

Sim, May, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius*

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2007 was a banner year for comparative studies, with the publication of three monographs on related topics: *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle* (New York: Routledge) by YU Jiyuan, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge) by the author of this review, and *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* by May Sim. For many scholars, such comparisons will immediately seem appropriate and potentially productive. As Sim points out in her Introduction, Aristotle and Confucius both “recognize the central place of virtues [and] enjoin us to get our practical bearings by modeling the behavior of exemplary individuals (rather than learning to apply rules)” (2). However, others have emphasized the dissimilarities between Confucius and Aristotle. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, has argued that, because of differences in their fundamental philosophical vocabularies and methods of argumentation, the two are ultimately incommensurable. (MacIntyre also believes, though, that incommensurable traditions can enter into a sort of dialogue and learn from one another. See his “Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues,” in Eliot Deutsch, ed., *Culture and Modernity* [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991], 104–22 and “Once More on Confucian and Aristotelian Conceptions of the Virtues,” in Robin Wang, ed., *Chinese Philosophy in an Age of Globalization* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004], 151–62.) Furthermore, Roger Ames and the late David Hall argued in a series of books that Confucius is similar to postmodernists like Richard Rorty, who reject the substantialist view of the self and concern with truth as correspondence, which is (supposedly) required for Aristotelian ethics. Sim expresses her admiration for these thinkers, but a significant part of her book is devoted to arguing that they are mistaken.

In Chapter 1, “Aristotle in the Reconstruction of Confucian Ethics,” Sim argues that there is a fundamental methodological difference between her two subjects of comparison: “Aristotle’s view of the end [of human existence] has the support of metaphysics, whereas Confucius’ view has the support of tradition” (35–36). She argues that this is a comparative

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strength of Aristotle, because his metaphysics allows him to critically reflect upon his own social biases and justify his views to those who come from other traditions. Sim seems to think not only that Confucians need a metaphysics, but that they need a metaphysics much like that of Aristotle, to undergird their views.

In Chapter 2, “Categories and Commensurability in Confucius and Aristotle,” Sim acknowledges that Confucius, unlike Aristotle, does not have an explicit theory of metaphysical categories. Nonetheless, Confucius does certainly make reference to specific qualities, quantities, places, times, and instances of the other categories. Furthermore, while Confucius would certainly reject Aristotle’s detailed view of “substances” as independent and metaphysically fundamental, the Confucian view does require a “minimal” view of substance as the thing, whatever it is, that has various qualities and stands in various relations. This is particularly true in ethics, because “while he focuses on relations, Confucius does not at all deny that relations need something to relate—such as particular mothers and children” (58). Without such a conception, how could a Confucian determine whether someone performs a role well or badly? (*Who* fails to be a good father? *What* is not the appropriate sort of vessel for this ceremony?)

Sim employs a similar methodology in Chapter 3, “Ritual and Realism in Early Chinese Science”: Confucius does not seek to give definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, nor does he seek a purely theoretical correspondence between language and reality. However, Sim argues, Confucius is committed to “commonsense” realism and practices of definition. For example, Confucius objected to the Duke of She applying the term “upright” to the son who turned in his father for stealing a sheep (*Analec*s 13.18). This objection only makes sense if there is a distinction between genuine uprightness and a given society’s convention for using the term (84–85). Sim also cites examples from early Chinese science (including the study of medicinal herbs) to illustrate that the general intellectual context within which Confucius acted and spoke emphasized correctly categorizing different types of things and understanding their capacities and effects. She concludes, “The realist would fix on the former, [while] the pragmatist on the latter. I am trying to suggest that that two interpenetrate and harmonize in the classical view” (96).

Having addressed some alternatives to her general project, Sim turns in the remaining chapters to comparisons between Aristotle and Confucius, with an eye on how each can learn from the other. In Chapter 4, “Harmony and the Mean in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Zhongyong*,” Sim notes the general similarity between the Aristotelian view that virtues are means between extreme states (e.g., courage is a mean between rashness and cowardice) and the Confucian view that virtue is manifested in *he* 和, “harmony,” meaning the contextually appropriate expression of the various feelings. (Throughout this chapter, Sim treats the *Zhongyong* as an important “Confucian” text, while leaving aside the issue of whether Confucius himself would endorse its specific views.) The *Zhongyong* is also similar to Aristotle in arguing that the outline of human ethics (the “Way”) is determined by human “nature.” However, the two approaches differ in their metaphysical bases: “Unlike Aristotle’s mean, the Confucian *zhong* precedes everything in this world and is an almost metaphysical principle with cosmic significance” (103). Nonetheless, the *Zhongyong* does not explain in any detail how this metaphysics justifies the Confucian Way. Returning to a point she makes in Chapter 1, Sim proposes that a “Confucian could profit from Aristotle’s example of a more explicit metaphysics” (131).

In Chapter 5, “The Moral Self in Confucius and Aristotle,” Sim gives an inventory of what traits Confucius must implicitly attribute to the human self in order to make sense out of his various pronouncements. For example, Confucius condemns those who merely go through the motions of following ritual, without a personal commitment to what they are

doing (160–61, citing *Analects* 17.11, 3.12 and 17.13). This does not require a Cartesian self, but it does require more than a mere “generative space–time locus of will without personal content,” as Fingarette, for one, would have it (155). Sim also addresses in this chapter (albeit briefly) an issue that will have occurred to many readers, which is that, assuming that Sim is right about Confucius requiring a metaphysical basis for his ethical views, “Why Aristotle and not Mencius?” (163) (We might add, Why not Xunzi? Why not ZHU Xi? Why not WANG Yangming?) Sim’s suggestion is that Aristotle’s “elaborate metaphysics of how God is related to the rest of the world and human activity” (164) is an advantage over Mengzi’s less specific account of Heaven.

In Chapter 6, “Virtue-Oriented Politics,” Sim notes the important differences between Aristotle and Confucius on political theory. Aristotle’s view was based on the city-state, where full virtue is exercised only by the male citizens who participate directly in decision-making. The family, for Aristotle, is merely a tool (albeit an important one) for producing and supporting such citizens. Confucius was familiar with much larger political entities than the city-state. In addition, he viewed government as the family writ-large, and thought that full virtue could be exercised simply by being a good father, son, etc. However, Aristotle and Confucius agree that the state exists for the sake of cultivating and exercising virtue. Sim suggests that this gives them both a way of justifying certain rights. For example, a right to assistance “can be justified on the grounds that the pursuit of virtue is impossible unless at least the minimum needs of animal life are met. It is neither a matter of *noblesse oblige* nor a holdover from some fictitious state of nature that underwrites individual entitlements” (192).

Finally, in Chapter 7, “Making Friends with Confucius and Aristotle,” Sim observes that the two philosophers regard the highest sort of friendship as based on and supportive of virtue. Aristotle states that there are also friendships based on pleasure and utility. Confucius does not indicate that a friendship can be based solely on one of these factors, but he would agree that friendship based on virtue is also pleasant and useful.

In my opinion, Sim makes a number of persuasive points, both in her direct comparisons of Confucius and Aristotle, and in her rebuttals of alternative approaches. In the space that I have left, I cannot do justice to all the subtle and intriguing observations that she makes. I shall simply offer two suggestions for consideration. First, although Sim is very well read, there were certain authors whom I was surprised she did not engage. For example, although he does not focus on Confucius and Aristotle themselves, Lee H. Yearley’s *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) anticipates some of the observations that Sim makes. Second, I am less confident than Sim in the need for a robust Aristotelian metaphysics to supplement Confucianism. She suggests that Aristotle’s metaphysics can be shown to be true ahistorically and aculturally, so that “a general theory of human virtue can be derived intellectually even absent the relevant political background needed for the practical cultivation of virtue” (39). However, we have not been able to reach a consensus on metaphysics even *within* the West, let alone outside it. Rather than starting from a detailed, robust, and controversial metaphysical worldview, we should begin cross-cultural dialogue with assumptions that are as minimal (and metaphysically noncommittal) as possible. (I defend a more naturalistic, Mengzian version of Confucianism in the conclusion of my *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*.)

But disagreement is to be expected any time someone states a challenging and thoughtful philosophical position. May Sim’s book is an impressive achievement and should be read by anyone interested in Confucius, Aristotle, or the project of comparative philosophy.