

# *On Mirrors of Virtue*

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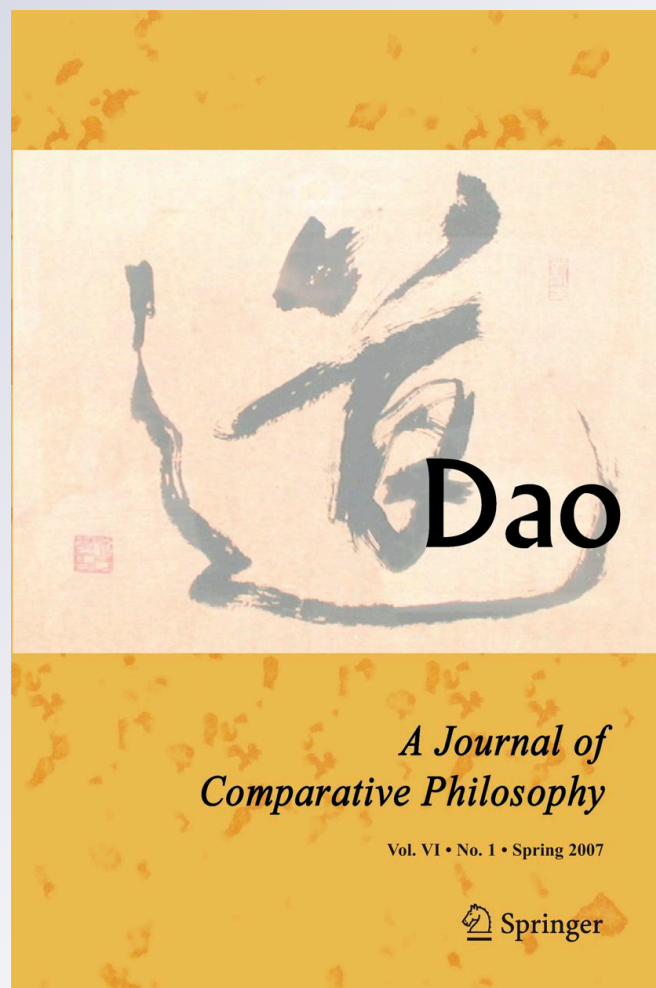
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# On Mirrors of Virtue

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I address YU Jiyuan's *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (MV) from a specifically comparative perspective, under the rubrics of methodology, the relations of individuals to traditions, and categories of comparison.

## 1 Methodology

### 1.1 Two Methods

YU Jiyuan juxtaposes two methods, both derived from Aristotle. The first is the idea of friendship as a mirror, constructing an analogous relation of “friendship” between Confucius and Aristotle.

When we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking into the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves we can obtain that knowledge by looking at a friend. For the friend is, as we assert, a second self. If, then, it is pleasant to know oneself, and it is not possible to know this without having someone else for a friend, the self-sufficing man will require friendship to know himself. (MM 1213a20-26)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise stated, translations of Aristotle are from Barnes 1984. The following abbreviations are used: EE, *Eudemian Ethics*; NE *Nicomachean Ethics*, MM *Magna Moralia*, Pol *Politics*, and Metaph *Metaphysics*. Greek terms are inserted where appropriate.

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What are the implications of this method? In her review of MV, May Sim observes that:

It is vital to note that a friend is only a second self for Aristotle if she is similar to oneself; only then can one take pleasure in seeing the friend because she has the same virtues as oneself. As such, YU Jiyuan is taking liberties by extending this mirroring metaphor to friends who are different. (Sim 2009: 226)

In a footnote to his discussion of this passage Yu points to an apparently similar statement in Book 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

If we can contemplate our neighbors better than ourselves and their actions better than our own, and if the actions of virtuous men who are their friends are pleasant to good men (since these have both the attributes that are naturally pleasant)—if this be so, the blessed man will need friends of this sort, since he chooses to contemplate worthy actions and actions that are his own, and the actions of a good man who is his friend have both these qualities. (NE 1169b33-1170a2)

There is an important difference between these two passages: the *Magna Moralia* passage discussed by Sim presupposes an element of shared identity in a “second self.” The *Nicomachean Ethics* passage focuses its lens elsewhere, highlighting the difference that allows us a better view of our own actions *through reflection in the clearer* (by virtue of distance) actions of our neighbor.

Thus the metaphor of the friend in the *Magna Moralia* and the neighbor in *Nicomachean Ethics* are different. Similarity is the key to the mirroring in the *Magna Moralia*. If Aristotle and Confucius are not similar, the mirror should not reflect, but the claim that they are prefigures the comparison, and would render it in some sense tautological. But in the *Nicomachean Ethics* the distance (and by implication, difference) between the happy individual and her friend is what allows us clear vision, as the passage is refuting an argument that the happy individual is self-sufficient, and does not need friends:

It is also disputed whether the happy man will need friends or not. It is said that those who are blessed and self-sufficient have no need of friends; for they have the things that are good, and therefore being self-sufficient they need nothing further while a friend, being another self, furnishes what a man cannot provide by his own effort; whence the saying “when fortune is kind, what need of friends?” (NE 1169b3)

The metaphor of distance clearly does apply to Confucius and Aristotle.

YU Jiyuan describes his second method, “saving the phainomena,” as Aristotle’s characteristic methodology, again from *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Having placed before us the *phainomena*, and having first gone through the difficulties (*diaporesantas*) we thus can demonstrate (*deiknunai*), if possible the plausible opinions (*endoxa*) concerning these affections (*tauta ta pathē*).” In other words, Aristotle works by establishing phenomena, considering the difficulties, and demonstrating what is right in conventional opinion. Yu proposes to extend this method to comparative philosophy: to demonstrate some truths about virtue by establishing juxtaposed phenomena and *aporiai* and “saving the phainomena.”

It is worth mentioning that this is very much Yu's own method. His approach to both texts is systematic and meticulous. Like Aristotle, he attempts to give a clear and fair exposition of the ethics of Aristotle and Confucius, considering the difficulties presented by each text on its own terms, and using the two as mirrors to demonstrate what is ethically valid and valuable in each. This approach is well suited to Aristotle, but it introduces some problems when applied to the *Analects*, which is conspicuously *not* systematic, and which does not offer taxonomies or distinctions. Yu attempts to address this imbalance by supplementing the *Analects* with evidence from other "Confucian" texts, especially the "Four Books": the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Great Learning* (*Da xue* 大學), and *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸). He argues that, although this compilation dates from the twelfth century and is associated with the Neo-Confucianism of ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), it provides genuine insight into "classical Confucianism" (19). Nonetheless, it may be asked which friend, or neighbor, is being compared with Aristotle, and whether the placement of the mirrors affects the reflections that emerge.

Yu begins with an account of virtue and virtues (Chapter 1). He first argues that the ethics of both Confucius and Aristotle focus on the central question of how we should live, although they formulate the central question in different ways: What is *eudaimonia*; where is *dao* 道? Yu's second claim is that both answer their central question with an account of virtue. The result, Yu argues, is two corresponding accounts of virtue, under the rubrics of Greek *aretē* and Chinese *de* 德 and *ren* 仁, respectively. *Aretē* (Latin *virtus*) is "manly" (Yu 2007: 28–29); *de* is associated with achievement and acquisition. It is also associated by some, notably the late Henri Maspéro (Maspéro 1933: 249–96), with quasi-magical charisma. It has a complex semantic history, including what Chad Hansen describes as "virtuosity," as distinct from virtue (Hansen 1996). As Yu puts it: "Confucius proceeds from *dao* to *de* and then to *ren*, and Aristotle from *eudaimonia* to *aretē*" (Yu 2007: 35). The force of the chapter is not simply to juxtapose and discuss two sets of possibly comparable terms, but the more significant claim that the Confucius and Aristotle had comparable motivations for their respective inquiries into virtue. Yu points to the significant (albeit controversial) evidence that each considered his philosophical mission to be in some sense divinely inspired. Both figures, he argues, linked their ethics to notions of piety, whether understood as Socrates' examination of the moral beliefs of his contemporaries or as Confucius' claim (*Analects* 7.1) to be a transmitter of the values of antiquity (Yu 2007: 43–44).

In Chapter 2, Yu redeploys the central motivating question posed in Chapter 1 (how we should live) in a comparative account of what it means to be a human being. His analysis grounds Confucian ethics in a tacit (for Confucius) and subsequently (in Mencius) explicit claim that human nature (*xing* 性) is good, a claim much disputed by Xunzi. Its counterpart in Aristotelian ethics is the notion of a human function or "work" (*ergon*) and related notions of essence, form, and primary substance (Yu 2007: 58). Both ethics stress the centrality of virtue, and also they construe it very differently and have different views of its functions. For Confucius and Mencius virtue is an element of original nature; for Aristotle it is what makes us perform our function/work well (Yu 2007: 74).

## 1.2 Virtue and the Mean

“Virtue, the Mean, and Disposition” (Chapter 3) is a wonderful piece of comparative analysis and showcases the ability of Yu’s method to provide philosophical insight. Here Yu draws on the “Doctrine of the Mean” (*Zhongyong*) chapter of the *Liji*, which he reads as an elaboration of the idea of Confucius. He argues that both Confucius and Aristotle conspicuously characterize virtue as the mean (Yu 2007: 79). Why does each develop a notion of the mean? Yu argues that this is not coincidence and there are deep historical and philosophical reasons.

His approach is to use Confucius and Aristotle as mirrors to attempt to illuminate disagreements within each tradition surrounding their respective notions of mean. For Confucius the problem is the meaning of *Zhongyong*. Disagreement about the meaning of this term has led to different interpretations of a Confucian “mean.” *Zhong* 中 clearly refers to a center or middle, but *yong* 庸 has been understood to mean: “use” or “practice,” “interchangeable” and “ordinary,” or “common.” Aristotle uses the term mean (*meson*) to refer to an “inner” state of one’s character, but also to the “outer” expression of virtue in feelings and actions, and there has been considerable debate about which was his real interest (Yu 2007: 81).

The chapter makes three key arguments. The first concerns the location of the mean. Here Yu uses his “mirror” to argue that: (1) both Confucius and Aristotle divide the mean into an outer and an inner mean. This distinction is clear for Aristotle, but the *Analects* does not provide enough information. Yu uses the *Zhongyong* to identify an inner mean that precedes the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, etc. When this inner mean is exercised, feelings “hit” (*zhong* 中) appropriately, resulting in harmony (*he* 和). Yu argues that Aristotle’s inner and outer mean structure corresponds to the *Zhongyong*’s “*zhong-he* structure” (Yu 2007: 82). (2) He argues that mean is based neither on quantity nor proportion but rather is identified with what is right. Importantly, (3) both use the analogy of archery, and both conceive virtue as an archery-like quality.

In rethinking the idea of mean-as-moderation, Yu contributes to our understanding of both Aristotle and Confucius. His new account of Aristotle’s mean allows him to argue against pejorative accounts of Aristotle’s mean by such figures as Bernard Williams and Jonathan Barnes, and trivializing accounts of the mean in the *Analects* by CHAN Wing-tsit.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the comparison allows him to choose an interpretation of *yong* as use or practice—“Using the Mean”—a recurring Confucian theme. This choice of interpretation allows him to give a coherent account of the action of the mean. Finally, in this analysis, both Confucius’ and Aristotle’s notion of the mean have three corresponding aspects: an inner mean, an outer mean, and “practicing” or “using” the inner mean to “hit” the outer mean.

This is a case where his reflective method clearly aids us to understand both. Again he draws on Aristotle, specifically his remark that the mean is a mean (moderation) in substance and accounts of it, but it is an extreme in regard to what is

<sup>2</sup> Williams considers Aristotle’s mean as “one of the most celebrated and least useful parts of his [Aristotle’s] system” (Williams 1985: 36). Barnes considers it without “practical or advisory force” (Barnes 1976: 24–26). Chan makes light of the mean in the *Analects* (Chan 1963: 96). See Yu 2007: 240 notes 4 and 5.

best and right (NE 1107a6-8). But Yu also uses the comparison to shed light on debates about the *Zhongyong*, which turn on three meanings of *yong* (Yu 2007: 81). He uses the *Zhongyong* account of an inner state emerging and “hitting” and harmonizing with an outer state as a model to interpret Aristotle’s *meson*, to argue that the inner mean manifests itself by hitting the outer mean (Yu 2007: 82).

### 1.3 Political Animals and Relational Selves

In Chapter 4, Yu argues that the parallel between Aristotelian habituation and Confucian ritualization is rooted in a shared belief that the individual develops within a social web, either as a political animal or as a relational self (Yu 2007: 108). This is an interesting departure from the tendency to contrast the relational self to modern liberal notions of individuality. Yet this is not an even-handed comparison. The comparison privileges Aristotle, in part because Aristotle’s concept of the political animal is explicit, detailed, and grounded in his belief (Yu 2007: 110) that humans have innate social impulses, capacity for language, and moral sense. Aristotle claims that these can only be actualized in a polis.

Yu compares Aristotle’s ideas of human social nature to Confucius’ understanding of human nature. To do this, he argues for an implicit conceptual framework (Yu 2007: 112) that presupposes a notion of virtue in original nature, a theory that becomes explicit in Mencius. The problem here is that the comparison is not an evenly held “mirror” because the two comparanda are not equally developed. Aristotle’s theory of human social nature is fully developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. By contrast, Confucius’ account of human nature can scarcely be called a theory; his remarks are elaborated into two conflicting theories after his death by his intellectual descendants Mencius and Xunzi. An analogue might be comparing Mencius to Stoic notions of responsibility or free will.

Yu focuses on two key areas: the inseparability of ethics and politics and the role of the family. In both areas, Aristotle and Confucius differ from modern ethics and individualism. As regards the family, he notes an important difference of emphasis in views on education: that Aristotle is primarily concerned with the education of children, while Confucius focuses on the filiality of grown sons toward parents. This difference points to a deeper one: Confucius considers family ritualization the root of excellence, whereas Aristotle gives pride of place to human function (Yu 2007: 124).

The relation of politics and ethics is a case where the mirror may distort one of the images. Yu describes Aristotle’s view that the polis is a precondition for *eudaimonia*: that in the best state the good man is indistinguishable from the good citizen, and that the merits of a constitution hinge on its concern, not with freedom, but with virtue. His discussion of Confucius focuses on the maxim to “keep people in line with social rites and guide them through virtue” (*Analects* 2.3). I think Yu is entirely right that the two have similar priorities. But in the discussion of constitutions he may try to take that similarity further than it can go:

Confucius aspires to an ideal constitution, just as Aristotle does in the *Politics*. However, whereas Aristotle attempts to find one by examining different constitutions (he is known to have collected 158 constitutions) Confucius

believes that the ideal constitution can be found in the social rites of the Zhou. (Yu 2007: 135)

The problem here is that the term is being used in two senses: in the general sense as a set of socially constitutive institutions and as a specific set of written laws or codes. Confucius and Aristotle may be comparable in the former sense, but cannot be in the latter. But since Aristotle is believed to have consulted 158 constitutions, we cannot ignore the more restrictive meaning.

#### 1.4 Practical Wisdom

We find another example of possibly uneven comparison in Chapter 5. Starting again from Aristotle and his treatment of *phronesis* as the intellectual aspect of practical virtue (Yu 2007: 140), Yu chooses *yi* 義 as the “ethical aspect” of virtue. This choice seems to arise from the comparison, rather than from the Chinese semantic field. Is *yi* an intellectual virtue, as opposed to *zhi* 智 (wisdom), which has widely been recognized as “know-how” rather than propositional knowledge? Yu acknowledges that the relation of *yi* to *zhi* as well as other intellectual qualities such as the heart-mind (*xin* 心) and discretion (*quan* 權) is less than clear (Yu 2007: 141). *Yi* has been taken as an ethical standard or as practical reason. The former interpretation has a solid textual basis (Yu 2007: 144). The question of whether the locus of *yi* is inner or outer might help to clarify the question, but this becomes an explicit issue only in Mencius. Here the choice of the latter may be primarily motivated by the comparison. Finally, both believe in the unity of virtue.

In summary, while there are arguments that could be made on many points (and Yu astutely is not derailed by them), all these arguments have great explanatory force, and correspond very well to Aristotle’s notion of saving the *phainomena*.

#### 1.5 MacIntyre’s Neutrality Problem

Nonetheless, I want to ask whether Yu addresses Alasdair MacIntyre’s neutrality objection that there is a fundamental incompatibility between Aristotle and Confucius because each system has its own philosophical psychology and politics, and its own internal standards for explanation and justification. As a result, “there is just no neutral and independent method of characterizing those materials in a way sufficient to provide the type of adjudication between competing theories of virtue” (MacIntyre 1991: 105). Yu does do so, insofar as his method has great explanatory force, as demonstrated by the previous examples. But on another level he does not. The problem is that his methods are entirely Greek, not just Greek, Aristotelian. He is even-handed in ends, but not in means.

I think part of the reason for this difficulty is his choice of comparanda. In choosing Confucius, elucidated at times by later “Confucius” texts (more on this later), his “friends” are equal in their considerations of virtue, but not in the sophistication or breadth of their methods. And in this sense Yu may fail to answer MacIntyre’s criticism. Could this problem have been avoided? Were there Chinese (or Confucian) thinkers comparable to Aristotle in his intellectual methods? Two obvious candidates present themselves. One is Zhuangzi, but he would make a strange “friend” of Aristotle because his ethics (and I believe he has one!) is so different that it is hard to imagine them living in the same neighborhood.



The other is Xunzi. Yu claims that “historically Xunzi’s view did not gain favor, and it is Mencius’ view that came to define orthodox Confucianism” (Yu 2007: 54). I would argue that what Mencius’ view defines is orthodox *neo*-Confucianism. By contrast, the Confucianism of the Han period was Xunzian, and Xunzi was the central figure in the consolidation of Han Confucian teachings and traditions. His greater significance in Han times is often under-appreciated because of the influence of ZHU Xi and other Song neo-Confucians who preferred Mencius.

## 2 Individuals and Traditions

Yu initially sets out to compare two thinkers, but often compares two traditions. On the Chinese side, these include Confucius, Mencius, and the *Liji* (especially the *Daxue* and *Zhongyong* chapters ZHU Xi compiled as two of the Four Books), with less attention to Xunzi and little or none to “non-Confucian” ethics of any kind. On the Greek side they include Socrates and Plato, with less attention to the “pre-Socratics” and little or none to the Stoa and other intellectual descendants (in some senses) of Aristotle. Yu focuses on the *Nicomachean Ethics* (and to a lesser extent the *Eudemian Ethics*) as the major source(s) for Aristotle’s ethics; he also draws on the *De Anima*, the *Politics*, and *Metaphysics*.

Overall, the interchangeable use of individuals and traditions is justified, usually to clarify terms that are treated in passing in the central texts under consideration. But the result is not so much one comparison (of Confucius and Aristotle) but a web of comparisons between: (1) Aristotle and Confucius, (2) Aristotle and a Confucian tradition, (3) Aristotle and his own intellectual predecessors, and (4) Confucius and his intellectual descendants.

Two aspects of this comparative web stand out. First, Confucius has no intellectual predecessors. By contrast, Aristotle’s entire pattern of analysis rests on examining prevailing and prior views, prominently including those of his own teacher Plato and those of the pre-Socratics, for which he, in some cases, is the major source. In this sense the two contexts are simply not comparable. Second, the internal Chinese comparison uses an entire Confucian tradition to gloss Confucius. This method raises issues of anachronism by using later thinkers in vastly different intellectual (and rhetorical) climates to gloss or elucidate the *Analects*. On the positive side, Yu very effectively asks how ideas first raised by Confucius are pursued more systematically by others.

## 3 Ethics and Rubrics

Now I turn to the problem of the relation between ethics and other sciences (in a Greek and Chinese framework). In both China and Greece there are complex meta-ethical contexts in what Aristotle called the theoretical, practical, and productive sciences.<sup>3</sup> Can we see Aristotle clearly if we look only at his ethics (a practical

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle divided the sciences into three areas: theoretical, practical, and productive (Metaph. 1063b36-1064a1, NE 113b12-1140a10). Although all three aimed at knowledge and truth, they had distinct aims, subject matters, and epistemic characters. For example, the theoretical sciences pursued knowledge for its own sake and sought truths that were independent of any human activity. The practical sciences sought ethical knowledge that could guide human conduct and human life (NE 1103b27-29). The productive sciences, by contrast, had no theoretical or ethical aims, but produced things (NE 1140a1-6).

science) and do not consider his contributions to theoretical or productive sciences (Yu 2007: 11)? Yu himself argues that we cannot: “Aristotle’s ethics is part of his whole knowledge system, and a good discussion of it needs to draw on the relevant ideas from his politics, metaphysics and psychology” (Yu 2007: 20). In particular, “Aristotle always associates the final cause with the good of the organism. The function argument links Aristotle’s ethics to his teleology and to the theory of potentiality and actuality” (Yu 2007: 73–4).

But if we ground Aristotle’s ethics in his account of the theoretical, practical, and productive sciences, we again lose at least one friend, since neither Confucius nor his intellectual descendants offer any counterpart of this kind. We do find a counterpart, but again not among the *Ru*. I refer here to the intense interest in mathematics and astronomy in quasi-Daoist compendia such as the *Huainanzi*, a long history of Daoist physicians such as GE Hong 葛洪 (283–343), TAO Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536), and SUN Simiao 孫思邈 (581–682), and also to the technical traditions in medicine (acumoxa and drug therapy), the mantic arts (astronomy, calendrics, mathematics), and traditions associated with “nurturing life” (*yang sheng* 養生). These probably begin with the *Zhuangzi*, and are becoming more accessible through the evidence of excavated texts.

What might such a comparison between ethics and the *techne* look like? How might it differ in important ways from the comparison that Yu presents? He is comparing traditions and contexts, not just individuals. If Yu is (as he seems to be) willing to move forward in the *Ru* tradition beyond simply glossing Confucius, or even to move beyond the *Ru* tradition, a comparison might be possible with two contexts. One would be a comparison of ethics and logic in Warring States Masters texts. Other Warring States philosophers do take up questions, especially of language, logic, and some sciences (the Mohists, *Zhuangzi*). The other would be the complex relations and competition between the Schoolmen and the technical traditions. These technical expertise traditions are represented in particular by the last three rubrics of the bibliographic chapter of the *Hanshu* (*Hanshu Yiwenzhi* 漢書·藝文志): Military Arts (*bing shu* 兵書), Numbers and Techniques (*shu shu* 數術), and Recipes and Methods (*fang ji* 方技), especially medicine and longevity practices. These traditions were effectively the defeated competitors of the schoolmen. In particular, the technical expertise traditions share several important concerns with Mencius. These include: (1) nurturing life or nurturing *qi*; (2) interest in fate and prediction; and (3) interest in language. The difficulty is that either of the above approaches would be incompatible with reading Confucius through Han Classical or Neo-Confucian traditions.

Let me end on a point that might seem idiosyncratic, especially to colleagues who know my work on women and virtue traditions in early China (Raphals 1998). Is gender worth being mentioned at all? Confucius says little about it in the *Analects* and Aristotle is straightforward; he considers women inferior to men (Yu 2007: 122; see Pol 1260a13). Yu understandably declines to enter this thorny woods (Yu 2007: 122), and focuses on important insights about the role of the family. But can we entirely afford not to engage, unless we are willing to relegate virtue and social/political existence to “separate spheres” that trivialize the problems of virtue and human good as they affect half the human race?

There may be ways to address this question. A fuller discussion of Aristotle’s disagreements with Plato might be productive, but I suspect that the comparison would be imbalanced. The Chinese tradition provides a richer discussion of these

issues if we turn to dialogues ascribed to Confucius outside the “Classics” and “Masters” traditions. How does Yu’s method handle the problem of “heterodox” texts outside the received tradition, which (as I have argued elsewhere) have more to say (Raphals 2002: 275–302)? Given the possibility of a more nuanced view of Confucius’ attitudes, is this a case where Aristotle and Confucius are too dissimilar to mirror each other at all?

To conclude, I raise these speculative questions because of the extraordinary richness and effectiveness of MV, and the many questions it brings to mind. Yu has written a magisterial book. Given his immense talent for discovering friends, neighbors or mirrors, and his skill at working through difficulties and saving the *phainomena*, I look forward to what he may find.

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