Holding an Aristotelian Mirror to Confucian Ethics?

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It is an honor to be part of this book symposium on Yu Jiyuan's splendid book. The best way of repaying the honor, I believe, is to engage actively and critically with the issues Yu has raised. However, in this essay I will only be able to discuss selected aspects of this extremely rich, ambitious, erudite, and inspiring book. I shall focus on three of its most impressive achievements.

The book's first achievement is that Yu has redefined comparative philosophy by doing it "critically" and "philosophically." He does it "critically" in the sense that both sides of the comparison are subjected to critical examination; neither is regarded as an unquestioned authority. It is one of the book's strengths that the author is an Aristotle scholar by training, and the book is as much about Confucians as about Aristotle.[1] In fact, as he has made Confucians seem more Aristotelian, Yu's Aristotle has taken on some Confucian characteristics. Yu also does comparative philosophy "philosophically" in the sense that he tries to discover whether the two ethical systems are true. Yu thinks that it is not enough to have provided *coherent* interpretations of Confucian and Aristotle's ethics; he also wants to know whether each of them is *true*. In other words, Yu is interested in not only getting the right interpretations of Confucian and Aristotle's ethics but also whether they have got ethics right. In the end he reaches the conclusion that "neither Aristotle nor the Confucians are completely right or completely wrong" (Yu 2007: 6).

Yu's second achievement is that he has given us *coherent* interpretations of Confucian and Aristotle's ethics. The first thing a reader would notice about the book is that Yu's style of thinking can be characterized in Aristotelian adjectives, such as "systematic," "meticulous," "patient," and "perceptive." But Yu is also an Aristotelian in a deeper sense: he has mastered Aristotle's method of "saving the phenomena," as

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[1] Yu's first book is a monograph on the concept of being in Aristotle's metaphysics (Yu 2003).

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well as the Aristotelian art of distinction-making. The reader would find Yu constantly making classifications and distinctions, and classifications within classifications and distinctions within distinctions. Since the Aristotelian art of distinction-making is one of the most effective ways to clarify and explain away contradictions and inconsistencies, not surprisingly, as one reads Yu's book, clear and coherent pictures of Confucian and Aristotle's ethics with mirroring structures gradually emerge.

Yu's third achievement is that he has given us the most systematically articulated picture of what Confucian ethics would be like *if* its basic structures were parallel to the basic structures of Aristotle's ethics (with various degrees of dissimilarities and contrasts on different levels). One way to summarize the book is to say that it consists of a series of what I shall call Yu's "parallel structure theses" (PS theses), together with detailed and nuanced arguments and textual exegesis that support them.[2] Yu also argues for a general thesis, which can be formulated as follows:

> (GT) Confucian ethics is a virtue ethics that is structurally similar to Aristotle's virtue ethics.

Here is a road map of this essay. It is divided into four sections: each of sections 1, 3, and 4 deals with one of the three achievements. In section 2, I subject two aspects of Yu's book to critical and philosophical examination.

1 Doing Comparative Philosophy Critically and Philosophically

In this section, I first discuss a possible objection to Yu's project, which is motivated by concerns over comparative philosophy in general. Following Benjamin Schwartz, I shall call it the "appealing to the 'latest word' from the West" objection. I show that Schwartz has a good solution to it (which I shall call the "Schwartzian strategy"); as we shall see, such a strategy can also be found in Yu's book.

Yu argues that it is necessary to compare Confucian and Aristotle's ethics. Making use of what he calls "Aristotle's friend-as-mirror thesis," he states that Confucians and Aristotle are "friends" in the sense that their ethics "can be viewed as mirrors for each other" (4). One reviewer of Yu's book has rightly pointed out that Confucius and Aristotle cannot literally be "friends": "Aristotle and Confucius were not friends. They never met and they never saw each other. They did not 'spend time together' and 'share lives,' as would be required for being friends in Aristotle's sense" (Wenzel 2010: 306). However, this is how Yu states his thesis:

> One lives one's own life, but still needs friends in various ways. Similarly, *we* must read the original work of Aristotle and Confucius to understand them, but a comparison could help them be better understood. Taking them as mirrors for each other leads *us* to reflect upon the traditional roots of both ethics, to examine their otherwise unexamined presuppositions, and to generate alternative perspectives to determine why each proceeds in the way it does. (Yu 2007: 4; emphasis added)

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[2] If one puts together all the major theses Yu has defended in the book, one would notice that almost all of them are "parallel structure theses."

It is important to note that Yu clearly intends to speak metaphorically when he says that the Confucians and Aristotle are "friends," by which he simply means that *we* should be "taking them as mirrors for each other."

If we must do the comparison, how should we do it? Yu has made it very clear at the beginning that both sides of the comparison should (and will) be treated equally and subject to critical examination:

> When comparison is used in the study of non-Western philosophy, Western philosophy is usually treated as some established framework or tool of analysis to be applied rather than as a subject matter that is itself subject to investigation. The focus of discussion has always been on the non-Western side. In contrast, in this book, although we appropriate Aristotle's methodology, his ethical doctrines are also the object to be studied. This book treats both sides equally and aims at developing an interpretation of each side through comparison. (Yu 2007: 3)[3]

Why is it important and necessary to subject both sides of the comparison to critical examination? Why does Yu's book have to include so many materials on how Aristotle's ethics should be critically interpreted and constructed? I want to suggest that this is not because Yu happens to be an Aristotle expert, but rather it is the best way to respond to one of the most powerful objections to comparative philosophy in general.

Someone may praise Yu's book by saying that Yu has validated Confucian ethics by invoking its structural resemblances to Aristotle's virtue ethics, which is one of the most exciting rediscoveries or revivals in contemporary moral philosophy in the West. However, to other people's ears, they may not hear such words as praise. Rather they may hear them as reasons to reject Yu's approach. It is indeed the case that Aristotelian virtue ethics is all the rage at the moment. But why should we take the "latest word from the West" as the "unquestioned authority," to put the point in Benjamin Schwartz's terms?

As we shall see, this objection is parallel to Schwartz's objection to A. C. Graham's similar praise of Herbert Fingarette's book *Confucius: Secular as Sacred* (Fingarette 1972), which is that Fingarette has validated Confucius' theory of rituals by invoking its resemblances to Austin's speech-act theory. This is how Schwartz characterizes Graham's praise: "Graham, in fact, is deeply impressed by the fact that Fingarette is able to relate the *Analects* to certain exciting tendencies of twentieth-century 'serious philosophy'.… Confucius, we are told, 'can be relevant to contemporary "professional" philosophy'" (Schwartz 1996: 144). From this passage, as Schwartz points out, one would get the "uneasy impression" that a new principle of authority is being invoked here by Graham (Schwartz 1996: 144):

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[3] It seems that Yu's approach is representative of an emerging trend, which can be found in an increasing number of works in the field of comparative philosophy and Chinese philosophy. If we take this trend as forming a new tradition of doing comparative philosophy critically, its origin might be traced back to Benjamin Schwartz. Here I disagree with Yu's reading and assessment of Schwartz. Relying on A. C. Graham's reading of Schwartz, Yu misreads Schwartz's approach as belonging to one of the two uncritical approaches he rejects (Yu 2007: 226, 6n).

The practice of validating Chinese thought by invoking resemblances to certain Western philosophers such as Kant or Hegel without further discussing of the Western thinkers themselves has often in the past been recognized as a kind of cultural-bound approach. *It is not the comparison itself that is cultural-bound but the assumption that one side of the comparison represents unquestioned authority.* (Schwartz 1996: 144; emphasis added)

Note that Schwartz is not against comparison. In fact, Schwartz insists that he does not have an *a priori* view that ancient Chinese thought cannot be meaningfully compared to Western thought. He even acknowledges that "it may well be that Austin may in some of its tendencies be closer to ancient Chinese thought than Plato" (Schwartz 1996: 145). His worry is rather that a comparative study may be "cultural-bound" in the sense that one side is being taken for granted uncritically: "I would nevertheless submit that in order to validate the *Analects* by reference to Austin, one must critically examine the claims of Austin himself and even examine what critics of Austin in the West have had to say about him" (Schwartz 1996: 145).[4]

I believe the worry Schwartz talks about here is the same kind of worry that motivates Yu to adopt a critical attitude toward both sides of the comparison. Furthermore, Yu actually has two concerns here: first, he is keenly aware that there are various and often conflicting *interpretations* of either side, hence one always has to defend one's interpretation of either Confucius or Aristotle; second, one must be careful not to automatically take one side as representing the *truth*. We shall call the first "Yu's worry about interpretation," and the second "Yu's worry about truth." Yu's worry about interpretation is explicitly stated in the following passage:

Since one major mistake of doing comparative philosophy is the unreflective imposition of assumptions of one's own tradition on the other, extra caution will be exerted not to fall into this trap. I will also take into account the rich scholarship on each side, and deal with relevant controversies on either side before a comparison is drawn. (Yu 2007: 6)

Yu also makes the general Schwartzian point by saying that "it is difficult to see how one can take Western philosophy as a ready-to-use framework, for there is hardly any concept or issue in it that is not subject to controversy" (Yu 2007: 3). He emphasizes that this is especially the case with Aristotle:

[A]lmost each view of his has been subjected to different and even contradictory interpretations. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is by no means an exception. There are numerous ongoing disputes not only about the contents of particular views presented in it, but even about the structure of Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia* and about whether the *NE* is a unified and consistent work. […] Our comparative approach, then, requires a defense of our own

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[4] This emphasis on critical attitude toward both sides of the comparison is a common theme running through all of Schwartz's work. As early as 1964, in his book on Yᴀɴ Fu's encounter with the West, Schwartz has already said, "In speaking of the encounter between the West and the 'non-West' we generally assume that the West is a known quantity.… We undoubtedly 'know' infinitely more about the West, but the West remains as problematic as ever. One may even hope that the ground of encounter may itself provide a new vantage point from which to take a fresh look at both worlds" (Schwartz 1964: 1–2).

understanding of Aristotle, just as it requires a defense of our own understanding of Confucius. (Yu 2007: 4)

Yu has gone even further than Schwartz by suggesting an Aristotelian method to find out how much of Aristotle's ethics is true (and how much of Confucian ethics is true). This is why Yu has made a major revision of Aristotle's method of "saving the phenomena" when he applies it to comparative philosophy. He treats both Aristotle's ethics and Confucian ethics equally as two of the *endoxa* (reputable opinions), which are the starting point of his comparative inquiry.[5] Starting from here, Yu then proceeds to find out how much of Aristotle's and Confucian ethics is true. This is what he means when he says that he wants to "save the phenomena from both of them" (Yu 2007: 10). And the authority Yu appeals to when he critically assesses them is neither Aristotle nor Confucius, but rather what he (following Martha Nussbaum) calls "human grounding experience":

> [H]uman beings live in the same world, possess the same psychic capacities, and share many of the same basic relationships and institutions such as father-son, brothers, family, community, politics, etc. Hence, there is a set of basic desires, feelings, beliefs, and needs which all human beings share and which are necessary for living a human life. This forms the common ground for comparative studies of different cultures. In Martha Nussbaum's terminology, this common ground can be called "human grounding experience" and she rightly takes them as "reasonable starting point for cross cultural reflection." The ultimate basis for us to take the ethics of Aristotle and the ethics of Confucius as mirrors of one another and to save the *phenomena* from both of them is the grounding human experiences. (Yu 2007: 9–10)[6]

In this sense, this book has gone beyond what is normally meant by "comparative philosophy," a label Yu himself uses to describe his project. I believe a more accurate description is that Yu has redefined "comparative philosophy" by showing us how it should be done *philosophically.* As he himself puts it, he wants to provide a "defense of comparative philosophy as a philosophical enterprise" (Yu 2007: 1). Yu's book should be seen as having given us a paradigm of a new way of doing comparative philosophy, which could be best described by the following slogan: philosophy

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[5] This is a very innovative and original idea. But we can imagine that some might object to it by saying that Aristotle's ethics is the result of applying the method of saving the phenomena to *endoxa*, whereas Confucius' ethics has not gone through such a procedure. The *Analects* can be seen as a collection of "raw *endoxa*," namely, "the undemonstrated sayings and opinions of those who have experience and are old… who have practical wisdom" (*NE*, 1143b11-4; cited by Kraut [Kraut 2006: 78]). So even if we assume that both Aristotle's and Confucius' ethics can be taken as *endoxa* for our inquiry, they are not "equal" in the sense that the former is not "raw *endoxon*" because it is what has been "saved" at the end of the procedure and the latter is just "raw *endoxon*." Therefore, according to this objection, it is wrong for Yu to "treat both sides equally" (3). Another interesting objection to Yu's applying "saving the phenomena" to comparative philosophy is made from the perspective of the "Cambridge School" in intellectual history (Lang 2009).
[6] However, for many people, this view of Yu's (as well as Nussbaum's) raises another set of problems. Please see, for example, the debate between Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum (Williams 1985: 30–53; Nussbaum 1995; Williams 1995). These are extremely important issues for Yu's project, but Yu does not address them in the book.

should be done "comparatively," and comparative philosophy should be done "philosophically."[7]

2 Critical Examination of Two Aspects of Yu's Book

In this section, I want to engage with Yu's book in the same critical spirit embodied in the book.

My main criticism is that Yu does not always live up to his own exemplar of doing comparative philosophy critically and philosophically. He sometimes does not spread his scrutinizing net wide enough; several important assumptions of the book are uncritically taken for granted. Here I want to subject two aspects of Yu's book to critical and philosophical examination. The first is Yu's adopting a common typology of ethical theory as the framework for his inquiry, and the second aspect is Yu's assumptions about the unity of the Confucian texts.

Yu's book focuses on the comparison of Confucian and Aristotle's ethics. Let us call it the "first pair of comparison":

(1a) "Confucian ethics" vs. (1b) "Aristotle's ethics."

This is obviously the main focus of the book. Yu subjects both sides of the comparison, (1a) and (1b), to critical and philosophical examination, and tries to save the phenomena from both of them (more of this in section 3). However, Yu also groups (1a) and (1b) together as belonging to a distinctive type of ethics, and compares and contrasts it with another supposedly radically different type of ethics, namely "modern Western moral philosophy" (Kantian deontology and consequentialism). Let us call it the "second pair of comparison":

(2a) "Confucian and Aristotle's ethics" vs. (2b) "Western modern moral philosophy."

Yu gives only a very brief discussion of this comparison in the Introduction. Relying on a popular typology of ethical theories as his basic framework, Yu characterizes the second pair of comparison as a divide between two radically different types of ethical theory. I shall call it his assumption about the "big divide" (BD):

(BD) There is a big divide between (2a) and (2b). The former is "virtue ethics" or "character-based ethics," whereas the latter is "action-based," or "rule-based or rights-based ethics" (see Yu 2007: 2).[8]

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[7] This paradigm has been anticipated by Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the first to have done a comparative study of Confucian and Aristotle's ethics (MacIntyre 1991, 2004a, 2004b). Although Yu has expressed his disagreements with MacIntyre on certain issues (Yu 2007: 6–10), they share the fundamental insight that it is impossible to do philosophy without in some way doing comparative philosophy, and vice versa. As MacIntyre puts it, "all reflective ethics needs to develop, whether explicitly or implicitly, a comparative dimension" (MacIntyre 2004b: 152).

[8] Yu does not use the term "action-based" there, but he does say that "modern ethics focuses on moral acts" (Yu 2007: 2).

I wish Yu had not readily and uncritically accepted this popular typology of ethical theories, in terms of which (BD) is formulated. In other words, we should not take it as a "ready-to-use framework," to put it in Yu's own terms used in a different but similar context (3).

The first thing we notice about the typology of ethical theory Yu relies on is that it only classifies ethical theories that can be described as a "*x*-based ethics," *x* being "character," "virtue," "rule" or "act," and so on. For example, a "virtue ethics" is a "virtue-based ethical theory" in the sense that character trait is a "primary concept," in terms of which all the other concepts are defined; for example, the concept of "morally right actions" is defined in terms of what a virtuous agent would do (Watson 1997; Hursthouse 1999).

The notion of "primary concept" is a central notion in this typology. The following is my formulation of the definition of "primary concept": *x* is a primary concept in an ethical theory *E* if and only if (i) *x* is logically priori to, and independent of, all the other concepts in *E*, and (ii) all the other concepts in *E* can be defined in terms of *x*. When this is the case, we call *E* an "*x* ethics" ("*x*-based ethics"). Note that all the ethical theories classified according to this typology share one thing in common, which is that they all have a "hierarchical" structure: at the bottom there is a primary concept and on the upper levels there are other non-primary concepts. I shall call this kind of theories "ethical theories with a hierarchical structure."[9]

We now can see that this typology is not a complete classification of ethical theories. It has left out those ethical theories that do not have a primary concept (or a hierarchical structure). From an Aristotelian point of view, this is obviously a serious flaw. Here I mention only two possible configurations of ethical theories with different structures. First, there can be an ethical theory that has a "flat" structure: there is no primary concept in terms of which other concepts are defined. Second, we can also imagine an ethical theory that has a global "flat" structure but multiple local "hierarchical structures" with different primary concepts in different spheres of life. In this second type of ethical theories, some local structures in certain spheres of life may have a hierarchical structure with a primary concept, even though the global structure is still a non-hierarchical one.

CHEN Lai has recently argued that in the *Analects, li* 禮 (rituals) is not a virtue, rather it is *haoli* 好禮 (loving rituals) that is regarded as a virtue (Chen 2010). To put his point in our terms, we may say that in the sphere of rituals, the concept of "rituals" is a primary concept, in terms of which the concept of "loving rituals" as a virtue is defined.[10] Note that even though the concept of rituals is a primary concept within the sphere of rituals, it is not a primary concept in the global structure of the ethical theory in the *Analects*. This is because not all the other concepts in the *Analects* are defined in terms of the concept of rituals. So the global structure of the ethical theory in the *Analects* is still "flat," even though there are local structures within it that are "hierarchical."

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[9] I borrow the term "hierarchical structure" from Julia Annas (Annas 1993). Similar ideas can also be found in Susan Hurley (Hurley 1989), who uses the term "centralism" to refer to an ethical theory that has a "central" concept, which is similar to what we have called "primary" concept.

[10] The term li 禮 (rituals) in the *Analects* could mean either "ritual rules" or "ritually appropriate actions." So the primary concept here could be either ritual rule or ritually appropriate act.

Here it might be helpful to make use of a distinction made by some philosophers recently, namely the distinction between "virtue ethics" and "theory of virtue" (see Baxley 2007). Virtue ethics is a "virtue-based" ethical theory, in which one takes character traits as a primary concept, in terms of which the concept of right actions is then defined. However, we may find a "theory of virtue" within an "act-based" ethical theory. Since this is an act-based ethics, the concept of right actions is the primary concept, and the concept of virtue is then defined as the reliable character traits to do right actions. One will then have a "theory of virtue" within an act-based ethical theory.[11] To put Chen Lai's point in these terms, we may say that there is a "rituals-based" ethics in the sphere of rituals in the *Analects*, but one can also find a "theory of virtue" within it, which defines the virtue of "loving rituals" as the reliable character trait that reliably takes pleasure in following ritual rules (doing ritually appropriate actions).[12]

How do we choose between Chen Lai's and Yu's interpretation of the structure of ethics in the *Analects*? Whose reading is the valid one? As I shall argue in section 4, to settle issues like this there is no substitute for nuanced arguments based on textual evidence and philosophical considerations. Until we examine closely their concrete arguments, we do not know who has got it right. Fortunately, the point I am making here is not about the *validity* of Chen Lai's alternative reading. The point is rather that the *possibility* of this reading is ruled out from the very beginning when Yu adopts an incomplete typology of ethical theory as the framework of his inquiry.

The second aspect of Yu's book I want to subject to critical examination is Yu's two assumptions about the nature of Confucian texts. The first is the assumption about the "unity of the *Analects*":

(UA) The *Analects* has a coherent unity, which is Confucius' unified moral vision.

The second is the assumption about the unity of the Four Books (the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Daxue*, and the *Zhongyong*):

(UFB) The Four Books have a coherent unity, which is Confucian virtue ethics.

Here I shall only discuss (UA). Most of what I say about it is applicable to (UFB).

Yu thinks that (UA) is supported by Confucius' own self-understanding. After quoting several relevant passages from the *Analects*, Yu concludes:

Apparently, he [Confucius] thinks that his work forms a coherent ethical worldview or outlook. *Hence*, when we read the *Analects*, we *must* assume that there is a coherent moral vision that is implicit in the fragmented sayings. A good reader of the *Analects* must grasp this moral vision. Needless to say, this

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[11] For example, in the second part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, entitled the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant has spelled out his "theory of virtue" (or "doctrine of virtue" to use his own terms), which defines virtue as a character trait (Baxley 2007).

[12] Of course, it is possible that in other spheres of life, we may find the concept of character traits, not the concept of rituals, being taken as primary. It is also possible that although this is the case in the *Analects*, it is not the case in the *Mencius*. We have to make our judgments on a case-by-case basis. In other words, there might be no unity of the Four Books in terms of the structures of their ethical theories (more of this later). It should be pointed out that this is my reading (and reformulation) of Chen Lai, and he might not necessarily agree with it.

vision is open to different interpretations, but if we fail to see its unity, we fail to understand Confucius." (Yu 2007: 14; emphasis added)

These are very strong claims. Yu would allow only different interpretations of Confucius' unified moral vision. The possibility that the ideas in the *Analects* might contain, for example, a hybrid of heterogeneous and inconsistent components or visions, is ruled out *a priori*. However, Yu does not offer an argument for the transition from Confucius' self-description before the word "hence" to the conclusion after it. Of course, I am not saying that Confucius' self-description must be *false*; I am only denying that it *must* be true. It may turn out that Confucius' self-description is true, and it may turn out that it is false.

I believe it can be argued that it is probably false. The central part of the argument should be based on nuanced and detailed textual exegesis. In addition, there are other considerations; I mention four of them here. First, the *Analects* is not a single text by a single author in terms of its composition. Individual "books" (*pian* 篇) of the *Analects*, or sets of them, might have been circulated before they were put together as a book.[13] The received text of the *Analects* is a product of a long process with many hands involved, and it is not clear how many of Confucius' sayings in the received text could be safely attributed to the historical Confucius. This fact about the composition of the *Analects*, of course, does not *necessarily* imply that Confucius' moral vision must have no unity. But it is possible (or even probable) that it might not.[14]

Second, many commentators and scholars have noticed numerous inconsistencies and contradictions in the received text.

Third, in the long history of the exegesis of the *Analects*, commentators and scholars have come up with many interpretations of what Confucius' moral outlook is, and they are astonishingly pluralistic and heterogeneous, and often in conflict with one another. And furthermore, they all have textual evidence to back up their interpretations. One of the ways to "save" these scholars' interpretations is to assume that each of them captures one component of Confucius' moral vision. As a consequence, we may conclude that Confucius' moral vision has no unity, but rather it is a complex vision that contains multitudes.

The fourth reason why Yu should not have accepted (UA) and (UFB) is that they are not consistent with Yu's critical and philosophical style of inquiry.[15] It seems that we should not rule out *a priori* and *uncritically* the possibility that the Four Books, as well as the ideas embodied in them, might be more heterogeneous and diverse than we have imagined. We do not want to rule out a wide range of possibilities before our inquiry starts. I mention only two of them here:

(1) It is possible that it makes the best sense to interpret (or organize) certain passages in the *Analects* in terms of Aristotelian structures, but it makes little sense regarding some of the other passages in the *Analects*. (This possibility is ruled out by [UA].)

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[13] This specific hypothesis is based on our general knowledge of how books were circulated in early China (Yu 1985). We do not have direct knowledge about how the *Analects* was circulated.

[14] It seems that Yu might allow such a possibility, namely it is possible that the fact that the *Analects* is not a single text might have partly caused some inconsistencies in Confucius' moral outlook. He allows such a possibility in the case of Aristotle's *Politics*: "Partly because the *Politics* is not a single and coherent text, Aristotle's description of the best constitution is not always consistent" (Yu 2007: 134).

[15] Nor is it consistent with the spirit of the Aristotelian method of saving the phenomena. I say more about this in the next section.

(2) It is possible that it makes the best sense to interpret (or organize) certain passages in the *Analects* in terms of Aristotelian structures, but not passages from other texts of the Four Books. (This possibility is ruled out by [UFB].)

It should be emphasized that my point here is a modest one. I am not claiming that these two scenarios are actually the case; I am only saying that these possibilities should not be ruled out *a priori* before the inquiry begins. I believe Yu could recast (UA) and (UFB) as working hypotheses that will have to be confirmed, modified, or even falsified by testing it against textual evidence. Then the possibilities mentioned above would not be ruled out *a priori*; rather they would be determined and tested through arguments based on textual interpretations. They will then become an indispensable part of the critical enterprise of comparative philosophy. I offer more nuanced arguments for this approach in section 4.

3 Yu's Uses of the Aristotelian Method of Saving the Phenomena

In this section, I focus on two of the main methods Yu uses to explain away the contradictions and inconsistencies, as well as varieties and multiplicities, in his interpretation of Aristotle and Confucian philosophers. I also argue that the methods might also be used to reconcile scholars' various interpretations of a text.

When one reaches the end of Yu's book, one will get a coherent picture of both ethical systems, with apparent contradictions explained away, and different interpretations reconciled. How does he do it? The answer is: Aristotle's method of saving the phenomena. This is Yu's summary of it:

> Aristotle's method of "saving the phenomena" consists of the following procedures: (1) collecting and establishing the phenomena; (2) discussing and analyzing the conflicts of these phenomena and the difficulties to which they give rise; and (3) saving the truth contained in all reputable opinions (*endoxa*). (Yu 2007: 5)

The second step turns out to include not only "discussing and analyzing" *aporiai* but also "putting an end to difficulties and contradictions (*aporiai*)" (*EE*, 1235b14; cited by Yu on 5). Aristotle gives the following description of the result of the procedure: "Such a view [that we arrive at in the end] will be most in harmony with the phenomena; and both the contradictory statements will in the end stand, if what is said is true in one sense but untrue in another" (*EE*, 1235b15-7; cited in Yu 2007: 5). Obviously Aristotle is not really trying to hold two *genuine* contradictory statements at the same time. He is saying that it is possible that a statement can be "true in one sense but untrue in another." As a result, the two *apparently* contradictory statements will turn out to be consistent. Aristotle has basically two strategies to accomplish this goal of reconciling apparently contradictory claims. The first is to assume the ambiguity of the semantic *meaning* of the terms. The second is to assume the plurality of the *content* of the concepts.[16]

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[16] There is an ambiguity of the meaning of the term "the meaning of A." It could mean in a narrow sense just the semantic meaning of A, or it could mean in a broad sense, which includes both the semantic meaning of A and the content of the concept represented by the word "A". If we use the term "meaning" in its broad sense, we would then say that there is only one strategy to save the phenomena.

Let us start with the first strategy. It is a familiar phenomenon that if a certain term in a statement has double meanings, the statement will be "true in one sense and untrue in another." This strategy of distinguishing ambiguous meanings of a term is part of what I have in mind when I use the phrase "the Aristotelian art of distinction-making." This is indeed one of the main strategies Yu adopts to construct coherent interpretations. Examples are abundant in Yu's book. Let me just mention four examples here without going into detail. The first is Yu's construction of a coherent interpretation of the doctrine of the mean in Aristotle and the Confucians. By assuming that the term "the mean" has the dual meanings of "inner mean" and "outer mean," Yu eventually comes up with a coherent and compelling theory of the mean in both Confucian and Aristotle's ethics (80–90). The second example is Yu's treatment of Aristotle's thesis of the unity of virtues. Drawing upon Aristotle's assumption that the term "virtue" has dual meanings, Yu suggests that it actually has triple meanings, which are (i) natural virtue that we are born with, (ii) trained or habituated virtue, and (iii) full virtue that is a fusion of ethical virtue and practical wisdom. Yu is then able to solve all the major *aporiai* associated with Aristotle's thesis of the unity of virtues (Yu 2007: 162–5). The third example is Yu's claim that the term "*ren*" in the *Analects* has the dual meanings of "excellence" (virtue in general) and "benevolence" (a particular virtue) (Yu 2007: 33–5). His argument is that this is the best way to make sense of all the seemingly inconsistent uses of the term in the *Analects*.[17] The fourth example is Yu's treatment of the well-known and on-going debate between inclusivist and intellectualist readings of Aristotle's notion of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. By assuming that the term *eudaimonia* (happiness) in Aristotle has the dual meanings of "living well" and "acting well," Yu eventually develops a third, alternative reading of Aristotle's theory of happiness that goes beyond both the inclusivist and intellectualist reading of Aristotle (172–6, 196–200).[18]

It is interesting to note that not all conflicting *endoxa* can be reconciled by the recognition of the ambiguity of the *meaning* of the terms. Aristotle sometimes tries to reconcile various opinions by assuming that each of them has captured just one component of the *content* of a complex notion. This seems to be what is going on in one passage about happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*, 1098b9-29). Aristotle starts with a survey of various *endoxa* about what happiness is:

> Some identify happiness with virtue, some with practical wisdom, others with a kind of philosophic wisdom, others with these, or one of these, accompanied by pleasure or not without pleasure; while others include also external prosperity. Now some of these views have been held by many men and men of old, others by a few eminent persons. (*NE*, 1098b23-7)[19]

Aristotle then makes a bold statement: "It is not probable that either of these should be entirely mistaken, but rather that they should be right in at least some one respect,

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[17] Here the reader should read George Rudebusch's essay in this symposium, in which he argues against Yu's interpretation, as well as Yu's response to his paper. There seems to be no knock-down *a priori* arguments to settle the disagreement between them; it shows that we have to engage with one another in actual textual interpretation on a case-by-case basis.

[18] Yu's reading is similar to Sarah Broadie's interpretation (Broadie 1991).

[19] I am using David Ross's translation (Aristotle et al. 1980).

or even in most respect" (*NE*, 1098b27-9). As we know, Aristotle's own notion of happiness does contain several components, such as virtue, practical wisdom, external prosperity, each of which has been one-sidedly identified as identical with happiness by different philosophers. Aristotle could have said that none of these opinions is completely right or completely wrong, which is very similar to what Yu has to say about Aristotle's and Confucian ethics: "neither Aristotle nor the Confucians are completely right or completely wrong" (Yu 2007: 6). This should not be a surprise because Yu does take both as "reputable opinions" (*endoxa* or phenomena).

Inspired by Yu's applying the method of saving the phenomena to comparative philosophy, one may want to apply it to the practice of interpreting texts. There seems to be no reason why we cannot take scholars' interpretations of a text as reputable opinions. We may say that if Aristotle and Yu can save people's opinions about how to become a good person, why can't we try to save people's opinions about what a text means? Perhaps we could use the method of saving the phenomena to reconcile scholars' conflicting interpretations of a text, just as Aristotle uses it to reconcile philosophers' conflicting opinions about life.

After having summarized the three steps of Aristotle's method, which I cited earlier, Yu continues, "This is meant to solve conflicts between phenomena by showing that each phenomenon is neither completely wrong nor completely right. It identifies each phenomenon's limit and adjusts what is said by all sides of a debate" (Yu 2007: 5). If we replace the word "phenomena" in the above passage with "interpretations," what we get seems to be a perfect description of the interpretive practice of those who are hermeneutically wise, as well as a good description of how they deal with others' interpretations. Aristotle's method is not Aristotle's alone; it should be seen as a description of practically wise people's strategies of making sense of things (be it life or texts), a point that has been argued by Gadamer (Gadamer 1979).

I have found only one explicit example in which Yu seems to be using the method of saving the phenomena to reconcile other scholars' apparently conflicting interpretations. We have already mentioned Yu's assumption that the word "*ren*" has dual meanings in the *Analects*: it may mean virtue in general (excellence) or benevolence (a particular virtue). Yu further assumes that the notion of *ren* (excellence) has three components in its content.[20] The procedure in which he makes his case is very similar to Aristotle's method of saving the phenomena. Yu first gives a survey of the scholars' existing views: Some equate excellence with the "following of the rites," some with "love (or benevolence)," and some with "appropriateness (*yi*)." Note that these three items are quite heterogeneous, and commentators who hold these readings all have textual evidence to support them. Yu then assumes that the notion of *ren* (excellence) actually has triple components, each of which is one-sidedly captured by one of the three existing readings:

> The general *ren* (excellence) in Confucius is a complex notion. The rites, love (or benevolence), and appropriateness are three key components of the general *ren* (excellence) in Confucius.… Each of these views has its ground, but each

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[20] This is one of many examples of "Yu's constantly making classification within classifications and distinctions with distinctions," as I observed earlier.

is partial. The Confucian notion of ren should be viewed as a dialectical unity, composed of these three aspects. (Yu 2007: 94–5)

Another merit of Yu's reading is that he also tries to give what may be called a "theory of error," which explains why others have got things partly wrong: "Many commentators choose to concentrate on one of [the three aspects], and even overemphasize one aspect at the expense of the other(s). Such a partial emphasis is probably one of the major reasons why there are so many different and even conflicting accounts of *ren*" (Yu 2007: 94).

Yu does not say why many commentators would "choose" to overemphasize only one of the components of *ren* at the expense of the others. It seems that Yu's theory of error might need to be complemented by Aristotle's. When Aristotle argues against the view that great misfortunes are compatible with happiness, he says, "No one would consider happy a person living in that way—unless he were defending a thesis at all costs" (*NE*, 1096a2; cited in Kraut 2006: 79). As Richard Kraut points out,

> The term Aristotle uses here (*thesis*: matching precisely our English term) has a technical sense: it is the paradoxical supposition of a well-known philosopher (*Topics* 1048b18). When arguing with each other, philosophers have been known to persist in defending, at great length, propositions that, to most people, lack all plausibility. (Kraut 2006: 79)

We may also add that, unlike ordinary people, philosophers seem to have professional interest in presenting their opinions as radically different because they are in a "profession" in which it seems what is at stake is always whether one can say something radically different from what others have already said.

Yu does not explicitly say that his method of reconciling the three readings of Confucius' concept of *ren* is indeed Aristotle's method of saving the phenomena applied to interpretation. So it is not clear whether he would agree with our description of what he is doing here. It is also not clear whether he would be willing to adopt it as a general method because we only find him using it once. I think it can be argued that Yu should accept our description of what he is doing, and adopt it as a general method. One of the main reasons, I believe, is that it would give him a powerful tool to deal with the historical fact that commentators and scholars have given conflicting interpretations of the nature of Confucius' ethics in the *Analects* in the long history of its exegesis. One of the ways to deal with this fact is to regard the scholars' interpretations of Confucius' ethics as reputable opinions (*endoxa* or phenomena), and then apply Aristotle's method to them. We can save them by assuming that each of them captures only one of many components of Confucius' ethics.[21]

4 The Mirror-Projecting Objection

I have mentioned that Yu's third achievement is that he has given us the most systematically articulated picture of what Confucian ethics would be like *if* its basic

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[21] It goes without saying that such a method might also become a powerful tool at the hands of those who do not assume that the ethical theory in the *Analects* has a global hierarchical structure. Using this method, they would be able to argue Yu's virtue ethics reading only captures certain local structure of the ethical theory in the *Analects*.

structures are parallel to the basic structures of Aristotle's ethics. This can be summarized as Yu's general thesis (GT):

> (GT) Confucian ethics is a "virtue ethics" that is structurally similar to Aristotle's virtue ethics.

Let me now turn to a specific objection to (GT). The objection goes something like this: "The Confucian ethics and Aristotle's ethics are two radically different systems of ethical thought; therefore, Yu must have imposed an *Aristotelian* framework or structure on *Confucian* ethics. The reason why we see a Confucian ethics as having Aristotelian structures is not because they are there in the original Confucian texts, but rather because Yu is holding an Aristotelian mirror for the Confucians to look into. In other words, the Aristotelian structures Yu has discovered in Confucian ethics are actually the result of projecting *Aristotelian* structures into *Confucian* ethics."[22] I shall call this the "mirror-projecting" objection.

Yu might be aware of this objection, for he shares the general worry about "one major mistake of doing comparative philosophy," which is the "unreflective imposition of assumptions of one's own tradition on the other" (Yu 2007: 6). In section 1, we have discussed how Yu has adopted what we called the Schwartzian strategy of having a critical attitude toward the interpretation and truth of Aristotle's ethics in order to deal with a similar concern. However, it seems that Yu's Schwartzian strategy will not work here; it seems not enough for Yu to subject Aristotle's ethics to critical examination and defend his interpretations of it. For even when one is convinced by Yu's defense of his interpretation of the structures of Aristotle's ethics, one can still disagree with his interpretation of the structures of Confucian ethics, especially his conclusion that Confucian ethics is a type of virtue ethics, and its structures are a "mirror image" of the structures of Aristotle's ethics on many levels.

How might one respond to the mirror-projecting objection then? Obviously the worry behind the objection is a legitimate one. However, the formulation we have seen is a confusing way to express it. We may single out two problematic assumptions here. Note that the objection is formulated in such a way as if "Confucian ethics" and "Aristotle's ethics" were two unified substances (ethical systems) on both sides of the comparison. This is an *a priori* and speculative essentialist assumption about the essence or the form (*eidos*) of each of the two ethical systems. The part about Confucian ethics is the assumption that we have mentioned in section 2:

> (UFB) The Four Books have a coherent unity, which is "Confucian virtue ethics."[23]

Let me now turn to the second assumption. Note that this particular version of the mirror-projecting objection is quite brief and abstract; it does not present its conclusion as based on textual exegesis. It seems to have assumed the existence of certain "direct access" to the "forms" (*eidos*) of the ethical systems on both sides:

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[22] This is not an actual quote from anyone. I have often heard people making arguments of this kind.

[23] So here we see another reason why Yu may want to reject (UFB). By rejecting it, he could easily dismiss the objection which is based on (UFB).

(DA) One can have an unmediated and direct access to the forms of both Aristotle's and Confucian ethics, and could "look into" each of the two unified systems and "see" that they are radically different.

These two assumptions seem to be at the core of this version of the mirror-projecting objection. Now obviously the objection will lose its force if Yu formulates (GT) without making these two assumptions, (DA) and (UFB).

Yu seems to reject (DA), even though he explicitly endorses (UFB). Let me start with (DA). What does it mean to reject (DA)? It means that all of our understanding of Confucian ethics and Aristotle's ethics must be mediated through textual interpretation. What are the practical implications of rejecting (DA)? It means that the general thesis (GT) should not be presented as the result of an "insight" into the essence of Confucian and Aristotle's ethics. Rather it should be presented as simply a summary of all the concrete PS theses that are established through nuanced arguments based on textual evidence. Furthermore, each and every PS thesis should not be seen as being derived from (GT). Rather they are established on a case-by-case basis; to judge whether a specific PS thesis is true is always a matter of making concrete judgments about whether the interpretation of the relevant passages from the Confucian texts in terms of Aristotelian structures makes the best sense of these passages.

This seems to be exactly what Yu does in the book. He does not take his general thesis (GT), which is that Confucian ethics and Aristotle's ethics are virtue ethics with similar structures, as an *a priori* thesis, from which all the PS theses are derived. For Yu, (GT) is either a working hypothesis waiting to be confirmed, or a summary of the specific PS theses that are established independently later in the book. This is why at several places Yu is able to discover sharp structural dissimilarities and contrasts between Confucian and Aristotle's ethics. These concrete case studies provide modifications of his general thesis. This explains why a great merit of the book is that it is full of incredibly nuanced and detailed exegesis of numerous passages from the texts on both sides of the comparison, and why Yu's book is such a pleasure to read for those who love details.

What about Yu's endorsement of (UFB)? As we have mentioned in section 2, Yu does not have to accept (UFB) as an *a priori* assumption. In the same spirit of his treatment of (GT), he could recast (UFB) as a working hypothesis that will have to be confirmed, modified, or even falsified by testing it against textual evidence.

As we have mentioned, Yu's (GT) consists of a set of what we have called "parallel structure" theses (the PS Theses). Among all the PS theses, the strongest case Yu has made, I believe, is his thesis about the doctrine of the mean in Confucius and Aristotle. I believe this thesis can pass the test of textual interpretation in the sense that it seems to make the best sense of the relevant passages in the *Analects* and the *Zhongyong* as well as the relevant passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Moreover, Yu's argument includes a deeper explanation about why Aristotle's and the Confucian doctrines of the mean share the same structure, which is that both use archery as the model to understand right actions. This fact firmly rules out the possibility that the parallel structures of their doctrines of the mean could be the result of mirror-projecting, or a pre-established harmony, or sheer coincidence.

I personally think that Yu's textual evidence for his thesis about the doctrine of the mean in Confucius and Aristotle is very convincing. But I am aware of the

possibility that others may interpret Yu's textual evidence differently. I have been using the phrases such as "textual evidence" and "textual interpretation and exegesis." I hope I did not give the reader the wrong impression that I believed that we could have "direct access" to textual evidence, and that I wanted to find in "textual evidence" a substitute for the Platonic "form." On the contrary, I believe Davidson's argument against the notion of unmediated empirical sense data is perfectly applicable to the notion of unmediated textual evidence. There will always be further disagreements among scholars about "textual evidence," such as what a certain piece of textual evidence really means, what counts as "textual evidence," how much weight we should give to a certain piece of textual evidence in a Quinean-Davidsonian holistic scheme of interpretation.

However, we have no choice here. There is no *a priori* knock-down philosophical proof to settle the whole issue once and for all; we simply have to get our hands dirty in the messy business of textual interpretation. We are fully aware that scholars make different hermeneutic judgments, and there is no such thing as the "form" of Confucian ethics, or pure textual evidence, to appeal to in order to settle the disagreements. So this is my proposal about how we might go about assessing Yu's theses. We should take them as working hypotheses, and subject them to the test of textual interpretation, the test of consensus of the community of scholars, as well as the test of time. What I have said in this paper is only one piece of *endoxon*, a point of departure for future inquiry.

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