
ARISTOTLE, CONFUCIUS AND ROUSSEAU ON HUMAN NATURE AND THE GOLDEN MEAN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers of different cultural traditions have written extensively on the nature of the human being. In the ancient times, Aristotle contended that human beings are not naturally good but are led to be good in the society through education. He also expounded a doctrine of the golden mean, a kind of middle-way philosophy, as a theory on how human beings learn to be good, achieve happiness and live the good life. In the modern times, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau also provided some political reflections on these topics. Other cultures apart from the West have developed explanations on the nature of human beings. For instance, Confucianism in the East talks about the nature of human beings in their natural conditions and prescribes a middle-way doctrine for the ultimate happiness of human beings in the society. This paper takes a comparative approach to understand the areas of convergence and divergence in the thoughts of Aristotle, Confucius and Rousseau on the middle-way philosophy and the natural goodness of man. This is necessary in order to know the points at which various cultures and philosophical traditions or thought systems in the world can connect and overlap or differ on certain philosophical matters.

Keywords: human nature; human goodness; Aristotle; Confucius; Rousseau; golden mean

Introduction

There are different socio-historical circumstances which underlie the formation, growth and development of every culture. These experiential circumstances are instrumental in the shaping of cultures and in the formation of their worldviews. The implication of this is that cultures across continents have different worldviews. Different worldviews are like separate spectacles through which every culture perceives reality. Consequently, the way in which a culture conceives reality informs the thought-system of that culture. However, these thought-systems also serve as guide to their daily life. Philosophy, nonetheless, is the bedrock or foundation of deep thought about the principles guiding cultural worldviews. It follows from this that every culture has its own philosophy which may be different from or similar to various philosophies of other cultures.

The phenomenon of plurality of cultures and philosophies makes the comparative endeavor which is the main focus of this paper plausible. This is so because the world, as vast as it seems to be, is also a very small global village which provides the basis for cross-cultural interaction and cross-fertilization of ideas. Following from this, the urge to understand other peoples, cultures and customs apart from our own has increased in the intellectual arena. However, it is hardly possible to understand other people or cultures without being acquainted with their philosophies. This accords in a very large degree with Bertrand Russell's observation that "if we want to understand an age or a nation, we must understand its philosophy."² This is because, the experiences of a culture determine its worldview, its philosophy and the way it perceives reality. We cannot, therefore, separate philosophy from culture. This is because they are so inextricably interwoven. Akin Makinde buttresses this point when he argues that:

Insofar as everybody belongs to an age or culture, then, to whatever school he or she may belong, a philosopher is first and foremost a person of culture, a product of the education and belief of his society. If a philosopher in one culture sets a higher standard of philosophizing than some others in other cultures, it is because one culture sets a higher standard of education, belief, knowledge, moral, and social values than some other cultures...³

However, this does not mean that philosophy and culture are the same; rather, it means that philosophy serves as an unavoidable backdrop, material or expression for culture. There are many and different philosophical doctrines and cultures in the world, nevertheless, if we take a comparative look at the different philosophies of the world, we are likely to discover both convergences and divergences. Against this background, this paper attempts a comparative discussion of the philosophies of Confucius, Aristotle and Rousseau on the doctrine of moderation and the natural goodness of man – focusing on the areas of convergence and divergence.

Aristotle on the Goodness of Man and the Doctrine of the Golden Mean

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, his work on morality and human virtue, stands out as his masterpiece. Aristotle addresses several morally-relevant issues in this book. However, our interest focuses on his view on the goodness of man, and his philosophy of moderation. Concerning the goodness of man, there are two opposing views. On the one hand is the view that man is naturally or innately good. On the other hand, is the view that man acquires his goodness from his contact with the society through teaching and conscious self-development. Aristotle belongs to the category of scholars who uphold the view that man acquires his goodness through teaching and conscious self-development. Virtues, for Aristotle, are what determine the goodness of man. There are two classifications of virtues: intellectual and moral.⁴ These two virtues are not innate in human beings. The intellectual virtues can be acquired through training. In other words, they can be taught to people. However, the moral virtues cannot be taught to people – they are acquired through habituation and self-development. The implication of this is that human beings are not naturally good. Nonetheless, they have the capacity to be good if they are trained or if they consistently develop themselves.

In the second chapter, book two of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asks a fundamental ethical question “how can we be good?” This question has always been the concern of Normative Ethicists. It connects to the question of how human beings can attain happiness in a society, especially in their relationship with their fellow human beings, and their natural environment. Aristotle contends that it is human action that determine

their dispositions. That is, human actions determine the nature or the state of character that are produced by human beings.⁵ In an attempt to answer the question “how can we be good?” he tries to understand virtues or moral qualities, and how they are preserved or undermined.⁶ We can be good, Aristotle contends, if we take to the virtues and what preserves them. One important inference that can be made from this developmental approach to virtues is that human beings are not originally born good.

Virtues, Aristotle contends, can be destroyed on the one hand by deficiency and on the other hand by excess. However, between excess and deficiency, there is a “mean.” This mean is the moderate ground between the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency. This is what is known as the Aristotelian philosophy of the middle. Accordingly, between prodigality and meanness, which are excess and deficiency respectively, there is a mean called liberality. Between fear and rashness, there is a mean called bravery. The “mean”, for Aristotle is what preserves moral quality. The “mean” ought to be sought for in our actions. The man who observes the mean is a virtuous man because the mean itself preserves moral quality. If we fail to seek the mean, we expose ourselves to two types of vices: the vice of deficiency and the vice of excess.⁷ We control our passions through the rational power of the soul and thereby form virtuous habits that lead us to spontaneously follow the middle course.

Aristotle describes the mean as a point equidistant from the extremes and he argues that this definition is not the same for everybody. The implication of this is that in spite of the differences in the various cultural practices of the world, there is a universal recognition of what constitutes the mean. However, Aristotle recognizes that within this universal recognition of the mean, there is what we can, for our purpose here, describe as relative understanding of the mean. Accordingly, Aristotle maintains that:

The equal is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by intermediate relatively to us, that which is neither too much nor too little - and this is not one, nor the same for all.⁸

Following Aristotle's explanation of the mean, the quantity of food that will serve as a mean between gluttony and starvation for one person is different from the quantity that will serve as a mean for another. Virtue, then, for Aristotle lies in moderation. For him, it:

Is the disposition of the soul in which when it has to choose among actions and feelings, it observes the mean relative to us, this being determined by such a rule or principle as would take shape in the mind of a man of sense or practical wisdom.⁹

The mean does not, however, apply to everything. There are some actions that we cannot determine the mean. Such actions include: envy, malice, shamelessness, adultery, theft and murder. These actions are bad in themselves.¹⁰ However, even where the mean can be determined it remains difficult to achieve. He confesses that virtue is hard to achieve because it is not easy to find the middle point. Virtue requires prudence or phronesis. For him,

To be angry with the right person and to the right extent and at the right time and with the right object and in the right way is not easy, and it is not everyone who can do it. This is equally true of spending money. Hence, we infer that to do these things properly is rare, laudable and fine.¹¹

He therefore outlines three major rules that can help human beings in their relentless effort to moderate their actions by prudence and achieving the middle point. Those rules include: keep away from that extreme which is the more opposed to the mean; note the errors into which we personally are most liable to fall; always particularly be on your guard against pleasure and pleasant things.¹² Aristotle maintains that if we follow these three rules, it will be easier to strike a balance between the two extremes of excess and deficiency, which are both vices, for the ultimate realization of the middle ground which is the preserver of virtue.

However, it is one thing to outline the ways through which human beings can maintain the middle ground between the vices of excess and deficiency thereby threading the path of virtue and it is another thing

for such outlines to be practicable. Human beings, given their nature, are not in the position to easily follow the paths through which virtues can be obtained as outlined by Aristotle. This is because it is natural that human beings indulge themselves in either excess or deficiency because they naturally value pleasure than pain. Moderation can often require a painful level of self-denial to steer the middle-way in every action.

Confucius on the Natural Goodness of Man and the Middle Way

Confucianism is one of the fundamental ancient philosophico-religious doctrines of the East. It embodies a whole spectrum of ideas ranging from political to moral, ethical and social. This school of thought is believed to be founded by Confucius. However, it embodies some other ancient Chinese teachings that predated Confucius himself. Nonetheless, Confucius was said to have edited and reconstructed a lot of these ancient teachings without the slightest consciousness that a school of thought would eventually encompass them. Confucius believed that human beings are naturally good. However, his conception of the natural goodness of man is in relation to the nature of man as rational creatures, different in kind and degree from other animals.

There are three basic texts in Confucianism: The Analects, Mencius and Xunzi. These three texts express different views on the natural goodness of man. The Analects represents the teachings of Confucius himself which were compiled after his death. It was written in form of dialogue between Confucius (who is often referred to as the Master) and his disciples just like Plato's dialogues. Mencius and Xunzi are, however, students of Confucius with whom he had several intellectual discussions on the nature of morality and politics. According to Huang, Confucius holds the view that human nature is good. However, what makes the human nature good is humanity. Humanity, according to Confucius, is inherent in every individual human life.¹³ This humanity is what makes human beings alike in their nature and distinguishes them from beasts.¹⁴

There are, however, some Confucians who presented a more elaborate view on the natural goodness of man. These are Mencius and Xunzi. They continued the teachings of Confucius after his death. Their teachings, together with the teachings of Confucius himself are referred to as Confucianism. While Mencius defended most of the teachings of Confucius, Xunzi rejected some. On the natural goodness of man, Mencius

argues that human beings have innate ability to be good and that it is the human society that corrupts human beings. According to Amine,

Mencius argues that human nature is good and only gets corrupted by the society. The idea of the four hearts is effectively meant as an illustration of the natural goodness of human beings...Mencius asks us to imagine a situation in which a child is about to fall in a well. Who would not feel compassion and alarm at seeing this? One feels alarm neither because he wanted to get in the good grace of his parents, nor because he wished to win the praises of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child.¹⁵

Mencius' argument for the natural goodness of human beings is predicated on the ability of human beings to express pity, take responsibility for certain things, or care for their fellow human beings. However, this does not justify the natural goodness of human beings. Human beings learn to care for their fellow human beings and to take responsibility for certain actions which may not even benefit them in anyway in the human society. It is man's contact with the society that implants or inculcates the care for fellow men in him. Besides, some other lower creatures like monkeys and birds demonstrate certain level of care towards their kind. This makes it evident that human beings are not exclusive in showing care to their fellow human beings. This contrasts with Mencius' claim that it is the human society that corrupts human beings. In fact, Mencius himself recognizes that human beings persistently do what is wrong. Yet he claims they are naturally good. This claim seems to be contradictory.

We may raise an objection to this claim by asking that if human beings are naturally good, how can they be corruptible by nature? Aristotle for instance, seems to disagree with Mencius' stance on the natural goodness of man when he argues that whatever is by nature cannot be taught to act otherwise. He gives examples of fire and stones – fire, for him, cannot be taught to burn downward and stones cannot be taught to fall upward.¹⁶ The same ought to apply to human beings if we agree that they are products of nature. In other words, if human beings are naturally or innately good as Mencius claims, nothing in nature or in the society

ought not to have the power to corrupt them. This is because that will amount to being taught to act against their very nature if we are to accept Aristotle's explanation.

Moreover, Xunzi argues in contrast with Mencius' claim, that human beings are naturally bad. For him, human beings are born with a natural desire for profit, feelings of envy, hatred and fondness for the indulgence of the senses.¹⁷ He, nonetheless, believes that human beings can be good or made to be good because they possess the natural faculty that can understand ethical principles.¹⁸ Xunzi's picture of the nature of human beings is similar to Thomas Hobbes's conception or understanding of the human being in the state of nature. That is to say that human beings in a state of nature are in a state of war of all against all. But how plausible is this understanding of human nature? If human beings cannot be said to be naturally good, does it make sense to argue that they are naturally bad? Goodness and badness are polar concepts which both presuppose that human beings possess some innate attributes or characteristics.

However, what are the parameters for measuring or ascertaining that human beings innately possess one attribute and not the other? If it is reasonable to say that human beings are naturally bad, it is also reasonable to argue that they are naturally good. This is because both claims weigh equally. A more plausible position to adopt here is John Locke's claim that the human mind is a *tabula rasa* at birth and that human knowledge and virtues are acquired from experience. If we follow this line of thought, it will follow that human beings are either good or bad 'in' society. In other words, the society is both influential and inflectional on the development of human attitude. This also seems to follow Rousseau's argument that human beings are corrupted by the society. However, unlike Rousseau, this view does not presuppose that human beings are innately good – rather, it claims that they can either be good or bad in relation to the society and not from their prenatal or disembodied forms.

Like Aristotelianism, Confucianism also advocates the middle-way philosophy, which enjoins human beings to strike a balance between two extremes. According to this principle, excesses and defects are vices. However, virtue lies between the two. A virtuous person, therefore, is a person who maintains the middle ground between excess and defect. Confucius says in the *The Doctrine of the Mean* that "let the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will

prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish.”¹⁹ This means that if the government of the state knows how to strike a balance between two extremes, there will be no problem in government. According to Omoregbe, Confucianism is mainly an ethical system or moral philosophy named after its founder.²⁰ Confucius’ moral philosophy is embodied in his concept of the ideal man, the perfect gentleman or the superman.²¹ Accordingly, he describes the person who maintains the middle ground as the superman. This is like the concept of *Omoluabi* in Yoruba culture. According to Confucius,

The superior man cultivates a friendly harmony, without being weak – how firm is he in his energy! He stands erect in the middle, without inclining to either side – how firm is he in his energy! When good principles prevail in the government of his country, he does not change from what he was in retirement. How firm is he in his energy! When bad principles prevail in the country, he maintains his course to death without changing – how firm is he in his energy!²²

This means that anyone who cultivates the habit of maintaining the middle ground between two extremes is a strong and super person. Such a person will know what to do at the right time and he or she will easily adapt and do well in any situation. No circumstance can baffle such a person because he or she is already “super”, meaning that he or she is beyond ordinary human beings. Virtue, for Confucius is man’s highest good²³ and the virtuous person is the one who maintains the middle ground between two extremes.

Rousseau on the Natural Goodness of Man and Middle Philosophy

Rousseau’s conception of the natural goodness of man is a reaction to the accounts of human nature presented by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Hobbesian understanding of human nature depicts a hypothetical pre-political human society, characterized by wickedness and viciousness. This society is called the “state of nature.” Hobbes argues that human beings in the state of nature are brutish due to the inability to determine what was morally condemnable and commendable. As a result of this, human destroy themselves because of greed and self-interest. This

therefore makes the state of nature to the state of anarchy and uncertainty. Accordingly, the need for the civil society arises in order to guarantee the safety of lives and properties and reason suggests what Hobbes calls “convenient articles of peace upon which men may be drawn to agreement.”²⁴

Rousseau however disagrees with Hobbes’ negative understanding of human beings in the state of nature. For Rousseau, human beings in their natural state possess natural virtue. They are peaceful, compassionate and good: it is the very contact with the civil society that corrupts man. This is evident in his popular saying that “man is born free; yet everywhere we find him in chains.”²⁵ Rousseau comes up with this saying presumably after reflecting thoroughly on the relationship among human beings in the civil society and the various forms of atrocities which human beings have done to their fellow human beings. According to him,

The strength of a man is so exactly in proportion with his natural needs and his original state that, if his state alters and his needs increase, even by the smallest amount, the assistance of his fellows becomes necessary, and when eventually his desires embrace the whole of nature, they can scarcely be satisfied even with the help of humanity in its entirety. In this way the causes that make us wicked also turn us into slaves, subjugating us by corrupting us. Our sense of our own weakness derives not so much from our nature as from our cupidity; our needs bring us together at the same time as our passions divide us, and the more we become enemies to our fellow-men, the more we need them.²⁶

This is to say that the original human nature is different from how it has been conditioned in civil society. Natural human beings in the state of nature according to Rousseau did not acquire more than they needed. This suggests immediately that they understood the principle of striking a balance between excess and defect. However, their social interaction, intercourse or relationship with fellow human beings in the society distorted this instinctive orientation concerning their needs and desires. Their capacity for self-perfection created unnecessary needs and desires.

Comparing and Contrasting the Thoughts of Aristotle, Confucius and Rousseau on Human Nature

Having presented the views of Aristotle, Confucius and Rousseau on the natural goodness of man and the doctrine of the golden mean or the middle-way, we shall consider the areas of convergence and divergence among these three philosophers. Aristotle and Confucius express similar views on this middle-way doctrine. They both argue that excesses and defects are vices while virtue lies in the middle of excess and defect. In this respect, the middle-way doctrine is an area of convergence between Confucianism and Aristotelianism. Meanwhile, Rousseau simply argues that human beings possessed the instinct of moderation and contentment before coming in contact with the civil society which divested them of this instinct and polluted their minds with greed, discontentment, selfishness and incontinence.

However, on the natural goodness of human beings, Confucius and Rousseau express different views from Aristotle's. While Confucius argues that human beings are naturally good because they participate in humanity and civil society which differentiates them from beasts; Rousseau argues that human beings are naturally good and are corrupted by the civil society. Aristotle on the contrary, argues that human beings are not naturally good but can be made good through education. For Aristotle, there are two types of virtue – moral and intellectual. While intellectual virtue is derived and developed through teaching and learning, moral virtues are acquired through habit and consistent personal development. The implication of this is that the goodness of human beings is not innate. It is through their contact with the human society that human beings try to cultivate and develop their senses of morality and goodness.

There are two followers of Confucius that express different views on the teachings of their master. They are Mencius and Xunzi. Xunzi expresses a view similar to Aristotle's view, while Mencius expresses a view similar to Rousseau's and Confucius' views on the natural goodness of human beings. Mencius argues, following Confucius and Rousseau that human beings are naturally good and that they are corrupted by the society. However, the reason he gives for the natural goodness of human beings is that human beings have the natural virtue of compassion towards one another. This is similar in a way to Confucius' claim that humanity is what differentiates human beings from beasts and Rousseau's argument

that the state of nature was ruled by love.

Contrasting Mencius, Confucius and Rousseau, Xunzi, who is also a follower of Confucius, argues that human beings are naturally bad. For Xunzi, human beings are born with a natural desire for profit, feelings of envy, hatred and fondness for the indulgence of the senses. Nonetheless, he argues that human beings can be good or made to be good because they possess the natural faculty that can understand ethical principles. This position corresponds with Aristotle's claim that human beings are naturally self-interested and that intellectual and moral virtues can be acquired by human beings because they possess a natural receptacle for the reception of virtues. Accordingly, both Aristotle and Xunzi agree that human beings are not naturally good but can be made good through education.

This comparison is significant because we are living in a global age where many different cultures and traditions are brought together. They are marked by differences, and yet they require searching a common ground. The flexibility of this philosophy of the golden mean or middle-way allows us to appreciate cultural difference and yet provides a framework to consider virtue relative to each cultural and individual experience.

ENDNOTES

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⁴ Aristotle, "The Nature of Moral Virtue" In Sher, G. (Ed) *Moral Philosophy: Selected Readings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1987), 67.

⁵ Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics" In Bonevac, D. (Ed.) *Today's Moral Issues: Classic and Contemporary Perspective* Second edition (Toronto, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1996), 8.

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¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Yong Huang, *Confucius: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 49-50

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Loubna El Amine, *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 103.

¹⁶ Aristotle, "The Nature of Moral Virtue" In Sher, G. (Ed) *Moral Philosophy: Selected Readings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1987), 67-68.

¹⁷ Loubna El Amine, *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 105-106.

¹⁹ Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Mean*. (Blackmask Online. www.blackmask.com, 2001), 1.

²⁰ Joseph Omoregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publications, 1993), 292.

²¹ *Ibid.*

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²³ Joseph Omoregbe, *Comparative Religion*. (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publications, 1999), 144.

²⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Edwin Curley. Ed. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 78.

²⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy and the Social Contract*. (trans.) Betts, C. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 169.

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