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# Is It Possible to Ground Virtue Ethics in a Theory of Human Nature?

Shuttling Between Confucian Ethics and Virtue Ethics \*

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## 1. Confucian “*meide lunli*” and Virtue Ethics

This paper discusses the Chinese philosophical term “*meide lunli*”. So, what is “*meide lunli*?” To begin with, let’s entertain the following tentative explanation: “*meide lunli*” is the Chinese counterpart of “virtue ethics” in English. Explaining it with such a precise equivalent in English, the question seems to disappear at first. Not before long, however, disparities start to emerge: “virtue ethics” is also commonly translated back into Chinese as “*dexing lunli*” (德行伦理) and “*dexing lunli*” (德性伦理). So, the initial question reappears, yet steeped in complexity. To explicate it, one can’t help but to notice two meaningful problems; one concerning the content to be explained, the other concerning the act of explanation itself.

With regard to the first problem, we currently find a set of disparate Chinese terms competing for the right to translate the content of the English term “virtue.” In other words, in response to the question, “how do we translate the word ‘virtue’ into Chinese?,” there are already several replies: “*de*” (德), “*meide*” (美德), “*dexing*” (德行), “*dexing*” (德性). Do they all work equally well, or is there a distinction between better and worse among them? But wait! Are words like “*meide*” just translation terms? This question brings us back to the very issue of explaining the Chinese term “*meide lunli*” through the English term “virtue ethics.” The very validity of this way of explaining Chinese terms subtly reflects the important role that Western thought plays as a reference for Chinese thought today, and yet, the very

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importance of this referential act puts us all in a rather awkward position: Having understood that “*meide lunli*” is used to translate “virtue ethics,” it then seems as though one has grasped what the former has been wanting to say; the appearing and presence of “virtue ethics” on the stage makes the dispute between “*meide lunli*”, “*dexing lunli*”, and the other terms appear as senseless chatter, because “*meide*” and the others are nothing but translation terms, that is to say, Chinese words that derived from the English word “virtue.” If such were the case, then the study of “*meide lunli*” in the Chinese language world would amount to nothing but the study of virtue ethics using the Chinese language, and there with virtue ethics as the only legitimate research approach, the study of Confucian “*meide lunli*” in the Chinese language world would amount to taking Chinese as a working language and Confucian thought as a topic of research. In brief, this is to study the meaning of Confucian ethics from the perspective of virtue ethics.

To study the meaning of Confucian ethics from the perspective of virtue ethics is basically the most common method used to research Confucian “*meide*” ethics in the English speaking world. Following the revival of virtue ethics in the West, more and more scholars with a background in Chinese philosophy have started to focus on the relationship between Confucian ethics and virtue ethics. Representatives of this trend include scholars born and raised in the West like May Sim<sup>1</sup> and those born and raised in China like Yu Jiyuan<sup>2</sup>. In the complex development of Western thought, the ethics of Aristotle could stand as the paragon of virtue ethics. The Confucian ethical doctrine does present some similar thinking tendencies with the ethics of Aristotle. In the Wittgenstinnian sense of a family resemblance, there is no hurt in saying that we have a Confucian virtue ethics. Because of this, the comparative study of Confucian ethics and Western (specifically Aristotelian) virtue ethics is of course meaningful work. However, scholars usually adopt the following research approach: Study the meaning of Confucian ethics from the perspective of virtue ethics. Their intention is still to use the new perspective of virtue ethics to reevaluate Confucian ethics, or rather, “to discover” the implied meaning of virtue ethics in Confucian ethics, and only subsequently there is the construction of Confucian “*meide*” ethics. However, in this way, Confucian “*meide*” ethics remains nothing more than a negative image of Confucian ethics in the mirror of virtue ethics. “Negative” here means: It doesn’t

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1. See May Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

2. See Yu Jiyuan, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007.

obstruct the mirror from being a mirror even though there is no image, and the mirror remains absolutely as itself without any change when some image comes into being. This is an unfortunate truth. The misfortune here lies both in the misfortune that has been allotted to Confucian ethics in the dependent position it has been forced to occupy in the East/West conversation, and also in the misfortunate lot of virtue ethics, which it has allotted to itself by throwing away the opportunity to seek its own reflection in the other while upholding the haughty air it has been cultivating throughout the past several centuries. But then again, it is even more the misfortune of Confucian “*meide*” ethics, because according to its ideal form, it ought to make Confucian ethics and virtue ethics inspire one another, strengthen one another, and push both of these ethics of heterogeneous origin into a new development, and thereby benefit the becoming of a world philosophy<sup>3</sup>.

“Virtue” is doubtless a key word for thought concerning virtue ethics. From the perspective of a world philosophy, the dispute revolving around the proper translation of “virtue” in actuality has concentrated the interaction-dialogue of Eastern and Western thought. In order to choose the translation most suitable, we need to inspect the concepts “virtue” and “*meide*” in finer detail. In other words, we cannot but undertake a conceptual investigation that crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries. Perhaps, thinking that a Chinese translation term’s suitability depends upon whether or not it precisely reflects the word “virtue” makes it seem as if the English word “virtue” stands prior to the translation term as an objective being that must remain uninfluenced by the Chinese translation term [in order to be an objective reflection]. I’m afraid this naive position of reflectionism in the practice of translation runs counter to the real conditions of cross-contextual communication of thought: “virtue” becomes present really in Chinese thought on the level of its translation term; the determination of the Chinese translation term involves how to import and transplant the fundamental content of “virtue ethics” into Chinese thought, but it no less involves the process of reinterpreting and developing ancient Chinese thought as well as its retroaction upon “virtue ethics,” etc.

In 1958, Anscombe presented her thesis “Modern Moral Philosophy”, in which she stated: “Eventually it might be possible to advance to considering the concept ‘virtue’; with which, I suppose, we should be beginning some sort of a study of

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3. Huang Yong’s recent research on Confucian Virtue ethics is particularly worthy of attention here. See Huang Yong, “Two Dilemmas in Virtue Ethics and How Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confuciansim Avoids Them”, *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. 36, 2011: 247 – 281.

ethics.<sup>4</sup>” That “a study of ethics”, which she advocated there was pushed even further by scholars like MacIntyre, who catalyzed the revitalization of contemporary virtue ethics. Following this development back to what Anscombe originally meant, we see that the conceptual analysis of “virtue” in the end provides the true starting point of virtue ethics. If this is indeed the case, then “*mei-de*” ethics (or “*de-xing*” ethics for that matter) must begin not only with a conceptual analysis of “virtue”, but also with the analysis of concepts like “*mei-de*” and the others<sup>5</sup>.

In Western languages, “virtue” is roughly equivalent to the ancient Greek word “ἀρετή”. In Aristotle, “ἀρετή” is used in the narrow sense in the domain of morals, but in the broad sense it is not so limited. For instance, when Aristotle discusses “ἀρετή” in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he speaks of the “ἀρετή” of horses, the “ἀρετή” of eyes, and of course the “ἀρετή” of human beings; but aside from the moral domain, the “ἀρετή” of human beings also concerns the domain of skills that includes running and wrestling<sup>6</sup>. In ancient Chinese, “*de*” (德) is also used in similar ways. Broadly speaking, “*de*” (德) means to acquire (*de* 得).<sup>7</sup> “*De*” (德) is any one of those things which is acquired from nature. For human beings, “*de*” (德) is not limited to moral qualities. In general, even one’s physical shape and physiognomy falls under the scope of “*de*” (德). For example, *Zhuangzi* states, “I am tall and large, elegant and handsome, and all those who see me are pleased with me — this is a *de* acquired from my parents.<sup>8</sup>” Even with regard to moral qualities, *de* is a neutral concept, that is, it doesn’t necessarily contain positive value: *The Book of History* states, “[h]armony and compliance are good *de*, while resentment and revulsion are ominous *de*.<sup>9</sup>” This certainly differs from Aristotle’s conception of virtue. In Aristotle, “ἀρετή” is almost always used in combination with “ἀγαθός (good),” “κάλως (excellent),” “καλῶς (excellently)” and other such entirely positive terms. For example, Aristotle claims, the good of man (τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθόν) means the soul has excellently (καλῶς) completed its actualization and activities in accordance with

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4. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, Vol. XXIII, January, 1958: 15.

5. Concerning the present condition of modern Chinese thought and the need for a manifold examination of philosophy’s key words, see Liu Liangjian: “The Difficult Position of the Academic Terminologies of Modern Chinese Philosophy”, in *Journal of Humanities (renwen zazhi)*, No. 5, 2007. Also see Liu Liangjian, “New Wine, Old Bottle: On Yan Fu’s Scientific Outlook,” in *Journal of East China Normal University*, No. 2, 2009.

6. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a: 15–20.

7. *Guanzi*, Chapter 36.

8. *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 29.

9. *The Book of History*, Chapter 20.

logos or its actualization in accordance with virtue (κατ' ἀρετήν)<sup>10</sup>. There is nothing stopping us from saying then that what the Ancient Greeks meant by *virtue* (ἀρετή) is what the Ancient Chinese designated as good-*de* (*shande*) or what the Modern Chinese call beautiful-*de* (*meide*). In this sense, “virtue ethics” could be translated into modern Chinese as “*meide lunli*”, and hence there may be such a thing as “Confucian *virtue* ethics”.

There are two points here that are particularly worth attention in the evolution of the Chinese language from “*shande*” to “*meide*”:

First, in modern Chinese, when “*de*” is used as a semantic particle to compose compound words, it generally connotes appraisal. For example, “*niangao-deshao*” (年高德劭) is a compound meaning “of venerable age and exemplary virtue”; the compound word “*quede*” or “lacking *de*” is depreciatory and is used to reprimand; “*dexing*” (德性) — virtuous nature and “*dexing*” (德行) — virtuous behavior are sarcastic rhetorical devices (“Just look at how virtuous (德行) your behavior is!” “Oh, what a virtuous nature (德性) you have!”). Thus, the modern Chinese compound word “*meide*” and the ancient Chinese word “*shande*” are not completely identical in terms of the way they are constructed: The “*shan*” in “*shande*” is used to modify and qualify a neutral “*de*”, whereas the “*mei*” in “*meide*” is used to accentuate and emphasize an already praiseworthy “*de*”.

Second, it could be said that the transformation from “*shande*” to “*meide*” illustrates the consistency between the good and the beautiful in the Confucian tradition. When critiquing Le Zhengzi, Mencius once pointed out, “What is desirable is called good (*shan*); having it within oneself is called sincerity; fully actualizing it is called beautiful (*mei*); fully actualized such that one possesses it as an air of brilliance is called great, great and transformative is called sagacious, sagacious and yet unfathomable is called mysterious.<sup>11</sup>” Here, “*shan*”, “*mei*” and so on are used to evaluate the different stages of personality cultivation, which entails among other things that the beautiful (*mei*) and the good (*shan*) on the level of personality cultivation and human maturation are consistent.

From the perspective of Confucianism, virtue (*de* or *meide*) is always the unity of the internal nature of character and external behavior, that is, the unity of “*dexing*” (virtuous nature) and “*dexing*” (virtuous behavior). “Virtuous behavior” emphasizes behaving (*xing* 行), while virtuous nature emphasizes the nature of the human being (*xing* 性). Etymologically speaking, it seems that “*de*” by itself already contains

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10. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a: 15–20.

11. *Mencius*, Chapter 13.

both meanings insofar as the character “*de*” (德) is constructed out of the radical “*xin*” (心), which adds the meaning of “the heart or the sensitive mind” and the radical “*xing*” (行), which adds the meaning of “to act/to carry out/action oriented.” Normative ethics in the history of western philosophy (including utilitarianism and Kantian ethics) is act-based, and hence mainly theorizes on the action oriented “*de*” (*dexing* 德行), while Aristotle’s virtue ethics is agent-based, and hence mainly theorizes on the virtue of human nature (*dexing* 德性).<sup>12</sup> Comparatively speaking, although the ultimate concern of Confucian “*meide*” ethics is likewise the virtue of human nature, it also explores to great depth the action oriented “*de*” (德行), and so it could be said to surpass Aristotle in richness. On the question of the behavioral dimension of “*de*”, Confucians have tended to focus on the motive of behavior and the intrinsic value of rules (rules in the form of ritual (*li* 礼) or Principle(*li* 理): Pre-Qin Confucianism stresses ritual, Neo-Confucianism stresses Principle, while Qing Dynasty thinkers such as Ling Tingkan (凌廷堪), Ruan Yuan (阮元) and Sun Xingyan (孙星衍) advocated replacing Principle with ritual.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the distinction between the virtue of human nature (德性) and the virtue of human behavior (德行) is one of the most important components of Confucian “*meide*” ethics; the themes surrounding this distinction include: The cultivation of virtuous behavior and a virtuous human nature; the verification of virtuous behavior and a virtuous human nature; the controlling of virtuous behavior by the moral sensitivity of human nature; virtuous character, virtuous behavior, and rules, and so forth.<sup>14</sup> These themes may conceal within Confucian “*meide*” ethics the possibility of a reverse impact upon virtue ethics.

## 2. Virtue Ethics and the Possibility of a Theory of Human Nature as Its Foundation: Peter Singer’s Critique

The entry for “ethics,” written by Peter Singer in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, summarizes Aristotle’s ethics as follows:

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12. See Xu Xiangdong, ed., *Virtue Ethics and Moral Demands*, Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2008: 71.
  13. See a discussion on a new theory of morality in Qianlong (乾隆) and Jiaqing (嘉庆) Regimes in Wu Xiaofan, “On the Philosophy of Gong Zizhen: A New Perspective” (龚自珍哲学新论), Ph. D. Dissertation, East China Normal University, 2010.
  14. See Yang Guorong, *Ethics and Existence* (伦理与存在), Huadong Shifan Daxu Chubanshe, 2009: 146 – 181; and “Confucianism and Virtue Ethics”, in *Philosophy of Mencius* (孟子的哲学思想), East China Normal University Press, 2009: Appendix II.

Aristotle conceived of the universe as a hierarchy in which everything has a function. The highest form of existence is the life of the rational being, and the function of lower beings is to serve this form of life . . . From this perspective also came a view of human nature and an ethical theory derived from it. All living things, Aristotle held, have inherent potentialities, which it is their nature to develop. This is the form of life properly suited to them and constitutes their goal. What, however, is the potentiality of human beings? For Aristotle this question turns out to be equivalent to asking what is distinctive about human beings; and this, of course, is the capacity to reason. The ultimate goal of humans, therefore, is to develop their reasoning powers. When they do this, they are living well, in accordance with their true nature, and they will find this the most rewarding existence possible.<sup>15</sup>

Peter Singer then points out some fallacies in Aristotle. This is one of the most serious ones:

A broader and still more pervasive fallacy underlies Aristotle's ethics. It is the idea that an investigation of human nature can reveal what one ought to do. For Aristotle, an examination of a knife would reveal that its distinctive capacity is to cut, and from this one could conclude that a good knife is a knife that cuts well. In the same way, an examination of human nature should reveal the distinctive capacity of human beings, and from this one should be able to infer what it is to be a good human being. This line of thought makes sense if one thinks, as Aristotle did, that the universe as a whole has a purpose and that human beings exist as part of such a goal-directed scheme of things, but its error becomes glaring if this view is rejected and human existence is seen as the result of a blind process of evolution. Whereas the distinctive capacity of a knife is a result of the fact that knives are made for a specific purpose — and a good knife is thus one that fulfills this purpose well — human beings, according to modern biology, were not made with any particular purpose in mind. Their nature is the result of random forces of natural selection. Thus,

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15. "Ethics", *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2010. Web. 6 Apr. 2010. [http://0-search.eb.com.libcnu.lib.ecnu.edu.cn/eb/article-252575](http://0-search.eb.com/libcnu.lib.ecnu.edu.cn/eb/article-252575).

human nature cannot, without further moral premises, determine how human beings ought to live.<sup>16</sup>

Some points in Singer's criticism are open to discussion. First, in Singer's opinion, Aristotle's definition of human good is based on his teleological cosmology. This may not be true, however. MacIntyre claims, for instance, that although Aristotle's understanding of good is set in the background of his cosmology, his cosmology doesn't play an important role in his argument, and further, that when Aristotle defines "good", he relies merely on the idea that rational behavior is particular to human beings.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle asks: What is the characteristic activity (ἔργον) of human beings? We should first rule out the vital activity of nourishment and growth, which is obviously shared even by plants. Next what should also be ruled out is some sort of sentient life, since it is clearly shared by the horse, the ox and indeed by every animal. There, what remains for the human being is nothing but the practical activity of a certain part of the soul possessing logos. In this way, the human good turns out to be excellent actualization (ἐνέργεια) of the soul in accordance with logos.<sup>18</sup> Despite the teleological implications of key terms such as activity and actualization, the core of the argument lies in the distinction between human beings and animals, which could be justified without the presupposition of a teleological cosmology. Notice that the distinction between humans and animals was also the predominant means of ethical argument for the Confucians. In fact, Xunzi (荀子), one of the great Confucian thinkers of the Pre-Qin period also defined the human good by appeal to such a distinction without a teleological cosmology:

Water and fire have force (*qi* 气) but no life; grass and trees have life but no awareness; birds and animals have awareness but no sense of what is righteous; human beings have force (*qi*), life, awareness and a sense of what is righteous.<sup>19</sup>

A sense of what is righteous is in other words a morally sensitive self-awareness, which depends on the reasoning capacity of human beings. It is because of this

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16. *Ibid.*

17. See A. MacIntyre (1967), *A Short History of Ethics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 63.

18. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a: 1 – 20.

19. *Xunzi*, Chapter 9.



reasoning capacity that human beings “can know what is humane, righteous, and legally just and hence become a sage like the emperor Yu (禹).<sup>20</sup>”

Second, knives are made to fulfill a particular function while human beings are not made in such a way; so we cannot understand the good of a human being in the same way we understand the good of a knife. It would be prudent here to remind the reader of the different usages of the term “good”. Moore once analyzed the word “good” and concluded that good is a simple attribute, even though it is not as natural as other attributes such as “yellow”. Vendler explains why good is not natural through grammatical analysis. By inquiring respectively into the three kinds of reasons why something or somebody is called good, Vendler finds that Aristotle understands the good of horses by its function and applies the same principle to a *good man*. However, he asks, “What is a good man? What is man’s function?” Since these questions lead us far beyond the grammar of the word, Vendler claims that he fails to provide an answer.<sup>21</sup> However, we can say that something or somebody is good for different reasons — this fact shows the diversity of usages the term “good” has. The identity of the word “good” easily leads us to overlook its grammatical diversity on deeper levels and its corresponding factual differentiation.<sup>22</sup> Is the good of horses or knives the same as the good of human beings? Singer reminds us that the purpose of knives comes from the conscious rationality of knife makers, and so we may speak of the good of knives in accordance with their function. However, if there was no rational self-consciousness, who “made” humans at any point in the evolution of the human species, then how could we ever identify the characteristic function of human beings? Without any such characteristic function, there is no way to speak of the good of human beings in the way that we speak of the good of knives. Although Singer goes no further, we can go on inquiring: If we cannot understand the good of a human being in the way that we understand the good of a knife, then in what way can we legitimately understand the good of human beings? What on earth is the difference between the good of knives and the good of human beings? As a matter of fact, Aristotle has already given us some direction. He insists that good things (ἀγαθὰ) are said to be so in two different senses: They are either good in themselves (καθ’αυτὰ) or they are good through the things which are good in themselves (διὰ τὰ ἄλλα). In this way, we can distinguish the things what are good in themselves

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20. *Xunzi*, Chapter 23.

21. See Zeno Vendler, *Linguistics in Philosophy*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1979, Chapter 7.

22. See Wittgenstein’s discussion of this in his *Philosophical Investigation*, Part I : 11; 12; 14.

from useful things (οὐωφέλιμοι).<sup>23</sup> Knives and horses are those, which are useful while humans are those beings who are good in themselves. We should grasp the good of human beings from within the human itself. Knives and horses exist for other things, but human beings exist for themselves. To borrow Aristotle's terminology, human beings are the ultimate good (απλῶς τέλειος) compared to knives and horses: "And so that which is always worth choosing in itself and never for the sake of something else we call ultimate good."<sup>24</sup> Human beings take themselves as their own purpose, and it is in this sense that the good of the human being lies in being good at taking human beings as the ultimate purpose.

However, from the perspective of Confucian ethics, Aristotle's understanding of the relation between humans and things is dubious. Although in a way quite different from the Western tradition, emphasizing the special position humans have in the cosmos in relation to all other things is a fundamental tendency of the Confucian tradition. For example, in *The Book of Rites* it is stated: "humans are the heart of the cosmos (tiandi 天地)."<sup>25</sup> Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐), a thinker of Neo-Confucianism, also states, "Only humans, with embracing the perfect parts of energy in the cosmos, are most intelligente."<sup>26</sup> However, these statements must not be understood in the following anthropocentric sense: Humans are the only things which are good in themselves, and things other than humans are only valuable as tools and can only gain value as the means to human ends. According to Confucians, the human being is the most intelligent in all things, but this isn't a convenient edge that man has over things, it means rather that man needs to self-consciously take on its responsibility in the cosmos. It is not things which *are for human use*, it is *man who helps things complete themselves*. This is precisely that which is expressed in Section 22 of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhongyong 中庸) concerning man's participation in the cosmos:

Only those who are fully genuine can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they then can develop the nature of others. If they can develop the nature of others, they can fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist the process

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23. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096b: 10 – 16.

24. *Ibid.*, 1097a: 30 – 1097b: 5.

25. *The Book of Rituals*, Chapter 7.

26. Zhou Dunyi, *Collected Works of Zhou Dunyi*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1990: 5.

of transforming and nourishing the world. If they can assist the process of transforming and nourishing the world, then they can fully participate in the world.<sup>27</sup>

Third, since human nature is the result of random forces and natural selection, it is a fallacy to infer what human beings ought to be from what human nature is. This touches upon a fundamental problem: Can a theory of human nature lay the foundation for Aristotle's ethics or any virtue ethics in general? Singer's reply is negative, but his argument is debatable. First, while the blindness of evolution and the randomness of natural selection may serve as proof of the purposelessness of human nature in its origin, it still cannot show us what human nature is, which is precisely the problem. Discerning where human nature comes from constitutes one problem, while discerning what human nature is constitutes another. If we were to replace the question concerning what human nature is with the question concerning the origins of human nature, we would commit the "genetic fallacy". Furthermore, to infer how humans ought to be from what human nature is would involve a particular form of inference from Is to Ought. Could such an inference hold valid? Let us take a closer look at this Is-Ought problem concerning human nature.

### 3. The Is-Ought Problem Concerning Human Nature

The Is-Ought problem can certainly be traced back to David Hume. From the perspective of Confucianism, to distinguish between "Is" and "Ought" corresponds to separating "knowing" from "acting". In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume distinguishes "Is" and "Ought" based on the principle that reason has no impact upon morality, and moreover, that knowledge cannot engender action: We come to know "what is" through reasoning, but reason alone cannot influence action, which in actuality does not correspond to "what is" but rather to "what ought to be"; thus, directly deducing "Ought" from "Is" involves an illogical leap. In other words, "it is necessary that it should be observed and explained" if we were to make such a deduction.<sup>28</sup> Although Hume reminds us of the gap between "Is" and "Ought", he

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27. See Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963: 108.

28. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978: 469.

certainly doesn't hold it to be an absolute abyss since he claims that it is emotion that connects "Is" to "Ought", knowing to action.<sup>29</sup>

However, the important question here is not whether or not the gap between "Is" and "Ought" can be bridged. Rather, it is the following questions, which matters: Does this gap really exist? If so, in which cases does it exist? Does it exist everywhere and always? Anscombe's discussion of the transition from "is" to "need" in "Modern Moral Philosophy" may shed some light on these questions. She claims that, in most cases, *that* such-and-such "ought to be" or "is needed" has no direct influence upon actions. "In the case of a *plant*<sup>30</sup>, let us say, the inference from 'is' to 'needs' is certainly not in the least dubious." "Certainly in the case of what the plant needs, the thought of a need will only affect action if you want the plant to flourish." In other words, "needs" here still works on the level of knowing, and thus does not bear directly upon action without the intervention of the middle term "wanting". Let us proceed: "But there is some sort of necessary connection between what you think you need, and what you want." In other words, knowing what you need is a special kind of knowing since it inevitably induces wanting and consequently leads to action.<sup>31</sup>

We can easily find in Confucianism many cases wherein the growing of a plant is used as a metaphor for human nature.<sup>32</sup> Mencius is well-known for his doctrine of the Four-Sprouts (*siduan* 四端). The Chinese character 端 (*duan*) was originally written as 耑. According to Xu Shen (许慎), "'耑' describes the sprout of plants, the upper part [of the character] resembles the shape of something growing and the nether part the shape of the roots." Duan Yucai (段玉裁) then explains further: "'耑' is an ancient character, which expresses the meaning of 'sprout.' Nowadays '端' is prevalent while '耑' has been abandoned."<sup>33</sup> Thus, for Confucianism, what human nature is simultaneously what human nature needs and there is no gap between them. Furthermore, what human nature needs is what a person himself fundamentally needs, and thus knowing what one needs will inevitably engender wanting and consequently action. Human nature is, therefore, what human beings are in accordance with their

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29. *Ibid.*, p. 457.

30. Italic mine.

31. See G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy": 6–8.

32. As for metaphors in the pre-Qin period, see Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, State University of New York Press, 1997. As for those in Neo-Confucianism, see Bao Yongling: *Seed and Light: A General Examination of the Metaphor System in Wang Yangming's Doctrine of Mind-Heart*, Shanghai Shudian Chubanshe, 2012.

33. Duan Yucai (段玉裁), *Commentary on Xu Shen's Explanation of Chinese Characters* (说文解字注). Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1997.

nature; it is “that which is needed” or “what ought to be” according to their nature, and thus, it is also the “ought to do” according to their nature. In this sense, nothing can bridge the gap in human nature between “Is” and “Ought” because there is no such gap.

#### 4. “Human Nature in Daily Growing and Maturing”: The Ontological Foundation of the Direct Connection Between “Is” and “Ought”

Here, the kind of “knowing”, which involves knowing “human nature”, would not properly speaking be that of some representational object. As far as human nature is concerned, it would better to speak of “becoming aware of human nature [in his or her own]” (*mingxing* 明性) rather than of “knowing human nature [as an object]” (*zhixing* 知性). The Chapter 21 of the *Zhongyong* states: “Given becoming sincere, there will be aware” (*cheng ze ming* 诚则明). In his interpretation of this sentence, Wang Chuanshan (王船山), a great Confucian scholar in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, argues that becoming aware in this case involves not only knowing but also acting<sup>34</sup>; so it must be distinguished from the knowledge of representational objects. To become aware of human nature is to become self-aware, to understand “the being of the human being”, i. e. that which the human being is. This kind of self-aware grasp of “that which the human being is” functions as a formal index according to which one can project one’s existence into the world. “The being of the human being” becomes “that which the human being ought to be” and consequently influences how one conducts oneself in the world.<sup>35</sup> Because of this, to become aware of human nature is precisely to obtain consciousness of one’s own being, to grasp the active forces of one’s own being, and hence even to initiate the process of one’s own being. In other words, becoming aware of human nature becomes the way in which human nature unfolds.

The continuity between “Is” and “Ought” on the level of human nature is based on the following ontological fact: Human nature becoming aware of itself impacts human nature to such a degree that human nature can no longer be understood as something ready-made. Here, we must take notice of the complicated relationship

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34. Wang Chuanshan, *Discussions after Reading the Great Collection of Commentaries on the Four Books (Du Sishu Daquan Shuo 读四书大全说)*, *Collected Books of Chuanshan (Chuanshan Quanshu 船山全书)* Book 6. Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 1988:571.

35. See Chen Yun 陈贇, “The Good of Human Nature”, in *Journal of Modern Philosophy*, January, 2003: 82 –8.

between virtue as human behavior and virtue as human nature, which we have discussed above. Virtuous deeds are the external verification of virtuous character, but at the same time, virtuous deeds have a reverse impact upon the character or nature of the human being (that which the human being is). The Is-Ought relationship could then be restated thus: “Is” engenders “ought”, and “ought” correspondingly reacts back upon “Is”. Because of this, the communication between “Is” and “Ought” is no longer characterized by one dimension - the flow from “Is” to “Ought”, rather, it has two dimensions in reciprocal interaction. On this basis, human nature unfolds as a continuous process of becoming. In Wang Chuanshan’s words: “Human nature is in growth; [it] grows daily and is daily achieving something.”<sup>36</sup>

In modern Chinese, “*xing*” (性) usually serves as a translation term for “nature” and “essence” and is understood to express the meaning of these terms, because it is supposed to translate them. It is thus understood to be the unchanging substance, which lies behind phenomena and causes phenomena to appear. The English speaking world thus usually understands *xing* in traditional Chinese writings to express the sense of “nature” or “essence”. “Nature” derives from the Latin word “nascor”, which means “I am born.” Because of this, English speakers usually understand “nature” as something innate and given by birth. However, as A. C. Graham already observed, when early Chinese thinkers spoke of “*xing*”, they very rarely thought of some intrinsic, unchanging nature that things gain at the very moment of their birth, unless they were thinking of non-living things like water; it was precisely the opposite case for them. That which they were concerned with was the unfolding development of things: Things naturally are the way they are, and they adequately actualize their potentials solely in conditions where they are not suffering injury and are sufficiently nourished. This is especially so for Mencius, who seems to have never even cast his sites back upon the moment of birth; he was always looking ahead at the mature state that continuous growth brings about.<sup>37</sup> A. C. Graham notices here the processual and generative meaning, which *xing* had during the pre-Qin period. In some sense, Wang Chuanshan’s concept of “*xing*” as human nature growing daily and maturing daily is precisely a return to this pre-Qin tradition.

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36. Wang Chuanshan, *Elaboration on the Meanings of Shangshu (Shangshu Yinyi 尚书引义)*, *Collected Books of Chuanshan*, Book 2, p. 300. There is a more detailed discussion on Chuanshan’s doctrine on human nature in Liangjian Liu, *Heaven, Human and Fluctuating Boundary: A Metaphysical Exposition of Wang Chuanshan (天人之际: 对王船山的形而上学阐明)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2007.

37. See A. C. Graham: *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990: 8.

Human nature is growing daily and maturing daily, and thus human nature is neither ready-made nor determined at the moment of birth; it is not “fully formed at the moment it is received and unchanging up to the moment of death.”<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, it has not yet become something, but it is becoming and pending completion. Human nature is not complete, it is to complete itself; it depends upon the human being himself to go out and complete it. In the affair of achieving one’s own nature, a human’s nature is always completing itself and incomplete; it is in an imperfective process of perfecting itself at every moment, intensely cautious as though walking along the edge of an abyss or treading on thin ice; it can only be spoken of as finished after death. Recorded in *The Book of Rites* there is a situation that became the canonical case of Confucian “*meide*” ethics: On the brink of death Zengzi rose to his feet and changed beds out of the desire to die in perfect observation of ritual propriety. A human being facing death at the final hour still doesn’t dare to slack off from upholding and cultivating human nature! So it is that kind of responsibility! Confucian ethics expresses its own fundamental position via Zengzi: To perfect the human being or to refine virtue is the intrinsic demand of human nature. Because of this, we should say that at least on the level of a formal index, human nature can determine how the human being ought to live. In this way, we also reply to the question inspired by Singer’s critique of virtue ethics in the affirmative: A theory of human nature can lay the foundation of virtue ethics.

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38. Wang Chuanshan, *Discussions after Reading the Great Collection of Commentaries on the Four Books*, pp. 750 – 1.