The Idea of the Good Life in Aristotle and Confucius

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ABSTRACT

Man, by nature, desires to live a good and happy life. But often times, the enduring quest for the blissful and delightful, eludes man. This constant questing and concurrent yearning make man restless, until his hopes and aspirations of the good or happy life, are crowned with an éclat. But, can man ever attain or realize this feat in the society? Is the idea of the good life, a mirage, a myth or reality? Even more seriously, what does the good life really entail? Is it predicated on material things, that is, on the mundane? Or is the good life, a kind of utopia, an ideal that seeks to bring to the glare of publicity, the “oughts” of life as the case may be? Since the idea of the good life is something well-defined, does it also imply that there is such a thing as the bad life? If, such exist, what would it consist of? Armed with these cogitations, this paper, attempts an expository-comparative study of the good life, its constitutive elements and its attainability in the thoughts of two distinguished philosophers: Confucius (in the East) and Aristotle (in the West).

Keywords: Good life, attainability, Aristotel, Confucius, Comparative Study.

INTRODUCTION

Occupying a conspicuous stead, among the multifarious concatenation of issues that frequents the carte du jour of moral philosophy, is the notion of “bonum vitae” (the good life) (Ogar et al., 2016; Ushie 2018; Udoudom et al., 2018). This notion, has over the years occupied the central stage of ethical ruminations and even theories in ethics, are weaved to capture this very idea, directly or indirectly. Many philosophers over the years have attempted to grapple with this notion, perhaps, because of its practical relevance and its humanistic character. Among these philosophers are, Confucius and Aristotle, who have made significant contributions to the discourse (Mealing, 2008), Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C), were two renowned philosophers, of two very different and distinct backgrounds.

Confucius’ ideas were spawned as a result of his immersion and presence in the ancient Chinese culture, while Aristotle’s ideas were as a result of his immersion and presence in the ancient Greek culture. In spite of this aloofness, however, both touched on subjects of a similar nature quite frequently, including the concept of virtue, the golden mean, being of a good moral character, and the idea of the good life. Therefore, a comparison of the teachings of the two philosophers on the good life and its constitutive elements, will allow first, for a determination of the similarities and differences between the two viewpoints, and extensively between the two cultures. It is true that Confucius wrote little or nothing of his own, all we have is a transcript of his disciples on his enwisdomizations.

This information, though provided in piecemeal, finds it’s fleshing in “The Analects”, (Creel 1949, 211), also, in other relevant translated works. Nonetheless, this paper hopes to distill equally, the thoughts of Aristotle as clearly fine-tuned in his Magnus opus titled Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle 1953). The highlight of these works would aid in deciphering the areas of commensurability and incommensurability in their respective discursive formations. As a propeller, an insight into the meaning and nature of the good life in general, is apposite.
1. Conceptualization of the Good Life in General

Far from being a banality or a philosophical naivety, the idea of the good life, has occupied the carte du jour of philosophical ruminations. Philosophers, from antiquity, have engaged in the conceptualization of the ‘good life’ (bonum vitae) phraseology, the result of which have led to myriads of opinionated accounts. But, what exactly, do we mean by ‘good’? What does the “good” in the “good life” designate? According to Peter Angeles, ‘good’ designates something of interest, value, or desire; that, which is the object of, or valued by, the rational will; that, desired by the will; the product of contemplative activity. (Angeles 1981, 111). The idea of the good life, therefore, seems to suggest a kind of life, that is desirable, valuable, and of kin interest to a person. Now, it is true that, the good life is often understood as that which is desired, but the content of what is desired, seems to differ. For some people, the good life, was only realizable in the community (the commonweal). But, the Cynic philosophers of ancient Greek society, called for the abdication of such ideas, and in its place, advocated a return to nature and a renunciation of earthly pleasures and possessions. The Cynics were misanthropists; that is, haters or disparagers of society who saw community or society as a distraction and as something that hinders individuals from leading a life of primitive innocence, which in their thinking is the truly happy or good life. (Agulanna 2010 282-298).

For others, the content of what is desired in the good life, is the pleasurable, (a kind of pleasure of the Epicurean type). The label Epicurean is often associated with the philosophy “Eat, drink and be merry” (Lawhead 1996, 108-109). Armed, with this line of thought, some people maintain that the good life consists in the accumulation of wealth, riches, power and so on. Nevertheless, the religious conception of the good life, takes a different dimension, by construing it to mean, living in accordance with divine commands or detects. It is often characterized by the ultimate end, which is to be united with God in heaven. Conversely, the good life, from the canvas of varied cultural conceptions, consists in the diligent observance of the rules, customs and norms of the society. Even so, the good life, has also been conceived by many to mean, a life of moral excellence, virtue, or contemplation. Thus, whichever way one conceives the good life, it seems to be closely linked with happiness. That is, a certain life, of fulfillment, flourishing and shear blossom. But, how does Confucius and Aristotle, construe the whole idea of the good life? Are their views incommensurable? Since they lived worlds apart, is it possible for their ideas upon analysis, to be commensurable? To attempt these questions lucidly, insights into the thoughts of Confucius and Aristotle, is apposite.

2. The Good Life and Its Constitutive Elements in the Thoughts of Confucius

Confucius (551-479 B.C.), is the most influential and most revered person in Chinese history (Chan 1963; Creel 1949; Enor 2019). As a descendant of a noble family, he grew up in poor circumstances, but, became a self-educated man, and one, most learned for his time. Confucius was the first in China to become a professional teacher, to teach people literature and principles of conduct instead of vocational statecraft, and to open the doors of education to all. He also inaugurated the tradition of wandering scholars. (Chan 1967 189). According to H.G. Creel, the number of books that have been written about the ideas of Confucius is staggering. (Legge et al. 1930: Udoh 2017). Probably, no other philosopher has been the subject of more discussions. Yet, our reliable knowledge of his
philosophy remains regrettably meager. For this, there are several reasons. Very important is the fact that his type of thinking was an extremely evanescent phenomenon. Indeed, it was almost necessarily so. What we know of Confucius today, are domiciled in a collection of conversations (with Confucius), containing many of his most important sayings, which was compiled by his disciples after his death. It is known as: Lun Yü, “The Analects” (Eno 2015, 374) with twenty different books (Bks, I-XX), following the online teaching translation by Robert Eno. (Eno 2015, 374).

Now, when Confucius died, it is recorded that his last words were regrets, that none among the rulers then living, possessed the sagacity requisite to a proper appreciation of his ethical philosophy and teachings, which is contained in the Analects. The philosophy conveyed through the Analects is basically an ethical perspective, and the text has always been understood as structured on a group of key ethical terms. And so, to understand clearly, the idea of the good life, as enshrined in Confucius’ ethical philosophy, it is important to highlight these key terms, often employed in the Analects to drive home Confucius’ thoughts. These include: (Eno, R. 2015. 374) Ren (仁); a comprehensive ethical virtue: benevolence, humaneness, goodness; the term is so problematic, that many Analects passages show disciples trying to pin Confucius down on its meaning (although, he escapes being pinned). Junzi (君子); often used to denote an ideally ethical and capable person; sometimes, simply meaning a power holder, which is its original sense. Dao (道); a teaching or skill formula that is a key to some arena of action: an art, self-perfection, world transformation. Li (禮); the ritual institutions of the Zhou, of which Confucius was master; the range of behavior, subject to the broad category denoted by this term, ranges from political protocol to court ceremony, religious rites to village festival, daily etiquette to disciplines of personal conduct when alone. Tian; carrying the basic meaning of “sky,” “Tian”, becomes a concept of supreme deity, often translated as “Heaven,” sometimes possessing clear anthropomorphic features, and sometimes appearing more like a natural force. In addition to these items, other complex key terms are rendered by very vague English words, the meaning of which can only emerge as contextual. They include: Virtue (de 德); a very complex concept, initially related to the notion of charisma, derived from power and gift-giving, developing into an ethical term denoting self-possession and orientation towards moral action. Pattern (wen 文); denoting a relation to features of civilization that are distinctive to Zhou culture, or to traditions ancestral to the Zhou; “wen” can refer to decoration, written texts, and personal conduct, but most importantly, it points to the behavioral matrix underlying Zhou li. Finally, a set of important terms can be translated with some accuracy into English, but only with the understanding that the conceptual range of the Chinese term may not match English perfectly; in some cases, alternate English translations are used. These include: Right/Righteousness (yi 義); often a complement to ren, denoting morally correct action, choices, or the moral vision that allows one to make them. Loyalty (zhong 忠); denoting not only loyalty to one’s superiors or peers, or to individuals; but, also to office; an alignment of self with the interests of others, or of the social group as a whole; Trustworthiness/Faithfulness (xin 信); derived from the concept of promise keeping, meaning reliability for others, but also unwavering devotion to principle. Respectfulness/Attentiveness (jing 敬); derived from the notion of
alertness, and fusing the attentiveness to task, characteristic of a subordinate and the respect for superiors that such attentiveness reflects. Filiality (xiao 孝); a traditional cultural imperative, of obedience to parents, raised to a subtle level of fundamental self-discipline and character building; and Valor (yong 勇); in a feudal era marked by incessant warfare, bold warriors and adventurers were common; for Confucians, valor concerns risk taking on behalf of ethical principle.

All these key terms, are quintessential in the appropriate understanding of what Confucius, takes to be the good life. Now, the central conception of the good life in the philosophy of Confucius, is that of the way (Tao); roughly, translated as “road, to guide, a sense of action or a way of action.” (Creel 1949, 122-123). Confucius, believed that, if an individual “has the Way” he acts as he should act and is a person of high moral character. But, what does Confucius really mean by the way (tao)? H.G. Creel, quoting Lorraine Creel, reacts to this question by asserting that:

Tao...is what Confucius considered to be the ideal way of life for the individual and the state. It is a way of life which includes all the virtues, sincerity, respectfulness, justice, kindness, and the like. It pays full attention to the rules of propriety (li) and to music. Like the human body, it is more than the sum total of its parts; for by a kind of “emergent synthesis” it attains a character and a power of its own...Tao is completely independent of any government; it derives authority from itself...Tao does not operate by the use of sanctions. If punishments are invoked as a result of failure to conform to a standard, it is not possible to have such a high standard that the mass of the people are unable to conform to it...Also related to the fact that, tao, has no sanctions, is the fact that, its stimulus to virtue is not based on an appeal to self-interest. Because, it does not encourage the individual to be good by the promise of reward or punishment, it does not turn the attention of the individual back on himself and on what is profitable or unprofitable for himself (Creel 1949 124-125).

When Confucius, speaks of Tao as the way, perhaps, the way to the attainment of the good life, he was simply making reference to some kind of ‘entrance’, for who can go out of a house except by the door? Precisely, because the way, summed up the totality of his philosophy, Confucius, never clearly defined it; to understand it, one must look at his philosophy as a whole. Confucius, frequently, talked about life instead of death and about man, rather than spiritual beings. As Wing-Tsit Chan, observes rather poignantly: “Confucius declared that it is man that can make the Way great and not the Way that can make man great” (Chan 1967, 189). Thus, we see in Confucius, the growing humanistic tendency (ethical humanism, as the case maybe). He (Confucius) begins with the individual and emphasizes the necessity of self-examination, of the cultivation of virtue, and of education (Creel 1949; Abel & Uket 2016). He conceived education, as being largely directed toward the cultivation of character. It was designed to develop such virtues as loyalty, sincerity, good faith, justice, kindness, accord with li (propriety) and so forth. Confucius emphasized the fact that, the man who cultivates and practices virtue, who loves the Way and does his best to try to realize it in the world, has fulfilled the whole duty of man, and can be said to lead a good life. This, ought to be done in the knowledge of two principles: integrity and reciprocity. And by reciprocity, Confucius means that, what one does not want done to himself, he should not do to others. Another conception that is very important in Confucius’ idea of the good life, is what is here translated as “right”, forged in the character of ‘i’. Its sense is not simply what is “right” or “righteous” in the ordinary meaning of these words. It means rather, that which is fitting and suitable; and which the individual must decide. But the question is: how is one to determine what is suitable? It would seem that in Confucius’ response, meditation is not enough, but it is better to study (even though study alone is not the answer) (Creel 1949, 135).
Another constitutive element of the good life, in Confucius’ thought, is essentially a philosophy of compromise, the middle path, the mid-way, the mean or via media. The good life ought to be weaved in the rubrics of moderation and avoidance of extremes. This idea of striking a balance, of keeping to the middle path, was very important for Confucius. In the Analects, we read that, the Master said, “Since, I cannot get men who pursue the middle course with whom to practice my principles, I must take the impetuous and the over-cautious.” (Confucius. The Analects, Bk. III). Since to go too far, is as bad as to fall short, the middle course is indeed the way of the highest virtue. Nevertheless, since in Confucius’ philosophy, so much responsibility is left to the individual, little can be done for him except to educate his mind and strengthen his character for his tasks. In the training of character, the ideal of the mean, has an important function. Like li, the Way, and i, it is another principle which can assist one in his self-discipline. One who is moderate may err, but he is unlikely to go so far wrong, as the man who goes to extremes. Even in cultivation, Confucius held, one should not become so over-refined as to obscure one’s basic manhood, which is the true foundation of character. Thus, virtue and truth are not, for Confucius, snug havens in which we may rest in complacent security. Rather, they are goals toward which we must continually make our way. Study, he said, “as if you were following someone you could not over take, and were afraid of losing” (Creel 1949, 141). This does not mean that life must always be hectic and one’s mind harassed. On the contrary, the race is not always to the swift, nor does the most impatient seeker always find the object of his search. Through education and self-discipline, and by keeping to the middle path, we achieve poise and freedom from confusion. But, so long as we live, our very possession of moral faculties, imposes a corresponding obligation to exercise them, and to choose in each new situation between the various courses of action open to us. Confucius, makes this very clear, by poignantly avowing that: “If a man does not constantly ask himself, ‘What is the right thing to do?’ I really don’t know what is to be done about him.” (Sih 1952, 141).

3. Fundamentals of the Good Life in Aristotle’s Philosophy
Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) is one of the greatest Philosophers of ancient Greece. His thoughts have been marked by scholars as simply exceptional, and it stands evergreen even in present times. Aristotle has a plethora of areas or philosophical well-springs to tap from, but our immediate concern in this paper, would be his conceptualization of the good life, which can be found in his works: Nicomachean Ethics and Eudemian Ethics. The prelude to Aristotle’s teaching on the good life, is in his recognition of the telos (end) of human existence. The telos or end of human life, which he also identifies as the summum bonum (the highest good), is eudaimonia (Aristotle 1097b2-21) (or what is loosely translated as; happiness or well-being). (Aristotle, 1097b2-21) This, according to Ludwig Von Mises, connotes some sense of purposefulness, (Mises 1996, 11) perfection or finality. (Dubois 1956, 74). We shall return to this notion of happiness, which stands as the foundation of the good life in Aristotle’s philosophy. Suffice it, to say that, crucial to Aristotle’s idea of the good life, is the concept of the good. Aristotle’s examination of the good is fundamental to the whole idea of his discourse on the good or happy life. This is visible, in his distinction between two kinds of good: goods with the lower degree of finality (or what we can also refer to as instrumental good), and goods with the highest degree of finality (which we can also call intrinsic or most complete good). (Aristotle, Bk. I, Ch. 7).

What Aristotle, aims at achieving in his search for the good in general, is according to Richard Kraut, the establishment of the highest, intrinsic or most complete good (Kraut 2010). A good which would make clear, the fact that, the instrumental good, is not a final
good in itself but only serves as a means to the final and most complete good for man, in the realization of the good life. By instrumental good, for Aristotle is meant, a good that has a low level of finality, that is, a good that serves as a means to other goods. It would be difficult to deny that as humans, we are constantly in search of fulfillment or happiness. Thus, since the goal in view, is to achieve happiness, man engages in various activities. Sometimes, in the totality of his numerous actions, he seeks more ends than one, in order to be happy. But this often leads him to a continuous, recurrent and perpetual search, simply because, what he constantly arrives at in each search for the good, is the instrumental good. For this reason, there is need to identify that good, which, on attaining it, man searches no further. It is this kind of good, which Aristotle conceives as, a good with the highest level of end or highest level of completeness (Aristotle, Bk. I, Ch. 7). It is the most complete or most perfect good, because, it is never instrumental to any other good, and it is, as a matter of fact, good-in-itself. This is the kind of good, that leads to Eudaimonia or happiness, which is the highest good for man, and which lurks as the foundation of the good life. (Lear 1971 45). Before arriving at the knowledge of what happiness entails in detail, Aristotle, examines different types of life. There are in Aristotle’s view, three basic types of life: pleasurable, honorable and contemplative (Aristotle, Bk. I, Ch. 5). For Aristotle, happiness does not consist in Pleasure (as proposed by Epicurus), (Stumpf 1994, 109-110) neither does it consist in honour, (Putnam 1995, 286-288) for they do not have the prerequisite for satisfying man’s fundamental and eternal quest for the good life (or the best form of life) (Gottlieb 2009, 141). It is the third type of life (contemplation), which was considered by Aristotle, as the best form of life or the highest virtue. For it is, in accordance with eudaimonia fundamentally. But what really is eudaimonia for Aristotle and how is it implicated in his idea of virtue and the good life? Eudaimonia or happiness for Aristotle, is a complete and sufficient good for human beings (McCabe 2005, 6). It is the best, the noblest, (and) the most delightful thing in the world (Aristotle, Bk. I, Ch. 8). That, which brings about self-sufficiency (Jackson, 2007, 2-4) or fulfillment; and no one, chooses happiness for the sake of something else, but for its own sake. Aristotle, then, proceeds to state that Happiness, (sometimes, human flourishing) is neither a gift of the gods to humans, nor something acquired by chance. (Aristotle, Bk. I, Ch. 9).

Aristotle’s definition of happiness inevitably leads us to the concept of virtue (aretē). For, he defines happiness, as an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, Bk. I, Ch. 9). This definition is one that immediately calls for another question: what then is virtue for Aristotle? To this question, Aristotle thus, retorts: “virtue (aretē) is a purposive disposition, lying in a mean that is relative to us, and determined by a rational principle, and by that which a prudent man would use to determine it” (Aristotle, Bk. II, and Ch. 6). According to Whitney Oates, this definition completes or complements the definition of the supreme human good, happiness, as an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. (Oates 1963, 272). Now, a habit of acting in a certain way is acquired by a repetition of acting in that way. Virtue, which is a habit, is acquired by acting rightly, that is, as reason dictates (Aristotle, Bk. II, 1103a14-b25). Acting rightly is acting neither excessively nor deficiently but in moderation (Aristotle, Bk. II, 1103b26-5a16; Yta 2017). In acting rightly, a man must be disposed in a certain way; he must know what he is doing, he must deliberately choose to do this and do it for its own sake, and he must act with certainty and firmness (for the genus of virtue is neither passion nor natural ability but acquired habit). (Aristotle, Bk. II, 1105a17-b18; 1105b19-6a13). Virtue, thus, is a state of the soul from which choice of action emanates; a habit or trained faculty of choice, the characteristic of
which lies in moderation or observance of the mean relatively to the persons concerned, as determined by reason. So, the possession and exercise of virtue is the core constitutive element of happiness or the good life, for Aristotle. (Cooper 1989 196-197). This idea of virtue (aretē) brings to the glare of publicity, Aristotle’s bipartite division of virtue and the notion of the golden mean, in the attainment of the good life. Aristotle posits a twofold division of virtue: intellectual and moral (Ross 1995, 221). Intellectual virtue (or virtue of thought) in the main, owes its birth and growth to teaching (for which reason, it requires experience and time), while moral virtue (or virtue of character), comes about as a result of habit. From this, it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arise in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature (Aristotle Bk. II, 1103a15-b5). Aristotle, identifies nine virtues, beginning with the intellectual virtues, which is, wisdom, sophia (theoretical/philosophical wisdom) and phronesis (practical wisdom). The other eight moral virtues include prudence, justice, fortitude, courage, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity, and temperance (Aristotle, Bk. I, 1102a5-111b25). Aristotle, introduces another concept, called phronesis (designed to aid the virtuous person in distilling between vice and virtue, in the pursuit of the good life). Phronesis or Prudentia, (often translated as prudence, foresight, practical wisdom, or personal discretion), therefore, stands as one of the central devices employed by Aristotle, to drive home his teaching on the good life. Thus, Aristotle defines phronesis, as the capacity of deliberating well, about what is good and advantageous for oneself, and this is not just in a partial sense but, regarding what sort of thing contributes to the good life in general. John Wall, commenting on this, argues in line with Jude Mbukanma, (Mbukanma 1986, 75) that practical wisdom perceives the good that has already been determined by human potentiality and personal habit and deliberates either on it or about how to reach it. It understands and pursues the good, happiness or eudaimonia, which is already written into the fabric of human nature (Wall 2003, 319).

Nevertheless, it is Phronesis, which aids in the process of deliberation, by always directing man, to choose in accordance with the golden mean or moderation. In both the Nicomachean and Eudemian Ethics, the doctrine of the mean presupposes that an excellence of character, is a state often flanked by two vices, one of excess and one of defect (deficiency); of too much and too little, vis-a-vis emotions and actions in the particular sphere of human life to which this excellence and its defects, belong. For instance, gentleness, is a mean between irascibility and obtuseness; courage, the mean between rashness and cowardice; confidence, the mean between self-deprecation and vanity; generosity, the mean between miserliness and extravagance, to mention a few (Wall 2003). Thus, the good life, consists in choosing the mean, in all our actions, for as the Latin dictum has it in medio stat virtus: in the middle stands virtue (or extensively, in the middle stands the good life). Aristotle, emphasized among other things, the role of proper education (both physical and moral) (Agulanna 2010, 287) and contemplation, in the attainment of the well-being (good life). Aristotle insists that the ideal society is that, which affords its citizens the opportunity for attaining happiness or what he described as the good life. As Christopher Agulanna, puts it, “the good life, in this context is described as the complete and active realization of all man’s capabilities of activities’, that is, those activities which contribute to man’s self-fulfillment” (Agulanna 2010, 287). Thus, happiness (for Aristotle) in its most complete manifestation, is found in developing a life of contemplation (theoria/contemplata), above all else (Rorty 1987, 353-358). As a brief recapitulation on the constitutive elements of the good life in Aristotle’s philosophy, it is germane, to mark cursorily, the following notions: happiness (eudaimonia), virtue (aretē),
contemplation (*theoria/contemplata*), the golden mean (*via media*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and good deliberation (*euboulia*). It is these concepts, that serve as missing links to the attainment of the *bonum vitae* (good life), in Aristotle’s thoughts. We now, turn our beam to the apogee of the paper, which is a comparative analysis of Aristotle and Confucius, on the good life.

4. **Aristotle and Confucius on the Good Life: A Comparative Study**

Confucius and Aristotle were great philosophers of two very different and distinct backgrounds. Confucius’ ideas were spawned as a result of his immersion and presence in the ancient Chinese culture, while, Aristotle’s ideas were as a result of his immersion and presence in the ancient Greek culture. In spite of this, however, both touched on subjects of a similar nature quite frequently, including the concept of virtue, of being of a good ethical (moral) character and the idea of the good life. A comparison of the teachings of these two distinguished philosophers on the good life, will allow first, for a determination of the areas of commensurability and incommensurability, between the two viewpoints. First, in determining what the good life consists in, Confucius and Aristotle conceived and attempted to ‘codify’ for the ostensible benefit of humankind, the tracks, from which the trails of its attainability can be laid (Kirby 2016). Both Confucius and Aristotle, agree on the cultivation of virtue, for the attainment of the good life. They both understand virtue, as habits, which need constant practice and cultivation; Aristotle calls it *aretē* (virtue), and Confucius captions it, as *de* 德 (virtue) (Wenzel 2010, 303-306). In Confucius’ view, “it is the man who cultivates and practices virtue who loves the Way (*Tao*) and does his best to try to realize it in the world, has fulfilled the whole duty of man” (Creel 1949, 130).

Both Confucius and Aristotle have their catalogue, of virtues necessary for the attainment of the good of happy life, but Jiyuan Yu, gives an interesting, yet, elaborate reading of the unity of the virtues thesis that shows up in both Aristotle and Confucius. (See Yu, 2007, 24). Yu notes that what unifies the virtues for these thinkers are respectively: practical wisdom (*phronesis*) for Aristotle; learning about the rites (Confucius. Bk.17. 8) and judgments of appropriateness (Confucius. Bk.17. 23) for Confucius. What this implies, in Yu’s understanding, is that, for both scholars, we are always on the road of cultivation and refinement, with regards to both particular virtue and general virtue, which invariably means that, the good life is a process, that needs constant soaring, a process of being and becoming, that is not instantly acquired, but progressively attained. Another idea that is worthy of note, is Aristotle’s *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in comparison with Confucius’ *jen* (moral sense), which is practically linked to *yi* 義 (appropriateness). In Aristotle’s philosophy, *phronesis*, aids in good deliberation, anyone who has it, is able to make choices that would lead to the attainment of the good and happy life. This has strong affinity with Confucius’ idea of *jen* or what is loosely translated as *moral sense*. According to Lin Yutang, (in the thinking of Confucius), “since the right men are obtained by the ruler’s personal character; to cultivate the moral law, the ruler must use the moral sense (*jen*, or principles of true manhood); the moral sense, is the characteristic attribute of man” (Yutang 1948, 105). However, both Aristotle and Confucius, seem to have a common denominator with regards to the *telos* of human actions or what can be described as the *end* of human action, which lurks as happiness. As Yi Yuan Yu observes, Confucius' *dao* (道) corresponds to Aristotle's *eudaimonia* in the sense that each refers to the highest good, (Yu 2007, 25) (that is, a good or happy life); and that, it is from this vantage point, that both philosophers focus on virtue; (Yu 2007. 28) which is *aretē* for Aristotle and *de* or *ren*, for Confucius. Aristotle identified the best form of life, to consist
in contemplation, but, Confucius, also has something like that idea. According to Brad Wilburn, Yiyuan Yu, draws a rough parallel between cheng, or self-completion, in Confucius and contemplation in Aristotle. Yu claims that these two notions serve as the highest goods for the two thinkers, but his extensive discussion, seems to emphasize the differences between them (Wilburn 2016). Cheng is virtue, while contemplation is virtuous activity.

Furthermore, contemplation is the excellent exercise of our theoretical reason for Aristotle, while Confucius has no separate category of theoretical wisdom. The main additional similarity, between these two concepts that Yu points to, is that contemplation is the activity of the most divine part of us, while cheng is the full actualization of our human nature, which was given to us by Heaven, and links us to the heavenly. So, Yu has a keen eye for interesting parallels, yet he avoids mischaracterizing the views just to force them into lockstep with each other (Wilburn 2016). If this is true of what Brad Wilburn, says of Yiyuan Yu’s infusions, then, we might have a problem, distilling the real meanings of some of these terms employed by Confucius, especially in our comparison. And this, in a way lurks as a potential instance of incommensurability. By and large, Aristotle’s idea of contemplation and the need for education, in the acquisition of virtues or moral excellence, for the attainment of the good life, can be linked to Confucius’ idea of studies. Confucius conceived education as largely directed towards the cultivation of character. It was designed to develop such virtues as loyalty, sincerity, good faith, justice, kindness, accord with li and so forth. Thus, the necessity of self-examination, of the cultivation of virtue, and of education, stands as quintessential for both Confucius and Aristotle in the attainment of the good life. As H.G. Creel notes:

Confucius, was always guided by the principle of reciprocity and suitability, but how is one to determine what is suitable? By meditation? The master said, I once spent a whole day without food and a whole night without sleep, in order to meditate. It was no use. It is better to study. But study alone is not the answer. The master said, study without thought, is labour lost; thought without study, is dangerous. (Creel, 1949, 135).

This notion of contemplative life seems to be manifested differently in the thoughts of Confucius and Aristotle. In the Aristotelian tradition we find that the central moral question reads thus: How should I live? Which can be rephrased to read: How do I attain happiness or How do I attain the good life? But, within the Confucian tradition, the question seems to be formulated differently. Here, we find throughout the Analects something closer to: How shall we attend to others properly? (Confucius. Bk. 15.6, 15.8; Udoh 2020). The answer, must therefore, include others as constitutive of the right outlook on living well, for they are assumed in the very question. A life of contemplation, potentially serving no other end and being self-sufficient and independent is not a viable answer for the Confucian question. (Santiago 2008). Indeed, for Confucius, abstract contemplation is derided as a waste of time. (Confucius. Bk. 15.6, 15.31). But, for the Aristotelian tradition, not only is such a life a possible answer to the central moral question, it is the best answer, reflecting not merely some values but the highest values in Aristotle’s thought. This, is the standard by which all other life-attempts, can be judged and ranked accordingly. From the ex post facto, the acquisition of the moral virtues or qualities, are germane for this crescendo. For as Lin Yutang, observes: “Some men are born with the knowledge of these moral qualities; some acquire it as a result of education; some acquire it as the result of hard experience. But when the knowledge is acquired, it comes to one and the same thing. Some exercise these moral qualities naturally and easily; some because they find it advantageous to do so; some with effort and difficulty. But when
the achievement is made, it comes to one and the same thing” (Yutang 1948, 107). This idea of ‘one and the same thing’, is nothing other than the telos of human actions, which is a determinant for the realization of the good or happy life; a life of sufficiency and self-actualization. It is amazing to note that, Confucius and Aristotle, both talked about the golden mean (via media, middle way, or moderation). The good life, ought to be a life of moderation, a midway, that tilts neither to the extremes (of excess and deficiency).

In delineating their understanding of the mean, Confucius and Aristotle both make use of archery metaphors, and, Yiyuan Yu claims, this metaphor can help us properly understand the doctrine of the mean in these two thinkers. Yu identifies two views about what the mean is in both Aristotelian and Confucian ethics. First, the mean lies in the middle of excess and deficiency. Second, the mean is what is right or appropriate (Yu 2007, 84). The archery metaphor can help us unify these two views, in the sense that, the good or happy life, is a matter of hitting the right and proper target. One can go astray on either side of the target, so, hitting the right target (mark) is a matter of being in between two ways of going wrong (excess and deficiency). As Confucius states, “the life of the moral man is an exemplification of the universal moral order (chungyung, usually translated as the mean); the life of the vulgar person, on the other hand, is a contradiction of the universal moral order” (Yutang 1948, 95). Elsewhere, Confucius is quoted to have said that “the middle course is indeed the way of the highest virtue; but its practice has long been rare” (Creel 1949, 139). Here, we see some structural similarities between both philosophers. As Fang Xia notes, Ji Yuan Yu, summarizes this structural similarity of Aristotle and Confucius’ doctrines of the Mean, by noting that both philosophers have an internal and external Mean (Xia 2009, 41-42). In Aristotle’s doctrine of the Mean, we have: Internal Mean in character; External Mean in actions and passions; and in Confucius’ doctrine of chungyung (Zhong Yong), we have: Zhong: internal Mean; He: external Mean. Both the internal and external mean, are implicated in the practice of virtue and in the pursuit of the good or happy life. From this structural similarity, we find that both Aristotle and Confucius’ ideas, aim at hitting the target, not necessarily hitting somewhere in the middle, but hitting on the right point (like the pattern of archery). Thus, what Confucius in the East and Aristotle in the West, are telling us is that we should avoid extremes and take the middle path, by adopting the principle of moderation in all we do. Moderation should be our practical principle in life; for extremes do not pay. (Omoregbe, J. 2004. 50) In the final analysis, it is thought provoking to see that Confucius and Aristotle, though living worlds apart, had something in common with respect to their thought formations, on the good life. And as seen in the analysis above, some aspects of their philosophy are close knit, while others are not. For a vivid grasp of the areas that they interweave, a schematization is apposite:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aristotle</th>
<th><strong>Aretē</strong> (virtue) as habit.</th>
<th><strong>Phronesis</strong> (practical wisdom) and <strong>euboulia</strong> (good deliberation).</th>
<th><strong>eudaimonia</strong> (happiness).</th>
<th><strong>Theoria or Contemplata</strong> (contemplation) and the Need for Education.</th>
<th>The mean (Moderation).</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confucius</td>
<td><strong>De</strong> (virtue) as ritual.</td>
<td><strong>jen</strong> (moral sense), linked to <strong>yi</strong> (appropriateness).</td>
<td><strong>Dao</strong> (highest good).</td>
<td><strong>Cheng</strong> or self-completion; constant studies and the need for education.</td>
<td>Chungyung (the mean, middle way, via media).</td>
</tr>
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</table>
CONCLUSION

Let us bring this engaging discourse to a close. We set out to delineate the idea of the good life in Aristotle and Confucius, and to attempt a comparative study of both viewpoints. When we place Aristotle vis-à-vis Confucius, we feel amazed that the two great philosophers, who lived worlds apart, both tackled similar issues, which are quite relevant to us today. In fact, at some point, their ideas seem to mirror each other. Thus, through the ex post facto comparative analysis, we understand that Aristotle and Confucius believed that, in order to attain the good or happy life, we ought to live a life of moral excellence or virtue, in accordance with the Mean. But, can this life be achieved in clear terms? Aristotle would respond to this, by saying that, the complete realization of the good life is possible, and as such the society, must make this ideal a reality, to afford its citizens the ample opportunity for self-realization. Man, for Aristotle, must make conscious, deliberate, determined effort, through character formation and education, to inculcate the virtues necessary for the attainment of happiness. Confucius would say that, the good life, though painstaking, is a progressive and realizable feat that involves everyone. It is true that, the idea of the good life and the possibility of its attainability is a highly polarized one, but, at the base of its conceptualization is the self-evident truth, that man is a being towards perfection; a being on a constant journey of self-actualization, happiness and self-fulfillment: man is always in the process of being and becoming. Thus, despite the minimal differences in the thoughts of Aristotle and Confucius, it is pertinent to note that, there is one thing just out there as truth, which is our unquenchable pursuit of the good life and human goodness. Whether we attain it or not, man is condemned to the aevidential quest for self-actualization and self-fulfillment.

REFERENCES


