

Choosing “The Ferry of Life”: On Moral Agency as a Mean in Education

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Human agency and actions cannot be separated. Agency is the capability and the power of actions.¹ The intrinsic relationship between them is thus not difficult to discern: we proceed from this source that drives us to act and to which we commit ourselves by action. With agency, our actions and choices may be seen to entail a variety of rational features such as consciousness, reflection, meaning, intention. Furthermore, every action and choice we make throughout our lives contributes to individual qualities such as self-consciousness, self-reflection, self-discipline, self-overcoming, self-education, and so forth. Since we cannot avoid actions or choices, all of which are thus purposive, our agency, for ethical and practical purposes, is necessary. This necessity is what drives humans to have goals. For human life, as Aristotle proposes, consists of the pursuit of ends. In this sense, justifications for the end or ends at which humans ought to aim are inescapably tied to outlooks on human nature, which in turn determines choices and actions.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets out to discover the nature of the end or ends at which people aim.² This nature shows, as Aristotle points out, that humans regard their ends as valuable, because all human actions taken together comprise the good and “all knowledge and every inquiry aims at some good” (*NE*, 4). This defines the ends of education: empowering people’s function and perfecting their moral qualities through either being taught or self-taught. People’s function throughout this process is “an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle”; when the action is well performed, it is in accordance with virtue and reason (*NE*, 13–14).

This essay is an examination of moral agency: a metaphysical state of character in the person, which becomes apparent in the activities of the soul. In my analysis I take a renewed interest in traditional metaphysical issues (for example, the nature of human beings, morality) by discussing the idea of moral agency as an object of ethics and moral education with a focus on a mean state between experiences and choices, between the agentic moral state and educational efforts. The analysis is divided into four parts. The first section of the essay begins with a preliminary task of outlining Aristotle’s conception of virtue and the Golden Mean, and his ideas that the mean is the good or the right, and the choice, as a result of our “rational principle,” is the mean relative to us. Then, in the second part, Confucius’s *Doctrine of the Mean*, which views the mean as both an ideal state of virtue and a method for conduct, is compared to the Aristotelian mean. The third part discusses a disposition toward the mean state in which a virtuous choice is made by empowered agency gained through experiences. Questions concerning self-discipline, self-reflection, and courage ensure that moral choices approach the mean state, and such qualities can be inculcated through education. In the final section, self-discipline and courageous acts are defined as virtuous agency of the mean in educational

practices — teaching or self-teaching. Moral agency is thus heightened by an effort of choice between any extreme position or method in order to achieve the “highest virtue” (for Confucius) and the “perfect virtue” (for Aristotle) in activities of the soul. I hope to show that a person can make a moral effort to cultivate virtue — a state of the person’s character that is related to choice and therefore can be sought, rightly and practically, hence educationally.

ARISTOTLE’S GOLDEN MEAN

Aristotle’s concept of the mean in relation to virtue remains an essential element of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, within which lies a consistent and coherent ethical theory. In Aristotle’s definition, “Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (*NE*, 39).

Aristotle argues that virtue is “a state of character”; it is not “a passion,” or “a faculty” (*NE*, 35). Virtue, being “a state of character,” is “lying in the mean”; hence, “virtue is a kind of mean,” and “it aims at what is intermediate” (*NE*, 38). The mean, therefore, is the “perfect virtue” (*NE*, 24). Following Aristotle, intermediate is the equal; thus, “equality implies at least two things” (*NE*, 112). For example, temperance is the mean with regard to pleasures and pains, and courage is the mean with regard to feelings of fear and confidence: “while the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward” (*NE*, 40). The mean, the intermediate, or the equal, however, is not a simple mathematical mean that occupies a middle position — as an arithmetical or geometrical mean; rather, metaphysically and qualitatively, it is a mean that may not always be equidistant between the two possible extremes, and that may not be the same for everyone or under all circumstances; rather, it is “the mean relative to us.”

“Relative to us” is what Aristotle seeks to define within the inherent nexus of virtue and the mean. This, in a more extended sense, means that the act must be done at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way. The rightness or the propriety in human action is considered throughout the ten books of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The relativity between virtue and the mean is the nature of this state of character in a particular person. Virtue is an intermediate state, a middle state, a balanced or tranquil state of character in the person, relative to whoever views and possesses it.

Furthermore, this state of character is concerned with “choice,” that is, as Aristotle defines it, an adoption of action decided on after deliberation; choice is “thought to be most closely bound up with virtue” (*NE*, 53). Between character and action resides choice, and Aristotle considers choice to differentiate the character of individuals better than actions do. A virtuous choice is achieved by those who act in the right way, with the right persons, in the right direction, in the right place, and at the right moment. Choice, thus, is the adoption of an action arrived at by such a process. Virtue is divided by Aristotle into two kinds: intellectual virtue (or excellence) and moral virtue (or excellence). The latter is “a disposition to choose

the mean” (*NE*, 36) and thus be obedient to a principle, whereas the former is an excellence that apprehends such a principle. In this view, “human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting excellence” (*NE*, 14) in the sense either of yielding to a *rational principle* or of apprehending *such a principle* — in other words, it represents either good moral activity or good intellectual activity. It is the “rational principle” that determines “the mean relative to us,” namely, an individual’s virtuous choice.

CONFUCIUS’S THE MEAN

The Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong*) is one of *The Four Books* of Confucian philosophy and teachings; it is central to the Confucian canonical scriptures.³ For Confucius, as for Aristotle, the mean is *De/Te*, the virtue. The mean is the highest as such and the power of the “Middle Use” is transcendent, as Confucius says in *The Analects*. But the common people are short of this highest virtue for a long time.⁴

The following passage furthers our understanding of the Confucian mean:

When joy, anger, sorrow and pleasure have not yet arisen, it is called the mean (centrality, equilibrium). When they arise to their appropriate levels, it is called “harmony.” The mean is the great root of all-under-heaven. “Harmony” is the penetration of the Way through all-under-heaven.⁵

As such, the mean is the ideal state of virtue with things at “their appropriate levels,” and thus in the balanced and harmonious state. The mean is also the method that guides us to do things, when everything that reaches a measured expression “is called harmony,” which presents us the *Dao*, the Way through which proper and right things are obtained. Confucius’s ideal of life lies in its recognition of due degree, due time, and due way “without excessive deliberation.” This view calls forth a relation to Aristotle’s mean, with its emphasis on the rightness and propriety of things (for example, at the right time, in the right place, in the right way).

The Doctrine of the Mean thus becomes the guide to perfecting oneself through its demonstration of the usefulness of a golden path to gain the highest virtue, with a focus on the *Dao* (Way), which furnishes the Way of harmony. Confucius’s concept of the mean, thus, describes the subtle underlying principles of the entire cosmos, giving special attention to relationships. It is the Way of harmony that can be attained through reciprocal obligations and duties within human relations that have structured the social order. The five important relations, called *wulun* (that is, five kinds of human relations), outlined in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, are “between ruler and minister, parent and child, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend. These five [relations] constitute the Way throughout the land.”⁶ Through these relations we learn humanity and human sympathy. Through this path, we will arrive at *sandade* — three attained virtues: wisdom, goodness, and courage, which brings an integration of virtues and knowledge (or skills).

It should be noted that while some differences between Aristotle’s concept of the mean and that of Confucius may be as interesting and important as their similarities, I shall not delineate them in this essay. Like Aristotelian virtue — a state of character, lying in the mean, Confucian virtue (*De*, or spiritual power) consists in

reaching the highest level of sincerity and virtue, which resides within harmony. The mean — *Dao*, or the Way, in the cosmic order — refers to the ethical way of life, or the way to pursue a good life. It is important to note that the Confucian mean, or the highest virtue, does not necessarily mean there is no strife, no conflict, but it is precisely through overcoming strife, opposition, conflict, or tension that we can reach a realm of harmony. And characteristic of this realm is people's ability to actively face the strife of life through trying to achieve the highest state of a harmonious life and world. This Way renders in people a sense of social responsibility, of which Confucius was an exemplary model. I am here reminded of a little anecdote of Confucius's later years.

In his old age, Confucius was experiencing social upheavals. He summoned his pupils to travel across various countries to call on people to change the chaotic society. One time he was with one of his best-known pupils named Zilu on a horse carriage and came to a river. While trying to find the ferry to cross the river, Confucius told Zilu to go and ask the two plough hermits where the river could be forded. When the two men knew that it was Kong Qiu (Confucius) from Lu country, one of them said, "In that case he already knows where the ford is (or should, because he claims to be a Sage)." Another also told Zilu, when he discovered that Zilu was a follower of Kong Qiu of Lu, "Under Heaven there is none that is not swept along by the same flood. Such is the world and who can change it? As for you, instead of following someone who himself is dodging this way and that, you would do better to follow us in shunning this whole generation of men." And with that the man went on farming. Hearing of this, Confucius felt rueful and said, "One cannot herd with birds and beasts. If I am not to be a man among other men, then what am I to be? If the Way prevailed under Heaven, I should not be trying to alter things."⁷

Confucius never shuns the strife of life, insisting that the least that people should do during periods of chaos and upheaval is to maintain personal integrity and heed their own moral inclinations. This anecdote demonstrates that a person may have to make many choices throughout life, many times one has to find a ferry to ford the "waters of life," and the choice of a way requires moral effort. The subsequent monologues are provided for the purposes of illustrating how an ordinary person can and must choose his or her own "ferry of life" in order to ford the blocking chaotic waters.

CHOOSING ONE'S OWN FERRY

Yet choice making is a philosophical and educative process concerned with actions within which different desires, pressures, and attitudes fight it out, eventually resulting in a decision and action. In addition, it is an ethical effort called up by the conscious will for the *self* to control the conflict in the name of higher desires, or morality. Moving forward from the Aristotelian and Confucian Golden Mean, I maintain that choice is an educational effort that is made to achieve, ethically, an active end that lies in the mean between erratic impulses and the resolute steadfastness of the soul. This is an ethical act because choice requires us to bring our soul to these activities. It is a virtuous act because putting our character into our actions requires both a natural disposition to do so and our intentional efforts.

In the process of committing ourselves to the mean state in accordance with virtue and reason, choice making is the mean through which we endeavor to put our soul into actions through a moral struggle. Such is virtue, lying in the mean that is relative to us, or the *Dao* — the Way. Virtue in this case has an essential connection with shame, fear, happiness, pain, and courage. It is not by indifference to these, but by making choices in the right way and to the right degree, that we become virtuous.

MONOLOGUE 1: SELF-DISCIPLINE — A WAY TO SURVIVE⁸

During the five years of my elementary schooling, classes were often suspended due to the constant political upheaval during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. There was a lack of schooling at every level of education. Higher education during the ten-year Cultural Revolution was completely suspended; elementary and secondary schooling, though active, were regularly interrupted. Deprived of any hope of pursuing postsecondary education, we were motivated to become skilled and talented in areas such as sports, dancing, and singing. Having been labeled as “whelps” of the “Five Black Categories” — namely, the classes of social pariahs⁹ — we had to find a means to survive. That was why my father and mother started me in dance at a very young age while my brother Ming took up musical instruments and sports. Most of my elementary school days were spent rehearsing and performing the “Eight Modern Revolutionary Model Operas” (including two Chinese ballet operas) advocated by Chairman Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing. When I was nine, I was chosen to join the “Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team” of Neijiang No. 8 Elementary School, singing and dancing the “Modern Revolutionary Model Operas.”

From a Chinese proverb that “a clumsy bird should start flying earlier,” I learned that I, a “black” (meaning “bad”) bird, needed to fly harder, much harder than those from the “Red” families and even other “Black” families, because the “black” situation of my family was much worse. My father’s great-grandfather served in the feudal Imperial Palace of the Qing Dynasty (China’s last dynasty), his grandfather was a Qing high official, and both were prominent artists and intellectuals in the late Qing. My father himself was allegedly a “counterrevolutionary,” “bourgeois academic authority,” “traitor,” and more, all “targets” of the Cultural Revolution. I came to learn that I had to do exceptionally well in order to survive under those conditions, let alone get a job or become a person of respect when I grew up.

At age nine I set myself extra hours of training and practicing, both in school and after school. I was always the last to leave and the first to arrive at the practice room or platform. For a long time, every morning, no matter in summer or winter, whether I was sound or sick, I got up in the dark (on winter days) and walked to the school to start training myself in ballet technique. Although I never missed once, I still wanted to “fly” and jump ten times higher than other members on the team. I still dreamed of excelling in order to live a respected life while, at the same time, I watched as my father was taken away on numerous occasions and locked up in a “cowshed” or prison.

I advanced in dancing and was chosen, at the age of ten, to assume the principal role, Xi’er, in the modern ballet opera “The White-Haired Girl.” Soon I became

popular as a ballerina, and came to be known locally as Xiao Chen Hong (Little Chen Hong). For quite a few years, the local people thought that my family name was Xiao (Little). I liked being called Xiao Chen Hong because it made me feel accepted. And for a short time I seemed to be transformed — no longer seen as belonging to the “black categories” but now identified as the other child, called Little Chen Hong, a name that offered acceptance.

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This little girl had chosen to find herself an identity through self-discipline as the “Way” to suffer those inevitable conditions of life that she and her family had to bear in that social order. This inevitability compelled her to find her own “ferry” to ford the choppy waters of life, a life she had no choice but to lead, or to find “a means to survive,” as she described it. Her choice and actions driven by her longing for acceptance enabled her to strive for any available paths to “live a respected life.” Her higher moral agency through her volition and resolution was not only actualized but also strengthened through the activities of (self-)training and practicing dance, through playing Xi'er (the white-haired girl) and other leading roles in Chinese ballet operas. She had gone through a state of character concerned with her robust choice of the middle way between her wish to survive and the conditions to which she was confined.

MONOLOGUE 2: COURAGE — BEARING “A RED STIGMA”

After countless futile attempts, I gave up, for a while, my dream of becoming a professional ballerina. I just took pride in often being “borrowed” (a word often used in those days) to dance and perform in art troupes or companies. At age fifteen, I was asked to perform with a local army art troupe. It was composed of over forty members of all ages, “borrowed” from all walks of life. As we were representing the People’s Liberation Army (the most respected and admirable position and class in China then), we were temporarily “drafted.” The most exciting moment was the ceremony of presenting the army uniforms. What a moment of pride and honor for a young person like me! Just to imagine how beautiful, dashing, and dignified one would feel wearing such a uniform, especially with the red collar badges and cap insignia of the red star. This was a dream that I had never dared believe would come true!

But this moment became the most humiliating one for me, because I alone was never called to the platform to receive the uniform.... Later on, a “bare” uniform and cap (with no red badges and star) were handed over to me by the platoon leader. He said to me these words, simple and directive: “Xiao Chen Hong, you put on this.”

I put on the “uniform” and joined in the orderly ranks. We “marched forward” on the street. I suppressed the dreadful welling of tears and let the sense of shame engulf me. I shared in part the pride that marching with the “red” group brought me and reserved the shame that the lack of red symbols on my “army uniform” caused. I wanted then to find a way to stay (because I had to), charting some middle way between the pride and shame. I decided to borrow from a friend (who was from an army family) one pair of red collar badges and a red star insignia. I then stitched them

onto “my” military uniform and cap. With this renewed image, I seemed to present myself with a lofty public profile, although almost everyone in the city by then knew who I was and which category of family I belonged to. I had to choose to declare my stance, even if doing so might have placed me at greater risk and left me subject to more severe shame.

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It was indeed courageous for a girl of fifteen to accept such “shame,” with which she learned to internalize the values by finding “a way to stay,” as she stated, “because I had to.” Her way to stay was courageous. She did not flee from her “most shameful” moment, but instead stood her ground between pride and shame. It took her even greater courage to do what she had done next: borrowed the red badges and star and stitched them onto “‘my’ military uniform.” This courage derived from her ability to feel the appropriate amount of shame and to be brave; it is a mean between timidity and rashness in her situation.

CONCLUSION: EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS IN THE MEAN

Cultivating the Way is called instruction.¹⁰ Cultivation of moral agency through inculcating traits such as self-discipline or self-regulation and courage or bravery calls for educational efforts. The central theme of *The Doctrine of the Mean* is the self-cultivation of human nature, educating people to conscientiously develop their skills in self-cultivation, self-supervision, self-education, and self-perfection. A coherent understanding of the Confucius’s and Aristotle’s conception of the mean resides in the realm of moral principles, wherein Confucius emphasizes self-cultivation and self-perfection, reaching toward complete sincerity and highest virtue, and Aristotle similarly emphasizes the virtuous state of character represented by the mean, in which good choice making is the peak of moral excellence — the “perfect virtue.” This may point to a general idea of self-discipline and courage as an ethically agentic effort in education, a process of directing learning as well as perfecting it. For education in a broader sense is a process that embraces discipline, self-discipline, cultivation, child rearing, and is not limited to the commonly perceived concepts such as schooling, learning, tutelage, book learning, and so forth. Education *per se*, for Aristotle as well as for Confucius, is a particular way in which we ought to have been brought up from our very youth, “so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; this is the right education” (*NE*, 32).

Thus self-discipline, or self-regulation, or laws as well as rules in the similar sense of discipline, is itself a process of self-learning and self-preparation as well as being an agentic ethical effort made in the educational process. In this view, self-discipline is a mean that “bids us practice every virtue and forbids us to practice any vice” (*NE*, 111). The things that tend to produce virtue taken as a whole in the Aristotelian mean (as a unity of heaven and man), or in the Confucian mean (as a harmony between cosmos and individuals), are those choices and “acts prescribed by the law which have been prescribed with a view of education for the common good” (*NE*, 111). In addition, courage is the mean with regard to cowardice and rashness, and also a virtuous state of character with choice. In the case of the Chinese girl, her courage to suffer the public and performative quality of shame that

separated her from the larger group was an act of agency — an ability — that required her to make a choice and to act through rational activities (for example, to understand, to reflect, to intend, to overcome, to learn). In order to stand her ground against this public shame, she used her own courage to make a public change — putting the red collar badges and red star insignia on her uniform. This act required a corresponding agency in order to recognize its necessity. Her courage enabled her to make an ethical choice that yielded her the honor to act. Her action was a courageous attempt to achieve her goal of “living a respected life” despite taking the risk of suffering more shame.

Thus, self-discipline and courage, as discussed in this essay as a mean in education, entail a moral effort to choose and act as a result of our awareness of the possibility of moral struggle and of our commitment both to knowledge and experience as well as to strength and will. This shows that education, as a matter of acquiring moral knowledge (knowing certain actions and attitudes), is learning and preparation acquired in practice and through experience. By being good and by doing good, we carry the mean into our practices and follow the Way (*Dao*) in cultivating our humanity. We thus always do what is natural according to our status in the world and our circumstances in reality. We emanate from experience and understanding at which we aim and to which we commit ourselves by choice and action. Furthermore, self-discipline as well as courageous actions entail a moderate bearing on the virtue of character in a person right through education as well as through life, with weight, pressure, conflict, desire, and aspiration, as is experienced and exemplified in the monologues presented here.

1. Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). This work will be cited in the text as *NE* for all subsequent references.

3. *The Four Books* are *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects (of Confucius)*, and *Mengzi (or Mencius)*.

4. Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Arthur Waley (Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Publishing, 2006), bk. 6, chap. 27.

5. Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, trans. A. Charles Muller (Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Publishing, 2006), chap. 1, 1–6.

6. *Ibid.*, chap. 20, 8–9.

7. Confucius, *Analects*, bk. 18, chap. 6.

8. The monologues are an autobiographical account by the author.

9. These included landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists, all subject to reform.

10. Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, chap. 1.