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# Harmony, Justice & Virtue: A Comparison of Platonian and Confucian Ethics

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# Harmony, Justice & Virtue

A Comparison of Platonian and Confucian Ethics

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## Introduction

Although human culture varies in terms of language, customs, and ideas, the Ancient philosophical tradition of China and Greece had developed a similar ethical system. In both cases the system is based upon virtues and their cultivation within the individual in order to benefit a greater whole. Many scholars have realised the importance of comparing both traditions to gain not only a better understanding of the influence both ethical systems had in the past but also a better understanding of present ethical discourse. While most studies have focused upon comparing Aristotelian ethical thought with that of Confucianism, I have found only one study (Chang, 1964) that has exclusively compared Platonian with Confucian ethical thought.

Although, Aristotle remains one of the most important Ancient Greek philosophers, Plato is often called the founding father of Western philosophy and occupies arguably an even greater role for present philosophical discourse. So why has Platonian ethical thought been neglected by not being compared to Confucian ethics? Many point out that Aristotelian ethical thought is more alike to Confucian ethical thought and thus allows a better comparison. However, similarity of ideas should not be the only concern when conducting a philosophical comparison. A certain amount of difference can actually help to point out significant weaknesses or strengths of either tradition that are not visible in a comparison between two thinkers that are more similar. By comparing Confucian ethical thought with both, the more similar Aristotle, and the more different Plato, one can gain a better and more holistic understanding of their influence in the past and their influence on present ethical discourse. While enough research has been conducted regarding the comparison of Aristotelian and Confucian ethical thought, there is little material on a comparison between Platonian and Confucian ethical thought. This thesis, thus, tries to fill the gap that is present in the present literature by comparing Confucian ethical thought with that of Plato.

This research aims to compare both tradition's ethical system in order to gain a better understanding of each traditions respective weaknesses and strengths. I will not follow the previous study from Chang but instead provide a comparison based upon new translations of primary literature and a better understanding of Confucian ethics with the help of Chenyang

Li's extensive work on Confucian harmony.

I will focus on the ethical thought as presented in the Republic, for Plato, and the Analects, for Confucianism, as both texts represent foundational works in their respective tradition. This limitation ensures that each tradition's own ethical thought is as consistent and coherent as possible. The comparison will be split into three chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of both ethical systems.

The first chapter deals with the most abstract aspect of both ethical systems, something that I call the grand ideal. It represents what both traditions ultimately try to achieve with their ethics. In Confucianism, this is represented by the concept of harmony, for Plato it is the concept of justice. I will begin by showing how the Confucian tradition understands the concept of harmony and why it is so important for Confucian ethics. Afterwards, I will illustrate Plato's conception of justice while comparing his concept of justice to that of harmony. I will, then, critically evaluate the differences that I have identified.

In the second chapter, I will compare how each tradition conceptualises virtues and why they are important in bringing about the grand ideal. I will use the particular virtue of wisdom as an example to show how each tradition thinks of virtues in general and how this connects the individual with the grand ideal. I will start by illustrating the Confucian concept of virtue and wisdom. Afterwards, I will explore Plato's notion of virtue and wisdom as well as compare it to that of Confucianism. I will end the chapter by critically assessing the impact of those differences.

In the last chapter, I will discuss the most practical aspect of either ethical theory: How the individual cultivates virtuous qualities to realise the grand ideal. Due to larger differences between the traditions, the first part of the chapter begins with an illustration of Confucian cultivation in the form of self-cultivation and ritual practice. In the second part, I will explain the notion of Plato's moral education, first focusing on the subjects of music, gymnastics, and literature and then turning towards mathematics and dialectics. The third part of the chapter will compare both conceptions of cultivation, identify the relevant differences and critically reflect upon those.

# 1 The Grand Ideal of both Traditions

For the first part of this thesis, I will compare the most important concept - for Ethics - from each tradition: The grand ideal. It describes the ideal situation and shows what each tradition aims for with its ethics on a metaphysical but also moral basis. The grand ideal is the overarching concept that connects different elements of the respective ethical system together and allows for a cohesive theory. While applications of that theory are necessary for an ethical system, this chapter will first lay out how the overarching concept in each tradition is constituted. The subsequent chapters will deal with the particular application of this overarching concept.

## 1.1 Confucian Harmony

For Confucianism, the thing that humans should strive to achieve, is harmony. Although it is often not mentioned in relation with Confucian ethics, it is essential to understanding Confucian ethics. Harmony connects all other elements together to build one cohesive theory of ethics.

[...] The moment at which joy and anger, grief, and pleasure, have yet to arise is called a nascent equilibrium (zhong 中); once the emotions have arisen, that they are all brought into proper focus (zhong) is called harmony (he 和). This notion of equilibrium and focus (zhong) is the great root of the world; harmony then is the advancing of the proper way (dadao) in the world. When equilibrium and focus are sustained and harmony is fully realized, the heavens and earth maintain their proper places and all things flourish in the world (Ames & Hall, 2001, Zhongyong: Chapter 1).

The different feelings exist within the individual, where all of them are allowed to act within their due degree, keeping each other in balance. This creates an equilibrium where all feelings are given their due presence, being kept in check, and supported by others. This allows every feeling to exist and exercise its due control over the individual without dominating the others. This balance between them is what constitutes Confucian harmony within the

individual but also in the universe. Harmony is a dynamic state in which different things exist together in an equilibrium that allows all of its parts to thrive. With the example of the individual, the *Zhong Yong* illustrates how harmony should be thought of not just in the particular instance of the individual but regarding the whole world. This overarching metaphysical concept is what the grand ideal of Confucianism is.

My further discussion of Confucian harmony and its detailed aspects will follow the conceptualisation of Li (2014) in his book 'The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony', extending some of his points and explaining why these are important for this thesis. Li identifies five characteristics that summarise the idea of Confucian harmony as a metaphysical but also ethical concept (Li, 2014, pp. 9, 10). The first aspect is 'heterogeneity', the fact that the things that make up the harmony are of different nature. Secondly, 'tension', the fact that those different things interact with each other creating tension due to difference. Thirdly, 'coordination and cooperation', the fact that tension can lead to coordination and cooperation where differences are reconciled or somehow realised to benefit all the parties. Fourthly, 'transformation and growth', the fact that through coordination, tension is transformed into a favourable environment for all parties, in which the things themselves change and grow. Lastly, 'renewal', the fact that the harmonious relationship described in the previous four steps, needs to be renewed constantly and is only maintained through continuous renewal.

The first two aspects that Li identifies can be found in the excerpt from the *Zhong Yong* in the beginning of the chapter: Heterogeneity is found in the difference of emotions; tension arises from the fact that not all emotions can act at the same time in their desired way, but need to reconcile themselves with the others. These two aspects form the basis of Confucian harmony. As mentioned in the *Analects*: "Exemplary persons seek harmony not sameness" (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 13.23). Harmony is not just sameness but is a balance of difference. This is important because the main engine behind establishing an equilibrium is conflict. The equilibrium is not always a state of peace, especially not in the beginning, but it is a state of balance. The conflict between multiple things arises naturally from the tension that is created by their differences. The conflict is the expression of interaction.

It is equally important that things not just coexist next to each other, but that they

interact and that they are related in some way. The resulting conflict, coming from their relatedness and differences allows for coordination and cooperation in most cases. This third aspect, as defined by Li, is found in the fact that feelings within the individual act in their due degree. One is not more dominant or somehow suppresses the other feelings but acts within a balance regarding the other feelings. It is here, however, that I disagree with Li's conception of five aspects of harmony. Making coordination and cooperation a main aspect represents the main way in which things relate within a harmonious world but does not represent all ways in which things can form an equilibrium. Another way of things being in harmony together is one of restriction.

In the case of wolves and sheep, their harmonious relationship is not one of cooperation but one of balance between the populations of predators and prey. Too many wolves would extinguish the sheep population and, thereby, leave the wolves without food. But on the other hand, too many sheep would make it impossible for the wolves to keep the sheep-population in check, resulting in an ever-growing population of sheep that would endanger other parts of the ecosystem. The harmonious relationship between those two is one where there are enough wolves to keep the population of sheep in check but not too much so that the population does not decline. In this way, both populations are kept in an equilibrium. Li mentions this possibility but regards the main relation between things to be coordination and cooperation. While he is right that most relationship can be characterised as such, I would rather name the third aspect 'cooperation and restriction' to put emphasis on the fact that harmonious relations are not purely of positive aspects. While their effect is always positive for the whole, the relation of wolves and sheep itself cannot be characterised as coordinated or an act of cooperation. Additionally, unhindered cooperation may spiral out of control when not kept in check, and it is therefore that restriction is necessary in certain relationships. The element of restriction is present also in cooperative and coordinated relations such as in the symbiosis of fungi and trees. The growth of fungi is naturally limited by the availability of dead leaves, and the availability of nutrients naturally limited by the number of leaves decomposed by fungi. The element of restriction is thus an important part of keeping the overall equilibrium and harmony.

The fourth aspect is not explicitly mentioned in the Zhong Yong excerpt but is a logical part of the process of harmonisation. The transformation of a conflict into more favourable or balanced circumstances describes the change happening between the first interaction of things and their reconciliation. In the case of feelings within the individual, at first some may dominate or suppress others, but as harmonisation progresses, the role of particular feelings or their available space transforms. This aspect describes how support and restriction develop into more favourable circumstances. It is here that the 'flourishing of all things' begins once their circumstances become more favourable. The concept of flourishing is important as it gives harmony its ethical dimension. It connects the metaphysical theory of harmony to human action and gives humans a reason why they ought to pursue harmony.

The last aspect, renewal, is essential to understanding the concept of Confucian harmony. Harmony should not be seen as a fixed or constant state of things that once achieved is self-maintained. It is not an ideal that can be achieved (Li, 2014, p. 9), but a description of a situation in which all parts have transformed the initial conflict into favourable circumstances. While this can be considered impossible in practice, theoretically it can be conceptualised. The very purpose of harmony is to describe an ideal that should be striven towards even when it cannot be achieved because the importance of harmony is not achieving it but striving towards it. The process of harmonisation is the essential quality of the theory of harmony. The balancing between differences and resolving of conflict is important whether the situation is fully harmonised or not. Every step towards a more harmonious environment is significant and therefore no less meaningful even when the situation is not fully harmonised. The ideal of complete harmony can only be conceptualised in theory as harmony in itself is an ever-changing thing. The favourable circumstances depend upon which parties are interacting, in what way, under what circumstances and at what speed. The harmonious relationship between two things in one instance might not be harmonious in another. This quality of change is what is captured by Li's description of renewal. The fact that the process must be renewed constantly. That all things need to adapt to changes that are ever-present. The fact that things are never the same is a difference in itself - a difference of time. Two different moments are two different things in the same way that

two different kinds of apples are two different things. This final aspect adds to the ethical dimension, illustrating that humans should first and foremost strive towards harmony not as a goal but use harmonisation as a process in itself. While this description does not give concrete advice, it shows how the pursuit of harmony should look like theoretically.

## 1.2 Plato's Justice

In his Republic, Plato's calls his grand ideal justice. It is what both humans and societies ought to strive towards. Nowadays, justice is associated with fairness and retribution. Those who fail to abide by the rules or law will face punishment, while those that have suffered from the unlawful conduct are compensated. For Plato, justice was not just something that is meant to establish order, it is a more complex concept that describes perfected relations between parts. Justice can exist within an individual or a state, but in both, the individual or the state are only just when their parts are fulfilling their supposed role, coordinated together so that the whole flourishes (Plato, 1992, 442a-e). The, for justice, relevant parts within the individual are the three parts of the soul: *Logistikon*, *thymoeides* and *epithymētikon*. All those three parts are connected but essentially different from the others. The importance for justice is, that each part needs to fulfill their purpose together with the other. Only the can the individual be called just. Regarding the state, Plato thinks that in an ideal state there exist three classes: Guardians, warriors, and workers. While all three classes have different duties - Guardians are to rule the city, warriors protect it, and workers produce goods - only when each is doing their duty in coordination with the others does the city prosper and can it be called just. While I will discuss the duties and characteristics of the classes and the parts of the individual in chapter two, for now, it is important to understand that all those parts must perform not just their duty but do so in a coordinated fashion.

While most scholars have been satisfied with this description of justice Li (2014, pp. 32, 33), among others, has described the relations between parts as harmonious. Li makes the point that this connects the ideals of both traditions in the sense that they both use the concept of harmony, although in different fashions. He points out that the Confucian harmony is one without a pre-set order, whereas Plato's harmony refers to a static

conformity between the parts. This can be related to the different understandings of harmony between East and West. While harmony in Asia is often similar to the Confucian idea of harmony, the Western idea of harmony can be seen as an "agreement of ideas, feelings, or actions, or a pleasing combination of different parts" or "the situation in which people live or work happily together without any big problems"<sup>1</sup>, referring to ideas of conformity, agreement, and peace. As mentioned above, the idea of tension and struggle between things is an essential part for the Confucian idea of harmony. For Plato on the other hand, tension and struggle would be disruptive. The whole idea of harmonising the relations between the parts for Plato is to achieve a stable situation in which everything flourishes. The way towards this peaceful agreement is not of conflict primarily. Plato envisions that the harmonisation comes naturally from the realisation that doing one's duty and coordinating it with the duties of others is the most rational way of doing things (Hamedi, 2014). While the end-result of coordination is that of flourishing in both traditions, the element of tension or conflict never vanishes in the Confucian harmony. However, Plato's relations between parts are more accurately described as harmonious relations instead of coordinated duties because harmonious relations imply a sense of perfection, whereas coordination does not. It is important to clarify, however, that the harmony between Plato's parts is different from the harmony between parts in the Confucian tradition.

While the end-goal is fixed for Plato, he admits that the ideal society or state of the individual may be difficult to be achieved in practice (Plato, 1992, 502c). Therefore, the practical implementation of both theories does not differ with regards to the different types of harmony, as both traditions strive towards an ideal that cannot be achieved in practice. The practical differences arise more from the differences between justice and harmony than the different types of harmonies themselves.

Next to the static nature of the end-goal, Plato's ethics contain more static elements. Firstly, while Confucian harmony needs to be upheld through continuous adaptation and renewal, Plato's ideal is self-sustaining. This means that once the parts of the individual (or society) have been harmoniously integrated with each other the individual acts in a way

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/harmony>

that preserves and co-operates with this harmonious condition (Plato, 1992, 443c-444a). Because justice can only be achieved once the person has realised what 'The Good' is, everything afterwards will be in accordance with that Good. The Good represents truth, the way things really are, and how they are supposed to be. This will be discussed more closely in chapter three as it is an essential to understanding how justice is achieved in practice. However, since realising what the Good is a necessary condition for achieving justice in the first place, once the individual has realised what the Good is and has harmonised this understanding with the rest of themselves, all actions will be in accordance with that Good. Achieving the necessary conditions for justice also prevents the individual (and society) from ever not being just. The reward for the individual or society that becomes just is therefore not simply flourishing but also safety by remaining in a state of flourishing.

Secondly, Plato believes that the role everyone must play within the perfect society is pre-determined from birth (Plato, 1992, 370a-b). According to Plato, everyone is born into a specific class and must not switch between classes for the sake of the whole of the state (Plato, 1992, 420b-421c, 434a-c). The individual born to be a worker must stay a worker as his predispositions would suffice for the job of a guardian or a warrior and vice versa. The qualities that are necessary to become a guardian would not allow the individual to fulfill the role of a worker perfectly. Only when the individual has the desired qualities can they be educated to become guardians and fulfill their role to perfection. As pointed out by Annas (1981, pp. 76, 79), Plato supposes here that people will do what is beneficial for the common good instead of being selfish because it is always better to be rational than selfish. This problem of why people act in favour of the common good is later explained when Plato explains how the state is ruled and how much perfection is expected of everyone, which I will focus on in chapter three. Plato also sees a need for specialisation within the classes, not just of classes in general, this is especially important within the class of workers. Workers are supposed to specialise themselves, having one occupation and not changing once the occupation has been learned as the specialised worker is more efficient than someone doing multiple things at a time (Plato, 1992, 370b-c). This specialisation, however, is not determined by birth. More flexibility exists in this regard as the individual can choose what

occupation to learn as long as they stay within the same class. This specialisation is also present within the individual although not so relevant as Plato simply divides the soul into three parts, giving each part a different duty. As in the case of the individual of the state, the parts of the soul are defined by their qualities.

Lastly, the biggest static element in Plato's theory is the World of Forms. He supposes that next to our world there exists a realm in which things are unchanging and eternal. This realm contains Forms (essences) that are static truths which relate to our world because the objects we see are mere representations of those Forms (Kraut, 2022). Our world, therefore, is imperfect, as it merely tries to imitate the perfect realm of Forms. While this is primarily relevant for metaphysics, the World of Forms is significant for the topic of ethics and justice as one of the Forms is the Good. The Good represents the ultimate ideal for Plato. The Good in the phenomenological world is achieved when justice is achieved. For the phenomenological world, the ideal of justice and the Good is closely connected, although their metaphysical content is slightly different. While the difference is vague, for this thesis I have chosen to focus on the topic of justice as it more clearly related to the phenomenological world and therefore the world of ethics. Nonetheless, the Good plays a significant role for justice as only by realising what the Good is can justice be achieved. This connects the two worlds with each other and is Plato's main idea of how to achieve justice. By accessing the World of Forms, the individual realises what perfection is and can then imitate it in the phenomenological world. While the process of accessing the World of Forms will be discussed in chapter three, it is clear that Plato relies on ultimate and therefore static truths to make his ethical theory work.

While Li mentions the static element of harmony within Plato's ethics, static elements exist on more than just the level of justice. The idea of constancy is present at the highest level of Plato's metaphysics - the World of Forms - and influences his conception of how perfection is supposed to look like in the phenomenological world on all levels below. Not only are the relationships between the parts of the soul or the classes of the state fixed, the individuals themselves belong to only one class and are supposed to have only one occupation. Not only is justice a fixed state it is self-sustaining, an imitation of the World

of Forms in which Forms are unchanging and eternal. The need for renewal, in comparison to Confucian harmony is completely missing. The element of constancy is a fundamental element of Plato's philosophy, especially in the case of ethics, of which the static harmony represents one example.

### **1.3 The Abstractness of Harmony allows broader Application**

Plato's formulation of a static ideal allows him to be more concrete in describing its particular aspects. In contrast to the vagueness and abstractness of Confucian harmony, Plato can define more clearly what should be striven for but also how one should strive towards it, which will be more relevant in the subsequent chapters. By giving concrete examples and defining real circumstances, Plato allows the reader to understand his conception more easily and recognise it quicker. This makes the practical implementation of Plato's theory easier, thus more effective in this regard, than that of Confucianism. While Confucian harmony is a purely theoretical concept as it cannot be achieved in practice but is striven towards, Plato's justice, although highly unlikely, can be achieved in practice. It is, by definition, thus a realistic goal, whereas Confucian harmony serves as an indication of direction more than an actual goal. Plato's concreteness is thus not only visible in its practical aspects but also general realism connecting it to our everyday world. While Plato can give examples and definition that are recognisable during everyday life, Confucian harmony, representing an abstract ideal, seems harder to understand and strive towards. Regarding these two points, Confucian harmony is more disconnected from the phenomenological world <sup>2</sup>than Plato's justice, whereas it is exactly the connection to practice that is essential for ethics.

However, the fact that Plato's ideal is more concrete is not only helpful but also reduces the applicability of his ethics. In contrast to Confucian harmony which can be implemented in the whole phenomenological world, Plato's justice is only applicable to human beings and a particular subset of societies <sup>3</sup>. Not only does this allow for Confucian ethics to affect

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<sup>2</sup>In contrast to the unintelligible realm or other idealistic worlds

<sup>3</sup>Plato notes that his ideal state cannot extend past a certain population and needs to maintain its size. This envisioned population does not represent the numbers today's cities have (Plato, 1992, 423b)

more societies, but it also allows Confucian ethics to affect modern societies. Because the particular aspects of states in which harmony can be pursued are not concretely defined, almost any society can implement the ethical system. While this does not pose a theoretical challenge to Plato's conception of justice, the practical value of either tradition's ethical system is dependent upon its implementation in practice. How is ethics otherwise valuable? But then, how much more valuable is a more widely implemented concept when it seems more disconnected from practice in general? I will return to this question in chapter three when looking at how the ideal is striven towards in both traditions.

Another benefit of Confucian harmony over Plato's justice is the fact that Confucian harmony is expected to be striven towards in steps. The fact that it is not to be seen as a goal in itself but a process of harmonising the world, makes it less frustrating when not achieved and puts less pressure on the individual striving towards the ideal. Plato's concept of justice needs to be achieved because it is defined as a goal in itself. Anything short of having achieved the goal can be called failure in some way, whereas striving for Confucian harmony in itself is already something good. This is a psychological benefit of Confucian harmony which is relevant for the philosophical discussion of the ideal in general. Because the Confucian conception of harmony does not generate a sense of failure or frustration when not achieved, the individual is helped in the process rather than obstructed.

Furthermore, the idea of Confucian harmony does not create any hierarchy between individuals, whereas it does for Plato. Regarding classes in the state (and parts of the soul within the individual, something I will illustrate in chapter two), there is the idea of a moral hierarchy in which the most important class - the guardians - is more relevant than the workers or warriors. While both traditions realise that some people have a greater influence on ethics than others, the explicit nature of the social hierarchy present in Plato's justice makes it a more dominant aspect than in Confucianism. To live in tension with others trying to resolve or reconcile them is what is essential for Confucian harmony, therefore, the individual that is in the process of harmonising themselves and their environment has no feeling of failure. While there are degrees of harmonisation, there is no judgement in having harmonised oneself less than others, as the importance lies in the fact that one is trying to harmonise

themselves and their environment. While this element is also present in Plato, as the individual in pursuit of justice acts morally and therefore desirably to some degree, there is less recognition of the individual's effort. This stems from the fact that justice is an end-goal in itself, whereas Confucian harmony stresses the importance of degrees of harmony. Plato hereby adds the possibility for feelings of inadequacy next to the feelings of failure, creating another possibility to affect the mental health of the individuals in a negative way. This further impacts the effectiveness of the application of the ethical system negatively in the case of Plato. In chapter two, I will focus more in detail on the mental health of the individual and the impact it has on the success of the ethical system in practice.

Another difference is the fact that Plato's justice involves no element of tension, whereas Confucian harmony is based upon the element of tension. While the idea of a peaceful utopia may be more pleasing, one can question whether it is realistic, given the world we live in. While Plato seems to think that human beings can live together without tension, he avoids the problem altogether and fails to solve what is undeniably a part of human existence. Instead of trying to solve it, Plato denies that tension between humans is a problem and that in a perfect society it should not exist. He thinks that when all parts assume their pre-determined role and perform such role harmoniously with other parts, there remains no tension. Confucianism on the other hand sees tension as the catalyst that enables harmony. Whereas Plato is trying to suppress tension by stating that tense relations are relations that are not perfect and should be improved.

Confucianism transforms tension as something problematic into something constructive. Rather than eliminating tension all together, it is accepted as a part of our lives, but conceptualised differently so that it exists with the role to bring about harmony. Regarding the fact that both traditions accept that their ideal is, at least, unlikely to be achieved in praxis, Plato's solution of trying to eliminate tension all together seems problematic. Considering the current theory of evolution, tension between humans has never not existed, rather it seems to be one of the essential qualities of life on earth. It appears too optimistic to solve it entirely by simply eliminating it. The fact that a perfect society is never achieved, eliminating not all but only some tension does not solve any issue, especially when the ten-

sion is supposed to be resolved by redefining relations or duties. This totalitarian aspect of Plato's justice, the fact that boundaries and rules are strictly defined and enforced in order to eliminate tension, becomes especially problematic here, when total control is impossible. The tension created by trying to impose definitions and rules is likely greater than the tension resolved by them. Not only does Confucianism realise that tension is unresolvable, but it also provides a solution that can be applied in practice and thus is more effective overall.

Lastly, the fact that Plato does not include the entire world but only the individual and the state makes it difficult to apply his theory in circumstances that involve more aspects than those two. Confucian harmony is more holistic in this aspect and tries to envision perfection within the entire world, making it possible to apply it in cases that involve both humanity and nature - two things that seem impossible to separate in our modern society. This allows Confucian ethics (as depicted so far) to be applied in more cases than that of Plato.

## **2 Individual Virtue**

After having established what the grand ideal is that both traditions strive towards, I will now look at how both traditions connect the individual to that grand ideal. In this chapter I will illustrate how the micro-level (the individual) is connected to the macro ideal to form a coherent and holistic metaphysical and ethical theory. Both traditions make use of virtues to connect the individual with their grand ideal. Virtues are moral qualities that can be identified in individuals that exhibit moral behaviour. For Confucianism and Plato, moral behaviour is behaviour that strives towards, maintains, or supports the ideal. Through virtues, the individual thereby strives for the ideal through the cultivation or acquiring of virtues. It is therefore essential to understand what the particular virtues are, why they are important, and how they support achieving the grand ideal. While it is impossible to discuss single virtues in isolation from the others when concerned with the ethical theory as a whole, I will focus my attention on the virtue of wisdom in both traditions. It plays a central role in both traditions and illustrates the general importance of virtues best.

## 2.1 What is *Zhi* (智)?

While different Confucian writers more or less agree on the grand concept of harmony, it becomes more difficult to find their consensus on virtues. Not only does the amount of core virtues vary between the authors, but their definition of particular virtues is often not the same. Quoting the *Wuxing*, a fourth century BCE Confucian text, the five types of favourable behaviour (or virtues as we would call them today) are benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and sagacity (Knapp, 2016). While if we consider the Mencius, the four virtues would be benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. (Gardner, 2007, 6A.6, 2A.6) If we consider Confucianism as written about by Dong Zhongshu, the five constant virtues would be benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness (Knapp, 2016). Referring to the Analects, Confucius talks about many important virtues out of which *ren* (仁, benevolence or humanness), *zhi* (智, wisdom), *xin* (信, trustworthiness), *li* (禮, ritual practice), and *yi* (義, righteousness or appropriate conduct) seem to be the most important (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 17.8, 17.21, 17.23). It is evident that there exists some overlap between the writers within the tradition, regarding the names of the virtues but also the ideas behind them. However, it remains important to state which 'Confucian virtues' one is considering. For this thesis, the main focus lies on the ethics of early Confucianism, I will therefore deal with the virtues as presented by Confucius in the Analects. Something that stands out however, is the fact that wisdom appears among the core virtues in all four examples. It occupies an essential role in the Confucian idea of the moral individual.

Before defining wisdom it is important to be aware of a translational ambiguity. *Zhi* is most commonly translated as wisdom in the sense of virtue, especially in Confucian literature. However, it can also be translated as knowledge or cunningness. Some ancient Chinese literature therefore makes the distinction between *da zhi* (great wisdom) and *xiao zhi* (petty wisdom) which helps us get a better grasp of the sense of wisdom in general (Wang et al., 2022). What is most commonly referred to as wisdom in the modern Western world is a knowledge of ideas that is disconnected from moral actions. It refers to the intellectual abilities, and conceptual knowledge of a person. This conceptual knowledge is more closely connected to *xiao zhi* and is sometimes related to vice when humans use their intelligence

for personal gain or the harming of others. The Confucian virtue of wisdom, however, is more closely connected to *da zhi*. It is knowledge connected to morality which is important for Confucians and thereby different from what is commonly known as wisdom in the modern Western world. Interestingly, Plato conceptualises wisdom similarly to the Confucian tradition, as I will illustrate in the next section. It remains important to be aware of the translational ambiguities when dealing with wisdom and knowledge in ancient Chinese texts, as not all ancient Chinese traditions conceptualise wisdom as connected to morality.

Even in the tradition of Confucianism it is difficult to determine whether all sources understand wisdom as the same thing - even when it is almost universally referred to as *zhi* in the sense of virtuous wisdom. Confucians converge on the same idea of wisdom but differ slightly their specific definitions.

The Analects provide a potential definition, when wisdom is defined as: "To devote yourself to what is appropriate (*yi*) for the people [...] can be called wisdom" Ames and Rosemont (1998, 6.22). Here can be seen, that wisdom is not just connected to other virtues (*yi* in this example), wisdom is to be pursued for the sake of something. It is not abstract knowledge that is desirable, it is knowledge for the sake of the good of the people that is desirable. Knowledge that is directly connected to morality.

The Great Learning, a canonical text for Confucianism, agrees with this: "Things have their roots and branches; affairs have a beginning and an end. One comes near the Way in knowing what to put first and what to put last" (Gardner, 2007, The Great Learning: 3). The way (*dao*, 道) is a prominent concept in Chinese philosophy and refers here to the correct path forward, the harmonisation of the individual with themselves and the world. Coming to closer to achieving that goal is only possible when the individual knows how it is achieved. Knowing how to cultivate oneself is thereby necessary for the harmonious individual. Here we see that the appropriateness of the actions is not only important for social reasons as we could have inferred from the definitions of the Analects, but that the appropriateness is an overall quality extending the social context. Appropriate action is action that gets us closer towards the harmony within ourselves but also towards the harmony in the world. Wisdom here is the guide towards that action. It is knowledge with the purpose of guiding

us towards harmony. This notion of wisdom is strengthened when we look at the, at first, puzzling paragraph from the Analects: "The wise (*zhi*) enjoy water; those authoritative in their conduct (*ren*) enjoy mountains. The wise are active; the authoritative are still. The wise find enjoyment; the authoritative are long-enduring" Ames and Rosemont (1998, 6.23). Firstly, this time *zhi* is brought up in connection with *ren*, showing that they should not be thought of in isolation but rather as complementary qualities. 'The wise' are only able to flow when *ren* is stable like a mountain. It is the quality of *ren* that allows wisdom to affect the world. Secondly, 'the wise' are described as active, reinforcing the notion that wisdom enables moral action. Wise people are like water, active, changing, representing movement. It is this connection with action that is an essential quality of wisdom.

But wisdom is not just connected with activity, it is equally connected to non-activity: "Only the most wise (*zhi*) and the most stupid do not move" Ames and Rosemont (1998, 17.3). While both, the stupid and the wise, can arrive at the same conclusion, only the wise knows why they do not do anything while the stupid does so out of luck. Another interpretation of this passage could be that the wise are wise enough not to move while the stupid do not know what to do and therefore not move. The message relevant to this thesis is in both cases the same. The essential quality in this verse is the fact that wisdom is not just to know what to do, but also when to do it, or when not to do anything. This is closely connected to the virtue of *yi*, as appropriate conduct is heavily dependent on not just action but also non-action. This shows again, how interconnected the virtues in the Confucian tradition are, but also how interdependent they are. Wisdom is impossible to be fully cultivated without cultivating the other virtues. This aspect of the virtues will be something I will illustrate more closely in chapter three.

Wisdom, thus, is the knowledge of how and whether to act. It is closely connected to the ideal of harmony as those actions performed (or intently not performed) are in accordance with the ideal of harmony. Furthermore, wisdom is only able to drive the individual towards morally good actions (or non-actions) through the other virtues. *Yi* is only possible when one knows what the appropriate conduct would be, similarly, knowing what the appropriate conduct is would only be beneficial when one is able to also act upon that knowledge.

Cua (2007) Calls this relationship one of dependent virtues. Meaning that the ethical significance of the virtue is dependent upon the existence of another or other virtues. While Cua applies this concept to *ren*, *li* and *yi*, it is equally true of *zhi*. Wisdom represents the knowledge about the actions, but the performance of actions is another aspect that is trained by *li*, encouraged by *ren*, and enacted by *yi*. *Zhi*'s ethical significance therefore is dependent upon the cultivation and existence of the other virtues. The individual does not act morally because they are wise, in contrast to Aristotle, the knowledge of the right course of action alone is not a sufficient condition but only a necessary condition. Wisdom allows us to find the right course of action when it is not dictated by rules or rites (Li, 2014, pp. 130–131). Nonetheless, even when *li* is not available, *ren* and *yi* are still necessary for wisdom to have ethical significance. We can often see in the Analects that Confucius calls out those that overemphasise one virtue over others, leading the individuals to vice in a multitude of ways (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 1.12, 6.18, 8.2, 14.4, 17.8). It is in this conception of balance and equilibrium that wisdom has its role next to the other virtues.

It is the quality of wisdom that allows the individual to be moral in all circumstances when the cultivation of wisdom is in harmony with the other virtues. The concept of harmony can be found here again, on a smaller level. While all of things of the world need to be in harmonious relations for the equilibrium to exist, within the individual all virtues need to be in harmonious relations for the individual to be virtuous. Although the harmony of the individual is on a smaller level than that of the whole world, the whole world cannot be harmonised when the individual is not in a harmonious state themselves.

## **2.2 Connecting *Logistikon* and Wisdom**

In contrast to the Confucian tradition, where no clear consensus on the core virtues as well as definitions of those core virtues themselves is present, Plato's conceptualisation of virtues is clearer. While there are differences in conceptualisation between Plato's works, since I will only consider his account of the Republic here, the definition of virtues and wisdom is clear. Plato defines his virtues for both the state and the individual; however, I will limit myself to the virtues of the individual here as those are best comparable with the virtues

of Confucianism which are mostly connected to the individual. To discuss specific virtues in Plato it is essential to note that Plato's account of virtues is closely connected to his account of the soul. This metaphysical concept is relevant as Plato refers to three parts of the soul that are each connected to a specific virtue and are essential to understanding those virtues themselves. The soul should be understood as a slightly broader concept than what is called the 'mind' today (Annas, 1981, p. 124). The soul, for Plato, is responsible for mental functions but is also considered eternal and distinct from the body. However, those two extra qualities of distinctness and immortality are referring to a simpler soul, not the tripartite soul that he uses for his theory of virtues. The ambiguous conceptualisation is mainly a metaphysical problem and will therefore not be discussed here as it does not interfere with the theory of ethics.

In his Republic, Plato identifies three parts of the soul that each represent a part of the individual. Firstly, *logistikon*, which is our part of reason, knowledge, and logic; Secondly, *thymoeides*, representing our emotions and passions; Thirdly, *epithymētikon*, which carries the notions of desires such as lust and hunger (Plato, 1992, 439d-442c). Each part of the soul is closely connected to three of Plato's four virtues. A wise individual is one where *logistikon* has been perfected, a courageous individual is one where *thymoeides* has been perfected, and a temperate individual is one where *epithymētikon* has been tamed. Lastly, the just individual is one, whose parts have been perfected and harmoniously joined together. This conception of the soul is illustrated by the allegory of the chariot in Plato's Phaedrus (Plato, 1995): *Logistikon* represents the driver of the chariot, while *thymoeides* and *epithymētikon* are the horses that pull it forward. When all three parts do not assume their role, the chariot is unable to drive towards the desired location. Only when all three parts work together can the chariot follow its path uninterrupted. This happens only when *logistikon* and *thymoeides* co-operate together to tame *epithymētikon*. In other words, reason and passion need to work together to suppress the desires and lust of *epithymētikon* so that the individual can be just. It becomes essential to understand the characteristics of *logistikon* to grasp what wisdom entails, and equally so for the other virtues.

Before defining what wisdom is for Plato, multiple differences to Confucianism can

already be identified. Firstly, the metaphysical conception of the individual is different as Plato makes a clear distinction between body and soul, whereas Confucianism does not<sup>4</sup>. While this does not impact the field of ethics directly, it does influence the individual in their perception of themselves. I will show later in this chapter how that has an indirect influence on ethics.

Secondly, for Plato, the virtuous individual is one where one part of the soul (*epithymētikon*) is suppressed by the other two (*thymoeides* and *logistikon*). This relationship between the parts is static, pre-defined and self-maintaining, as his grand ideal justice. Once *logistikon* has gained the necessary knowledge, of knowing what its role is but also what the other parts' supposed roles are, and *thymoeides* has become courageous and strong enough to support and follow *logistikon*'s commands, *epithymētikon* will no longer be able to disrupt the individual from becoming just (Plato, 1992, 442d-444e). This relationship between the parts, where two occupy a dominant role aimed at suppressing the other cannot be found in the Confucian tradition. In Confucianism, virtues are complementary, and interdependent. They work together constructively, not destructively. The resulting equilibrium is one of balance, not due to suppression but harmonisation. For Plato, the harmonious relationship between the three virtues of temperance, wisdom, and courage is only harmonious due to the negative definition of temperance. It is the denial of *epithymētikon* that establishes the just relations between the parts of the soul.

Thirdly, Plato definition of temperance illustrates his conception of human nature. Temperance is defined as the suppression of *epithymētikon*, the suppression of a part of the individual. While early Confucianism is not clear about human nature<sup>5</sup>, there seems to be no clear opinion of whether humans are by nature evil or good. The Analects focus mostly on the cultivation of virtues, which is necessary for everybody but equally possible for everybody. So, while nobody is born with perfect virtues, everybody has the potential to become virtuous. Plato on the other hand sees part of the human nature as partly corrupted,

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<sup>4</sup>Confucianism does have a concept of the mind (heart mind, *Xin* 心) but it cannot exist outside or without the body unlike the soul for Plato

<sup>5</sup>While the *Mencius* talks extensively about human nature and makes a strong point for the inherent goodness in humans, *Xunzi* thinks that human nature is inherently evil and needs to be trained to become good. However, both Confucian philosophers are outside the scope of this thesis

which needs to be suppressed. The Confucian individual is probably neutral at its core, where goodness can be obstructed by mental, physical, and environmental aspects that need to be overcome. Additionally, while Plato is not explicitly negative about the body in *The Republic*<sup>6</sup>, he is not positive about the body either. The different conception of human nature leads to the difference in conception about what entails a virtuous human being. While for Plato, vice is inherent in the individual and needs to be silenced, in Confucianism, vices are temporary and conceptualised differently. Additionally, for Plato, the body - another element of the individual - is more like a vessel that should be cared for but does not help the soul in any way (Plato, 1992, 403d, 408e). Whereas for Confucianism, the individual is not diminished in any aspect, as there is no mention of instrumental parts. Everything is included with a purpose or is at least not dismissed as something minor.

Plato's wisdom, as defined in the *Republic*, is "that small part of himself that rules in him and makes those declarations and has within it the knowledge of what is advantageous for each part and for the whole soul, which is the community of all three parts" (Plato, 1992, 442c). Again, knowledge is the essential quality that is connected to courses of action in the form of commands. Knowledge is not just knowledge of things but is connected to knowledge of what is of interest for the other parts and for the whole individual. This knowledge is thereby connected to action primarily, but it is connected to action for the interest of the parts and the whole. Because Plato defined what is of interest to the whole, namely justice (Plato, 1992, 420b-c), the role of wisdom can be defined similarly as in Confucian thought: knowledge for the purpose of guiding the individual towards moral action. As in Confucianism, knowledge alone is not sufficient for moral behaviour but needs to be enforced by another/other quality/qualities. The difference between both traditions is, that wisdom, for Plato, only needs to work together with courage, whereas in Confucianism, wisdom needs to work together with all other virtues. Courage, as the virtue of *thymoeides*, represents the emotional and passionate part of the soul and, in the ideal case, supports wisdom. While the soul may know what the right course of action is, it needs courage to also enact it. But this relationship, unlike in Confucianism, is not one of balance. *Logistikon*, occupies the domi-

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<sup>6</sup>Other works of Plato conceptualise the body as prison for the soul or as corruption the soul

nant role in the relationship, issuing commands, while *thymoeides* is supposed to follow and support them (Plato, 1992, 440e, 442ab). Since *logistikon* occupies the more dominant role, wisdom can be seen as the more dominant virtue. Courage occupies a supporting position, enabling wisdom to fulfill its role fully. Plato's role of wisdom is therefore much stronger than that of Confucianism in that it is the primary engine behind the virtuous character of the individual.

The rationalisation for the dominant role of wisdom stems from the fact that it is the only part that cares for the whole (Plato, 1992, 441e) and that it is the only part that has access to truth, as represented by the World of Forms (Plato, 1992, 531c–535a). This illustrates two aspects. One, the individual can only ever know the right course of action if the knowledge it has is true, meaning they have realised what the Good is. It becomes, thus, a necessary condition for justice to ever be achieved to have 'access to the Realm of Forms'. Two, once the individual realises what the Good is, that realisation is conceptually so strong that other factors are considered less relevant. Plato places great importance upon this realisation of the Good - wisdom - and thereby diminishes the role of the other virtues. Once we realise that the Good is, our emotions should follow suit and any other desires, aside from wanting to achieve the Good, will be too weak to counteract the actions commanded by wisdom and supported by courage.

We can see here that Plato's soul might be in a state of harmony but not one of balance. In its most virtuous and harmonious state, *logistikon* occupies the 'driver's seat'<sup>7</sup>, *thymoeides* works as a catalyst towards enabling *logistikon*, and together both tame *epithymētikon*. Plato's emphasis on reason is something that is commonly associated with the Western world of philosophy. It has been the basis for Descartes' Dualism - with his emphasis on *Res Cogitans* - but also European Idealism as expressed by Berkeley or Kant, for example. While Plato does not go as far as idealists in describing full autonomy to the rational part of the human being, the role of reason is far greater than the role of the other parts.

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<sup>7</sup>See Allegory of the Chariot

### 2.3 Overemphasising Reason unbalances the Individual

In the past, a common made distinction between Western and Eastern philosophical traditions was that Western traditions were more reason-based and rational than Eastern traditions. Although this distinction was based upon misinterpretations and misrepresentations of the Eastern traditions, Western traditions did generally have more emphasis upon the rational aspect of humans whereas Eastern traditions focused equally on multiple aspects. This does not make Eastern traditions less rational, but less reason-centered. As can be seen by the emergence of modern theories in the West that move away from idealism and tend towards enactivism, pragmatism and phenomenology, the Western emphasis on reason and rationality can has, by some, been seen as an overemphasis. Although the stereotypical difference between East and West has been become outdated over the last centuries, this difference can be seen to some degree in the comparison between Platonian and Confucian wisdom, especially considering the overemphasis of *logistikon* in Plato.

While Plato emphasises the role of *logistikon* and thus reason, Confucianism places more importance upon a balanced development of wisdom along with other virtues. The result for Plato, is an unbalanced soul or state (guardians occupy the same position in the state as *logistikon* does in the individual), in which one part dominates the others and thus also carries most of the responsibility. While it would make sense to put most responsibility on the most effective and important part of the whole, Plato does not provide convincing arguments that *logistikon* is the most effective and important part of the whole, when compared to the Confucian depiction of the individual. Rather, Plato neglects other aspects such as passion, desires, and spirituality and fails to implement them in his ethical theory in a constructive way. Although, Confucianism does not explicitly mention a role for emotions or desires in the Analects, the overall image of balancing out virtues instead of having one part dominate allows for an easier implementation of other aspects later. By committing to the idea that *logistikon* is the most important part of the individual, Plato puts additional pressure upon its development. The individual is dependent upon the development of *logistikon* more than upon any other factors. While *thymoeides* enables *logistikon*, its function is merely supportive. For Plato, becoming a virtuous individual thereby hinges upon the

successful development of *logistikon*, something that is not supported by the development of other virtues, as a virtuous *thymoeides* cannot help in directing a vicious *logistikon* onto a better path.

The Confucian idea of the virtuous individual however not only puts less responsibility on wisdom conceptualisation virtues so that they are mutually supportive. The development of wisdom is not solely dependent upon its own development but is aided by the successful cultivation of other virtues. Because wisdom is not solely in charge, its influence is both aided but also suppressed (in the case of non-development or failure) by the other virtues. This balanced idea of virtues creates a safer environment where the failure of cultivating one does not lead to complete failure of the whole. Much rather, less pressure is put upon the individual as failure is less likely due to the protective nature of interconnected virtues. Furthermore, the development of virtues within the individual seems to be quicker as their mutual support enables an upward spiral in development. Confucianism shows how wisdom can be conceptualised to occupy a central role without overemphasising it. The result is a more balanced version of Plato's virtues, which are more effective, safe, and allow for other important aspects - like *ren*, *li*, *xin*, and *yi* - to be integrated more easily.

The other important aspect of the Confucian idea of wisdom is the fact that it leaves more room for other qualities to gain attention. While wisdom is central to achieving harmony, so is appropriate conduct, ritual practice, benevolence, and trustworthiness. The cultivation of other qualities occupies as much space as does the quality of wisdom. This conception of an ideal individual fits better into the idea of a healthy individual that we get from present psychology and medicine. The idea of repressing our desires (and emotions) has been criticised in psychology of today, as it bears negative consequences for the individual and thus for its environment. Constant repression leads to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and shame because the person does not feel like they are good enough or that there is something wrong with them. This disrupts the development of confidence and makes it difficult for the individual to function well. And is not courage and optimal functioning what Plato envisions for his perfect individual? The Confucian tradition, although including rules and rituals, does not primarily use the mechanism of repression or suppression to deal

with desires. As I have shown in the previous chapter, feelings of failure or inadequacy are not as present in Confucianism as they are in Plato's philosophy. The additional feelings of inadequacy due to the repression of desires (or emotions) in Plato, is again an argument for the flexibility and inclusion of multiple aspects that is present in the Confucian philosophy. While there is no consensus within Confucianism whether the individual is inherently good or not, the theory of virtues and harmony does not inspire feelings of inadequacy or failure as in Plato. It much rather fights the idea of failure by conceptualising virtues as being interconnected, aiding development and likewise buffering failure.

The Confucian conception of virtue and wisdom in particular provides a more holistic and balanced version of the virtuous individual than in Plato's Republic. This connects to the findings in chapter one, where I argued for the importance of psychological aspects that support the individual in their path towards the grand ideal. Again, Confucianism manages to build a more supportive environment for the individual than Plato's conception of virtues. Even if one would presume that both grand ideals are equally relevant and effective, the Confucian conception of virtues is more effective in striving towards their ideal than Plato's conception of wisdom.

### **3 Becoming Virtuous**

Having explained what the grand ideal is and what role virtues play in the ethical thought of both traditions, I will now cover how the individual is envisioned to cultivate those virtues within themselves in order to achieve the grand ideal. This will connect the most practical part of ethics to the more theoretical constructs of the previous two chapters. Due to the practical nature of the content of this chapter, both traditions show less similarities between each other than in previous chapters. While this does not compromise the comparative aspect of the chapter, the comparison will be more general than before. For the sake of clarity, I will first, introduce each tradition's ideas of how the individual is supposed to become virtuous, with little comparative notes, and then follow with the main comparative body.

Both traditions show enough similarity for a comparison, especially because both traditions focus, although in differing degree, on how the ruling subpopulation of the society can become virtuous. I will focus on this particular aspect of moral cultivation in both traditions, not only because it is the most prevalent aspect but also because it is the most impactful with regard to achieving the grand ideal, as the ruling subpopulation have the greatest influence.

### 3.1 Becoming *Junzi* (君子)

While Confucian teachings, especially in the Analects, may seem generalisable to the whole public, the target audience are mostly rulers and aristocrats. This is evident from the fact that the main aim of ancient Chinese philosophy is to find solutions for the conflict-heavy situation in which they emerged. The teachings of philosophers are usually aimed at those in power as a guide. It is this context in which Confucian teachings have been interpreted, and why his advice from the Analects should be seen as addressing a ruling subpopulation most of the time.

According to early Confucian thought in the Analects, virtues need to be cultivated. Only when all virtues are cultivated and harmoniously integrated is the person fully virtuous. This person is often referred to as *junzi* (君子). *Junzi*, although often translated as gentlemen, refers the concept of a fully virtuous person, one that has mastered the way (*dao*) so that it has become second nature (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2005, p. 2). Everybody has the potential in them to become *junzi* with the right and enough cultivation. Although it is unlikely that anybody ever becomes fully virtuous, the concept of *junzi* should not be seen as something to be reached but something to strive towards. It is the idea of an ideal that is supposed to show that for which the individual should aim.

The ideal of *junzi* is achieved through a combination of *li* (ritual practice) and self-cultivation. Although self-cultivation is more concerned with the inner nature of the individual, while ritual practice is more concerned with their outward relations, both need to be practised together in harmony for the individual to become virtuous. There is overlap between both concepts, as self-cultivation also improves the external relations and ritual is

supposed to help improve the inner nature of the individual next to the external relations. The combination of both capture all aspects of the individual's life, their inner and outer world. Only when both become more virtuous and do so together can we speak of a harmonious individual - *junzi*. I will now first present the concept of self-cultivation and only afterwards talk about the importance of *li*.

### 3.1.1 The Attitude of Self-cultivation

The word 'self-cultivation' implies that individuals are to perform actions and undergo training towards the end-goal of cultivation by their own means. But this would misrepresent the actual intention behind self-cultivation. Self-cultivation is better thought of as a general attitude instead of explicitly a means towards an end. While self-cultivation is necessary for the individual to become *junzi*, the nature of self-cultivation is not one that is used with the result in mind primarily.

The essence of that attitude, which Confucius is describing, can be seen in the following paragraph: "Learn broadly yet be focused in your purposes; inquire with urgency yet reflect closely on the question at hand - authoritative conduct (*ren*) lies simply in this" (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 19.6). The essence is learning and retaining what one has learned and applying it to similar situations at hand, for the purpose of using it to make one's decisions faster. Again, knowledge is connected to ethics by binding it to meaningful actions. Knowledge is not gained for the sake of it, but to act better. The knowledge gained by learning is only meaningful for ethical conduct when it is knowledge for the sake of moral action. The love for learning connects hereby to the virtue of wisdom, providing the tool to become wise. The essential idea of self-cultivation is thus learning, but not just learning in itself. Confucius thinks it important to describe this attitude as a love for learning (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 5.28). This adds an important quality, the fact that one does not learn with the desire to gain, or that one's success is bound by results. A love for learning means that one longs for the thing itself and nothing else, ideally.

In the last quote, we can also see another dimension of self-cultivation which is the element of reflection. The love for learning is not just to be applied to the outside world, but

we are also supposed to learn more about ourselves. “Having gone astray, to fail to get right back on track is to stray indeed” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 15.30). Straying away from the right path is not the essential mistake but staying astray is. The element of reflection is essential for *junzi*. A good person must examine themselves through reflection to realise whether they have strayed from the right path and correct their behaviour and course if that is the case.

One might object and say that with the last paragraph I have defined a specific goal for adopting a love for learning. But again, the essence of that love is more accurately captured by seeing it as an attitude because the openness for reflection is something constant. We cannot ‘achieve’ the love for learning, it is something constant that does ‘fulfill its purpose’ but more so that the individual is open to learn at any given moment, than learning something specific. The goal in mind is not achieving something static, but a stance towards the world, helping us to navigate the complexities of everyday life. This very much fits the general Confucian idea of maintaining an equilibrium, where our individual virtues help us navigate dynamic situations. We can see this idea of an unachievable goal in the following passage from the Analects:

As in piling up earth to erect a mountain, only one basketful short of completion, I stop, I have stopped. As in filling a ditch to level the ground, if, having dumped in only one basketful, I continue, I am progressing (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 9.19).

While the first task of piling up a mountain is difficult to define as finished, filling in a ditch to level the ground can be achieved more easily. However, the importance does not lie in finishing the task but in the process of finishing the task. It is the process that Confucius emphasises by saying that even only one basketful is enough to progress while stopping one basket short of completion is stopping completely. Striving for harmony should be seen in this light. One should not stop no matter how far they have come, nor is their striving diminished by the fact that they have just started. As long as the individual is in the process of striving for harmony, the individual is doing good. So, in order to become *junzi*, the individual must continuously strive towards harmony, although they might never achieve it.

Further, Confucius sees (the love for) learning as essential in the overall development of the individual.

The flaw in being fond of acting authoritatively (*ren*) without equal regard for learning is that you will be easily duped; the flaw in being fond of acting wisely (*zhi*) without equal regard for learning is that it leads to self-indulgence; the flaw in being fond of making good on one's word (*xin*) without equal regard for learning is that it leads one into harm's way; the flaw in being fond of candor without equal regard for learning is that it leads to rudeness; the flaw in being fond of boldness without equal regard for learning is that it leads to unruliness; the flaw in being fond of firmness without equal regard for learning is that it leads to rashness (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 17.8).

(The love for) learning balances out the other virtues and helps harmonising them all together, by adding humility, flexibility, openness, and consistence. Confucius here makes clear that our love for learning is an essential step in cultivating our virtues and becoming *junzi*. The love for learning harmonises the particular cultivations of virtues and virtues themselves in the individual. It is essential for the idea of harmony within the individual but also for harmony in the world that is achieved through the harmonisation of the individual. The Confucian concept of harmony, although mainly a holistic concept, appears on multiple levels of Confucian ethics. It is not merely a concept concerning the whole world but can be applied to any whole. The grand harmony is at the same time describing the inner and overall nature of the ideal whole. It is here that we see that the idea of self-cultivation is not only an active process in that we learn actively, but also a passive and complementary aspect of the individual that is necessary for the overall development. It not just helps to develop the virtue of wisdom specifically but further supports a harmonious integration of the others as well. However, self-cultivation is not the only aspect for the individual's cultivation and harmonisation.

### 3.1.2 Following Ritual Practice

In Confucianism ritual practice is connected to the virtue of *li*, where a fully cultivated virtue of *li* means that the individual properly follows ritual practice at all times. It is ritual practice that is essential for the practical cultivation of the individual next to self-cultivation. While self-cultivation enables the individual to become a better person by themselves and cultivate the virtues in a harmonious way, ritual is supposed to teach the individual how to act in relation with others, provide a way to apply what they have learned, and establish social order. Ritual teaches not just proper conduct but allows the individual to learn through practice, inspiring courage in their virtuous actions. Rituals define social and solitary aspects of the individual's life. Ranging from how to treat elders: "It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial and fraternal responsibility (*xiaodi*) to have a taste for defying authority. [...] As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (*ren*)" (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 1.2), to informing us of how to treat our deceased ancestors: "Be circumspect in funerary services and continue sacrifices to the distant ancestors, and the virtue (*de*) of the common people will thrive" (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 1.9). But they also include minor things such as how to hold a fork or which type of ceremonial cap to wear (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 9.3). The rituals of early Confucianism were not necessarily invented by Confucius but often copied from 'The Classics'<sup>8</sup> and changed in order to fit the teachings of early Confucianism. Rituals help establish a social harmony but also teach the individual to exercise virtuous aspects. For example, by defining how one should treat deceased family members the individual learns humility and respect, important qualities for the virtues of *li*, *zhi* and *xin*.

Ritual also helps the individual not just to cultivate virtuous qualities but also harmoniously integrate them: "Deference unmediated by observing ritual propriety (*li*) is lethargy; caution unmediated by observing ritual propriety is timidity; boldness unmediated by observing ritual propriety is rowdiness; candor unmediated by observing ritual propriety is rudeness" (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 8.2). Without ritual, the remaining virtues are not

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<sup>8</sup>Texts about previous dynasties which is the basis for most of Confucian teachings

enough to maintain harmony within the individual and society. Similarly, as with self-cultivation, rituals are necessary to balance out the virtues. They are ways of applying our core virtues, integrating them into everyday life. The harmonisation of the parts is one of the most essential features of becoming *junzi*, next to adopting the virtuous qualities. The harmonisation is present in multiple aspects, while self-cultivation harmonises the inner self, ritual is supposed to help harmonise the outer self, but both are equally mutually supportive and interdependent upon the other's cultivation. Ritual without a love for learning leads not to *junzi* and neither does a love for learning without ritual. The interdependence of aspects, as mentioned in chapter two, can also be found in the grand concept of harmony, virtues themselves, or even the idea of ruling:

Someone asked Confucius, "Why are you not employed in governing?" The Master replied, "The book of Documents says: It is all in filial conduct (*xiao*)! Just being filial to your parents and befriending your brothers is carrying out the work of government. In doing this I am employed in governing. Why must I be 'employed in governing'?" (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 2.21)

We can see how Confucius connects the practices of everyday life with that of governing. By practising ritual, we develop social harmony which, like an upward spiral, influences others to do so as well. By improving social harmony, peace is more likely to be maintained/established. Those with more influence will carry a greater effect, which is why it is more beneficial to have those in power be *junzi* than those who are not. This carries an essential quality of Confucian ethics which has been remarked upon in chapter one: By becoming more virtuous within themselves and within their social relations, individuals are able to affect bigger structures, such as cities and states, inspiring them towards harmony. The essential philosophy here is, that the individual must not invest unnecessary time into governing masses but does so automatically by putting themselves on the path towards harmony. By harmonising first the individual from within and then their social relations their environment is harmonised in the process the same. While the individual certainly has the potential to influence others, the effect is still small when just a small subset of people is following the Confucian path towards harmony.

It is therefore, that rituals should be followed by everybody, especially because nobody as is ever fully harmonious within themselves and in their external relations <sup>9</sup>. It is thus important that everybody tries to follow ritual practice and self-cultivation so that the effect is multiplied. Although not everybody needs to be *junzi*, following ritual is not just important for the virtuous individual but also for the improvement of societal relations:

Lead the people with administrative injunctions (zheng) and keep them orderly with penal law (xing), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (de) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (li) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 2.3)

The difference between ritual and rules is that ritual is like a norm that needs no fear punishment to be upheld. The practice of rituals is said to inspire others to perform the same practice as well. While this may be unrealistic in some respects, it shows that Confucius is unwilling to force people into (his version of) the 'flourishing of all things'. He believes in the goodness of human nature which will follow automatically towards virtue when it is inspired by others (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 12.19). Rituals allow people to realise what goodness is (developing wisdom), making them able to feel shame for not doing what is right, instead of inspiring resentment for seemingly unreasonable punishment. This in turn improves the reflective element and overall creates an autonomous individual, in the sense that they can improve themselves and not rely on others.

As with self-cultivation and individual virtues, ritual practice needs to be integrated into the process of becoming *junzi* harmoniously:

Achieving harmony (he) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety (li). In the ways of the Former Kings, this achievement of harmony made them elegant, and was a guiding standard in all things large and small. But when

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<sup>9</sup> "There are indeed seedlings that do not flower, and there are flowers that do not fruit" (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 9.22)

things are not going well, to realise harmony just for its own sake without regulating the situation through observing ritual propriety will not work (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 1.12)

At first glance, this passage may seem contradicting a later one:

Yan Hui inquired about authoritative conduct (ren). The Master replied, “Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (li) one becomes authoritative in one’ s conduct. If for the space of a day one were able to accomplish this, the whole empire would defer to this authoritative model. Becoming authoritative in one’ s conduct is self-originating—how could it originate with others?” Yan Hui said, “Could I ask what becoming authoritative entails?” The Master replied, “Do not look at anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not listen to anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not speak about anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not do anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 12.1)

However, the contradictory nature seems more to relate to the contrasting elements of ritual practice. On the one hand the individual needs to follow ritual practice, but they also must integrate it harmoniously with the other virtues - including understanding the ritual. While Confucius tells Yan Hui that things need to be in accordance with ritual, it is relevant to note that Yan Hui was one of the most promising of Confucius students. It seems logical to assume that Yan Hui understood the importance of ritual practice and the benefits of it. He understood why rituals need to be followed and had already cultivated his virtues to a good extent. This makes clear why Confucius recommends such a strong adherence to the philosophy of rituals to Yan Hui, seeing that Yan Hui was able to harmoniously integrate the strong adherence to ritual into his harmonisation of himself. Furthermore, the passages show again the nature of having to maintain the harmony the individual is striving for. Rigid adherence is meaningless as is casual conformity, which is equally true for self-cultivation.

Both ritual practice and self-cultivation are essential for the individual and society to become harmonious. Again, everything must be in balance with each other to have a positive

effect. But not only are the two aspects of becoming *junzi* necessary conditions for becoming virtuous, but they are also mutually supportive. Adopting the attitude for self-cultivation more vigorously also makes it easier to follow ritual practice and vice versa. This is also true for virtues in general and cultivation of the person. Every aspect is connected, every part dependent on the other's development while mutually supporting the other's development. Successfully striving towards the grand harmony is dependent upon the harmonisation of the smaller steps including the individual's love for learning, *li*, and single virtues. The repeated occurrence of harmony shows that the Confucian concept of harmony is not only a metaphysical and holistic concept, but also an essential quality of Confucian ethical thought that is present at all levels and in all steps constituting the ethical theory.

### **3.2 Becoming a Guardian**

The cultivation of virtues in Plato's Republic is an ambiguous topic for several reasons. One, it is unclear whether Plato's programme of education is supposed to be only for a certain class (e.g. the guardians) and if so, what part of the education do other classes receive (Jenkins, 2015; Jonas, 2016). It seems likely that other classes receive some kind of education as Plato never denies it, however, the discussion of how much education they receive is irrelevant for the purposes of this thesis and will thus not be dealt with - only the education of guardians is of interest which is the primary intent of Plato's education anyway.

Two, it remains unclear how the final education program looks like, because Plato talks about the education of people in two separate parts of his Republic, first offering an account of education that includes music, gymnastics, and literature. Later he accepts that his previous account is insufficient for educating future guardians of the city but does not explicitly state whether his newer account is there to replace or complement the previous one. Since Plato never questions his previous assumptions about the importance of music, gymnastics, and literature, I will assume that the education presented in book seven is complementary to the education presented in book four. I will, therefore, first explain why Plato chooses to educate people through music, gymnastics, and literature, then illustrate why he thinks it insufficient for the education of the guardians, and then explain the philos-

ophy behind Plato's education presented in book 7 adding mathematics and dialectics to the curriculum.

### **3.2.1 Moral Education through the study of Music, Gymnastics, and Literature**

Plato's main way of cultivating the virtues within a person is through education. Although this education is not consistently the same throughout the Republic, it is the only way of becoming a virtuous human that is described. Most important is the fact, that those who will become guardians of the city, must be educated from an early age onwards. Only then can their virtuous qualities be cultivated successfully to a level which would allow them to become guardians. The advantage of educating the young is that their character is in the process of forming so it can be influenced the most (Plato, 1992, 377a-b). While Plato realises the advantage of education at an early age, he further establishes it as a necessary condition for the young to become guardians. If the education would start later, Plato argues that vice could have tainted the person (Plato, 1992, 409a-b) or would fail to adapt their character sufficiently for the task of guardian. This conclusion, however harsh it may seem, still seems to hold up today. For example, players of the game of chess that start studying and playing the game at an early age usually achieve a higher level of excellence at chess than those who start at a later age. While players can still become good at the game when they have started from a later age, the best players, are those that start early. And it is those 'best players' that Plato is seeking for the class of guardians.

Another aspect is the fact that guardians must have a natural makeup present at birth that enables them to cultivate the necessary virtues for the job of guardianship (Plato, 1992, 376b-c). The same way that workers are born into their class, guardians are born into the class of guardians. From this statement, scholars, such as Jenkins (2015), have debated whether Plato thinks it possible for everybody to become fully virtuous, as the guardian class presents the most important class in the state. By stating that not every individual is able to achieve that high ideal, it seems plausible to conclude that not everybody can become fully virtuous. However, for the purpose of this thesis, it remains relevant that only a certain portion of the population can become guardians, something that is pre-determined at birth.

This is the first relevant difference to Confucianism where everybody can become *junzi*. Although this notion in Plato has been questioned by some like Jenkins (2015), Plato seems to take an elitist attitude to the matter of education. It seems plausible to assume that Plato is less inclusive than Confucius, even though Confucian teachings are mostly aimed at the ruling class, they seem more generalisable to the public.

The second difference is the fact that Plato's education focuses mostly upon educating the individual's inner nature - the soul. Plato thinks that by perfecting the inner nature of the person their actions and external relations are perfected automatically, whereas for Confucius, both inner and outer aspects need to be cultivated. The soul plays the vital role in Plato's ethics and is what should be most cared about. As mentioned in chapter two, improving the soul improves the body but not vice versa. Developing the individual from within is the primary focus whereas the external aspects will follow suit once the inner world has become virtuous. While not necessary a problem, Plato again puts more pressure on one part than the others. He aims to improve both the inner nature of the individual as well as their external relations but does so by only improving the inner part. Unlike in Confucianism, there are no mutually supporting elements, either the inner nature is cultivated or not. The process is not aided by external relations and only marginally by physical training of the body. While Plato's education itself, as will be seen later, is based upon different aspects, the focus of education is upon a single thing. The Confucian idea of cultivation provides more safety and balance to the individual by establishing that multiple parts must be improved together. This allows for setbacks to be overcome more easily and consistently.

The content of the education is first described in the third book to consist of music, gymnastics, and literature (Plato, 1992, 376e-380c, 397e-406e). Literature must be carefully selected to inspire virtues of courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice in the youth. Works that do not promote the virtuous aspects must be censored, according to Plato, in order not to taint the character of the youth. Gymnastics is supposed to allow the soul to exist in a healthy body but also prevent medical problems that occur due to a lack of exercise. While it may seem as if this contradicts my previous statement that Plato's education focuses primarily on the inner aspects of the individual. The purpose of gymnastics is merely supporting the

development of the soul. By having a physically healthy body, the individual becomes able to concern themselves with more important aspects, not having to waste time going to the doctor for things that could have been prevented beforehand (Plato, 1992, 405b-d). An education in music fulfills the role of teaching the individual about beauty and harmony. While pieces and harmonies that inspire vice are censored, specific harmonious music is supposed to fulfill the soul with beauty and teach the young to recognise and cherish it. Plato thus tries to educate the youth in a variety of things as they would otherwise become limited in certain ways. Here, there is some resemblance with the Confucian idea of balance, because multiple aspects need to be cultivated in a similar manner so that one does not dominate over the others.

This first account of education, although providing a good basis for how young ones should be educated, leaves gaps. Plato fails to account for how the rational part of the soul is supposed to be cultivated or whether a conception of beauty through music is enough to realise it in the world and oneself. He further fails to mention how this education allows for individuals to become guardians and rule and guide the whole state and its people.

### **3.2.2 Realising the Good through Mathematics and Philosophy**

In his seventh book, Plato acknowledges that his previous account of education was incomplete, hinting at adding more aspects to his theory of moral education. This extension of his previous account is based upon the concept of the Good. The future guardian must realise the Good during his education to be fit for the job of guardianship. The Good is realised by being educated in mathematics and dialectics from someone that has realised the Good. I will first describe what Plato means with the Good, then illustrate why both mathematics and dialectics are important for the young ones to realise the Good and how that ensures that the individual is fit for the job of guardianship and to establish justice.

Plato uses the 'Allegory of the Cave' (Plato, 1992, 514a-519d) as an analogy to explain his concept of the Good and enlightenment. The allegory of the cave shows that people who live in a cave and only ever see shadows without being aware or being able to see the figures that produce the shadows, take shadows to be ultimately real instead of productions

of a more complex figure. In order to realise the truth of reality, the people would have to leave the cave and see the figures that produce the shadows themselves. Only then would they realise the true nature of reality. Similarly, people living in this world only ever see shadows of actual things leading them onto wrong conclusions about the nature of things. Only when the individual escapes the cave can they see the true nature of things and realise what the Good is. For Plato, we escape the cave by 'accessing' the World of Forms, a world that is full of figures that "produce" the shadows. It is the World of Forms in which the truth about our world resides. Once the individual has realised what the Good is, they have knowledge about the true nature of things, which allows them to make decision in accordance with the Good. It is those decisions that will be moral. Escaping the cave, for Plato, is enlightenment. Guardians of the city must be enlightened to guide the city and its population on the right path, in the same way that *logistikon* must realise the Good in order to guide the other parts of the soul well. Individuals that have achieved enlightenment must then "go back into the cave" to help others towards enlightenment, meaning that they must try to help others realise the Good as well. What follows is an upward spiral in which enlightened individuals educate the younger ones and teach them to reach enlightenment, who in turn teach their young ones and so on (Plato, 1992, 540b). While the World of Forms has been criticised for that it is questionable as a metaphysical entity, Jonas (2016) has argued that the World of Forms should not be seen as a metaphysical entity that is distinct from our world but merely an ideal that is striven towards. According to Jonas the World of Forms and the Good represent ideals that the individual should strive towards. This would solve the problem of having to define what the World of Forms is and how it relates to our world. However, this conception of the World of Forms solves another issue, which will be clearer when I illustrate the second part of education from Plato. I will then argue again for this particular conception of the World of Forms as an ideal that is part of our world rather than a distinct entity.

Plato extends his education with mathematics and dialectics. Mathematics includes the topics of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics (Plato, 1992, 521d-531c). The primary aim is to teach the individual to be able to study abstract concepts, reason

about those and do so non-empirically (Annas, 1981, p. 273). It is essential that mathematics comes first for two reasons. One, the study of abstract and elusive concepts is there to create the desire for objects of permanence and perfection. Plato, hereby, tries to teach the individual to strive towards the Forms like the Good and justice. While those are also abstract, they are not elusive but form essential truths about our world that help the individual in their task of guardianship. Annas (1981, p. 275) points out that the study of mathematics is "in favour of theoretical and purely contemplative knowledge, refusing any significance to particular matters". While she is right in claiming that the study of mathematics is primarily theoretical, its purpose seems to be primarily pedagogical. Mathematics is supposed to inspire the individual and teach them tools that are relevant for the later study of dialectics. Would this not be the case, then the study of mathematics would contradict Plato's idea of the virtue of wisdom, which is knowledge with the purpose to guide action, not theoretical knowledge. Nonetheless, mathematics remains a primarily theoretical subject of which mostly the tools are relevant for the virtuous individual. Might there not be a more efficient way of teaching the individual the tools with relevant knowledge at the same time?

Two, the study of mathematics is there to teach the individual the basics of abstract reasoning without giving the individual the ability to question themselves and their thoughts. Plato thinks it necessary that calculation, geometry, and all other preliminary education must be taught before dialectics because dialectics will make the individual question their beliefs (Plato, 1992, 536d-537d). If there would be no stable beliefs present within the individual, the individual would stray away from virtue rather than finding the truth in it (Plato, 1992, 537c-539d). The virtuous individual must first learn about the virtues and find the truth behind them before they can question them thoroughly without straying away from them. It is for this reason that I consider Plato's education from book seven to be extending and complementing the previous one instead of replacing it. The individual still needs to learn justice, beauty, and wisdom but that cannot be achieved through the study of mathematics alone.

After the individual has studied mathematics, music, gymnastics, and literature sufficiently and has acquired the necessary experience and maturity can they start the study

of dialectics (Annas, 1981, p. 272). Dialectics is also sometimes translated as philosophy or 'the ideal method'. According to Annas (1981, p. 278), dialectics are a way of reaching truth and defending it without the need for unsupported hypotheses. Plato's idea is that dialectics is the way towards the perfect knowledge. It connects all previous studies together to reach the ideal of the Good (Plato, 1992, 531c). It is the realisation of truths (like the Good) through rationalisation, without the need for assumptions or empirical evidence (Plato, 1992, 532a-e). Plato compares dialectics with mathematics using among other things the image of the cave as an analogy. Like the people in the cave taking the shadow to be the true thing, mathematicians do not realise that their truths are like shadows in comparison to what actual truths derived from dialectic methods looks like. The study of dialectics allows the individual to arrive at truths through questioning and rationalisation. Plato argues that like this, the individual with enough education and cultivation can reach truths such as the Good.

Here, it is important to discuss the metaphysical concept of Forms such as the Good. While scholars have thought of the World of Forms - and the Forms themselves - as a distinct metaphysical reality, Jonas (2016) argues that it is not a distinct reality. Jonas' s conception of the World of Forms makes more sense regarding the process of how the Good is realised. The individual does not gain access to the Realm of Forms by some miraculous way but realises the truth - conceptualised as a Form - by reasoning and questioning in the right way. Whether or not there exists a distinct realm with these Forms is not relevant as long as there is consensus that there exists a concept that captures what is morally good. Plato's conception of the Good can be understood as a symbol for representing full knowledge of what one ought to do. Whether or not the individual gains access to a distinct realm is irrelevant for the field of ethics. Accessing the Realm of Forms, for the purposes of this thesis, is thus not different from saying that one has realised the Good or has become wise. Important for this thesis is, that dialectics play the key role in teaching the individual how they are to become wise.

With the study of dialectics Plato gives the individual the tool to become wise by themselves. It is like teaching the prisoners in the cave how to cut their ropes, which tie them

down, and walk outside the cave. Although, realising the Good is much harder than simply 'walking out of the cave'. This ability enables the individual to realise what is necessary for the state and for themselves in order to become just themselves and spread justice over the state. This is the most important aspect of Plato's education and what all the other subjects are supposed to lead up to. Although in accordance with his idea of *logistikon* and its role within the soul, the emphasis on rationalisation shows a stark contrast to the cultivation of Confucianism. The shortcomings of overemphasising one aspect over others as well as overemphasising reason itself have been discussed at the end of chapter two and apply here as well.

Why does Plato focus so much on the theoretical aspects of the mind and praises the theoretical study that is completely disconnected from praxis if the purpose of wisdom is ultimately to guide the individual towards moral action? Why is the practical dismissed as not truthful enough if the ultimate end lies within praxis? Plato does make a convincing argument regarding the fact that only with real knowledge can action be ultimately moral. But how can the theoretical be more relevant than the practical for in the end to only serve the practical? And does 'real knowledge' really exist?

The last question is connected to the question about ultimate truth and whether such can ever be achieved. Confucian ethics does not provide any account of ultimate truth but takes a more pragmatic approach in trying to find a way of achieving perfection and happiness without claiming that it is the only way because of abstract truth. Plato, on the other hand, tries to establish truths but remains ambiguous as to whether they are ultimately true. Whether Plato's ambiguity is because he himself realised that the Realm of Forms is a questionable metaphysical concept, or because of something else is unclear. Nonetheless, Plato tries to establish some kind of truth, but fails to provide sufficient proof for the metaphysical realm supposedly containing it.

The last aspect of Plato's education is that the education is not to be forced upon individuals but brought to them in a playful manner (Plato, 1992, 536d). Not only is this supposed to show whether the individual has the natural makeup to qualify for the education of guardian, but it is also supposed to have the individuals love to learn the subjects. The

latter part is similar to the love for learning in Confucianism, although weaker. Plato, however, does realise the importance of not forcing the youth to study subjects, as that would only turn them away from it. Forcing the youth would only discourage them from learning and would ultimately fail to achieve Plato's end of having them become guardians. Both traditions, here, realise the significance of learning for the sake of learning and not for the purpose of personal gain, status, or another end-goal, although one can argue that Plato does define an end-goal.

### **3.3 Confucian Cultivation is more easily implemented**

The first difference between both traditions is that Plato focuses mostly on cultivating virtues in the individual from within, whereas in Confucianism the emphasis is placed upon a combined cultivation from within and outside. Plato focuses almost entirely on the cultivation of the soul, except for gymnastics. Similarly, as in with wisdom, Plato hereby puts an overemphasis on the role of the soul over the body, whereas no such overemphasis can be found in the Confucian notion of cultivation. Furthermore, by focusing on the development of the soul he neglects the importance of social interactions. The soul is educated by inner reflection and logical as well as abstract thinking. While the youth is supposed to be taught by someone, this particular 'social interaction' is merely instrumental to serve the purposes of education not a willed interaction in itself. Contrasting, in Confucianism, social interactions - in the form of rituals and conduct within the family/society - are essential for the cultivation of virtues. It is the most important part of Confucian ethical thought, that individuals learn through the application of their knowledge, grow more confident in their virtuous qualities and gain insights through repeated exercise of those qualities. Similar as in the case of wisdom, Plato does not give a compelling reason for neglecting social interactions or the body in its role for the virtuous individual, when compared to the Confucian conception of similar aspects.

This overemphasis on the soul and its education forces Plato to adopt a rigid and time-consuming education. Similarly, as in the case of Platonian wisdom, the soul carries most of the responsibility for the virtuous individual, as the soul is supposed to cultivate

the individual on the inside but also on the outside. Contrasting, Confucian inner and outer qualities are trained individually but mutually supportive and interconnected. The soul on the other hand needs to overpower all other aspects. As with wisdom, this puts much strain on one aspect and fails to recognise and use other aspects for the development of the individual. Therefore, the Confucian idea of cultivation is more effective and safer at guiding the individual towards harmony than Plato's education towards justice. Because the task is spread among multiple aspects that are interdependent, the development of each is aided by the other aspects and correspondingly the impact of setbacks is buffered by those other aspects. Furthermore, the Confucian idea of cultivation represents everyday life much more closely because it allows individuals to become virtuous through interaction with others and realises that the individual will not become tainted by encountering vice but learns from the experience.

The second difference is the fact that Confucius ethics are more easily implemented than those of Plato. This conclusion is grounded in two aspects. Firstly, Confucian ethics are more inclusive than those of Plato. While Plato's guardians already need a specific makeup at birth, without such they would never be able to become true guardians, Confucius thinks that everybody can become *junzi*, although unlikely to be so in practice. Further, Plato's guardians need to be educated from an early age onwards otherwise their character does not develop in the right way, or they will not take the necessary impression upon them which are required of guardians. Contrasting, in Confucianism people do not need to be taught from an early age onwards. Their education can begin at any moment and be fruitful. While someone that has cultivated their virtues for longer should show more virtuous qualities than someone that has just started to cultivate them themselves, Confucianism allows and encourages everybody to start the process of cultivation at whatever stage. While Plato poses specific requirements and narrows the amount of people than can become guardians to a small subset of the population, Confucian ethics can be adopted by anybody at any time.

Secondly, Confucian cultivation has almost no requirements to begin with, whereas Plato's cultivation is dependent on multiple factors to begin with. For Confucius, everybody can start the process of cultivation by themselves. They can adopt the love for learning and

practice rituals. While the ritual practice is limited to those parts that can be conducted by a single individual, the process can be started alone. Additionally, the one person starting the process is likely to inspire others to follow suit, allowing them to practice rituals that require more people and further inspire each other with virtuous actions. Naturally, this upward spiral is more effective the more people are included and the more influence the people that are included have. Nonetheless, the only requirement for starting the process is that one person follows it. For Plato, the requirements to begin with are high. Someone needs to be already enlightened to educate the youth, but also an existing educational and social system that support this education must exist. While the argument can be made that the process of realising the Good can be tried alone, the success of realising the Good is heavily dependent upon education. Plato does not give much other ways of realising the Good other than the education in the relevant subjects. It seems difficult to imagine that a single person can teach themselves the relevant tools and knowledge to then realise the Good, or that Plato believes that this is possible. While Plato does not state that he himself is fully virtuous, he did develop the theory of the Good, which must mean some progress towards the end-goal of justice. However, how did Plato develop this theory himself? Does the education he received help him in realising part of the Good, although the education was less perfect? And does he suppose that others could educate themselves in a similar way? Since Plato does not answer any of these question, it remains up to speculation. Thus, Plato's envisioned way of achieving justice within the individual through education is limited by the requirements of starting the process. Confucian ethics, on the other hand, can be applied much more readily and are thus much more likely to have an actual impact on populations. Its practical value is therefore higher when compared to Plato's ethics.

Both aspects make Confucian ethics not just more effective for the society but also much more generalisable. The fact that Confucian ethics are more easily adopted and can therefore spread more widely is significant for the discussion of the ethical system as ethics are only relevant when practised. Similarly, to the previous chapters, the Confucian conception of cultivation is a more balanced and more easily implemented system than that of Platonian education. Confucian cultivation provides thus a more compelling way of guiding

the individual towards virtue in order to harmonise themselves and the world.

## Conclusion

In chapter one, I have shown that the conception of the grand ideal is different whereas its function is the same in both traditions. Although Plato's justice is in some way harmonious, the main difference between both conceptions is the fact that Plato's justice is a static ideal that presents an end-goal and allows for concrete advice, whereas Confucian harmony is an abstract ideal that represents a dynamic equilibrium where the process of striving towards it matters most. Although, the concrete nature of justice allows Plato to be more concrete in his theory, the abstractness of Confucian harmony makes it easier to be more inclusive and be applied in more circumstances.

In chapter two, I illustrated the conception of virtue and how it relates to the grand ideal with the example of wisdom in each tradition. The main difference between both traditions was that the Confucian conception of virtue was more balanced as each virtue fulfilled an equally vital role within the framework. The virtues were also interdependent and mutually supportive. Plato on the other hand, emphasised the role of wisdom over the role of the other two virtues and created an unbalanced depiction of the soul. Although virtues are dependent upon each other to some degree in Plato's framework, wisdom occupies the central role in achieving justice within the individual. The Confucian conception of wisdom showed that although it occupies a central role, wisdom can be conceptualised in a way that puts less pressure upon one single aspect, resulting in a safer and healthier idea of the virtuous individual.

In chapter three, I showed that both traditions think differently about how the ruling individual is supposed to achieve the virtuous qualities in order bring about the grand ideal. While Confucian thought focuses on self-cultivation and ritual practice, Plato thinks that a thorough education is more effective to achieve the goal. The two most crucial differences were that one, Plato focused mostly on cultivating the inner nature of the individual, whereas Confucian thought emphasised the importance of cultivating the inner nature as well as

the external relations of the individual. Plato here shows a similar overemphasis upon one aspect over others as in the chapter two and puts much pressure upon the inner nature of the individual, whereas Confucian thought can divide the task upon multiple aspects and use the other aspects in order to cultivate the person more effectively. Two, Confucian cultivation is more easily applied because everybody can become *junzi*, whereas Plato's idea of education needs people to have a particular makeup at birth and requires an existing social and educational structure. This allows Confucian philosophy to be more effective and generalisable across multiple cultures.

Overall, Confucian ethics is more cohesive than Plato's due to the reoccurring theme of harmony and the interdependence of most elements. Confucian ethics are also psychologically easier to implement due to the nature of not having an end-goal as the grand ideal, so that being unable to reach the grand ideal is not seen as failure, and because of the conception of human nature, where no part needs to be suppressed, unlike in Plato where *epithymētikon* needs to be suppressed. Confucian ethics also provide a more balanced view of the individual due to the equal importance that is given to all elements. The more abstract conceptualisation of Confucian ethics also allows them to include more scenarios and people. This allows them to be more easily applied and spread, giving them a much bigger practical impact than those of Plato. While Confucian ethics seemed to be abstract at first, their particular conceptualisation of virtues and cultivation of those, have allowed them to give concrete advice while at the same time being inclusive and general enough for wide application. Confucian ethics seems to have balanced out their disadvantages - the abstractness that allows less concrete advice and the pragmatic approach about ultimate truth - by strong conceptualisation of particular aspects such as virtues. Plato's ethics on the other hand struggle to show that the concrete approach is more beneficial or effective. By overemphasising *logistikon* and the soul as well as the exclusion of individuals and particular situations, Plato's ethics gain little benefit from their concreteness.

As the overemphasis on reason is a prominent aspect of Western philosophy, inspiration might be taken from Confucian ethical thought to provide a more balanced view of the individual and the world. Future research should aim to integrate the advantages of Con-

fucian ethical thought into Western philosophy to improve upon current theories not just within the realm of ethics but also metaphysics. Inspiration can additionally be taken from the coherent structure of Confucian ethical thought, through the reoccurring concepts of harmony and interdependence, that appear much less in Plato. It would be interesting to see whether the ancient virtue-ethics approach could be applied in a modern context or whether the insights from this analysis could be used to improve upon modern ethical theories.

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