Introduction

Melodrama is difficult to avoid when discussing the impact of Aristotle upon Western thought and practice and Confucius upon Asian thought and practice. Chinese culture is the single stem from which most East Asian cultures branch, and Master Kong is a taproot of these branches. Western cultures owe much to the Greek and Latin civilizations that styled Aristotle as the "master of those who know." Each thinker's prescription for life has influenced his traditions for millennia. Even in their rejection of the ancient masters, modern movements in both cultures have been shaped by their rejection, right down to their interpretation of the sciences and society. When I speak of "remastering" in this connection, I mean both to recommend that moral study return to a focus on these masters and that we try to recapture their sense that morality is above all a craft with demands and rewards of the utmost consequence for human life. Moral mastery is what both these estimable masters exact. Without it, we wander in the childhood of morality despite all our clever theories.

My project is a close comparison of the ethics of Aristotle and Confucius, with attention to their views of the cosmos, the self, and human relationships. Dialogue between Asian and European cultures is so important, and Aristotle and Confucius are so pivotal to these cultures, that I hope this study will not be the last. It does, however, seem to be the first monograph-length study of these two figures. An inventory of similarities and differences would hardly suffice. My aim is to involve these authors in each other's problems

and to engage both in reconsidering the contemporary difficulties to which they speak with surprising frequency in one voice, or at least in genuine harmony. For instance, both men recognize the central place of virtues, enjoin us to get our practical bearings by modeling the behavior of exemplary individuals (rather than learning to apply rules), and emphasize social roles and pragmatic contexts. However, the situation is not simple: just where it seems the two might be most easily compatible, small divergences make for an unexpected rift; just where they seem most alien, some unforeseen subtlety makes for a surprising reconciliation.

The field of this study is stretched between problems of ethics and problems of "first philosophy" (i.e., the thoughtful consideration of our most basic presuppositions and beliefs about the most basic realities). I compare the central ethical concepts of the two figures and ask to what extent these concepts and their associated practices are bound by their respective cultures. I examine each author's most primitive assumptions about human beings and our natural and social environments and wonder to what extent each author's ethics requires or would be aided by a theoretical "first philosophy." The conclusion that emerges is that these two towering figures can help each other, reaching out to each other across the miles and to us across the centuries.

The questions I raise about culture are important because both Aristotle and Confucius admit that ethical practice and thought about ethical practice are context sensitive – so much so that critics have charged that their ethics are relevant only to a limited set of circumstances and offer no general prescriptions for life. I shall contest this. It is crucial to gain clarity about cultural context because of the titanic difficulties of translation and comparison this sort of study must face. My claim is that evaluative comparison is difficult but not impossible, and I aim to bring Aristotle and Confucius head-to-head, where the strengths and weaknesses of their ethics are revealed and each can suggest remedies for the other's deficiencies. In particular, I shall make the case that while Aristotle's ethics makes social training central and leaves room for cultural variation within the perimeters of shared natural function, Aristotelians can learn much from Confucians about the nature and ethical pertinence of ceremony and decorum. In other words, Confucian aestheticism provides resources

for Aristotelian theoreticism. Reciprocally, Confucian traditions can learn from Aristotle a form of first philosophy that grounds talk of our common humanity without neglecting cultural or individual differences and roots ethics in a practical rationality that does not claim mathematical exactness or exceptionless legislation. Aristotelian metaphysics provides resources for Confucian parochialism.

The questions about first philosophy are important in part because prominent Aristotelian thinkers (e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre in his *After Virtue*) have argued that a teleological metaphysics is not a prerequisite to Aristotelian ethics. Confucian commentators such as Roger Ames and the late David Hall judge that first philosophy is tantamount to "foundationalism" and is wed to a view of "transcendence" that is avoided by Confucianism, to its credit. To many thinkers, metaphysics is the bane of Western thinking, is best avoided in ethical theory, and is not only unnecessary but quite possibly destructive of a humane ethical life that is tolerant and situated. I shall argue, to the contrary, that it is the dependence of Aristotle's ethics on his first philosophy that underwrites its claim to cross-cultural relevance and shall suggest that certain features of Aristotle's view of human nature (in relation to nature generally) provide needed supplements to Confucian ways.

In the end – I say it now in full cognizance that the point will really make sense only after a number of detailed analyses – it turns out that though Aristotle refers to practices and manners and what we might think of as "aesthetic" dimensions in the pursuit of a fine (*kalon*) life, he says too little about them and what he says is far from useful. Confucius can help here. On the other hand, Confucius leans so hard on proprieties and decorum that his own appeals to something beyond authoritative manners (e.g., as his appeals to nature or to the mandate of heaven) are thin and inexplicable. Here, Aristotle can help. But again, we shall find the situation far more complex and interesting. Moreover, Aristotle takes human relations far more seriously in his ethics and politics than he does in his teaching about the soul and first principles of being. Confucius can help here with perceptive reminders about the centrality of human relationships. My argument will be, finally, not merely that each man's teaching has assets that make good the liabilities of the other man's teaching but that each already has an opening in his teaching by which the other

might enter. Neither tradition will remain untransformed by this encounter – not in its ethics and not in its metaphysics.

It is true that within a broader historical purview, one can find Aristotelians who make more of the latent aesthetic dimension and matters of style and mode of comportment. There are also people who emphasize the imagination more than Aristotle the Stagirite did and who develop the connection between rehearsal for agency and theatrical preparation or between modern forms of identity and novels. One can find thinkers (e.g., Dewey, particularly in his later, Aristotle-inspired phase of growth) who press process and relationship more than Aristotle did in his theoretical, if not his ethical, works. If that is true, why should we not remain within the many departments of the Occident? Why go to an alien tradition – Chinese Confucianism – to make such points? Similarly, one can find later Confucians (e.g., Song neo-Confucianism, culminating in Zhu Xi) who bring out a latent but by no means elaborated metaphysical element in Master Kong. Why then turn to Aristotle to provide a metaphysical supplement, even supposing one is needed or useful?

The first and overriding reason is the one noted at the outset: it is simply interesting and important to compare two key figures from alien traditions, even if similar corrections and supplements were available in their own histories. Second, talk of similarity is notoriously vague. It is not the case that the same points about relationship and context will be pressed if we look to Dewey rather than to Confucius to help Aristotle. It is not true that the same points about aesthetic sense will be made if we direct Aristotle to modern Hegel- or Nietzsche-inspired thought. Nor will the same points about first philosophy appear if we direct Confucius forward to Zhu Xi rather than sideways (as it were) to Aristotle. Third, my juxtaposition provides useful test cases for the respective schools of thought. Think of it – so much thought and practice in the West and the Middle East have grown up under the tutelage of Aristotle that it is difficult to find a culture that might put to the test Aristotle's claim to a sort of universality. Chinese culture is sufficiently different and sufficiently removed to provide an attractive test case to see if Aristotle's ethics could be received, understood, and evaluated. Confucius repeatedly invoked the Zhou *li* as embodying the ways and means of cultivating a humane life with others, a guide that was far superior to the available

alternatives. Two and a half millennia hence (if not before), these observances are no longer live options. How then might we guide our selection and enshrinement of authoritative observances? This is not something Confucians left to individual choice. It is not a matter of personal preference among transient patterns but a matter of the stabilization and standardization of ethical norms, norms that are precious and fragile treasures neither easily found nor readily retrieved. Aristotelian reflections on forms of ethical and political life can help to test and amend the Confucian reliance on *li*.

I focus on a couple of primary texts at the roots of these two traditions for several reasons. A focus on early primary texts is useful first because these are foundation documents that demand and deserve attention. They require, it must be said at once, quite delicate handling. It is easy to exploit vagaries and ambiguities, caving in to anachronism (at best) or ideological imperialism (at worst). Too often, the people who approach such a project with an open and curious mind lack adequate expertise, while the best-prepared specialists have their own projects to promote. Despite these temptations, the foundation documents are useful, frankly, just because of these uncertainties; that is, such texts contain elements in key teachings that are unspecified or underdetermined and that their later traditions specify. Those tantalizing moments of unstipulated inexactitude in the foundation documents make the project of comparison riskier but possible and, possibly, more fruitful.

Not everyone believes that such comparisons are feasible, given the distances – historical and cultural, linguistic and conceptual – separating Aristotle and Confucius. Concepts such as *li* (authoritative observances that are to guide the choreography of behavior), *shu* (reciprocation), *yi* (appropriateness), *xiao* (filial piety), *zhing* (deferential respect), *zhong* (the personal integrity and reliability that imply fidelity and loyalty to appropriate others), and *dao* (way) in Confucius do not have straightforward counterparts in Aristotle. By the same token, *dikaiosunê* (justice), *megalopsycheia* (magnanimity), *energeia* (being as enactment), and *entelecheia* (immanent finality as an attractor for process and development) are central notions in Aristotle that do not have counterparts in Confucius. Study must take great pains to try to achieve a negotiated response. Sometimes direct translation is possible and sometimes it is not. Where no translation is

possible, this is itself a result significant for finding snares for intercultural communication and evaluative comparison.

This is a pivotal problem – perhaps *the* problem – for comparative studies. I provide no special treatment of translation problems here, in the conviction that because actuality implies possibility, the best way to argue for the possibility of fruitful comparison across cultural, linguistic, and conceptual divides is simply to accomplish it. However, I do try to suggest how the categories and concepts most pivotal for each thinker might be appropriated and assessed by the other.

For example, even the perfunctory reader of Aristotle and Confucius may notice that both thinkers stress personal qualities of moral excellence or "virtues" as opposed to geometrically pure duties or juridical "rights" in their ethical thought. But this may be a superficial and even possibly deceptive similarity. Readers socialized into Greco-Latin habits of thought will find it entirely natural to take *ren* or *yi* to be "virtues" and therefore to be candidates for a slot on Aristotle's list of *aretai*, understood as excellences of character. However, there is no term that corresponds to "virtue" in the Chinese original, no covering generic under which these particular qualities might be subsumed as types.

Part of this, but only part, is a problem with the translation of basic terms between Confucius' Chinese and Aristotle's Greek. It is good to appreciate that there is not even one adequate translation that will meet the strictest standards of translation. Recognition of this point cultivates carefulness and humility. On the one hand, paraphrase and supplement will often suffice to provide a rendering that will not count as a translation in the strict sense. On the other hand, once we adopt standards on which there is at least one rendering, there will be indefinitely many renderings that are no less adequate. In short, there is more than one way to translate Confucian sources in a target idiom (Aristotelian, Hegelian, Deweyan, or what have you), given enough compensating calibrations, even though none will prove *uniquely* faithful or *fully* adequate. Whether we find too many or too few adequate translations will depend on our standards of translational faithfulness – and they are no more fixed than the aims of translation. This simple point expresses a complex situation in a nutshell. Too often, philosophers defend either the thesis that there is not even one adequate translation of an idiom (e.g., Confucian) in

an alien idiom (e.g., Aristotelian) or the thesis that there are many, perhaps indefinitely many, translations of the first in the second. But each is a partial truth that becomes fixated into what looks like an independent "position" only if we ignore the dependence of the claim on standards and norms that are variable in the nature of the case. There is a kernel of truth in both incommensurability and indeterminacy theses. Both points need to be held in view throughout. So there is cause to say both that there is no adequate translation of Confucian sources in an Aristotelian idiom (according to the strictest standards of faithfulness) and that (given suitable adjustments and marginally less unbending standards) there is at least one.

Of course, friends of incommensurability, such as MacIntyre, do not lean on problems of term–term translation alone. Two traditions are incommensurable when each has its own norms of interpretation, accepted patterns of explanation and justification, and standards of rationality. In the most radical situations, there are no shared standards and measures, and none that are – according to MacIntyre and others – neutral between them that might serve as an independent court of appeal. When dealing with rival claims, each tends to image the other in its own terms and according to its own norms. In such a situation, each side easily convinces itself of its superiority and ultimately fails to achieve a genuine understanding of the other.

For instance, a Confucian may notice that an act of giving fails to conform to *li* (authoritative observances or normative patterns of conduct). Perhaps the giver neglected to use both hands and bow in the act; omitting that element of the *li* would prevent the act from being truly generous and the agent from being *ren* (where *ren* is the highest Confucian virtue, sometimes translated as benevolence or humaneness). Such an omission would be necessarily "invisible" to the Aristotelian, according to MacIntyre. The Aristotelian, who lacks even the words to translate *li*, must fail to see the moral shortcoming, MacIntyre thinks. By the same token, an Aristotelian may notice that an act fails to conform to the proper function of the *psychê* for a citizen of a *polis*, where both *psychê* and *polis* are understood in very specific teleological ways. This shortcoming will be "invisible" to the Confucian because he lacks the pertinent concepts – the Confucian even lacks the words for *psychê* and *polis*, after all.

I shall argue that while Aristotle might well have been baffled by the Confucian demand that one must use both hands and bow in order for the giving of a gift to have moral worth, he would nevertheless recognize both the ethical importance of manners and the fact that manners may vary. That granted, there is no bar in principle to mutual understanding on this point. For instance, Aristotle knows that a giver who flings a gift at his recipient with a sneer is not acting generously and not exhibiting virtue, no matter what universal rule his act embodies. Similarly, Confucius appeals to no entity that we call the "self" (in several meanings of that term), much less a metaphysical *psychê*, and he neither knows nor invokes any political arrangement sufficiently like the Greek *polis*. Nonetheless, Confucius undeniably shares with Aristotle an appreciation of the importance of what we call social and political institutions for the shaping of moral thought and practice. He also appreciates that there is something in us that is harmed by wrongdoing, a locus of relation and action (if not of independence and preference) that is shaped by one's social environment and in turn either upholds or undermines it. Hence there are some grounds for dialogue about the moral self, even if only some of the features Aristotle ascribes to the *psychê* are part of the Confucian's conceptual lexicon.

Similarly, Confucius has no explicit list of categories corresponding to or even rivaling Aristotle's infamous inventory. But I shall argue that Aristotle's categories have functional analogues in Confucian thought. A close reading of the text will bring out these functional analogues that I shall use to underwrite the claim that Aristotle and Confucius share a basic set of categories.[1] To show how

[1] In line with my earlier remarks about translation, this is not to be taken as the claim that Aristotle's categories are explicit in Confucius or as the claim that they are there fully formed but implicitly, or even as the claim that Aristotle's categories uniquely express Confucian intent. Rather, I shall show that Confucius recognizes and appeals to distinctions between action and passion, quantity and quality, situation and outfit, and even between people (as organic wholes) and their relationships, and shall argue that these distinctions are central to his moral teaching. Each of these items is comparable to its more explicit Aristotelian counterpart in several specifiable respects. Although not identical in every way, these Confucian "categories" are close enough kin (the "substance" category will require special handling instructions) to underwrite the comparison and ground dialogue.

these thinkers share a fundamental set of categories is also to show that there are grounds for a limited sort of commensurability and hence for the possibility of dialogue. Without these more generic categorial grounds of speech and thought, such dialogue would be impossible. That is because their principles, their standards of thought, and the weights and measures of their judgment differ in important ways. But without their sharing at least tacitly some basic categories, it would not be possible even to speak of such differences intelligently.

MacIntyre for some years has expressed reservations about the possibility of cross-cultural comparisons of the sort I wish to take up. A great tradition, according to him, is unable to understand another tradition in that other's own terms because each tradition's practices and concepts are organically intertwined, having grown up together in a shared history. Lacking a shared history ipso facto implies the impossibility of deep communication or shared understanding. Because concepts are creatures of context, there are no context- or history-neutral concepts and standards and no impartial perspective outside of all traditions from which one could assess one's portrait of the other or evaluate the other's rival claims. However, it is possible, according to MacIntyre – if difficult and rare – to learn a second tradition from the inside, acquiring a kind of "second first language" that allows one to begin to learn the history and to master the conceptual scheme of each. It is the lack of shared history that blocks understanding; this history can of course develop, and a person who learns both traditions from the inside in this way can act as a bridge person to help that shared history come to be.

In the MacIntyrean diagnosis and remedy, the unit of analysis is the tradition (as opposed to the text, the concept, the proposition, or what have you). A bridge person is better situated to assess the merits of each tradition as a whole. This assessment focuses on how and how far each is able to recognize its own limitations, how and how far each provides the resources for overcoming these limitations, and indeed how and how far each tradition lays itself open to possible correctives from other, quite alien traditions of thought and practice. In this study, I aspire to act as a bridge person in something like this mode. MacIntyre is surely an influence, and my argument as a whole exhibits something very like this pattern. However, while I accept his

diagnosis of the problem, my sense of the remedy owes more to the *Topics* of Aristotle.

The means of comparison adopted in this book is grounded in my understanding of Aristotle's conversational dialectic. This "topical" approach to comparison is detailed in my *From Puzzles to Principles? Essays on Aristotle's Dialectic* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999) and summarized in Chapter 2 of this volume. To be sure, aspects of conceptual and linguistic divergence are discussed in almost every chapter of this book. Nevertheless, I aim to focus resolutely upon points of interpretation and comparison, leaving methodological and metaphilosophical considerations for another venue.

Closely related to problems of term translation are issues about definition – the functions of definition, how sharp definitions must be to serve those functions, and whether definitions can be true or false. I tackle these issues in Chapter 3. Contemporary Confucian commentators too often suppose that Confucius is entirely unconcerned with definitions. I argue to the contrary that it is not a prejudice merely of Western thinking to suppose that learning and knowledge want definition and a due measure of objectivity. The Confucian practice of rightly ordering names (*zhengming*) can profitably be understood as a quest for true definitions – with caveats about essentialism – in the sense that the "right" name, like an Aristotelian definition, aligns language with nonhuman nature as well as with other human beings and human practices. Confucian names are neither rigid designators of individuals nor expressions of immutable essence, but they are also not mere tools of practice or linguistic convention. The notion of a "rectification of names" has its classical locus in the ancient emperors' calendar reforms; in such reforms, there are, to be sure, political and pragmatic elements, but also an endeavor to track the movement of the heavens and so align heaven and earth. The Confucian "rectification" of ethical names is like this. Not a matter of pure theory, it is not pure pragmatism or a matter of tidying mere conventions either. In some interesting ways, Confucius' attempts to define virtues in his discussions with others and in his criticisms of their understanding are quite like Aristotle's procedure of definition in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Topics*, even while they are not really like Aristotle's stricter procedures of