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Aristotle and Xúnzǐ on the Good Life

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Introduction: Canons and Legitimacy

Since the theme of the conference is the legitimacy of the philosophical canon, I'll begin with a few remarks about canons and legitimacy, which help to explain the motivation for my comparative topic.

The concept of a "canon" has different implications in different contexts. In context of organized religion, such as Catholicism, the canon may represent an official orthodoxy, which defines "correct" ways of thought. Historically, in China, a particular canonical list of writings was taken as the basis for the official examination system and so functioned as a touchstone of intellectual orthodoxy, although outside of official life, educated readers were free to and regularly did peruse extra-canonical works.

Philosophically, for our purposes nowadays, we might think of a canon as a syllabus or curriculum. A syllabus sets a framework for education and inquiry. It offers a platform from which to proceed in reading and scholarship. As such, it obviously reflects the interests and assumptions of those who set it and teach it. Provided a canon is indeed intellectually rich enough to constitute a fruitful basis for inquiry and discussion, there is nothing illegitimate about it. Any path of learning and research must start somewhere.

Problems arise when a philosophical canon takes on, or begins to take on, the exclusivist character of a religious canon. An apt attitude toward a purported canon is simply that it is a body of profound work, representing a selection of the finest thought in some tradition, which it is well worth mastering and thinking through. As custodians of a field or fields of inquiry, however, for various reasons scholars may slide from this stance to treating the canon as the only works really worth reading, such that anything not on the list can safely be ignored. It is in this prejudicial, exclusivist sense that the legitimacy of a canon can and should be questioned. For some of what is excluded may be as rich and interesting as the material that is included. It may have been excluded for indefensible reasons—because it challenges the presuppositions of those arranging the syllabus, for example, or because it expresses the ideas of oppressed social groups—or for no reasons at all, simply out of ignorance of its existence.

I myself have devoted some effort to reviving interest in non-canonical material in the Chinese tradition. My work on *Mòzǐ* attempts to present a richer picture of Mohist thought than was previously available. My recent book *Late Classical Chinese Thought* treats material from the *Guǎnzǐ* and *Lǚshì Chūnqiū* that relatively few readers have studied. Some of these writings are easily as rich and worthy of attention as canonical sources such as the *Analects*

and *Mèngzǐ*, which are regularly included in any syllabus of readings on early Chinese ethics and politics. To exclude them is to overlook significant contributions to pre-imperial Chinese intellectual discourse, which may also broaden our understanding of the philosophical landscape and the range of positions it may present.

The problem of an exclusivist canon or syllabus is of course compounded when we consider the plurality of traditions of thought. On the one hand, as teachers, to formulate a manageable syllabus for a course, we need to be selective. Whether in our teaching or in our own reading, practical constraints may prevent us from fitting in a representative sampling of every tradition. Moreover, understanding requires context. To genuinely understand selected works from a tradition, we may need to know quite a bit about the context in which they were produced, which again may require a significant investment of time and energy. So we may have legitimate reasons in certain practical contexts to set boundaries for a particular course syllabus, although nowadays I hope we at least acknowledge the existence of other traditions and attempt to offer students a taste of them.

On the other hand, we can never have good reasons to exclude works from other traditions from an entire curriculum or from a canonical catalogue of works to be studied. To do so would be to unconscionably discard valuable repositories of past thought and potentially fascinating and fruitful resources on which to draw in our own thinking. Aside from their intrinsic value, other traditions may offer fascinatingly different understandings of any number of philosophical issues or indeed of what it is to be human. These different understandings may capture dimensions of lived experience familiar to us but not explicitly articulated in works we have studied, or they may present wholly unfamiliar but intriguing ways of thinking about things. It would be reckless and foolish not to attempt to understand and learn from them.

In this spirit, then, let me give a pair of examples that illustrate how setting aside an exclusivist conception of a canonical catalogue and considering thought from different traditions may broaden our horizons quite radically. I'll sketch two intriguingly different conceptions of the good human life, one drawn from Aristotle, one from Xúnzǐ. I am not arguing here that either is more defensible than the other—in fact, my view is that both have strengths and weaknesses. My claim is only that any discourse on what it is to be human and to live a good life can be significantly enriched if we are aware of both of these views.

Aristotle: εὐδαιμονίᾱ as Fulfilling Our ἔργον

For Aristotle, the well-lived life is the life of εὐδαιμονίᾱ, which he understands as a life that manifests virtues characteristic of what it is to be human. These virtues in turn he understands as the finest fulfillment of human ἔργον, or function, which refers to what is distinctive of humanity, compared with other species. Humans' distinctive ἔργον, he proposes, is our capacity to guide ourselves by using reason, for the reasoning part of the soul (λογιστικόν) is what distinguishes us from plants and animals. Accordingly, εὐδαιμονίᾱ thus lies in applying one's capacity for reasoning well over the course of one's life. Excellence in life consists not in a static state but in activity. So Aristotle proposes that εὐδαιμονίᾱ lies in activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue.

Aristotle identifies more than a dozen virtues needed to live well, among them courage, justice, temperance, wittiness, and friendship. Virtues include both ethical and intellectual excellences, the intellectual being divided into the theoretical and practical. Ethics is not a science (ἐπιστήμη), and accordingly there is no precise decision procedure for acting virtuously. Instead, virtuous conduct depends on the practical intellectual virtue of φρόνησῐς, which involves discretion and contextual perception (αἴσθησισ) developed over a lifetime of experience. Ethical virtue is complete only when integrated with φρόνησῐς, which is in effect a "master virtue" that coordinates and guides the other virtues. So the virtuous person is regarded as a "person of practical wisdom," the φρόνιμος.

Although Aristotle emphasizes that εὐδαιμονίᾱ consists in guiding action by rationality, he also says that virtuous actions are done for the sake of what is τὸ καλόν—"fine," "beautiful," or "noble" (1120a23). The implication is that virtuous activity is not merely rational but beautiful or aesthetically admirable. Accordingly, part of the reason for acting virtuously must be an appreciation or love of the aesthetic qualities of virtuous action, such as harmony, balance, and proportion.

I suggest this aesthetic dimension partly explains Aristotle's view that the finest life, one devoted to the highest form activity, is the life of theoretical contemplation, or θεωρία, the life of political activity being second best. θεωρία is the activity in which we most fully exercise our distinctive capacity for rational thought. But presumably Aristotle also holds that it has a certain nobility or beauty, which explains why he values it so highly. This aesthetic element is perhaps intertwined with his view that in θεωρία we approach the activity of a god.

In the context of a comparison with Xúnzǐ, a prominent feature of Aristotle's conception of the good life is what I will call its individualism. By "individualism," I am not suggesting that Aristotle thinks the individual can be wholly self-sufficient in fulfilling virtues and attaining εὐδαιμονίᾱ. To the contrary, he holds that friendships and family relations are crucial parts of the good life. Some of the virtues explicitly concern relationships with others (such as friendship). Moreover, Aristotle thinks that only in a social setting can people develop virtues. To attain εὐδαιμονίᾱ, people must live in communities with norms and laws that guide the young to develop the habits needed to acquire the virtues. This point is one reason that Aristotle's ethics is intertwined with his political philosophy.

Still, for Aristotle, the distinctive ἔργον of human beings that provides the basis for his account of the good life is a feature of individuals, namely our capacity for directing our lives through the activity of the rational part of the soul, with which each human is endowed. The good life is a realization of inherent, biological capacities possessed by individual humans. Virtues are traits of individual persons that are aspects of what it is to be an excellent-functioning individual *qua* individual. As I will explain, Xúnzǐ's ethics is not individualistic in this way.

Xúnzǐ: The Good Life as Masterful Performance

Like Aristotle, Xúnzǐ holds that the good life lies in realizing what is distinctive about human life. To Xúnzǐ, however, what is distinctive about human life is a social, cultural achievement, not a development of inherent capacities individual humans possess by birth.

Moreover, unlike in Aristotle, an inherent capacity for reasoning has no role in Xúnzǐ's ethical conception of the good life. The capacity for awareness, knowing, or understanding is what humanity shares with animals, not what sets us apart. What is distinctive is our ability to form cooperative social groups based on ethical norms. The good life lies in masterful performance according to such norms, exhibiting the beauty of "good order."

> 水火有氣而無生，草木有生而無知，禽獸有知而無義，人有氣、有生、有知，亦且有義，故最為天下貴也。力不若牛，走不若馬，而牛馬為用，何也？曰：人能群，彼不能群也。（王制 9）
>
> Water and fire have qì but no life; grass and trees have life but no cognition; birds and beasts have cognition but no ethical norms; humans have *qì*, life, cognition, and also ethical norms. So they are the noblest in the world. Their strength is less than oxen, their speed is less than horses, yet oxen and horses are used by them. Why? I say, humans can form communities and those animals cannot.

How do humans form such social groups?

> 人何以能群？曰：分。分何以能行？曰：義。故義以分則和，和則一，一則多力，多力則彊，彊則勝物；故宮室可得而居也。故序四時，裁萬物，兼利天下，無它故焉，得之分義也。
>
> How can humans form communities? I say, by social roles. How can social roles be put into practice? I say, by ethical norms. So taking norms as a basis for roles yields harmony; harmony yields unity; unity yields great effort; great effort yields strength; strength allows us to overcome things. So we can get to live in palaces and homes....[These and other goods] come from ethical norms associated with social roles.

For Xúnzǐ, the distinctive features of human life are not a realization of anything we have by nature, nor of any inherent ἔργον associated with humans as individual creatures. We are able to attain a distinctively human form of life—and so live in palaces and houses—because of how we are able to form communities in which we work as one, combining our strengths to overcome other things. We are able to form such communities because we can follow norms associated with various social roles or distinctions. It is our participation in a community through learned mastery of such norms that makes us fully human.

> 人之所以為人者何已也？...非特以二足而無毛也，以其有辨也。...夫禽獸有父子，而無父子之親，有牝牡而無男女之別。故人道莫不有辨。辨莫大於分，分莫大於禮，禮莫大於聖王。（《非相》）
>
> What is it by which humans are human?...It's not merely that they are featherless bipeds but that they have [normative] distinctions....Now animals have fathers and sons but lack the intimacy of fathers and sons; they males and females but lack the

> separation between men and women. So no human *dào* fails to have normative distinctions. Among distinctions, none are greater than social roles; among social roles, none are greater than [those embodied in systems of] ritual propriety; among [forms of] ritual propriety, none are greater than that of the sage-kings.

The norms are cultural constructs instituted by ancient sage-kings to achieve good order. There may be a plurality of human *dào*, but the greatest is that of the sage-kings, as reflected in the norms of ritual propriety transmitted and curated in the Ruist cultural tradition.

Aristotle would agree, of course, that we develop virtues through participation in community life. What is different about the Xunzian picture is that in learning to follow the norms of the community, we are not fulfilling anything inherent to us as individual, biological humans. By nature, Xúnzǐ holds, humans tend to be loutish and disorderly, disposed mainly to pursue the objects of sensory desires. The process of ethical development is one of working to overcome our bad tendencies through the accumulation of normative, cultural learning as transmitted by a particular cultural tradition. The person who internalizes such learning and becomes adept in its practice is called the gentleman (君子).

Although for brevity I won't elaborate on this feature of Xúnzian thought here, the ability to follow such norms is grounded in the capacity of the *xīn* 心, or heart-mind, for "approving" (可) a particular conception of *dào*, learning from various models, and emulating those who have already mastered it. The *xīn* 心, as presented in the Xúnzǐ, is regarded as the "labour supervisor of *dào*" (道之工宰). It overlaps with Aristotle's conception of the reasoning part of the soul in being concerned with choice. But it is not regarded as having an inherent capacity for grasping the right *dào*. It must somehow learn *dào.*

The Xúnzian focus on the practice of an ethical, social, and political *dào*, along with the view that it is not our cognitive capacities that are distinctive of human life, has implications that contrast sharply with Aristotle's conception of the good life. One point is that, unlike Aristotle, Xúnzǐ does not value theoretical enquiry. Since the *dào* is a set of normatively relevant cultural norms imposed on nature, not something discovered in the world, his attention is not directed toward theoretical investigation of nature. Nor does he value investigation of conceptual or metaphysical issues. The focus is on mastery of ritualized norms of conduct as transmitted in a tradition he traces back to the sage-kings.

> 故君子之於禮，敬而安之；其於事也，徑而不失…其於天地萬物也，不務說其所以然，而致善用其材。《君道》

> So as to ritual propriety, the gentleman reveres and is at home in it; as to affairs, he is direct without error…as to heaven and earth and the myriad things, he does not devote himself to explaining how they are as they are but only makes the best use of their resources.

> 夫「堅白」、「同異」、「有厚無厚」之察，非不察也，然而君子不辯，止之也。《脩身》

> Investigations into "hard and white," "same and different," "what does or doesn't have dimension"—it's not that these are not discerning, but the gentleman does not engage in such distinction-drawing, as he sets limits [to what he studies and practices].
>
> 故學也者，固學止之也。惡乎止之？曰：止諸至足。曷謂至足？曰：聖王。...故學者以聖王為師。《解蔽》
>
> So learning is indeed a matter of learning to set limits. Where does one set limits? I say, set them with what is fully adequate. What is fully adequate? I say: the sage-kings...So in study, take the sage-kings as teachers...

A complementary point is that, in contrast to Aristotle, Xúnzǐ seems to regard the highest form of life as one in which little or no deliberation or reflectively self-conscious thought will occur. Xúnzǐ understands action through a framework similar to what we associate with the performance of skills. He conceives of practical reasoning mainly as a matter of pattern recognition grounded in a learned ability to follow analogical models in drawing distinctions between similar and different things, and not as, for example, a step-by-step process of applying deductive reasoning to derive conclusions from general principles. At high levels of competence, such pattern recognition can become an immediate, automatic process. So for Xúnzǐ advanced practical wisdom yields an ability to act almost automatically.

> 脩百王之法，若辨白黑；應當時之變，若數一二；行禮要節而安之，若生四枝...如是，則可謂聖人矣。《儒效》
>
> Practicing the standards of the hundred kings as easily as distinguishing white from black; responding to the variations of particular contexts as easily as counting "one, two"; as at ease in performing the key points of ceremonial propriety as in moving one's limbs....Someone like this can be called a sage.

Xúnzǐ regards *dào* as embodied in a system of hierarchical social roles and associated norms of propriety and duty that is justified by how it achieves *zhì* 治, or "good order," which in turn is understood to facilitate material prosperity. Xúnzǐ claims that the social framework he advocates meets people's material needs to a greater extent than any alternative framework. But beyond prosperity, "good order" for Xúnzǐ seems to include an aesthetic component. It is a relatively thick concept referring not only to minimal notions such as security and stability but to a particular, valourized form of social organization and interaction regarded as admirable because of its distinctive, orderly "patterns" (理). To excel in one's role in this orderly social system is to attain the good life for the individual. I call this an "orchestra" view of the good life: individuals live well when they excel in performing their part in the social orchestra—even if, for example, their part is relatively small, such as playing second violin.

Insofar as a person follows the *dào* and excels in their role in the orchestra, their life takes on aesthetic as well as ethical value. This is an interesting respect in which Xúnzǐ and

Aristotle converge, to at least some extent, although Xúnzǐ may emphasize the aesthetic side even more than Aristotle. Xúnzǐ says that "the gentleman studies to beautify himself 君子之學也，以美其身" (《勸學》). An association between ethical cultivation and beauty (美), cultural refinement (文), and elegance (雅) permeates the *Xúnzǐ* writings. Above I cited two passages that refer to the ethical adept being "at home in," "at ease in," or "secure in" the norms of ritual propriety. These phrases are all interpretations of the word *ān* 安, to be at peace, at ease, or secure.

A distinctive feature of the good life in Xúnzǐ is how the gentleman is said to be "at ease in" or "find their home in" refinement or elegance:

> 越人安越，楚人安楚，君子安雅。是非知能材性然也，是注錯習俗之節異也。仁義德行，常安之術也…《榮辱》
>
> Yuè people are at home in Yuè; Chǔ people are at home in Chǔ; the gentleman is at home in elegance. This is not so because of knowledge, ability, talent, or inherent nature. It's a difference that arises from the moderation of habit and custom. Benevolence, duty, and virtuous conduct are the art of reliably being at home [reliably attaining security, ease, or peace].

Comparative Remarks

Let me conclude with a few comparative remarks.

Each of these visions of the good life, I suggest, is attractive in some respects and one-sided in others. Both present at least partly persuasive depictions of an admirable person. Aristotle's exaggerates the role and function of reason, while Xúnzǐ's exaggerates those of cultural practices to the exclusion of individual reason and inquiry.

Each faces justificatory problems. Aristotle's claims about the content and role of human ἔργον and about the details of the virtues that constitute εὐδαιμονίᾱ are notoriously difficult to justify. Even the very idea of a human ἔργον is deeply questionable.

In the Chinese tradition, Xúnzǐ's claim that no inherent feature of individual persons is realized in or lends them a propensity toward the good life has traditionally been rejected. The privileged status he assigns to the *dào* he advocates is also open to challenge.

A salient difference between the two approaches is that for Aristotle, the good life is grounded in a certain understanding of nature and features we possess by nature, whereas for Xúnzǐ it is grounded foremost in a conception of *dào*, a path consisting of cultural norms that we undertake to follow. On this point, I suggest that a Xúnzian approach is especially instructive, as it starts from an issue that I believe is more fundamental than Aristotle's starting point, namely the role of human agency in adopting a way of understanding the world and our place in it. Xúnzi's approach underscores the fact that *dào* is never simply given to us—we must undertake it.