations for different moral status. However, all these considerations are based on the measurement of destiny and generally acknowledged the truth. The realization of a person's virtues aims not at contemplating virtues but reaching the extremes of current moral status-human extremes.

5. Conclusions

According to the analysis of two virtues above, Aristotle's virtue is similar to illustrating virtues regarding the structure. For example, both consider the source of virtues, think about the means of realizing virtues, and focus on the highest virtues. On the other hand, both concepts widely differ in theoretical contents: Aristotle divided a person into soul and body. Taking city-states as an example, the soul can realize itself and eventually reach permanent virtues on meditation. Conversely, *Great Learning* is based on one's life. It affirms one's ability to reflect over life and eventually reach the mutual identification between living organisms and the harmonious state.

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