Wisdom, Fate, and Moral Agency

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Rosa Chen's essay is rich and many-layered, and this response picks up just one of many possible threads to consider. I am grateful for the opportunity to have read it and respond to it. Without dissenting from any of the points Chen makes in her very interesting essay, in this response I consider some implications of her analysis, discussing some aspects of agency and moral development suggested, but not explored, in her discussion of Aristotle, Confucius, and the moral choices that were a significant part of her moral development. Specifically, I consider the different roles of fate and contingency in the two traditions.

Contingency and Moral Development

Contingency, or fate (Greek: *moira*; Chinese: *ming*), means the choices we make (moral and otherwise) are, to a large extent, beyond our control or determination, as are their outcomes. Though our decisions may reflect our agency, the circumstances that present us with the choices we have are not within our control. For this reason, to focus only on our agency is to miss part of the puzzle of, paradoxically, agency.

Contingency is central to the idea of virtue in Aristotle. Certain virtues are available only to those whom fate has blessed: one cannot acquire the virtue of liberality unless one is wealthy; one cannot acquire greatness of soul unless one is born into a position of power and wealth, and so on. More fundamentally, one's fate not only determines the length of one's life (as the Fates choose when to cut the threads of one's life), fate equally determines the quality of that life: Is one temperate or intemperate? A man or a woman? A citizen or a slave? A warrior of great prowess such as Achilles, or a lesser warrior destined to die young at Achilles' hand? While the development of one's power is a matter of practice and choice, the extent of one's potential is a matter of birth and capacity.

Similarly, Confucius reminded his students and followers of the inscrutability of *ming* (fate). I tread very carefully here, as I am by no means a Confucian scholar, but my understanding is that Confucius taught that once one had cultivated serenity and virtue — that is, right relations — one can face "life and death, fame and disgrace, wealth and poverty…'without worry and without fear'."[1] The goal for Confucius was to develop a virtuous self, the "sole area of life in which one does have control."[2]

While both sages recognized and discussed the importance and the unpredictability of fate, they differed radically on the question of the relationship between fate and living a Good Life (not good in the sense of morally blameless, a modern, Western notion, but Good in the sense of achieving a form of human thriving, *eudaemonia*). Confucius tells us that since fate is unpredictable and uncontrollable, one achieves the best possible life when one pursues virtue strictly

for its own sake and achieves a state of tranquility, independent of the vicissitudes of fate. In contrast, Aristotle deems us irreducibly hostage to our fate: no one can be considered to have lived a happy life until that life is over and it has been happy; one's happiness can, until the end, turn to dust if the fates so decree.

Here is what I take to be a significant difference in the two systems of evaluation and moral judgment: Confucius admonishes us to free ourselves of the world and its pleasures, including the positive regard of others. For Aristotle, those are the very essence of the good life, well lived, to the extent that some of the Aristotelian virtues are themselves defined with respect to these things: liberality or generosity requires the possession of sufficient wealth that one's giving is conspicuous; magnificence — the respect and admiration of others — requires one to be in a position of honor and power. In short, Aristotle's notions of virtue and the Good Life are inextricably bound up with the goods of this world, including the admiration of one's fellow citizens. This is quite different from the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation as independence from the things of the world.

What does connect these two wisdom traditions, however, is the notion that the recognition and the exercise of virtue is a practiced and developed skill rooted in wisdom, which must grow in tandem with (and may itself be part of) virtue. Knowing the right thing to do requires wisdom on the part of the doer, and actually carrying out the desired course of action requires skill. It is wisdom that mediates courage and prevents it from becoming either reckless as an excess or cowardice as a deficiency. The attainment of the Mean is a matter of both judgment and skill.

However, here too we are operating in the unknown, making imprecise judgments that may turn horribly wrong. In Chen's experience of appropriating the red stars for her undecorated uniform, she might well have misread the temper of the times or the local officials. What was in any event a case of self-definition and identification can be also seen as an act of courage, as Chen so describes it, *but only in retrospect*. That is, if things had turned out otherwise, one might have been justified in deeming Chen's act to have been rash (at least in Aristotle's view of things).

This demonstrates the ways in which the Confucian and Aristotelian concepts of virtue as a mean differ as instruments of evaluation, even though they appear to define virtue in the same moderate terms. If I understand the Confucian idea correctly, the determination of whether an act was virtuous, that is, the determination of whether it avoided both excess and deficiency, is a function of the act itself and the internal state of the agent in the performance of the action, regardless of the outcome. For Aristotle, this determination is done in examining the conditions surrounding the action: not only the intelligent consideration of the likely consequences, but also the actual outcomes. His famous standard for a virtuous act is that it is (1) the right thing to do (and "right" here means it meets the needs of the situation, that is, it is successful), (2) done at the right time (again, in the sense that it is efficacious), (3) in the right way, and (4) for the right reasons. While the inner state matters, it is not the only thing that does; one's judgment about the outcomes must be vindicated.

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This perhaps points to another distinction between the Confucian and Aristotelian moral universes: is it the case that the Confucian notion of vice is rooted in the pursuit of improper goals, that is, the things of the world, while the Aristotelian notion of vice is rooted in the pursuit of the wrong goals and a lack of skill in their pursuit? Is skill (*techne*) more central to the Aristotelian ideal of virtue than is the case for Confucius?

My hunch is that both claims are significantly true: on the one hand, the right thing to do is the right thing to do, and we must answer to our own conscience first for any choice that we make. On the other hand, for most of us, Aristotle is also right: acceptance of our peers and some degree of worldly comfort and success is also something to which we aspire. Questions of virtue aside, we hope that fate is kind to us. Furthermore, keeping with Chen's metaphor, while it is certainly true that each of us must choose our own ferries, once the choice is made we hope that we have a sturdy, reliable craft that will get us safely to the other side of the water.

More fundamentally, fate also plays a part in the very choices available to us: Chen's "red" peers did not have the options for moral growth available to them that she had available to her. It is certainly true she might have chosen some other ferry, and that it might have been to her moral detriment, but it is also true that the ferry she chose was only available to her because her fate (her talents, her birth into a "black" family) as well as her previous ferry rides (her decision to develop her talents as a dancer to their fullest potential) brought her to the crossing where this particular ferry awaited her.

The moral for me is that agency is real, though bounded and contingent. We make choices as we respond to the circumstances of our lives, but we do not get to choose those circumstances. We are active in our moral education, but we do not choose the curriculum. The context for our agency, as well as its outcomes, is both in the hands of our fates.

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1. Ted Slingerland, "The Conception of Ming in Early Confucian Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 46, no. 4 (1996): 568.

2. Slingerland, "The Conception of Ming," 568.

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