

Virtue Ethicist of the Ideal Type: Aristotle or Zhu Xi?

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Abstract

There has been an impressive revival of virtue ethics as a rival to deontology and consequentialism in contemporary Western normative ethics. Correspondingly, many comparative philosophers have shown a great interest in finding virtue ethics potentials in other philosophical traditions in the world, the most impressive of which is Confucianism. While the result of such comparative studies is equally impressive, in almost all these studies, scholars tend to use a historical example of virtue ethics in the Western philosophical tradition, particularly the Aristotelian one, as the ideal type of virtue ethics, to measure historical examples of virtue ethics in other philosophical traditions. The result is thus conceivably skewed: however great these non-Western examples of virtue ethics are, they are perceived to be deficient in one way or another in comparison with the Aristotelian one. In this paper, I first construct an ideal type of virtue ethics in its contrast with ideal types of consequentialism and deontology: a normative ethics in which virtue is primary. I then use this ideal type of virtue ethics to measure Aristotle's virtue ethics and Zhu Xi's virtue ethics, both regarded as historical types of virtue ethics, concluding that Zhu Xi's is closer to the ideal type of virtue ethics than Aristotle's.

Keywords: Zhu Xi, Aristotle, Virtue Ethics, Confucianism, Comparative Philosophy

Etika vrlin idealnega tipa: Aristotel ali Zhu Xi?

Izvilleček

V sodobni zahodni normativni etiki je opazna izjemna oživitev etike kreposti, ki se postavlja kot tekunica deontologiji in konsekencializmu. Kot odziv na to so se številni primerjalni filozofi z velikim zanimanjem posvetili raziskovanju potencialov etike kreposti v drugih filozofskih tradicijah po svetu, pri čemer izstopa konfucianizem. Kljub izjemnim rezultatom takšnih primerjalnih študij pa teoretiki in teoretičarke v skoraj vseh teh študijah pogosto uporabljajo zgodovinske primere etike kreposti iz zahodne filozofske tradicije, še posebej Aristotelove, kot idealen model za vrednotenje etike kreposti v zgodovini drugih filozofskih tradicij. To lahko privede do pristranskega dojemanja: ne glede na to, kako izjemni so ti nezahodni primeri etike kreposti, se jih v primerjavi z aristotelovsko

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na tak ali drugačen način dojema kot pomanjkljive. V članku najprej razvijem idealen tip etike kreposti v kontrastu z idealnimi tipi konsekencializma in deontologije, pri čemer gre za normativno etiko, kjer je krepost postavljena v ospredje. Nato uporabim ta idealni tip etike kreposti za oceno Aristotelove in Zhu Xijeve etike kreposti, ki ju smatramo za zgodovinska primera, in sklenem, da je Zhu Xijeva etika vrlin bližja idealnemu tipu etike kreposti kot Aristotelova.

Ključne besede: Zhu Xi, Aristotel, etika vrlin, konfucianizem, primerjalna filozofija

Introduction

In the last a few decades, virtue ethics, once regarded as ethics appropriate only for the ancient people, has experienced a very impressive revival, becoming a serious rival to deontology and utilitarianism, once considered to be the only appropriate ethics for the modern people (see Slote 2015). There are at least three indications for the flourishing of virtue ethics today. First, virtue ethics itself has become pluralized: while Aristotelianism is still the mainstream of virtue ethics, there are other schools of contemporary virtue ethics primarily drawing on other philosophical traditions, such as the Stoic, the Humean, the Nietzschean, and the Deweyan, among others. Second, while at the beginning of its revival, virtue ethicists devoted their main efforts to criticizing its rivals, deontology and consequentialism, virtue ethicists today are more seriously reflecting on its own potential or actual difficulties and respond to criticisms its rivals have started to lodge against them; in contrast, its rivals, especially Kantianism, and especially in China, start to unrelentlessly attack virtue ethics. Third, scholars doing comparative philosophy have become eager to look for the virtue ethics potentials in their own traditions, and thus articles and even books abound in Hindu virtue ethics (Gier 2005), Buddhist virtue ethics (Kewn 1992), Islamic virtue ethics (Bucar 2017), Daoist virtue ethics (Huang 2010a; Huang 2015), and, most importantly, Confucian virtue ethics (Huff 2015; Walsh 2015; Harris 2014).

However, comparative studies of virtue ethics have generally tended to use a historical instance of virtue ethics in the Western philosophical tradition, particularly the Aristotelian virtue ethics, as a measure, first to identify its main features and then try to see whether such features can be found in the tradition the comparatist is concerned with in order to identify whether virtue ethics also exists in that tradition. An obvious deficiency of such a comparative work is that, since it uses a historical instance of virtue ethics in the Western philosophical tradition as a paradigm to measure instances of virtue ethics in a different philosophical tradition, it not only tends to cut the feet of latter to fit the shoes of the former but also to draw the conclusion that, while the latter does contain something like virtue

ethics, it is somewhat defective or at least deficient in the sense that it doesn't contain all the features the former has or doesn't contain them as systematically, thoroughly, and coherently as the former does. This problem can be seen better if we imagine a comparativist starts off his or her comparative work from the opposite side: to use the instance of virtue ethics in the tradition the comparativist is concerned with, Confucian virtue ethics for example, as the paradigm, first to identify its main features and then try to see whether such features can be found in an instance of virtue ethics in the Western philosophical tradition, Aristotle's ethics for example, in order to identify whether the latter is a virtue ethics. We can easily imagine the result: although we can say Aristotle's ethics is something like virtue ethics, compared to Confucian ethics as the paradigm of virtue ethics, it is more or less defective or deficient. This tells us that, in order to determine whether a particular ethical theory in a particular historical tradition is a virtue ethics or not, we should not use a different ethical theory in a different historical tradition as a measure. Instead, we should use virtue ethics of an ideal type as a common measure to be applied to any ethical theories in any historical traditions. For this reason, in this essay, I shall first explain what virtue ethics of the ideal type is or should be (Section 2), and then apply it to Aristotle's ethics, concluding that it is short of being a virtue ethics of the ideal type (Section 3), and then apply it to the neo-Confucian Zhu Xi's ethics, arguing that it is a genuine virtue ethics of the ideal type or at least closer to it than Aristotle's (Sections 4), before drawing a brief conclusion (Section 5)

Ideal Type of Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is not any type of ethics that includes virtue talks, as otherwise almost every normative ethics would be a virtue ethics, since almost every normative ethics includes some type of virtue talks to some degree. The best way to characterize the ideal type of virtue ethics is to see how it is contrasted with other two familiar (ideal) types of normative ethics: deontology and consequentialism. In contrast to deontology, in which duty or principle is primary, and consequentialism, in which consequence of actions/rules are primary, virtue ethics is a normative theory in which virtue is primary. To say that virtue is primary in virtue ethics is not to say, on the one hand, that moral principles or consequence cannot have any role in virtue ethics; nor is it to say, on the other hand, that virtue cannot have any role to play in deontology or consequentialism.

On the one hand, virtue ethics does not (have to) exclude consequence or principle. A benevolent person, i.e., a person with the virtue of benevolence, for example,

cannot be the one who doesn't care about the consequence of his or her action at all. It is in this sense that Michael Slote claims that agent-based moralities, his term for virtue ethics, or the pure form thereof, "do take consequences in account because they insist on or recommend an overall state of motivation that worries about and tries to produce good consequences. Someone genuinely concerned with the well-being of another person wants good consequences for that other" (Slote 2001, 34). However, this doesn't mean that virtue ethics is no different from consequentialism. On the one hand, "if someone does make every effort to find out relevant facts and is careful in acting, then I think she cannot be criticized for acting immorally, however badly things turn out" (ibid.); On the other hand, "if the bad results are due to her lack of intelligence or other cognitive defects she is incapable of learning about, we can make epistemic criticisms of her performance, but these needn't be thought of as moral" (ibid.). In both of these two cases, in contrast, consequentialism will make negative moral judgements, as the consequence turns out to be bad.

Similarly, virtue ethics can also leave room for moral principles or rules. It's true that a completely virtuous person, like Confucius in his 70's when he can "follow what his heart desires without trespassing any moral rules" (*Analects* 2.4), has no need for moral principles. However, moral rules are certainly helpful for people who are not (so) virtuous and would like to be virtuous. So although radical virtue ethicist, such as Anscombe, would like to replace virtue for moral principles, most virtue ethicists today allow moral principles to play their roles in virtue ethics. However, there are a few salient features of such rules in virtue ethics, which distinguish it from deontology. First, these rules are derived from human characters, both virtuous and vicious. In Aristotle, corresponding to every feeling, there are three character traits, one virtue and two vices. So, as pointed out by Rosalind Hursthouse, "Not only does each virtue generate a prescription—do what is honest, charitable, generous—but each vice a prohibition—do not do what is dishonest, uncharitable, mean" (Hursthouse 1999, 36); Second the primarily function of such rules in virtue ethics is not to provide action guides for non-virtuous people but to provide opportunities for such people to realize the internal value of moral actions so that they will form a habit to act morally and become virtuous; Third, even when following such rules, a person at least need to be willing to acquire the corresponding virtues and in this sense and to that degree is already virtuous. This is because "a certain amount of virtue and corresponding moral or practical wisdom (*phronesis*) might be required both to interpret the rules and to determine *which* rule was most appropriately to be applied in a particular case" (ibid., 40; emphasis original). So, while virtue ethics can have moral principles, such principles are derived from, subordinated to, and relying upon virtue, which is primary.

On the other hand, deontology and consequentialism can also leave room for virtues. Kantian ethics is a typical version of deontology, which aims to formulate some formal principle(s), the so-called categorical imperative(s), to determine whether a person's action has any moral worth. However, virtue is an important concept in Kant's ethics as well. Indeed, while the first part of his *The Metaphysics of Morals* is "Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Right", its second part is "Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue". In this part, Kant provides the following definition of virtue: "the capacity and deliberate resolve to withstand a strong but unjust opponent is fortitude (*fortitudo*); and fortitude in relation to the forces opposing a moral attitude of will *in us* is virtue (*virtus, fortitudo moralis*)" (Kant 1964, 38). This definition is quite revealing. For Kant, the moral attitude of will is free, rational, and without any empirical elements. However, human beings are not only rational but also empirical. Thus a person as an empirical being often has the natural inclinations to not follow moral laws legislated by the person as a rational being, and virtue is precisely the fortitude to resist such natural inclinations. Here, virtue is clearly subordinated to moral law: its function is to help one overcome anti-moral forces and thus follow moral laws. Indeed, virtue here understood as a kind of fortitude, as pointed out by Robert Johnson and Cureton Adam, is very different from virtue in virtue ethics, where it is a kind of habitualized disposition of emotions and desires. As a matter of fact, Kant's virtue is more like continence in Aristotle, which, just like incontinence, is not virtue (Johnson and Cureton 2016, §11).

For this reason, we can understand why attempts to interpret the Kantian ethics as a virtue ethics cannot succeed. In her paper, "Kant after Virtue", published in 1984 on a book symposium on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Onora O'Neill, focusing on Kant's idea of maxim, argues that Kant is a virtue ethicist. This is because, in her view, maxims, as "underlying principles that make sense of an agent's varied specific intentions," "can have little to do with the rightness or wrongness of acts of specific types, and much more to do with the underlying moral quality of a life, or aspects of a life.... To have maxims of a morally appropriate sort would then be a matter of leading certain sort of life, or being a certain sort of person" (O'Neill 1989, 152). Thus, she claims that Kant "sees our duties as in the first place duties to act out of certain maxims—that is, to structure our moral lives along certain fundamental lines, or to have certain virtues" (ibid., 153). However, as we know, the most fundamental concept in Kant is not maxim but duty. Sometimes we have to refrain from acting on a maxim. It is duty that can tell whether we should act on a maxim or not. Realizing that, O'Neill adds a "Postscript" to this paper when collected in her *Constructions of Reason: Exploration of Kant's Practical Philosophy* a few years later, acknowledging that "characterizing Kant as offering an ethic of

virtue because he insists on the priority of principles over their outward expression is misleading.... Kant's fundamental notion is that of the morally worthy principle that provides guidelines not only for matters of outward right and obligation, but for good characters and institutions as well" (ibid., 161–62).

In his "Kant's Virtue Ethics", instead of maxims, Robert B. Louden focuses on Kant's idea of "good will", which, Kant claims, is the only thing that could be considered good without qualification. Since Kant's good will is "a state of character which becomes the basis for all of one's action," Louden argues that for Kant "what is fundamentally important in his ethics is not acts but agent" (Louden 1997, 289). In this sense, Kant may also be regarded as a virtue ethicist, since for Kant "virtue is the human approximation of the good will" and "the good will is the only unqualified good", and thus "moral virtue, for Kant, is foundational, and not a concept derivative or secondary" (ibid., 290). However, Louden immediately realizes that Kant is not a genuine virtue ethicist:

Both the good will and virtue are defined in terms of obedience to moral law, for they are both wills which are in conformity to moral law and which act out of respect for it ... Since human virtue is defined in terms of conformity to law and the categorical imperative, it appears now that what is primary in Kantian ethics is not virtue for virtue's sake but obedience to rules. Virtue is the heart of the ethical for Kant, in the sense that it is the basis for all judgments of moral worth. But Kantian virtue is itself defined in terms of the supreme principle of morality ... therefore is subordinate to the moral law, and this makes him look like an obedience-to-rules theorist. (Louden 1997, 7).

Similarly, consequentialism can also allow virtue to play its role. In Chapter 2 of his *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill discusses an objection to his claim that we do everything for the sake of happiness: what about the hero or martyr, who does things "for the sake of something which he prizes more than his individual happiness"? To respond, Mill asks,

But this something, what is it, unless the happiness of others, or some of the requisites of happiness? It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely one's own portion of happiness, or chances of it: but, after all, this self-sacrifice must be for some end; it is not its own end; and if we are told that its end is not happiness, but virtue, which is better than happiness, I ask, would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr did not believe that it would earn for others immunity from similar sacrifices? (Mill 1972, 16)

So virtue for Mill is important only instrumentally, because virtuous people tend to increase happiness by their self-sacrifice, and indeed we regard someone as virtuous only in the sense and to the degree that they increase happiness. Indeed, if one makes self-sacrifice for purpose other than increasing others' happiness, then he "is no more deserving of admiration than the ascetic mounted on his pillar. He may be an inspiring proof of what men can do, but assuredly not an example of what they should" (*ibid.*, 16–17). So virtue in Mill's ethics is not primary; the consequence of happiness is primary in his ethics.

This is also true even in Chapter 4, which is entirely devoted to the topic of virtue, of the same book when Mill seems to argue even that virtue has its intrinsic and not merely instrumental value. Here, Mill not only says that it is palpable that people desire things other than happiness, virtue, for example, and the absence of vice and that his utilitarianism doesn't deny it; but he also maintains that virtue "is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself," and utilitarian moralists "not only place virtue at the very head of the things which are good as means to the ultimate end, but they also recognise as a psychological fact the possibility of its being, to the individual, a good in itself, without looking to any end beyond" (*ibid.*, 37). In this sense, we can seek virtue not only as a means to happiness but for itself. If so, virtue seems to have obtained its primacy, at least in terms of its intrinsic value, in Mill's utilitarianism. However this is not the case. On the one hand, at the very beginning of Chapter 4, Mill states that "happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end" (*ibid.*, 63–64). Here he makes his point crystal clear: happiness is the *only* thing desirable as an end, which must have excluded everything else, including virtue, as desirable as an end; all other things, which must include virtue, are desirable only as means to happiness. On the other hand, he states that to seek virtue as an end is not contradictory to the utility principle:

the mind is not in a right state, not in a state conformable to Utility, not in the state most conducive to the general happiness, unless it does love virtue in this manner – as a thing desirable in itself, even although, in the individual instance, it should not produce those other desirable consequences which it tends to produce, and on account of which it is held to be virtue. This opinion is not, in the smallest degree, a departure from the Happiness principle. (Mill 1972, 37).

Here, Mill still maintains the view that virtue tends to increase happiness and so one should seek it, but the point is that even if it does not have the instrumental value to produce happiness, one should still seek it, not as a means to happiness

but as an end in itself. Yet he says that even when one seeks virtue as an end and not as a means to happiness, there is no departure from the utility principle, which seems to be contradictory to what he said in Chapter 2 discussed above.

In Mill's view, happiness is the satisfaction of desire. In order to satisfy a desire, i.e., seek happiness, we often need to seek something else as a means to satisfying such a desire. Indeed, initially, this something else has only instrumental value: we seek it only because it helps us seek happiness and we will not seek it when it ceases to help us seek happiness. However, in the process of seeking this something as instrument, gradually we may have desires for it itself so much so that we will feel happy when our desire for this particular thing is satisfied even if it does not lead to the satisfaction of the desire we originally want to satisfy as an end. Here, "What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness, has come to be desired for its own sake. In being desired for its own sake it is, however, desired as part of happiness. The person is made, or thinks he would be made, happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by failure to obtain it" (Mill 1972, 38–39).

Mill uses money as an example to illustrate this point. Originally we don't desire money except for what it will bring to us. If it cannot bring to us what we want, we would not desire it. So in this sense money only has instrumental value. However, Mill points out,

the love of money is not only one of the strongest moving forces of human life, but money is, in many cases, desired in and for itself; the desire to possess it is often stronger than the desire to use it, and goes on increasing when all the desires which point to ends beyond it, to be compassed by it, are falling off. It may be then said truly, that money is desired not for the sake of an end, but as part of the end. From being a means to happiness, it has come to be itself a principal ingredient of the individual's conception of happiness. (Mill 1972, 38)

Similar to money are power, fame, and, yes, virtue:

Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain. But through the association thus formed, it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good ... And consequently, the utilitarian standard ... enjoins and requires the cultivation of the love of virtue up to the greatest strength possible, as being above all things important to the general happiness. (ibid., 39)

What is crucial here is that, when Mill says that when we seek virtue in itself and not merely as a means to happiness, he doesn't say that we are seeking virtue not for the sake of happiness; instead, he says that we are seeking it as a *part* of happiness. For Mill, happiness is not "an abstract idea" but "a concrete whole", to use his own terms, consisting of different parts. Indeed, in comparison with satisfaction of primitive desire, the happiness derived by having virtue is "more valuable ... both in permanency ... and in intensity" (*ibid.*). It is in this sense that Mill concludes that "it results from the preceding considerations, that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness" (*ibid.*).

So virtue ethics as an ideal type is a normative ethics in which virtue is primary, just as deontology is one in which duty or moral principle is primary and consequentialism is one in which consequence is primary. Virtue ethics doesn't have to, usually doesn't, and often cannot afford to, exclude moral principles or consequence as long as they are reducible to, derived from, and subordinated to virtue, just as deontology can allow virtue (and possibly consequence) to play their roles as long as they are reducible to, or derived from, and subordinated to duty or moral laws and consequentialism can leave room for virtue and moral laws as long as they are reducible to, derived from, and subordinated to consequence. As we generally agree that Kant is an example of deontologist of the ideal type and Mill one of consequentialist of the idea type, we are tempted to and normally do think Aristotle is an example of virtue ethicist of the ideal type, but it is here that we are facing a question.

Is Aristotle a Virtue Ethicist of the Ideal Type?

Aristotle's ethics is clearly different from modern normative theories of deontology and consequentialism, for both of which the rightness of actions is the primary concern. For Aristotle, however, right actions are actions that a virtuous person would characteristically do in circumstances, and thus the rightness of actions is dependent upon, derived from, and subordinated to the virtue of the agent's characters. So it is clear that in Aristotle's ethics virtue of the agent has the primacy over the rightness of action. This, however, doesn't necessarily mean that Aristotle's ethics is a virtue ethics of the ideal type. To know this, we need to know whether virtue of character has the primacy in this ethics as a whole; in other words, while virtue of characters is primary in comparison to the rightness of actions, we need to know whether there is anything that is more primary than virtues of the characters. When we start to ask this question, we may realize that, at least in two senses, as pointed out by Michael Slote, Aristotle's ethics comes short of being a virtue ethics of the ideal type.

Although Michael Slote doesn't deny that Aristotle's ethics is a virtue ethics, he says that it is not a pure or radical type of virtue ethics, which is equivalent to what I mean by virtue ethics of the ideal type. This is because, in Slote's view, in Aristotle's ethics, although virtue rather than action is the focus and virtue is prior to action, virtue is not primary. Slote argues that a pure and radical type of virtue ethics is an agent-based ethics and not merely agent-focused or agent-prior, and for him, Aristotle's ethics can at most be interpreted as agent-focused or agent-prior but not agent-based. According to one prevailing interpretation of Aristotle's ethics, in contrast to modern ethics that is focused on action, Aristotle's ethics is focused on the agent, in the sense that "Aristotle seems to focus more on the evaluation of agents and character traits than on the evaluation of actions. Moreover, for Aristotle an act is noble or fine if it is one that a noble or virtuous individual would perform, and he does say that the virtuous individual is the measure of virtue in action" (Slote 2001, 5). However, why can the virtuous individual be the measure of rightness in action? This is because Aristotle "characterizes the virtuous individual as someone who sees or perceives what is good or fine or right to do in any given situation" (ibid.). If this is the case, Slote argues, a virtuous person does it because it is a right thing to do, which forms a contrast to the view that it is a right thing to do because it is what a virtuous individual would do. In other words, according to this view, whether a thing is a right thing to do or not is in a sense independent of the agent. A virtuous person is different from non-virtuous persons only because this person has a special ability to perceive or otherwise know what is the right thing to do, but the criterion of the right thing to do is independent of the virtuous person, and virtuous person has to use this criterion to make judgement about whether a particular thing is the right thing to do or not. It is in this sense that Slote argues that Aristotle's ethics, interpreted this way, is only an agent-focused ethics and so is not a virtue ethics in a pure or radical sense. In the terms used in this paper, we may say that, since the criterion of right action, which is primary, lies outside the agent and thus must also lie outside agent's virtues, virtue in such an ethics cannot be primary, and such an ethics therefore cannot be a virtue ethics of the ideal type.

However, Slote notices that there is another equally, if not more, prevailing interpretation of Aristotle. According to this interpretation, the way to determine whether an action is the right thing to do is to see whether it is what a virtuous person would characteristically do in circumstances. In other words, the rightness of action depends upon the virtuousness of the agent's character traits. In still other words, virtue is prior to action. However, whether a character trait is a virtue or not depends upon its relationship to something else, i.e., eudaimonia, which is primary in Aristotle's ethics. At the beginning of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle

says that every skill, inquiry, action, rational choice aims at some good. For example, the good medicine aims at health, the good economics aims at wealth, and the good military science aims at victory. Moreover, some of these skills, inquiries, actions, and rational choices come under some master ones, “as bridlemaking and other sciences concerned with equine equipment come under the science of horsemanship” (Aristotle 2004, 1094a), and so the end of the master one is more worthy of choice than the subordinate ones; or we choose the subordinate ends for the sake of the master one. For Aristotle, the master science of all master sciences, the highest science, is political science, and the good it aims at is what all agree upon, eudaimonia, i.e., happiness or human flourishing, although not all agree on what eudaimonia means. So it’s clear that eudaimonia has the overall primacy in his ethics. The question is how virtue is related to eudaimonia.

About this, Aristotle states clearly when he distinguishes among three types of ends we are seeking. There are ends that we aim at purely as means to other ends, which include wealth, flutes, and implements generally; there is end that we aim at just for itself and not as means to some other ends, which is eudaimonia; and there are ends we aim at both as means to other ends and for themselves, which include honour, pleasure, intellect, and every virtue. We do choose the ends of the third group

for themselves (since we would choose each of them even if they had no good effects), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness [eudaimonia], on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness; whereas happiness no one chooses for the sake of any of these nor indeed for the sake of anything else. (Aristotle 2004, 1097b)

In Slote’s view, since Aristotle’s ethics, interpreted this way, holds the view that

treats the evaluation of actions as derivative from independent aretaic character evaluations and to that extent the view can be described as an agent-prior one, but since the character evaluations are not regarded as fundamental and are supposed to be grounded in a theory or view of eudaimonia, the theory is not agent-based in the above terms. (I assume here that eudaimonia and the ideas of well-being and a good life are not themselves aretaic, even though some ethical views treat them as closely connected to or based in aretaic notions). (Slote 2001, 6–7)

In contrast, Slote argues, an agent-based ethics, or virtue ethics of the ideal type, “treats the moral or ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic (as opposed to deontic) ethical characterizations of

motives, character traits, or individuals. And such agent-basing is arguably not to be found in Aristotle” (ibid., 5). Here Slote emphasizes that the aretaic ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals are independent and fundamental in order to show that they are not dependent upon anything else. In Slote’s view, only the agent-based ethics can be regarded as a pure and radical type of virtue ethics, which is equivalent to virtue ethics of the ideal type used in this essay, because it alone maintains the primacy of virtue in such an ethics.¹

It may be objected that neither of the above interpretations of Aristotle’s ethics, particularly regarding the role or place of the virtue in it, is adequate. We have been emphasizing that, for Aristotle, virtue is subordinate to eudaimonia, but this, the objection goes, fails to see the genuine relationship between virtue and eudaimonia. To have a proper understanding of this objection, we may turn to Aristotle’s so-called function argument. Aristotle argues that the uniquely human function cannot be the life of nourishment and growth, as it is shared even by plants; it cannot be the sentient life either, as this is shared by animals. So, Aristotle claims, “what remains is a life, concerned in some way with action, of the element that possesses reason” (Aristotle 2004, 1098a). To relate virtue to such a life, Aristotle further points out,

If the characteristic activity of a human being is an activity of the soul in accordance with reason or at least not entirely lacking it ... and the characteristic activity of the good person to be to carry this out well and nobly, and a characteristic activity to be accomplished well when it is accomplished in accordance with the appropriate virtue; then if this is so, the human good [eudaimonia] turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and most complete. (ibid.)

1 Although Slote himself aims to develop an agent-based virtue ethics, which is different from Aristotle’s ethics that is either merely agent-focused (according to one interpretation) or agent-prior (according to another interpretation), because he refrains from providing an account of virtue, telling us what virtue is, while successful in maintaining the primacy of virtue, such an ethics, to use Gary Watson’s term, is non-explanatory, as it is strange for an ethics to not tell us what virtue is when virtue is the most fundamental concept in such an ethics. In an earlier work, Slote does try to provide an account of virtue: “traits of character can qualify as virtues through what they enable their possessors to do for themselves as well as through what they enable their possessors to do for others, and so we saw there that our ordinary employment of the aretaic notion of a virtue gives fundamental evaluative significance to the well-being of the self (i.e., the agent of an act or possessor of a trait) and to the well-being of others” (Slote 1992, 91). By doing so, Slote renders virtues secondary to the well-being of the self and others, which becomes primary in his ethics, and thus his ethics is no longer a virtue ethics of the ideal type.

We have said above that eudaimonia is ultimately primary in Aristotle's ethics, to which virtue is subordinate and we seek virtue, in addition to being for the sake of virtue itself, for the sake of eudaimonia. However, here virtue seems to be more primary than eudaimonia, since the latter is defined by the former: eudaimonia is "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." If so, Aristotle's ethics is a virtue ethics of the ideal type that we have been looking for.

However, unless we think that Aristotle is a thoroughly inconsistent philosopher, he would not hold this self-contradictory view that we seek virtue for the sake of eudaimonia which itself is defined by virtue. Richard Kraut argues that there is "no circularity in Aristotle's procedure. Happiness [eudaimonia] is the standard by which virtuous activity is judged; such activity has its prominence only because it meets the criteria Aristotle uses in his search for happiness" (Kraut 1976, 228). The criteria Aristotle uses in search for happiness, according to Kraut, includes (1) belonging "to a person in such an intimate way that it can be taken from him only with great difficulty" (1095b25-26), (2) consisting "in using a capacity that is distinctive of human beings, whatever that capacity turns out to be" (1092b22-1098a18), (3) not something that come "to us purely by chance (1099b20-25)," and (4) something that requires "hard work" (1176b28-30) (*ibid.*). So eudaimonia is final in Aristotle's system. The question is what eudaimonia is or what eudaimonia consists of. For Aristotle, whatever it is, it must meet above criteria, and it just turns out that virtue meets at least one of these criteria. So, Kraut continues, "It is not as though Aristotle is measuring the value of virtuous activity by means of a yardstick which has already been defined in terms of that activity. For [he] builds a reference to such activity into his definition of *eudaimonia* only after he has arrived at the conclusion that virtuous acts are among the principal ingredients of a happy life" (*ibid.*).

If Kraut's interpretation is correct, then Aristotle's definition of eudaimonia in terms of virtue doesn't render eudaimonia secondary to virtue and thus doesn't establish that Aristotle's ethics is a virtue ethics of the ideal type. However, even so, it appears that at least our interpretation of Aristotle's virtue as a means to eudaimonia, which renders virtue subordinate to eudaimonia, may still be wrong, as Kraut makes it clear that virtue is among the principal ingredients of eudaimonia. In other words, virtue is not instrumental to but constitutive of eudaimonia. Indeed this is perhaps the most prevailing interpretation of Aristotle among Aristotelian scholars. J. L. Ackrill, for example, compares the relationship between virtue and eudaimonia to the relationship between putting and playing golf or between playing golf and having a good holiday. The point is that

one does not putt *in order to* play golf as one buys a club in order to play golf; and this distinction matches that between activities that do not and

that do produce a product. It will be “because” you wanted to play golf that you are putting, and “for the sake” of a good holiday that you are playing golf; but this is because putting and golfing are *constituents of or ingredients in* golfing and having a good holiday respectively, not because they are necessarily preliminaries. Putting *is* playing golf (though not all that playing golf is), and golfing (in a somewhat different way) *is* having a good holiday (though not all that having a good holiday is. (Akrill 1999, 61)

With this analogy, to say that virtuous activities are for the sake of eudaimonia is not to say that these activities are means through which an end, eudaimonia, can be produced outside these activities; it is rather to say that these activities are constituents of or ingredients in eudaimonia. To act virtuously is living well (having eudaimonia), though it is not all eudaimonia is.

However, even if we agree that virtuous activities are constitutive of eudaimonia, it still does not mean that virtue and eudaimonia are therefore the same concept or otherwise equal in terms of their primacy in Aristotle’s ethics. Indeed, even Ackrill himself claims that here we still have “a kind of subordination which makes it perfectly possible to say that moral action is for the sake of *eudaimonia* without implying that it is a means of producing ... something other than itself” (ibid., 62). We may ask why virtue is still subordinated to eudaimonia when it is constitutive of eudaimonia. There are at least four things we can say to explain this.

First, since Aristotle clearly says both that we do virtuous things for the sake of eudaimonia and that virtuous activities are constitutive of eudaimonia, to do full justice to Aristotle, we should not opposing virtue as a means to eudaimonia and virtue as a constituent of eudaimonia and force ourselves to choose one of the two as the appropriate interpretation of Aristotle’s view. Instead, it is more appropriate to describe Aristotle’s virtue as constitutive means to eudaimonia. Constitutive means is in contrast to productive means. According to Kiera Setiya, productive means is an efficient cause. For example, our daily exercise is a productive means of health, where health is produced by and resides outside the daily exercise. In contrast, constitutive means is an example or a component of its end. For example, jogging is a constitutive means of daily exercise (Setiya 2007, 174). Clearly, virtue as a means to eudaimonia for Aristotle is not a productive means but constitutive means to eudaimonia. However, constitutive means is still a means, and a means, whether productive or constitutive, is subordinated to its end. It is in this sense that virtue, despite its being a constituent of eudaimonia, is subordinated to eudaimonia.

Second, for Aristotle, while virtue is constitutive of eudaimonia, eudaimonia is not exclusively constituted by virtue or virtuous activities. There are at least three constituents or components of eudaimonia: “the contemplative life is best; but since we are human we will be happy only if we act from the moral virtues; and as accessories we need the external goods” (Kraut 1976, 228). Now Aristotle doesn’t say eudaimonia is merely an aggregation of these three components or these three components in their interactions with each other.² If it is latter, then virtuous activities in themselves cannot be regarded as constituents of eudaimonia; only in their interaction with contemplation and external goods can they become constituents of eudaimonia, but virtuous activities in interaction with contemplation and external goods may not be the same as virtuous activities themselves. In this sense, clearly virtuous activities are subordinate to eudaimonia as the end. However, even if eudaimonia is merely an aggregation of the three components, including virtuous activities, there is still a good sense in which we can say virtuous activities are subordinate to eudaimonia. In this respect, Ackrill makes an important point with an interesting analogy:

eudaimonia, being absolutely final and genuinely self-sufficient, is more desirable than anything else in that it *includes* everything desirable in itself. It is best, and better than everything else, not in the way that bacon is better than eggs and tomatoes (and therefore the best *of the three* to choose), but in the way that bacon, eggs, and tomatoes is a better breakfast than either bacon or eggs or tomatoes—and is indeed the best breakfast without qualification. (Ackrill 1999, 64)

Here he makes it clear that eudaimonia is absolutely final and is more desirable than anything else, including virtue, which is part of eudaimonia.

Third, as we have seen, Aristotle says that we do indeed choose all virtues “for themselves (since we would choose each of them even if they had no good effects), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness [eudaimonia], on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness” (1097b). In the above, we have been talking about choosing virtues for the sake of eudaimonia, but what about choosing virtue for themselves? Does it mean that virtue is primary at least when we choose virtue for themselves? The key to answering this question is to see whether seeking virtue for themselves and seeking virtue for the

2 Ackrill raises this issue: “The very idea of constructing a compound end out of two or more independent ends may rouse suspicion. Is the compound to be thought of as a mere aggregate or as an organized system? If the former, the move to *eudaimonia* seems trivial—nor is it obvious that goods can be just added together. If the latter, if there is supposed to be a unifying plan, what is it?” (Ackrill 1999, 65)

sake of eudaimonia are related. While there are scholars, who, highlighting the similarity between Aristotle and Kant, believe that when we seek virtue for themselves we are not seeking virtue for the sake of eudaimonia, there are more scholars who emphasize the connection between the two. On the one hand, we have scholars like Kraut, according to whom, what Aristotle really says in the quoted passage is this:

We human beings choose to have some honor, pleasure, intelligence and virtue rather than none, and in so doing we are choosing these things for themselves. That is, even if nothing, not even happiness, resulted from these things, we would still rather have some of each than none. But in fact, we human beings do choose these goods for the sake of happiness, for some of us say that happiness is honor, some that it is pleasure, some that it is intelligence, and others that it is virtue. (Kraut 1976, 230)

In short, according to this interpretation, even seeking virtue in themselves is related to one's own eudaimonia. On the other hand, we have scholars like Jennifer Whiting, who provides a non-egoistical interpretation of Aristotle's view about choosing virtuous actions for themselves and for the sake of eudaimonia. According to this interpretation, choosing virtuous actions for themselves is compatible with choosing them for the sake of eudaimonia, both the eudaimonia of the agent and the eudaimonia of others. To illustrate it, she says that "[e]ven if temperance contributes primarily (though no doubt not exclusively) to the agent's own health and good disposition, generosity aims straightforwardly at the eudaimonia of others" (Whiting 2002, 281).

Finally, it is important to note that, as we have also seen above, Aristotle doesn't simply say that eudaimonia turns out to be the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, which seems to imply that virtue is constitutive of eudaimonia; rather, immediately after this, Aristotle adds that "if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and most complete" (Aristotle 2004, 1098a). We all know that Aristotle distinguishes between moral virtues, virtues that we are concerned with here, as our theme is virtue ethics, and intellectual virtues, and he makes it clear that intellectual virtues are best and most complete virtues. So if we understand this sentence in isolation from what Aristotle says elsewhere in his ethics, eudaimonia is activity of the soul in accordance with intellectual virtue, where the role of moral virtue, if at all, is not clear. Of course, almost no serious Aristotelian scholars think that we should read this sentence in such an isolation, and thus various theories have been developed to explain the relationship between moral virtue and intellectual virtue. Richard Kraut adopts a monist interpretation,

according to which philosophical contemplation is the single aim of a happy life; every other good is good and worth choosing only for contemplation's sake (Kraut 1989, 202–03, 211–13). In contrast, Irwin and Ackrill hold an inclusive interpretation, according to which the highest goal of human life contains a set of goods, including philosophical contemplation and virtuous actions (see Irwin 1991; Ackrill 1999). Gabriel Richardson Lear criticizes these two interpretations, arguing that the monistic interpretation cannot explain Aristotle's claim that one should choose virtuous actions for their own sake (as well as for the sake of contemplation), while the inclusivist interpretation cannot explain Aristotle's claim that contemplation is the highest good. In their stead, Lear proposes an approximation interpretation, according to which moral actions are choiceworthy for the sake of philosophical contemplation, as the former teleologically approximates and imitates the latter (Lear 2004, chapter 5). It is not my intention to join the debate. It seems to me, however, that, whichever interpretation we adopt, we cannot interpret away the fact that Aristotle himself says unequivocally that philosophical contemplation is the highest goal of human life, while virtuous actions can only have a secondary place.

While not all the points above I've made are without controversy, it is at least controversial to say that Aristotle has a virtue ethics of the ideal type as defined in the previous section of this paper. In addition to Slote, Gerasimos Santas claims that "the widespread belief that Aristotle had a virtue ethics is false" (Santas 1997, 281). Thomas Hurka also asks "the question of how distinctively virtue-ethical a theory is whose central explanatory property is in fact flourishing [eudaimonia] This ethics would not be at all distinctive if it took the virtues to contribute causally to flourishing, as productive means to a separately existing state of flourishing" (Hurka 2001, 233). Finally Gary Watson, for example, regards Aristotle's ethics as still an ethics of outcome, similar to ethical perfectionism, as it depends on a theory of ultimate good (see Watson 1997, 63). Watson himself does provide an account of virtue which he claims maintains the explanatory primacy of virtue without falling back into an ethics of outcome, an account in which "the theory of ultimate good is dependent on the theory of virtue" (*ibid.*, 65). Yet, in a lengthy note on whether Aristotle had an ethics of virtue in this sense, with a negative answer, he laments that "it is somewhat disconcerting not to be able to adduce here a single clear instance of a historically important ethics in the sense I have identified" (*ibid.*, 71n26; see also Hutton 2015, 333). I shall argue that such a clear instance of a historically important virtue ethics of the ideal type can be found in the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi's philosophy.

Zhu Xi as a Virtual Ethicist of the Ideal Type

Whether virtue is primary in Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian ethics or not, it goes without saying that it occupies an important place in it. One way to start to explain this is to examine his commentary on *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), one of the so-called Four (Confucian) Books (*sishu* 四書). It is customary to hold that this text consists of "Three Keys" (*san gangling* 三綱領) (to brighten the bright virtue, to renew people, and never stop until one reaches the highest good) and "Eight Items" (*ba tiaomu* 八條目) (to investigate things, to extend knowledge, to rectify one's heart/mind, to make one's intension sincere, to cultivate oneself, to harmonize family, to govern the state, and to make the world peaceful). However, in Zhu Xi's view, "when adequately understood, the sentence that 'we ought to brighten the bright virtue' (*ming mingde* 明明德) [the first key] is already enough, and there is no need for anything said thereafter. It is only upon realizing that people found it difficult to understand it that sages talked about many things" (Zhu 1986, 15.308). How can Zhu Xi say that?

First of all, Zhu Xi claims that among the three keys, the third one is not an independent one but one further qualifying the first two keys to show their degree (Zhu 1986, 260), i.e. one ought to go to the extreme in, and not merely make some minor efforts at, "brightening one's bright virtue and renewing people" (*ibid.*, 270). Since brightening the bright virtue refers to oneself and renewing people refers to others, "to never stop until one reaches the highest good" including both keys: the self needs to reach the highest good, and others also need to reach their highest good" (*ibid.*). So now only two keys and eight items are left.

Second, Zhu Xi argues that the eight items are already included in the two keys: the first five items, to investigate things, to extend knowledge, to rectify one's heart/mind, to make one's intension sincere, to cultivate oneself, belong to the key of brightening one's own bright virtue, while the last three items, to harmonize family, to govern the state, and to make the world peaceful, belong to the key of renewing people. So now only two keys are left.

Third, Zhu Xi argues that these two keys are really one and the same thing. In his *Commentary on The Great Learning Chapter by Chapter and Sentence by Sentence* (*sishu zhangju* 四書章句), Zhu Xi explains what these two keys mean. On the one hand, "the bright virtue here is what humans get from the heaven, which is immaterial, spiritual, and unobscured, compassing all principles to respond ten thousand things" (Zhu 1994, 5). The reason one needs to brighten it is that, "limited by endowed *qi* 氣 and obscured by selfish desires, one's bright virtue sometimes may become darkened.... For this reason, a learner ought to brighten it where it is affected by *qi*" (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the second key in the ancient text is

to love people (*qin min* 親民), but Zhu Xi adopts Cheng Yi's 程頤 view, understanding it to mean “renewing people (*xin min* 新民)”, and further explains it: “to renew means to get rid of the old. What is said is that, having brightened one's own bright virtue, one ought to extend it to other people so that they can also get rid of the dirt caused by previous contaminations” (ibid.). From here it is already clear that for Zhu Xi these two keys are really one thing in two senses. On the one hand, the first key is to brighten one's own bright virtue, which can also be described as renewing oneself, while the second item is to review people, which can also be described as brightening others' bright virtue. In this sense, both are about brightening the bright virtue. For this reason, Zhu Xi states that “to brighten the bright virtue is to renew oneself, and to renew people is to help them brighten their own respective bright virtues. Though there is some distinction between the two, in the sense that both are about brightening the bright virtue, there is no distinction between the two” (Zhu 1986, 308). On the other hand, properly understood, to brighten one's own bright virtue and to renew people are really not two separate things, one taking place after another. In other words, it is not the case that only after one has fully brightened one's own bright virtue can one start to help others brighten their virtues (to renew people). This is because to renew people, to help others brighten their bright virtue, is part of the same effort to brighten our own bright virtue. It is in this sense that Zhu Xi states that “if one has not reached the highest good in renewing people, this indicates that one has not yet reached the highest good oneself” (ibid., 272). In other words, if I do not renew people, this means I have not brightened my own virtues; if I have not renewed people to the highest good, this means that I have not brightened my own bright virtue to the highest good. As I've pointed out elsewhere (see Huang 2010b), one of the salient features of Confucian ethics is its emphasis that a truly virtuous person is not only concerned about others' external wellbeing such as happiness, joy, health, and peace, but also with their internal wellbeing, i.e., their virtues.³

At the very beginning of his “Preface” to *Commentary on the Great Learning Chapter by Chapter and Sentence by Sentence*, Zhu Xi emphasizes that “The Great Learning is the way of teaching one to be a human in the ancient great learning.” So the way of the great learning is the way to become a human, and the way to become a human that The Great Learning teaches is the so-called three keys and eight items, which can now be crystalized into one single key: brightening the bright virtue. This shows the importance of virtue in Zhu Xi's Confucian ethics. Of course, just from this it is still not clear whether virtue is primary in Zhu Xi's ethics and thus whether Zhu Xi's ethics is a virtue ethics of the ideal type. To

3 For a counter-argument that Confucianism, though not specifically focused on Zhu Xi, doesn't hold this view, see Schuh (2023).

know this, we need to investigate whether Zhu Xi has an account of virtue, and if so, whether this account gives or maintains the primacy of virtue. So what does Zhu Xi mean by the bright virtue? In one place, he says that “humans originally all possess this bright virtue, which includes humanity (*ren* 仁), rightness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智). They would become impaired if they are submerged by external things and thus lose their brightness. For this reason, the way of *The Great Learning* must be to brighten this bright virtue” (Zhu 1986, 262). This makes it clear that by “the bright virtue” Zhu Xi means nothing but the four cardinal virtues in the Confucian tradition. This of course doesn’t count as an account of virtue, as it only lists four items of virtues, answering only what counts as a virtue and not what is virtue.

To see Zhu Xi’s view on this latter question, we may examine what he says about one of the four cardinal virtues, humanity. This is because, although it is only one of the four cardinal virtues, for Zhu Xi, it is the most important virtue and, indeed, in some sense it includes all other virtues. Zhu Xi makes this point most clearly in his essay “On Humanity” (*ren shuo* 仁說):

Although the virtue of heart/mind is all encompassing and all integrating, with nothing left outside, to use one word, we can say it is nothing but humanity The virtues of the heart/mind of heaven and earth are four: origination, flourishing, advantage, and firmness, and nothing is not included in origination. In the operation of heaven and earth, there are spring, summer, autumn, and winter, and yet the *qi* of spring penetrates all. Similarly, the virtue of the heart/mind of humans also constitutes of four, humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, and yet nothing is not included in humanity. When emanated, these four virtues function as love, respect, being right, and discrimination respectively, and the heart/mind of commiseration [love] penetrates all This is the reason why the Confucian teaching always aims to make learners to earnestly seek humanity. (Zhu 1997, 3542)

Here we need to keep two things in mind. On the one hand, Zhu Xi explains in what sense humanity is one of the four virtues and in what sense it includes all four virtues: “spoken without distinction, it is humanity and there is just this atmosphere of generation, and rightness, propriety, and wisdom are all humanity; comparatively speaking, however, humanity is just like rightness, propriety, and wisdom” (Zhu 1986, 107). On the other hand, Zhu Xi emphasizes that, since humanity includes all other virtues, “we cannot understand the word ‘humanity’ unless we also see it as rightness, propriety, and wisdom. Humanity [in the specific

sense] is the substance of humanity [in the general sense], propriety is ritual of humanity, rightness is judgement of humanity, and wisdom is the discrimination of humanity” (ibid., 109).

In the above, we can see that, when regarding humanity as including rightness, propriety, and wisdom, Zhu Xi says that it is the virtue of heart/mind. Commenting on *Analects* 1.2, Zhu Xi says that “humanity is the principle of love and the virtue of heart/mind” (Zhu 1994, 62). In *Classified Sayings*, Zhu Xi also says that “humanity here is the virtue of the heart/mind; as long as you preserve this heart/mind, nothing is not humanity” (Zhu 1986, 114). Immediately following this, Zhu Xi compares the virtue of heart/mind and virtue of eyes and ears: “the virtue of ears is keenness in hearing, the virtue of eyes is clearness in seeing, and the virtue of heart/mind is humanity” (ibid.). Since humanity is the virtue of heart/mind and humanity includes rightness, propriety, and wisdom, when a student asks, “I heard you, my teacher, saying that ‘humanity is the virtue of heart/mind.’ Then are rightness, propriety, and wisdom also virtues?” Zhu Xi responds: “Yes, they are virtues. Humanity is just the greatest one” (ibid., 607–08). All these discussions at least show that the virtue (*de* 德) that Confucians talk about is also the character traits of the heart/mind and in this sense is similar to virtue that virtue ethicists in the Western philosophical tradition talk about. Although we have so far not made much progress toward our goal (to understand Zhu Xi’s account of virtue), we can see that, in order to know what virtue is for Zhu Xi, we can at least try to see what is humanity, one item of virtue, for Zhu Xi.

So what is humanity? Commenting on “what is meant by humanity (*ren* 仁) is nothing but humanness (*ren* 人)” in the *Mencius*, Zhu Xi states that “the reason that humans are humans is simply that they have this [humanity]” (Zhu 1986, 1458). Here Zhu Xi regards humanity as what makes humans human, without which a person ceases to be a human. To say that humanity is what makes humans human is to say that humanity is the human nature, and this is precisely what Zhu Xi says when he responds to a student’s question regarding the statement about humanity (*ren* 仁) and humans (*ren* 人): “humanity is humanity, itself not sayable. So we can say it only in terms of humans, i.e., in terms of human nature” (ibid., 1495). In other words, from Zhu Xi’s point of view, what Mencius says is really that humanity is human nature. It is in this sense that humanity (*ren* 仁) and humans (*ren* 人) can illustrate each other: “The reason that humans get the name ‘humans’ is that they have humanity. To speak of humanity without speaking of humans, one cannot tell where the principle resides; and to speak of humans without speaking of humanity, a human is nothing but a pile of flesh and blood. Only when speaking of them in combination can we see the truth” (ibid., 1459).

Here we start to see Zhu Xi's account of virtue: virtue is human nature, what makes humans human. In the above, what we see is the relationship between humanity as the general virtue and human nature. When speaking of separate virtues, humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, and their relationship with human nature, Zhu Xi's view is also consistent. In one place, one of his students asks: "is the bright virtue the human nature of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom?" Zhu Xi simply responds "Yes!" (ibid., 260). What is noteworthy is that Zhu Xi approves his student's use of "human nature of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom," which shows that humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom belong to human nature, and this human nature is precisely the bright virtue that we need to brighten in the *Great Learning*. Elsewhere, Zhu Xi states more clearly that "humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are the great items of human nature" (ibid., 107); "humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are human nature" (ibid., 108); and "human nature, as the undistinguished substance of the great ultimate, is originally something that we cannot talk about, but it contains ten thousand principles, out of which there are four great ones, which we can speak of as humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom" (Zhu 1997, 2977).

So, for Zhu Xi, on the one hand, virtue is the virtue of human nature (*xing zhi de* 性之德): "humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are all virtues of human nature" (Zhu 1986, 2583); on the other hand, human nature is one with virtues and so is virtuous human nature (*de xing* 德性), and so Zhu Xi responds affirmatively when one of his students asks whether "virtuous human nature refers to the human nature of rightness and principle" (ibid., 1585). Here, the human nature of rightness and principle (*yi li zhi xing* 義理之性) is nothing but the human nature of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, as pointed out by Zhu Xi: "generally speaking, one's virtuous human nature indeed contains these four: humanity is its warm and peaceful aspect; rightness its serious and resolute aspect; propriety its obvious and manifest aspect; and wisdom its restraining and traceless aspect"; immediately after this, Zhu Xi explains why humanity is prior in these four aspects:

there are these four aspects in human nature, but sages regards humanity as something most urgent for us to seek. This is because humanity is the head of the four. If the warm and peaceful aspect is kept, then when the time comes for it to be obvious and manifest, it will naturally be so; when the time comes for it to be resolute, it will naturally be so; and when the time comes for it to be restraining, it will naturally be so This is the reason that humanity includes all four aspects. (Zhu 1986, 110)

When a student asks, “since humanity is human nature, can the word ‘human nature’ refer to humanity?” Zhu Xi responds: “human nature is a general term. It is like a human body, while humanity is the left hand, propriety is the right hand, rightness is the left foot, and wisdom is the right foot”; when the student further asks, “humanity includes all the four; does this mean that left hand include all the four limbs?” Zhu Xi responds: “this is just an analogy. While the [left] hand indeed cannot include all the four limbs, when speaking hand and foot, we say hand first and foot later; and when speaking left and right, we say left first and right later” (ibid.).

Earlier we saw Zhu Xi claiming that humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are virtues of human heart/mind, and now we see him saying that humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are the great items of human nature, the fundamental principles of human nature, and the virtues of human nature. So, for Zhu Xi, humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are both virtues of human heart/mind and virtues of human nature. If so, what is the relationship between human heart/mind and human nature? According to Zhu Xi, “human nature is the principle possessed by human heart/mind, and human heart/mind is the place where the principle resides” (Zhu 1986, 88); and “if there is no human heart/mind, where can human nature reside! It is necessary that there is the heart/mind so that there is a place for human nature, from which it can be issued. All the principles that the heart/mind has are humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom. They are all substantive principles” (ibid., 64). In other words, humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are virtues of human nature, which has to reside in human heart/mind; in this sense, humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom can also be regarded as the virtues of human heart/mind. Although human nature resides in the heart/mind, Zhu Xi argues that human nature is the substance of human heart/mind: “generally speaking, human body has a heart/mind; the substance of the heart/mind is human nature, while the function of the heart/mind is feeling (*qing* 情)” (ibid., 2822). Here, other than the addition of heart-mind in human body to human nature in heart-mind, Zhu Xi’s emphasis is that human nature is the substance of heart/mind. Since the substance of the heart/mind is human nature, human nature consists of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, which are bright virtues that *The Great Learning* talks about, Zhu Xi explicitly approves what his student says: “*The Great Learning* emphasizes nothing but brightening the virtue and renewing people” (ibid., 308).

To say that humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are virtues of the heart/mind, are virtues of human nature, and are what make humans human is to say that, without humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, one is a defective person. Indeed, this is how Zhu Xi distinguishes between human beings and non-human

animals. For example, in his letter to Yu Fangshu, Zhu Xi states that “human beings are most spiritual, possessing the five constant human natures. In contrast, birds and beasts are dark, without possessing them” (Zhu 1997, 3067). Here, by “the five constant human natures”, Zhu Xi means humanity, rightness, propriety, wisdom, the faithfulness. In *Classified Saying*, when discussing with his students the chapter on the distinction between humans and birds/beasts of *The Mencius*, Zhu Xi makes a similar point: “The reason humans are unique is that they have humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, so that they are filial as children and loving as brothers. How can birds/beasts be so!” (Zhu 1986, 1347). For this reason, Zhu Xi maintains that human beings “must preserve this uniqueness, only in virtue of which can they be distinguished from birds/beasts” (ibid., 1389).

However, Zhu Xi’s view on this issue is a bit complicated, as sometimes he also claims that other beings have humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom as well. For example, he says that humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, as the nature of the heavenly destiny, are

not partial Those who are darkened are darkened by *qi*, and thus their nature is obscured However, there is a way to clear the obscured nature in humans; the same nature is also present in birds/beasts. Only due to constraints by their body is their nature obscured to the extreme, and there is no way to clear it. Tigers and wolves do have some humanity (*ren* 仁), jackal and otter do have ritual of sacrifice, and bees and ants do have rightness, but all just a little bit. (Zhu 1986, 58)

Here, Zhu Xi acknowledges that birds/beasts also have the nature of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, even just a little bit and constrained by their body, which seems to be contradictory to his claim we examined earlier that only humans have humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom. This, however, is not the case. Zhu Xi’s view is that, while all things have the nature of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, there is a distinction between the clearness and turbidness, between balance and one-sidedness, and between openness and blockedness, in terms of the *qi* that they are endowed with. The *qi* that humans are endowed with is balanced and open, and so even if it may be turbid to various degrees, it can still be purified. For this reason, the nature of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom can become the virtue of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom. Non-human beings are endowed with one-sided and blocked *qi*, which obscure the nature of humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom. Thus, while ontologically speaking, they still have the nature consisting of the four, functionally speaking, they don’t have it. Of course, the degrees to which the *qi* is one-sided and

blocked in different things are also different. When not so serious, as is the case with some animals, there are still bits and pieces of humanity, rightness, propriety, and rightness that are not obscured, and this is the reason that there is some humanity among tigers and wolves and there is some rightness among bees and ants. Indeed, for Zhu Xi, there may exist some extreme cases in which the animals that have the least degree of the one-sidedness and blockedness of their *qi* can be very close to human beings, and human beings that have the highest degree of turbidness of their *qi* can be very close to animal (Zhu 1986, 58).

So when Zhu Xi claims that only human beings have these four virtues as their nature and animals do not have them, Zhu Xi uses the term “have” in a special sense, different from merely possessing in Aristotle’s sense. In his discussion of a person’s “having” knowledge, Aristotle makes a distinction between a person’s merely possessing knowledge and the person’s actually using or exercising it. A person asleep, mad, or drunken may still possess the knowledge he or she has previously acquired but is not able to use it (Aristotle 2004, 1147a17-18). Zhu Xi makes a similar distinction between the two senses of “having” when he talks about human and non-human beings’ “having” or “not having” humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom in their nature. When Zhu Xi says that only human beings have these four elements, he means that only human beings can actually exercise them. Correspondingly, when Zhu Xi says that animals do not have these four elements, he only means that they cannot exercise them and not that they do not possess them. For Zhu Xi, both human and non-human beings are endowed with both nature, or principle, and *qi*. While their nature is the same, the vital forces they are respectively endowed with are different. As they are endowed with the same nature, they both have, in the sense of possessing, humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom; as they are endowed with different *qi*, the upright and balanced one for humans and the crooked and one-sided one for animals, only humans have, in the sense of actually exercising, the four constituents of nature, and non-human beings do not have (also in the sense of exercising) them. Thus, in a letter to his teacher Li Tong 李侗, Zhu Xi states that

all living things between heaven and earth have the same root. Human beings, animals, and plants all have this principle, which is fully present in all of them This is humanity (*ren*). However, the *qi* can be clear or turbid, and so their endowment in things can be either upright or crooked. Only human beings are endowed with the upright *qi* and therefore are seen to exercise *ren*. Non-human beings are endowed with the crooked *qi* and so, while possessing humanity, are not aware of it and are not seen to exercise it. (Zhu 2010, 335)

To explain how different *qi* affect the same nature different beings are endowed with, Zhu Xi uses an analogy. The same nature of both human and non-human beings can be seen as clear water, while different vital forces can be seen as bowls with different colors in which water is placed: the same clear water appears white in a white bowl, black in a black bowl, and green in a green bowl (Zhu 1997, 4.53). In a slightly different and perhaps more appropriate metaphor, Zhu Xi says that human nature is like the originally clear water. Put in a clean utensil, it remains clear; put in a dirty utensil, it is smelly; and put in a muddy utensil, it is turbid (*Yulei* 4; Zhu 1997, 66).⁴

Now, we can see clearly that Zhu Xi does have an account of virtue, explaining what virtue is. However, does his account of virtue, like Aristotle's, makes virtue no longer primary in his ethics? The answer is negative. Although Zhu Xi's account of virtue, just like Aristotle's, starts from human nature, which distinguishes human beings from non-human beings, there is a clear difference between their accounts of virtue in terms of human nature. For Aristotle, what makes human being unique is a life consisting of active rational activities, which is eudaimonia. Virtue is the character traits that makes such rational activities excellent. Thus, virtue has lost its primacy, as it is subordinated to eudaimonia. For Zhu Xi, however, what makes humans unique, i.e., human nature, is nothing but such virtues as humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom.⁵ In the previous section, we have seen that, in his discussion of the second interpretation of Aristotle, Michael Slote argues that the reason Aristotle's ethics, interpreted this way, is not a virtue ethics is that eudaimonia, which is primary in his ethics, itself is not an aretaic concept. In contrast, we can see that the uniquely human life for Zhu Xi is life with humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom, which are character traits or virtues of heart/mind and human nature and thus are aretaic. In this sense, Zhu Xi's ethics is a pure, radical, agent-based virtue ethics in Slote's sense. Also in the previous section, we mentioned Gary Watson's view that virtue ethics of the ideal type

4 It might be objected that Zhu Xi's conception of human nature is essentialist, which is problematic in this post-Wittgensteinian era. However, if Zhu Xi is indeed an essentialist, he is a naturalistic essentialist rather than a non-naturalistic essentialist. A naturalistic essentialist view of human nature has two salient features. On the one hand, it is consistent with the evolution theory in the sense that human nature as Zhu Xi conceives it is the result of evolution at its current stage, and so it is not fixed, with the possibility of its being changed in the next stage of evolution, which may last millions if not billions of years. On the other hand, it conceives what distinguishes between humans and non-human beings to be a narrow regions instead of a mathematical line, where resides beings that look like human beings in some aspects and non-human beings in some other aspects.

5 One may say that Zhu Xi here makes a circular argument: he first uses human nature to explain human virtues, and then he uses human virtues to explain human nature. I have shown why it is not the case elsewhere (see Huang 2011, 269–73).

is the ethics in which virtue is primary, an ethics “whose account of the highest good depends upon an account of virtue” and not other way round (Watson 1997, 65). What is the highest good in Zhu Xi? Of course, it is to live a uniquely human life. Then what is the uniquely human life? It is the life that exhibits such bright virtues as humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom. It is clear that, in Zhu Xi, the account of the highest good does depend upon a theory of virtue, and it is in this sense that Zhu Xi’s ethics is precisely a virtue ethics of the ideal type, no single instance of which can be found in the history of Western philosophy according to Watson.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this essay, I briefly mentioned a rather common methodology of comparative philosophy, which tends to use a historical instance of a philosophical theory from a particular historical tradition (normally the Western philosophical tradition) as a paradigm or ideal type of the theory to examine a different historical instance of the theory from a different historical tradition (normally a non-Western tradition). The conclusion of such a comparison is often that, while the latter contains some features of the former, it either doesn’t contain all the features of the former or that it doesn’t exhibit these features as well as the former. This essay compares a historical instance of virtue ethics in the Chinese tradition, Zhu Xi’s, with a historical instance of virtue ethics in the Western tradition, Aristotle’s, arguing that we should not use Aristotle’s as the paradigm or the ideal type of virtue ethics to measure Zhu Xi’s, nor the other way round. Instead, we need to construct an ideal type of virtue ethics, particularly in its contrast with deontological ethics and consequentialist one. A virtue ethics of the ideal type is one in which virtue is primary in the sense that all other concepts in this ethics are derivable from, reducible to, or subordinated to the concept of virtue, which is not derived from, reducible to, or subordinated to any other concepts. This parallels deontology, in which duty or moral law is primary in the sense that all other concepts in this ethics are derivable from, reducible to, or subordinated to it, which is not derived from, reducible to, or subordinate to any other concepts, and consequentialism, in which consequence of actions is primary in the sense that all other concepts in this ethics are derivable from, reducible to, or subordinated to it, which is not derived from, reducible to, or subordinated to any other concepts. I then use this constructed ideal type of virtue ethics to measure both Aristotle’s ethics and Zhu Xi’s ethics, concluding that Aristotle’s ethics comes short of meeting the criterion of virtue ethics of the ideal type, while Zhu Xi’s meets the criterion well.

It is important to note that to say that Aristotle's ethics is not a virtue ethics but Zhu Xi's is not to say that Aristotle's ethics is inferior to Zhu Xi's ethics as normative ethics (though we can say that Aristotle's ethics is inferior to Zhu Xi's as a virtue ethics). After all, Aristotle himself doesn't say that he would like to develop a virtue ethics, let alone doing so as an alternative to deontology and consequentialism, which appears in the West only many centuries later. Strictly speaking, what this essay does is merely a work of classification: if ethics can be divided into deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics, strictly speaking Zhu Xi's is a virtue ethics, while Aristotle's is not. As to whether Aristotle's ethics is indeed a type of consequentialism or teleology as some scholars have claimed is not the task of this essay. In this sense, the contribution this essay makes to ethics in general or virtue ethics in particular is not significant if at all. The more important thing to do is to see what contributions we can make to virtue ethics of the ideal type, including responding to criticisms of virtues ethics by its rivals, overcoming its internal problems, and exploring its implications to metaethics on the one hand and virtue ethics on the other, to which I have dedicated my work for the last decade or so (see, for example, Huang 2010b; 2011; 2014; 2019; 2024b). However, since Aristotle is normally the first person who comes into our mind when we think of virtue ethics, and since Confucian ethics, when measured with Aristotelian ethics as an ideal type of virtue ethics, has often been regarded as a more or less deficient, if not defective, version of virtue ethics, the conclusion this essays arrives at may still not be trivial either.

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