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Article

# Comparison of the Metaphysical Foundations of the Virtue Doctrines of Aristotle and Confucius

Ziyin Feng<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Philosophy and Public Administration, Henan University, Kaifeng, China

\* Correspondence: Ziyin Feng, School of Philosophy and Public Administration, Henan University, Kaifeng, China

**Abstract:** Aristotle and Confucius represent the central figures of virtue ethics in Western and Eastern traditions, respectively, yet their foundational views rest on fundamentally different metaphysical assumptions. This study examines Aristotle's concept of virtue, which is deeply grounded in teleology, substance theory, and soul theory. He defines virtue as the excellent state achieved through the full development of rational capacity, where his doctrine of the mean is governed by strict rational rules, exhibiting a pronounced rationalist character. Conversely, Confucius derives virtue from heaven and fate but lacks a logically closed metaphysical structure. Consequently, his virtue doctrine is non-essentialist and practically oriented, centered on benevolence and governed by ritual. Through continuous social practice, individuals cultivate a perfect personality and lead virtuous lives. The divergence between these thinkers stems from distinct research emphases: Aristotle investigates the essence of man, defining human nature through reason and viewing virtue as the realization of specific human functions. Confucius, however, focuses on how individuals attain a perfect personality, viewing virtue as formed through the practical exercise of benevolence and ritual within social ethical relationships. Ultimately, this comparative analysis clarifies the inner logic of both virtue doctrines, highlighting the essential distinctions between traditional Chinese and Western philosophical paradigms regarding moral self-cultivation, human self-worth, and the ultimate meaning of existence.

**Keywords:** aristotle; confucius; virtue ethics; metaphysics; moral philosophy; comparative philosophy

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### 1. Introduction

Since the middle of the 20th century, numerous challenges facing modern moral frameworks have become increasingly apparent, prompting renewed scholarly interest in virtue-based approaches to ethics. A pivotal moment occurred with the publication of an influential article that critiqued dominant deontological and utilitarian paradigms and advocated a return to classical virtue-oriented inquiry rooted in ancient traditions. Subsequently, a major monograph significantly advanced the systematic revival and theoretical refinement of virtue ethics within Western academic discourse. This resurgence stimulated not only deeper engagement with classical formulations but also growing cross-cultural attention to virtue-centered philosophical systems beyond the Western canon. Within this context, ethical thought originating in early Chinese intellectual traditions has attracted increasing international scholarly interest [1]. Several researchers have identified structural affinities between these traditions and Western virtue-oriented frameworks, highlighting conceptual parallels in their accounts of moral cultivation, character formation, and practical wisdom. However, such comparisons must avoid reductive assimilation; meaningful differentiation requires careful examination of

underlying metaphysical assumptions. Ongoing debates concerning the presence and nature of metaphysical inquiry in Chinese philosophical traditions—and whether moral philosophy inherently depends on metaphysical grounding—form an essential backdrop for this study. One historically influential perspective characterized certain strands of early Chinese ethical reflection as confined to pragmatic, non-speculative guidance—a view that long influenced external interpretations. In contrast, other scholars emphasize the existence of a distinctively structured metaphysical orientation in Chinese thought, marked by integrative principles such as the coherence of reality and function, and the continuity between cosmic order and human conduct—differing fundamentally from dualistic ontological models. Central to this tradition is the conception of moral life as grounded in the dynamic resonance between transcendent patterns and cultivated human dispositions. Rather than deriving moral authority through formal logical derivation, this approach affirms the normative significance of virtue through lived practice and reflective self-cultivation. Thus, comparing the foundational metaphysical commitments underpinning virtue-oriented thought in both Aristotelian and early Chinese contexts serves a dual purpose: clarifying the internal architecture of each system while also addressing broader questions about the scope and forms of metaphysical reasoning across philosophical traditions.

Scholarly work conducted within China on comparative virtue ethics has yielded substantial contributions [1]. First, research on moral foundations in early Chinese thought has explored the distinction between human beings and other living beings as a key starting point, identifying the alignment of human moral capacity with cosmic order as a central normative principle. Other analyses suggest that systematic articulation of moral metaphysics emerged more explicitly in later developments rather than in the earliest formulations, with subsequent thinkers elaborating cosmological grounds for ethical excellence. Further studies examine pre-classical cosmological frameworks centered on the continuity between heaven and humanity, assessing both their explanatory scope and inherent limitations. Second, investigations into the metaphysical underpinnings of Aristotelian virtue theory highlight its dependence on substance ontology and rationalist assumptions, distinguishing it from alternative conceptual architectures. Additional scholarship underscores teleological structure and psychological theory as indispensable supports for understanding virtue in this tradition. Third, direct comparative studies have examined convergences and divergences across multiple dimensions—including conceptions of balance, distinctions between ethical and intellectual excellences, and pathways of moral development. Other analyses clarify differences in anthropological assumptions, core ethical concepts, and the interplay between affective and rational dimensions of moral life. Despite this breadth, consensus remains elusive regarding whether foundational virtue-oriented teachings contain an explicit metaphysical dimension. Some maintain that systematic metaphysical construction was absent in the earliest formulations, while others identify implicit cosmological and anthropological commitments as constituting a distinctive metaphysical orientation. Still others argue that virtue-oriented teaching functions effectively without requiring metaphysical justification. Building upon this body of work, the present study proceeds from the premise that early Chinese virtue-oriented thought possesses its own coherent metaphysical orientation—distinct in structure, method, and emphasis from Aristotelian frameworks. Yet existing scholarship often prioritizes surface-level ethical categories over sustained analysis of deep-seated ontological and epistemological presuppositions; moreover, the relationship between practical discernment and rational cognition in early Chinese virtue-oriented thought remains insufficiently clarified. Against this background, this study undertakes a systematic comparison grounded in metaphysical foundations, ontological commitments, anthropological assumptions, and theories of virtue.

This study employs three complementary methodological approaches. First, textual analysis draws upon primary sources—including foundational treatises on ethics and first philosophy attributed to Aristotle, and core collections of recorded dialogues and

reflections—to reconstruct core concepts of virtue and their grounding assumptions, while also surveying national and international scholarship to map prevailing interpretations and unresolved questions. Second, conceptual analysis explicates and clarifies central terms within each tradition: for one, concepts such as excellence, flourishing, and proportionate response; for the other, notions such as humane conduct, ritual propriety, and balanced responsiveness—elucidating their precise meanings and practical implications [1]. Third, comparative analysis systematically examines correspondences and contrasts across five interrelated dimensions: metaphysical foundations, conceptions of human nature, definitions of virtue, pathways of moral development, and ultimate aims of ethical life.

## **2. Aristotle's Virtue Doctrine and Its Metaphysical Foundations**

The ethical system developed by Aristotle exhibits a rigorous internal logic. Within this framework, happiness constitutes the highest human aim, virtue serves as the central ethical concept, and the doctrine of the mean functions as the fundamental principle guiding moral conduct. At the outset of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is observed that all human arts, inquiries, actions, and choices are directed toward some good. Building upon this premise, happiness is identified as the supreme good for human beings. All subordinate goods serve higher ends; only the supreme good is pursued for its own sake and represents the ultimate objective of all human endeavor—namely, happiness. Happiness is fundamentally distinct from pleasure, honor, and wealth: pleasure pertains to sensory gratification, a capacity shared with non-rational animals; honor depends on external judgment and lies beyond individual control; wealth functions solely as an instrumental means toward other ends. In contrast, happiness is understood as the full and active exercise of the soul in accordance with virtue—a state of flourishing life and morally sound action [2]. Scholarly analysis emphasizes that happiness represents a comprehensive condition of life integrating external material conditions with internal virtuous development. It is not transient sensory enjoyment but sustained activity aligned with virtue, enabled by appropriate external circumstances. Contemplative activity is further identified as the highest expression of human happiness.

This virtue-based ethical system rests upon a foundational theory of the soul. In defining virtue, the analysis begins by situating it within the structure of psychic phenomena associated with action and emotion. These phenomena are categorized into three types: passions, capacities, and character states. Passions refer to affective movements accompanied by pleasure or pain—such as desire, anger, and fear; capacities denote innate faculties enabling perception of such feelings; character states signify enduring dispositions—either commendable or blameworthy—that govern responses to emotions. From this classification, it follows that virtue belongs neither to the category of passions nor to that of innate capacities. Passions are largely involuntary and lie outside the domain of deliberate choice; capacities are natural endowments, not themselves moral achievements. Genuine virtue is instead a stable character state—neither inborn nor automatic—but acquired through voluntary decision and repeated practice, thereby shaping moral conduct. Human virtue is thus defined as a disposition that renders a person good and enables the excellent performance of their distinctive function [3].

Drawing upon the tripartite division of the soul, virtue is further differentiated into intellectual and moral varieties. The soul comprises rational and irrational components. Intellectual virtues pertain to the rational part and are cultivated through instruction, study, experience, and disciplined thinking—exemplified by wisdom, practical insight, and theoretical understanding. Moral virtues reside in the irrational part of the soul, which, though lacking reason in itself, is capable of heeding reason [4]. These virtues are not present at birth but emerge gradually through habitual performance of right actions and the consolidation of stable moral dispositions.

It is maintained that human feelings and actions admit of three possible conditions: excess, deficiency, and a balanced intermediate state. Excess and deficiency are deemed irrational; only the intermediate state qualifies as morally appropriate and worthy of

pursuit. This optimal intermediate condition is termed the 'mean', and the cultivation of virtue is understood as the consistent selection of this mean. Importantly, the mean is not a fixed numerical value but a context-sensitive equilibrium, varying according to individual circumstance, timing, and situational demands. Illustrative examples clarify this principle: regarding fear and confidence, excessive confidence manifests as recklessness, insufficient confidence as cowardice, while the mean is courage; concerning pleasure and pain, unrestrained indulgence appears as licentiousness, complete insensitivity as insensibility, and the mean as temperance. The standard for identifying the mean is grounded in rational judgment, particularly that of a person possessing practical insight. Practical insight thus functions as the essential link between reason and ethical action [2]. Consequently, the doctrine of the mean bears a pronounced rationalist orientation: virtuous conduct is neither mechanical repetition of habit nor unregulated emotional response, but a reasoned, situationally attuned choice of the good. Reason empowers individuals to discern right from wrong, recognize the highest good, and enact virtue within concrete contexts.

Aristotle's virtue doctrine is not a self-contained moral theory but is embedded within a coherent metaphysical architecture composed of teleology, substance theory, and soul theory. A central claim holds that Aristotelian ethics rests upon a metaphysical biology, with teleology serving as its foundational pillar. Teleology asserts that natural entities possess an inherent orientation toward a determinate end or final state; the value and significance of any being derive from the realization of its proper telos. This principle is grounded in empirical observation: an acorn naturally develops into an oak tree; a knife is for cutting; an eye is for seeing. The excellence of any entity therefore consists in the full actualization of its specific function and natural purpose. Applied to human beings, it follows that the ultimate end is the realization of the highest good—happiness. Thus, teleology provides the metaphysical grounding for virtue ethics: since happiness constitutes the supreme human end, virtue is the requisite excellence enabling its attainment and the perfection of human nature. Teleology accordingly addresses the fundamental question of why virtue must be cultivated.

Happiness as the highest human good stands as a foundational proposition. Yet before defining happiness, the essential nature of human beings must first be clarified to establish criteria for the human good. To examine human nature, recourse is made to substance and soul theory. It is held that every individual substance comprises matter and form. Matter constitutes the underlying physical substrate; form embodies the essential structure, defining characteristics, and functional identity of the thing [5]. For instance, bronze serves as the matter of a statue, whereas its shape constitutes the form—the essence of the statue resides exclusively in its form.

Regarding the human substance, the soul is understood as the form of the living body. This formulation affirms that human beings are not mere composites of soul and body but unified, organic wholes [6]. The soul confers life and agency upon the body; the body furnishes the material basis for all psychic operations. The human soul is hierarchically structured into three levels: the vegetative soul, governing nutrition, growth, and reproduction; the animal soul, governing perception, desire, and locomotion—capacities shared with other animals; and the rational soul, responsible for reasoning, judgment, and knowledge—the uniquely human faculty that distinguishes human beings from all other living things.

On the basis of teleology and soul theory, the function argument is advanced. The logical progression from human nature to human flourishing is systematic: first, the excellence of any functionally defined entity lies in the optimal exercise of its distinctive function—as a skilled harpist excels in playing the harp. Second, the distinctive human function cannot reside in nutrition or perception, since these are shared with plants and animals; rather, it resides in the rational activity of the soul [7]. Hence, the highest human good is identified as the excellent, reason-guided activity of the soul. Virtues constitute the excellences that enable such activity, and happiness is the enduring state of soul-activity conducted in accordance with virtue. Virtue is thus defined as the perfect exercise

of the human rational capacity: just as a well-functioning eye sees clearly and a superior horse runs swiftly, human excellence consists in the full actualization of rational potential.

Moreover, the doctrine of the mean underscores that virtues are neither innate nor static, but progressively refined through practical engagement. It is observed that just actions shape the just person, temperate actions foster temperance, and courageous actions cultivate courage. Since virtues do not appear fully formed, their development is explained through the distinction between potentiality and actuality: human beings naturally possess the potential for rational deliberation and affective responsiveness—the foundational capacity for virtue. Yet this potential remains merely latent until actualized through education, habituation, and sustained practice. Virtue is therefore not an inborn perfection but a dynamic process of self-realization achieved through repeated, guided activity [8].

In summary, Aristotle's virtue doctrine is anchored in a comprehensive metaphysical system comprising teleology, substance theory, and soul theory. Teleology establishes the universal orientation toward final ends and identifies happiness as the definitive human telos, thereby justifying the necessity of virtue. Substance theory defines the human being as an integrated unity of soul and body, while the threefold soul structure identifies rationality as the essential human differentia. The function argument articulates the conceptual pathway from human nature to human good: the highest good is rational soul-activity; virtues ensure its excellence; and happiness is the consummated result of virtuous activity [9]. The doctrine of the mean and the potentiality-actuality framework jointly affirm that virtues are acquired, evolving dispositions rather than fixed, innate traits. Collectively, these metaphysical foundations confer upon Aristotelian virtue theory its rationalist, essentialist, and teleological character.

### 3. Confucius' Virtue Doctrine and Its Metaphysical Foundations

Confucius' virtue doctrine centers on the concept of "benevolence (Ren)," is guided by the behavioral norms of "ritual (Li)," aims at cultivating the noble personality (Junzi), and relies on lifelong learning and moral self-reflection as its practical path. It constitutes an action-oriented, context-sensitive ethical system grounded in human relationships.

The central concept in Confucius' teaching on human virtue is benevolence (Ren). In the *Analects*, Ren appears over one hundred times, yet no abstract or universal definition is provided. Instead, Confucius elucidates the concept situationally—tailoring his explanations to the individual student's level of understanding and mode of inquiry—thereby underscoring the experiential and pragmatic character of his thought. At its most fundamental level, Ren signifies "love for others." When asked directly about its meaning, Confucius replies, "love people," framing Ren as general goodwill and compassionate concern for fellow human beings. The principle of loyalty and forbearance (Zhongshu-Dao) serves as the primary method for realizing Ren: "Loyalty (Zhong)" expresses active altruism—"If you wish success for yourself, help others succeed; if you wish flourishing for yourself, help others flourish." "Forbearance (Shu)" embodies reflective self-restraint—"What you do not wish for yourself, do not impose on others." Together, these principles provide concrete, actionable guidance for embodying benevolence in daily life.

Confucius' most pivotal formulation of Ren states: "Overcoming the self and returning to ritual is benevolence." This statement integrates inner moral development with outward conduct: Ren constitutes the inner spiritual essence of ritual, while ritual manifests benevolence in observable practice. If Ren represents the internal moral disposition, ritual functions as the external standard for expressing and evaluating that virtue. The injunction "What does not accord with ritual, do not look at, do not listen to, do not say, do not do" illustrates ritual's comprehensive regulatory role over perception, speech, and action—curbing excess and deficiency alike, and serving as the principal external framework for enacting the Confucian ideal of the right middle way. Ren and ritual are mutually constitutive: without benevolence, ritual devolves into hollow formalism, as affirmed by the observation "Where there is no benevolence, what use is ritual?" Conversely, without ritual's normative structure, benevolence risks becoming

unmoored emotional impulse, leading to the warning "polite manner without ritual becomes toil." Only through sustained observance and practice of ritual can individuals nurture and actualize their inherent moral potential. Ritual thus bridges personal cultivation and social order, harmonizing ethical conduct with political responsibility.

The ultimate aim of Confucian moral cultivation is the formation of the noble personality (Junzi). Junzi denotes not merely high social rank but, more essentially, a person of exemplary virtue. A key distinction lies in value orientation: "The noble person understands righteousness; the petty person understands profit." This highlights the noble person's commitment to moral integrity over material gain. The noble personality embodies the integration of benevolence, wisdom, and courage—the harmonious alignment of inner nature and outer conduct, expressed in the maxim "When substance and form are balanced, then one is a noble person." Such a person remains steadfast in benevolence, never abandoning it even momentarily in ordinary life. Their preoccupation is not with poverty or low status, but with insufficient moral development and inadequate study of righteous conduct: "The noble person worries about the Way, not about poverty."

According to Confucius, moral virtue is not innate but progressively realized through lifelong learning and independent moral reflection. He explicitly affirms his own reliance on diligent study rather than spontaneous insight, stating he loves the teachings of earlier sages and pursues them with perseverance. Learning, in this sense, centers on classical texts and emulation of virtuous exemplars, aiming to grasp the principles of harmonious coexistence and appropriate action [10]. Alongside study, self-reflection is indispensable: individuals are urged to emulate the worthy and examine themselves when encountering the unworthy—"See a virtuous person and strive after him; see an unvirtuous person and examine yourself." Moral formation thus involves the gradual internalization of external norms into stable character traits through persistent study and introspection. Confucius further emphasizes the inseparability of learning and thinking: "Learning without thinking leads to confusion; thinking without learning leads to danger," affirming the equal necessity of disciplined study and critical reflection—a stance reflecting deep appreciation for practical wisdom.

Regarding the metaphysical foundation of Confucius' virtue doctrine, careful textual analysis reveals that he did not construct a systematic, teleological, or substance-based metaphysics akin to later Western traditions. Nevertheless, his thought contains reflections on the ultimate grounding of virtue, articulated along two interrelated dimensions.

First, Confucius frequently refers to heaven and heavenly fate, yet his conception differs markedly from metaphysical notions of an unmoved mover or immutable substance. Drawing upon the Western Zhou tradition of "virtue conforming to heaven," he treats heaven as a moral transcendental source rather than a physical or logical first cause. The assertion "Heaven has placed virtue in me" positions heaven as the sacred origin of human moral capacity, conferring transcendent authority upon ethical life. However, this heaven is not accessible through logical deduction or speculative reasoning [11]. His remark on "knowing the heavenly mandate at age fifty" points to a lived recognition of life's necessary patterns and moral order—not a rationally deduced cosmic blueprint. Confucius approaches fate with reverence and practical responsiveness, not theoretical dissection. Unlike later thinkers who elaborated systematic cosmologies, he rarely discusses human nature or cosmic order in abstract terms. When questioned about spirits and the afterlife, he redirects attention to ethical praxis: "We cannot yet serve people properly, how should we serve ghosts?" and "We do not yet know life, how should we know death?" Thus, while heaven provides a transcendent value foundation for virtue, it does not yield a logically structured metaphysical system.

Second, Confucius' view of human nature diverges fundamentally from essentialist frameworks grounded in fixed rational essences. His foundational observation—"The nature of people is similar to each other; through habits they differ"—affirms a shared, malleable human disposition rather than an immutable, defining essence. Variations in moral character arise not from innate differences but from acquired habits, education, and

environmental influences [12]. This reflects a non-essentialist perspective that prioritizes human plasticity and educability over predetermined traits. Confucius' inquiry is therefore not directed toward defining an immutable human essence, but toward identifying the conditions for moral excellence: sustained learning, self-directed cultivation, and faithful observance of ritual and righteousness. Human virtue is not given at birth but perfected gradually across a lifetime through study and the practical enactment of benevolence and ritual within familial, social, and political relationships. Classical imagery such as "cut and file, grind and polish" powerfully conveys this vision of continuous refinement—emphasizing lifelong formation over static endowment.

In summary, Confucius' virtue doctrine bears a distinctive metaphysical imprint: it acknowledges heaven as the transcendent source of moral value, yet refrains from constructing a speculative, systematized metaphysics [11]. Virtue develops incrementally through learning, self-cultivation, and ethical engagement in concrete relational contexts. Benevolence and ritual serve as the twin pillars of moral life, while the right middle way guides context-sensitive ethical judgment. This orientation stands in contrast to theories that seek universally valid, necessary knowledge through logical analysis of essence. Confucius advances instead a philosophy of practical wisdom—one rooted in experience, responsive to circumstance, and oriented toward moral realization in everyday life.

#### **4. Basic Comparison of Essentialist and Non-Essentialist Virtue Doctrine**

The central difference between the virtue doctrines of Aristotle and Confucius stems from their distinct metaphysical foundations. Aristotle's philosophy reflects an essentialist standpoint: all things possess fixed, unchangeable essential characteristics; the specific essence of human beings is reason, understood as universally valid and inherently stable. Human nature is thus defined by rationality, from which standards of goodness and conceptions of virtue are derived. Human virtue consists in the full development of rational capacities and the realization of self-perfection.

Teleology constitutes the core of Aristotelian metaphysics. All entities in the cosmos possess an inherent ultimate end; the highest human end is the realization of eudaimonia—often rendered as flourishing or fulfilled happiness—and the highest good. This cosmic teleology provides the ultimate value foundation for Aristotelian virtue ethics: virtues are cultivated as necessary conditions for attaining this final end [10]. In contrast, Confucius' system does not posit a general cosmic teleology. Although references to Heaven and fate appear in his teachings, the Confucian conception of Heaven is not an active, directive cosmic force analogous to Aristotle's unmoved mover. Rather, heavenly fate signifies an orderly pattern underlying individual life circumstances and the broader natural and social world—not a universal purpose binding all things. Confucius does not articulate a doctrine of a shared cosmic aim, nor does he interpret virtuous conduct as the fulfillment of a predetermined universal mission. For him, virtue itself constitutes an ultimate value; the practice of benevolence and ritual carries intrinsic significance, independent of external instrumental goals.

The criteria for identifying the right mean also differ fundamentally. In Aristotle's framework, the mean is determined through rational deliberation. Since reason is regarded as the defining human capacity, the appropriate mean emerges from reasoned judgment applied to concrete situations. This reason-centered structure imparts a pronounced rationalist character to Aristotelian virtue ethics: every stage of virtuous action depends on rational discernment, moderation, and guidance. By contrast, the Confucian understanding of the mean is oriented primarily toward ritual propriety. Ritual constitutes a comprehensive normative framework governing social interaction, communal harmony, and personal conduct. Confucius emphasizes learning and internalizing ritual norms, urging individuals to align their desires and behavior with ritual standards as a path toward realizing benevolence. For Confucius, moral formation arises through embodied practice and experiential insight—not through abstract logical deduction or speculative reasoning [4].

These divergent metaphysical foundations yield significant differences in how virtue is conceptualized and articulated. Aristotle offers a precise, systematic definition: virtue is a stable disposition of character, formed through voluntary choice, aligned with reason, and expressing the situationally appropriate mean. He constructs a coherent explanatory framework grounded in the function argument and the doctrine of the mean. Confucius, however, refrains from offering a fixed, abstract definition of the central concept of benevolence. When asked about its meaning, his responses are context-sensitive, relational, and practice-oriented—for instance, 'loving others', 'subduing the self and returning to ritual', or applying the principle of reciprocity.

The relationship between reason and emotion also differs markedly. Aristotle underscores reason's dominant and regulative role over emotion. Achieving the mean depends entirely on rational control: emotions themselves are morally neutral; their ethical quality arises only when guided by reason into appropriate expression and intensity. The virtuous person exercises rational direction over both emotional responses and actions. Confucius, by contrast, values the authentic yet measured expression of emotion. Affectionate care for others lies at the heart of benevolence. Ritual does not suppress natural feeling but refines its outward manifestation, ensuring emotional expression remains fitting and harmonious with shared norms. Confucius explicitly rejects the total subordination of emotion to reason, instead seeking a balanced emotional state—what is described as 'the unexpressed emotional state being the middle, and the expressed yet appropriate state being harmony'. His virtue ethics rests on emotional experience and practical wisdom, whereas Aristotle's is shaped by rational analysis and formal normative structures.

The pathways to virtue formation and practical implementation likewise diverge. Aristotle identifies habituation as the primary means of acquiring virtue: enduring excellence of character develops through sustained, repeated performance of rational, well-considered actions—just, temperate, courageous acts gradually become second nature. Virtue formation is thus a process of deliberate practice and habitual reinforcement. Confucius, however, centers moral cultivation on the practical enactment of ritual. Through study and consistent observance of ritual forms, individuals progressively absorb socially transmitted norms and behavioral patterns into their moral character. Ritual represents distilled wisdom from prior generations; engaging with it constitutes moral education and personal refinement, as reflected in the statement 'Without learning ritual, one lacks a firm foundation in life'. Moral growth in Confucian thought is a lifelong journey of learning, reflection, and continuous self-cultivation.

Despite these contrasts, both traditions place strong emphasis on practical activity. Aristotelian practice centers on individual rational judgment, highlighting autonomous, voluntary choice and reasoned self-direction. Confucian practice, by contrast, is oriented toward ritual participation and the internalization of time-tested ethical norms and communal standards.

Notable differences also emerge in the relationship between virtue and flourishing. For Confucius, virtue is the ultimate end; flourishing arises naturally as a consequence of sustained virtuous living. The ideal of 'the joy of Confucius and Yan Hui' illustrates this view: even amid material hardship, the virtuous person maintains moral integrity and experiences profound inner fulfillment [9]. External conditions do not preclude spiritual flourishing; moral cultivation constitutes the fundamental orientation of human life, and flourishing emerges from the very process of virtuous engagement. Aristotle, by contrast, defines flourishing as the highest human good; virtue serves as the principal condition and means for attaining it. Flourishing is the final end, while virtue is the indispensable pathway. Nevertheless, Aristotle also affirms virtue's intrinsic worth: the active exercise of virtue is itself an essential constituent of flourishing.

In summary, the distinction may be concisely formulated: for Confucius, virtue is the ultimate end, and flourishing is its natural accompaniment; for Aristotle, flourishing is the ultimate end, and virtue is the foundational means to its realization.

These deep-seated differences arise from contrasting historical contexts, intellectual orientations, and philosophical lineages. Aristotle lived during the era of the Greek city-state, where civic participation and communal deliberation formed vital dimensions of daily life and fostered the development of systematic rational inquiry. For Aristotle, human fulfillment is realized through active engagement in shared communal life. Confucius lived during the late Spring and Autumn period, a time marked by weakening central authority, transformation of traditional institutions, and widespread social reorganization. His response was a dedicated effort to restore Zhou-dynasty ritual norms and reconstruct ethical coherence across society. Within traditional Chinese society, kinship relations served as a foundational organizing principle, the family constituted the primary social unit, and ethical relationships formed the bedrock of social harmony. Against this background, Confucius identifies familial virtues—such as filial reverence and fraternal respect—as the root of benevolence; moral development begins within the family and extends progressively to broader societal responsibilities.

Divergent social frameworks have shaped distinctive modes of thought and philosophical priorities. Greek philosophy consistently seeks certain, universally valid, and necessary knowledge. From early inquiries into the fundamental substance of reality to Plato's theory of Forms and Aristotle's metaphysical investigations, Western philosophy aims to uncover transphenomenal essences and immutable cosmic principles. This tradition prizes logical definition, classification, induction, and deduction, and places high value on rational speculation. Traditional Chinese philosophy, by contrast, emphasizes practical wisdom and real-world application, aiming not at abstract definitions of essence but at contextually appropriate conduct and harmonious life paths. Whether through interpreting dynamic patterns in the Book of Changes or following the principle 'learn from below, reach heaven above', Chinese philosophy grounds its understanding of cosmic order and human excellence in lived experience and practical insight, with comparatively less emphasis on formal logic or detached theoretical abstraction.

Distinctive philosophical lineages further reinforce these differences. Early Greek philosophy focused on questions concerning cosmic origin and ultimate reality—Thales' identification of water, Anaximenes' air, Heraclitus' flux, and Parmenides' unchanging Being—all represent attempts to identify the fundamental ground of existence and laid the groundwork for Western metaphysics. Aristotle's first philosophy represents the culmination of this trajectory. Early Chinese philosophy, however, centered on human affairs and social harmony: the Book of Documents addresses governance, the Book of Songs expresses human sentiment, and the Book of Changes explores patterns of change primarily to illuminate human destiny and ethical responsiveness [6]. Confucius adhered to the principle 'transmit rather than innovate, trust and cherish the wisdom of antiquity', dedicating himself to preserving ancestral insights and perfecting ethical relationships—not investigating primordial cosmic origins. This enduring orientation toward human practice, ethical cultivation, and experiential understanding shapes the pragmatic character of Chinese philosophical tradition.

## **5. Conclusion**

The virtue doctrines associated with Aristotle and Confucius reflect distinct philosophical traditions in the Western and Eastern intellectual lineages. One tradition grounds ethical inquiry in the metaphysical premise that reason constitutes the defining human capacity, developing a systematic virtue ethics through teleological reasoning, functional analysis, and the principle of the mean. This approach emphasizes essentialist, rationalist, and teleological commitments, exemplifying a mode of speculative metaphysical thought. The other tradition centers on the cultivation of exemplary human character, situating virtue within a transcendent framework symbolized by heaven, organized around the core ideal of benevolence and guided by ritual as a moral norm. Its practical orientation relies on lifelong learning and intentional self-cultivation.

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