

# Constructing True Friendship and Good Life with Aristotle and Confucius

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Aristotle and Confucius both attempted to show the way to a good life, as can be seen in *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *The Analects*. Specifically, both philosophers stress the importance of friendship and in fact show much similarity in views about friendship. In this essay, I will start by defining the ultimate vision of good life that each philosopher wishes to promote. I will then compare views expressed about friendship in the two texts and conclude by saying which philosophy is more helpful or convincing in terms of guiding people to a better life.

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, the central concern is “*eudaimonia*,” which is often translated as “happiness.” “*Eudaimonia*” in Greek does not exactly mean “happiness” in English. It is generally understood to mean human fulfilment, or to lead a fulfilled human life. Aristotle introduces this idea in Book 1 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, which is entitled “The Object of Life.” From Aristotle’s point of view, there are three types of life: the life of enjoyment, the life of politics and the life of contemplation.<sup>1</sup> These three types of life each implies a different goal of life and view of the good. Yet, no

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1 Book 1, Chapter i.

matter how divergent they are, they all point to the same end of *eudaimonia*, or a fulfilled life. Aristotle believes that everyone is pursuing this in life, as he describes it as “the most desirable of all things.”

In the last chapter of Book 1, Aristotle asks the reader, “Is it only when his life is completed that a man can rightly be called happy?” Here, Aristotle points out that “it is virtuous activities that determine our happiness,” so the happy man “will spend all his time . . . in virtuous conduct and contemplation,” and will be happy throughout his life.

In fact, certain things which people aim at are likely to become dull after a while, but Aristotle simply suggests that these are the sorts of things that people often aim at in the mistaken view that they will make life fulfilling. In the modern context, the general obsessions with consumer goods, with celebrity and with material wealth are some examples. Such misinformed obsessions are worrying in part because there is a tendency for them to provide a brief moment of high before proving less satisfying than they were supposed to be. The same, however, cannot be said of the love for one’s children, for good friendship or for the reading of great literature. The latter is an enduring source of fulfilment, and this is so precisely because it fulfills certain fundamental needs of human nature.<sup>2</sup> So, if one is able to understand and acquire the real means of fulfilment of life, one may hope to lead a good life.

As for Confucius, the core value would certainly be *ren*, which is often translated as “humaneness” or “benevolence.” Actually, the idea of *ren* is not explained clearly in *The Analects*. In different contexts the term connotes different meanings. However, if we examine the structure of the Chinese

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2 Grant 3.

character *ren* (仁), it is easy to tell its original meaning. The strokes on the left (亻) means “man” or “people” in general, while the remaining strokes (二) mean “two.” So, if we combine the two parts, it means “two people,” and “two people” here implies the relationship between two or more, or, in the broader sense, the relationship between an individual and society. Therefore, we can conclude that Confucianism deals with interpersonal relationship in a considerable proportion, as *ren* appears in *The Analects* quite frequently. There is a central thread to the teachings of Confucianism and to a superior life: “The humane person wants standing, and so he helps others to gain standing. He wants achievement, and so he helps others to achieve.”<sup>3</sup> So, the superior person (or the “gentleman,” *junzi*) will cultivate humaneness (*ren*), the spirit which gives life: it is nothing other than loving others.<sup>4</sup> In short, from Confucius’ point of view, a good life would be the life of the gentleman. He will pursue spiritual elevation and, granted an appropriate lifespan, pass through the appropriate stages to enlightenment. He will waste no time wondering about what happens after death, what spiritual beings do, what strange signs in the sky portend. Rather, he will be interested in human life and will study it all through his own life.<sup>5</sup>

With the ultimate vision of the good life of the two philosophies in mind, we will now move on to the concept and application of friendship in achieving the good life. Interestingly, the two philosophers have similar views about friendship. First, they both think one should not befriend a bad person. Even if one does, it cannot be called “friendship in the truest sense” for “bad people

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3 *The Analects* 6.30.

4 Pickering, “Aristotle and Confucius on the Superior Life.”

5 *Ibid.*

take no pleasure in each other unless there is a chance of some benefit.”<sup>6</sup> Confucius comments on the human nature as: “In nature close to one another, in practice far apart” (17.2). That explains why it is vital to choose friends wisely in order to become the “gentleman.”

What is more, both Aristotle and Confucius believe that real friends are for mutual good. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that the partners in the perfect friendship love each other for themselves, cherishing each other for their characters and not for some incidental benefit that they provide to each other. Here, perhaps Aristotle is hinting at the intriguing possibility that it is through our openness to pleasure and not in our need for what is good that we come closest to cherishing another simply for what he is.<sup>7</sup> In *The Analects*, it is stated quite explicitly, “The gentleman . . . uses friends in helping him to become humane” (12.24). Even when walking with peers, Confucius says, “I’m bound to find my teacher there” (7.22). From the above discussion, we can conclude that Aristotle and Confucius have similar stance on friendship.

We can now proceed to address the question: Which of the two philosophies is more helpful to us in achieving a good life? In response to the different social and historical contexts they found themselves in, Confucius and Aristotle have come up with different approaches to a good life. Despite their similarities, Aristotle’s approach is much more down-to-earth and helpful to ordinary people. His positive scenario for happiness is non-idealistic. He knows that practical people will not pursue a vision of the good life if it strikes them as abstract, unattainable or unattractive.<sup>8</sup> In *The Analects*, Confucius is

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6 Aristotle 207.

7 Pangle 43.

8 O’Toole 165.

more interested in shaping a good society rather than a good life. Actually, creating good life acts, in Confucius' mind, as a means to a good society. In an ancient Chinese text *Li Ji (The Book of Rites)*, or the *Zhou Li (The Rites of Zhou)*, it is said: "The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts."<sup>9</sup> We may conclude that Confucius' project is to revive the rites and rituals of an earlier, "golden" time—the *Zhou* Dynasty. He does more than re-enacting a set of dead formalities. He looks deep into the root and foundation of rites—a sense of benevolence (*ren*) that is the justification and measure of all rites. Consequently, *The Analects* does not put the major focus on the individual but on society as a whole, and one may therefore find it hard to accomplish the good life that Confucianism suggests.

In spite of the fact that Aristotle also cares about the relationship between the individual and society, he focuses on how to achieve the perfect friendship and provides guidelines throughout the process. True friendship, Aristotle asserts, is characterized by permanence, deep familiarity, frequency of interaction and generosity. It helps if friends have similar interests, tastes and desires, although they need not agree on everything. Aristotle says one has to be virtuous to be a good friend, for such a friend will "desire the good for the other." On the contrary, bad people have trouble keeping friends. They

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9 "Da Xue," The Chinese Text Project.

come into conflict and competition with others because they seek more for themselves. So the essence of virtuous friendship is selflessness: With a true friend, “we wish what is good for his sake.”<sup>10</sup>

More importantly, Aristotle points out why we need friends. This is indeed a key element in constructing a good life. We learn from friends through moral deliberation and discussion, and through them are better able to be ethical and virtuous than if we are socially isolated.<sup>11</sup> Leading a good life does not only mean pursuing happiness, it also requires a good social life, as “man is a social creature and naturally constituted to live in a company.”<sup>12</sup> This is what *The Analects* has not touched on.

Without a doubt, everyone wants to lead a good life. But what exactly does that mean? How can we move from “an average life” to “the good life”? Aristotle says, “Virtuous friends are the greatest of external goods.” We need them in times of adversity (for support) and when things are going well (to share our fortune). In perfect friendship one will never turn to his friend(s) when he is in trouble, or it will become a friendship of utility.<sup>13</sup> A blogger suggests that there are altogether seven elements in a good life, namely, “meaningful productivity,” “meaningful relationships,” “spiritual awareness,” “mental health,” “physical health,” “keeping money in its place,” and “cultivating a kind and caring disposition.”<sup>14</sup> From the arguments above, we can conclude by claiming that Aristotle’s approach towards a good life is easier and more helpful to the general public, whereas Confucius’ approach is more suitable in constructing a perfect society.

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10 O’Toole 168–69.

11 O’Toole 171.

12 Aristotle 246.

13 O’Toole 173.

14 Jonathan, “What is The Good Life Anyway?”

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