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**Панос ЕЛІОПУЛОС**  
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**EDUCATION AND THE DOCTRINE  
 OF THE MEAN IN ARISTOTLE AND  
 IN CONFUCIUS**



*Aristotle and Confucius elaborate their theories on the basis of a complex apprehension of the ethical and political problem as one. The Greek and the Chinese philosopher focus on the importance of virtue, which signifies a passage from an initial understanding of communal life to a life with others that becomes self-fulfilling and facilitates self improvement and excellence. The individual goal is the same as the collective goal; this becomes the foundation of their educational schemes. By their doctrines on the Mean, the two thinkers focus on the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge, not as mere theoretical equipment but as guidance for practical purposes. Virtue is the capacity to preserve oneself in a perfect condition, one that will lead to a eudaimonistic and harmonious life. The Mean is the proper way that will create the right habit and will secure the right evolution of the human being towards its ideal condition. Thus the Mean becomes a golden rule for education, as education is an ongoing process until righteousness and phronesis become indispensable aspects in one's personality.*

**Keywords:** Education, Mean, Aristotle, Confucius, Virtue, Excellence, Wisdom, Knowledge

While Ancient Greek philosophy, and particularly the philosophy of Aristotle, is orientated towards the theoretical life, Chinese philosophy discerns as most significant those issues that are encountered within the context of political reality (Dubs, 1946: pp. 273–282). Confucianism is no exception to this precept. In the doctrines of Confucius there is illustrated the need for societal order and prosperity, for learning, for harmony and stabilization, for an inner morality and subjectivity that will foster the matters of the State. For Aristotle, the solution of the moral and the political problem of the human being is equalled with a better understanding of life itself and with a profound responsiveness to our ontological situation. In their respective value systems,

the concept of the Mean is the cornerstone for human virtue, the initiation for the cohesive realization between man and a eudaimonistic or harmonious life, one of self-fulfilment. Thus, the Mean is not only an axiological and metaphysical constituent (Shen Keng, 1978: pp. 37–68) but also a prerequisite for continuous learning, a conception that is a measure and a secure instrument for individual growing within the frame of education.

Aristotle uses two words for the term “mean”: one is *mesotēs* and the other is *meson*. For Confucius, the term “mean” is contained in the Chinese words *zhongyong* and *zhong* (Yu, 2007: p. 240). The theory of the Mean does not denote an indication for the mediocre. As an ethical insight it is not even wholly about moderation. Quite the contrary, in both philosophies, it supports, as a main pillar, the conception of moral completion. This fulfilment of what is genuinely human is a process of moving towards divinity. Nevertheless this should not be conceived as an external goal. It is internal and it is the actualization of what is divine in us. Moral completion as self-completion is the way of Heaven, but in the form of the actualization of the originally good human nature (Yu, 2007: p. 184). The Mean is all about perfection; it excludes excess and deficiency.

For Aristotle it exhibits that every virtue of character lies between two correlative vices or faults. *Arête*, virtue, is no other than excellence. The Stagirate further elucidates that excellence enables a being/thing to perform its function well. For instance, the excellence of an eye makes the eye good and enables it to function well as an eye; having good eyes means being able to see well. Likewise, the excellence of a horse makes it a good horse, and so good at certain tasks. In accordance, the excellence of a human being will be that disposition which makes him a good human being and which enables him to perform his function well (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a16–25). The function or characteristic activity of human beings, according to Aristotle in Book I, is a way of living consisting in the exercise of the soul's capacities in accordance with reason, or at any rate not in opposition to reason; thus, a good person exercises these capacities and performs these activities well. Excellence, then, is that condition which best suits human beings to perform those activities which are distinctively human. Hence the best life for a human being will involve the active exercise of his soul's capacities in accordance with excellence (Aristotle, *NE*, 1098a12–18). Aristotle summarizes his account of excellence in Book II, adding his view about the Mean: “excellence... is a settled disposition determining choice, involving the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, as the practically wise person (*phronimos*) would determine it” (Aristotle, *NE*, 1106b36–1107a2).

The Greek philosopher imports this way of thinking into his account of ethical excellence. Bodily strength and health are destroyed by excess and

deficiency (Hardie, 1968). Too much food, or too much exercise, are bad for health, just as too little food or exercise are. The same holds in ethical matters; excellence of character is concerned with emotions and acts, in which there can be excess or deficiency or a mean. For example, one can be frightened or bold, feel desire or anger or pity, and experience pleasure and pain generally, either more or less than is right, and in both cases wrongly; while to have these feelings at the right time, on the right occasion, toward the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the mean—and the best amount is of course the mark of excellence. Hence excellence is a mean state in the sense that it aims at the mean (Aristotle, *NE*, 1106b15–29). Aristotle concludes his argument by comparing the person who has such excellence of character to a skilled archer able to hit a target (Aristotle, *NE*, 1094a23–24).

In Confucian ethics, before virtues to others, there are virtues to the self: sincerity and the cultivation of knowledge (Rainey, 2010). Virtuous action towards others begins with virtuous contemplation, which begins with knowledge. A virtuous disposition without knowledge is susceptible to corruption and virtuous action without sincerity is not true righteousness. Cultivating knowledge is also important for one's own sake; the superior person loves learning for the sake of learning and righteousness for the sake of righteousness. The Confucian theory of ethics as exemplified in Lǐ (禮) -which in the *Analects* means ceremony, ritual, propriety, proper conduct- is based on three important conceptual aspects of life: ceremonies associated with sacrifice to ancestors and deities of various types, social and political institutions, and the etiquette of daily behaviour (Chin, 2007). Confucius makes manifest that Lǐ did not originate from the heavens and stresses the development of Lǐ through the actions of several sages- rulers of the past. His discussions of Lǐ tend to redefine the term to refer to all actions committed by a person in order to build the ideal society, rather than those simply conforming with canonical standards of ceremony. In Confucianism, the concept of Lǐ is closely related to Yì (義), which is actually based upon the idea of reciprocity. Yì can be translated as righteousness, though it may also mean what is ethically best to do in a certain context. The term contrasts with action done out of self-interest. While pursuing one's own self-interest is not necessarily bad, one would be a better, more righteous person if one's life was based upon following a path designed to enhance the greater good. Thus following Yì denotes doing the right thing for the right reason.

As action according to Lǐ should conform to the aspiration of adhering to Yì, Yì is linked to the moral principle of Rén (仁). Rén consists of five basic virtues: seriousness, generosity, sincerity, diligence and kindness (Bonevac, Daniel; Phillips, Stephen, 2009). Rén is the virtue of perfectly fulfilling one's responsi-

bilities toward others, most often translated as “benevolence”, “humaneness”, “goodness”, even “authoritativeness” and “selflessness.” *Rén* literally means “man” and “two”; therefore it is a reference to the moral and social dimension of the human being. Without *Rén* man cannot ever be happy. Confucius' moral system is based upon *empathy* and understanding others, rather than ordained rules, originating from the heavenly sphere. However, obtaining *Rén* means to perform those individual duties that allow man to become gradually incorporated into the general context of a community (and subsequently of heaven, T'ien), in a harmonious and uninterrupted way (Velissaropoulos, 1981: p. 192). To develop one's spontaneous responses of *Rén* so that these could guide action intuitively is even better than living by the rules of *Yi*. Confucius asserts that virtue is a mean between extremes. For example, the properly generous person, as in Aristotle, would give only the right amount- not too much and not too little (Bonevac, Daniel; Phillips, Stephen, 2009).

For Confucius, *Li* does not describe a stable axiological conception. *Li* changes according to the times and to the ethos of a society, thus belonging to a social ever-changing order in process. The Mean that springs from *Li* is the mean as according to a certain historical era. Similarly for Aristotle the Mean does not come out from an objective and everlasting source. Rather it is the Mean according to each individual, the Mean that befits his individuality in the sense that what is the mean for one person cannot necessarily be the mean for another as well. By keeping the mean, man becomes better and conforms himself in the exemplar of the morally perfect person, the *Phronimos* or the *Zhun-zi*. As *exis* (habit) is the cornerstone for Aristotle's ethical theory, similarly for Confucius it is quite evident in his *Analects* that habit, as demonstrated in action, is what differentiates people from one another.

Confucius upheld that following the Way, Tao, is necessary (Rainey, 2010). The Way is not mystical; it is mostly practical and considers human and social reality in general, so it educates human beings in their everyday life. The Chinese word for virtue (*De*) implies power and the thing that can be built up within oneself. Virtue can be gained by doing the work before considering the reward and by attacking the evil within oneself rather than the evil in others. Another of the great threats that Confucius saw to virtue was the confusion of clever talk. For Confucius the good are never unhappy, the wise never confused, and the brave never afraid. The higher knowledge of wisdom is to know when one knows something and when one does not. “Whoever learns but does not think is lost; but whoever thinks but does not learn is in danger” (Confucius, *Analects*, II.15).

Education, under the right terms, is of primary importance in this virtue-seeking process. Love of learning is essential to the virtues, and Confucius explained how love of the six virtues can degenerate without the love of

learning (Yao, 2000). Love of goodness degenerates to simple-mindedness, love of knowledge to lack of principle, love of faithfulness to injurious disregard of consequences, love of uprightness to harshness, love of courage to insubordination, and love of strong character to mere recklessness. Yet the ultimate value of observing others is to learn how to equal those who are worth and to examine the faults of others in ourselves. Learning is not a mechanical process; it is the nucleus of man's unwavering effort towards a virtuous and harmonious life. Confucius insisted that he never found a single person who could see one's own faults and bring the charge against oneself. For this reason, he considered that to have faults and not be trying to correct them is really the greatest fault. Any knowledge of what is wrong or right is of no significance unless put into practice. Confucius advised strongly against the fear of admitting mistakes and in favour of amending one's behavior. He recommended friendships with the upright, sincere, and well-informed, but he warned against those who have weak principles. Beneficial pleasures are studying ceremonies and music, discussing good aspects in others' conduct, and having wise friends. Detrimental pleasures are all profligate enjoyments and wasting time.

The Chinese thinker taught the middle way between extremes in regard to most virtues and considered moderation transcendent and rare in his time as well. The Confucian middle way was later elaborated on in the treatise called the *Doctrine of the Mean* or *The Center of Harmony* (*Zhong Yong*) (Plaks, 1999: pp. 311–331). The greatest concept of virtue for Confucius was *Rén*, which is a form of humanity or human-heartedness, the virtue of a good person. Virtue has its own Mean. Confucius observed that faults fell into patterns, and that one looked for faults only in order to recognize goodness. Confucius upheld that goodness meant courtesy in private life, diligence in public life, and loyalty in relationships. The good establish their own character and then help others to establish theirs. Goodness is not only a duty; it is a whole art, an art based on the Mean. A good person does not worry about not being known by others but seeks to know them according to *Rén*. Without goodness one cannot endure adversity for long nor enjoy prosperity for long. The mean affects every side of human action but also character taxonomy: the good are courageous, but the brave are not necessarily good, just as the virtuous are eloquent, though the eloquent may not be virtuous.

Regarding the Chinese term *Zhun-zi*, it originally meant the son of a ruler and thus an aristocrat, a noble man, but in the time of Confucius it came to imply a moral quality and can also be translated as a superior man or a gentleman. In China one could attain higher social status through moral and educational development. For Confucius a good man was always a gentleman, but not all gentlemen were good. A gentleman considers loyalty and faithfulness funda-

mental and is not afraid of correcting his mistakes. For Confucius the main concern for the gentleman was self-improvement (Creel, 1949). A gentleman, as the noble person that he is, is distressed at his own lack of capacity, never at the failure of others to recognize his merits. A gentleman's nine cares are to see clearly, hear distinctly, be kind in looks, respectful in manner, sincere in words, and diligent in work. A gentleman should be cautious with words and diligent in action for the case that his words might outrun his deeds. The superior person does not promote someone merely because of what one says nor does one reject sayings because of who said them. He knows how to follow the mean in every matter of his everyday life.

Occasionally Confucius contrasted the superior person to the inferior and how they will make use of the doctrine of the Mean. The superior sets one's heart on virtue, the inferior on comfort. The superior think of sanctions, whereas the inferior will think of favors and of whatever can benefit their lives. The superior person looks at a question from all sides without bias; the inferior is biased and can see only one point of view. In this way, knowledge is affirmed as an instrument in the educational procedure towards a virtuous life, not as an abstract construction. The superior are not for or against anything but follow what is right; the inferior understand only profit and gain. The gentleman calls attention to the good points in others; the small person points out their defects. A gentleman makes demands on himself; the inferior person makes them on others. The gentleman is dignified but not proud; the inferior are proud but not dignified. For Confucius the gentleman thinks of the way and its progress, not how he is going to make a living. He warns against dehumanization, saying that a gentleman is not an implement. A gentleman considers justice essential, practices propriety, is modest and faithful. A gentleman acts before he speaks and then speaks according to his action (Legge, 2009). All these point to the direction of ethical action according to the mean, action which is enhanced and supported through the ethos of education.

In direct comparison, both ethical theories are based on virtue ethics and humanism in a broad sense. This bears notable effect on their educational viewpoints. The mean in Aristotle and in Confucius is the prerequisite for the self awareness and self completion of the human being. To achieve this end, the Stagirite proclaims that each being must have its appropriate virtue, in a form that contains no excess no deficiency. The capacity of the intellect in the human soul is what distinguishes man from other species and is responsible for realising the mean. For Confucius the two opposite cosmic forces, the Yin (the male force) and the Yang (the female force) comprise the harmonic existence of the world. For the Chinese philosopher those two forces, contrary to Aristotle and his theory that the Form is hierarchically more important than the Matter, are equivalent. This balance has *T'ien Tao* as an eternal exemplar,

which is the perfect exemplar for human virtue. The rational and emotional capacity which fosters other people in the form of philanthropy (Rén) is the element that characterizes human beings (Confucius, *Analects*, VI. 25 & VII. 28). Despite the capacity for rationality man is imbued by an inner tendency for irrational desires. Children and young people who are untrained ethically are unable of awakening their moral consciousness. Pedagogically, both for Confucius and for the Macedonian teacher time is necessary so as to provide a young person with the opportunity to cultivate his spirit. When this process is over, and when learning has reached a certain point where the mean is in practice, then Arête or Rén, respectively, allow each person to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, forever.

Axiologically speaking, as shown above, the mean is not a medium between two equally wrong choices. It is rather the best, the perfect and the most beautiful (Bostock, 2000). For Aristotle and Confucius moral value is not found in knowledge as much as in practice and in ethos, in the creation and stability of certain habits. In the ethical sphere the human being is required not only to know cognitively moral virtue but also to act according to it, so as to mold his character effectively. Thus the highest good for Aristotle is eudaimonia, living according to perfect virtue, whereas Confucius proposes that man should benefit from his inner connection with the universal order with Heaven, T'ien.

It is worth mentioning that both theories vehemently refrain from suggesting abstract moral rules. Quite the opposite, they propose a specific moral personality according to which each person should adjust his practice. This adjustment of practice is a non-linear conception of education. That moral personality for Aristotle is the *Phronimos* or *Spoudaios* (Hardie, 1968), while for Confucius is the *Zhun-zi*, the Confucian sage, the virtuous man. Both personalities possess every virtue and can serve as moral gnomons for the common people who have not yet reached that particular stage of knowledge and wisdom. Respectively, Right Reason and Lǐ are the objective measures for ethical conduct while Phronesis and Yi consist the subjective spiritual capability of man who knows and decides on what is right (Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b 31–34. Also, Düring, 1966: p. 468). The relation between right reason and phronesis in Aristotle are similar to the relation between Lǐ and Yi in Confucius. In this context, the *Zhun-zi*, the Confucian sage, has Yi as his essence, while he resorts to ethical action according to Lǐ. This entails certain training into specific habits just as in the Aristotelian theory of the Mean. If irrational desires are subdued to Lǐ, then man can return to a virtuous condition. Under the guidance of Lǐ man finds the proper mean for his conduct to himself and to others. As with Aristotle's right reason, Lǐ does not suppress man's free expression. Quite the contrary, it releases his inner capability for

perfection, virtue. Under this light, both right reason and *Li* take the role of indispensable educational elements, offering integrity and dignity, inherent both in the human nature and in human action.

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### **Панос Елиопулос. Образование и доктрина Середины у Аристотеля и Конфуция**

Аристотель и Конфуций разработали свои теории на основе комплексного восприятия этических и политических проблем как единого целого. Греческий и китайский философы подчеркивали важность добродетели, означающую переход от исходного понимания общественной жизни к жизни с другими, которая становится самореализацией и облегчает самосовершенствование. Индивидуальная цель та же, что и коллективная; это становится основой для их образовательных программ. В доктрине середины, два мыслителя сосредотачиваются на приобретении мудрости и знания, не только лишь в качестве теоретических изысканий, но и в качестве руководства для достижения практических целей. Добродетель является способностью сохранять себя в идеальном состоянии, приводит к эвдемонии и гармоничной жизни. Середина—это надлежащий путь, который создает правильные привычки и обеспечивает правильную эволюцию человеческого существа к своему идеальному состоянию. Таким образом, середина становится золотым правилом для образования, так как образование—это процесс, непрерывно происходящий до тех пор, пока праведность и фронеzis не станут незаменимыми составляющими личности.

*Ключевые слова:* образование, доктрина середины, Аристотель, Конфуций, добродетель, совершенство, мудрость, знание.

### **Панос Еліопулос. Освіта і доктрина Середины у Аристотеля і Конфуція**

Арістотель і Конфуцій розробили свої теорії на основі комплексного сприйняття етичних і політичних проблем як єдиного цілого. Грецький і китайський філософи підкреслювали важливість чесноти, яка б означала перехід від вихідного розуміння суспільного життя до життя з іншими, що стає самореалізацією і полегшує самовдосконалення. Індивідуальна мета та ж, що і колективна; це стає основою для їх освітніх програм. У доктрині середини два мислителя зосереджуються на надбанні мудрості та знання не тільки в якості лише теоретичних досліджень, але і в якості керівництва для досягнення практичних цілей. Добродетель є здатністю зберігати себе в ідеальному стані, що призводить до евдемонії і гармонійного життя. Середина—це належний шлях, який створює правильні звички і забезпечує правильну еволюцію людської істоти до свого ідеального стану. Таким чином, середина стає золотим правилом для освіти, позаяк освіта—це процес, що безперервно відбувається, допоки праведність і фронеzis не стануть незамінними складовими особистості.

*Ключові слова: освіта, доктрина середини, Арістотель, Конфуцій, доброчесність, досконалість, мудрість, знання.*

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