

**Self-determination and the Metaphysics of Human Nature  
in Aristotle and Mencius—May Sim (College of the Holy Cross)**

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If self-determination is to be conceived as an ability to know the truth and rule oneself, then its role is central to metaphysics and ethics because metaphysics understands the truth, and ethics grasps good actions that are impossible without self-rule. Given its significance to theory and practice, comparing Mencius's and Aristotle's conceptions of self-determination would shed light on the requirements for thinking about it and the challenges each view faces. Since these thinkers stand in radically disparate philosophical and cultural traditions, any insights or problems that arise from comparing them would have implications transcending each, offering resources for understanding 'self-determination'.

Why compare Aristotle and Mencius? Despite their differences, they agree that there's a common human nature that's intimately bound up with what's good for human beings. Both believe that the nature of a human being enables him to know the nature of reality/truth as well as the good, which in turn enables him to live a moral life or one of self-determination. Nevertheless, a closer examination shows that they differ in their conceptions of the self, how this self achieves knowledge of the truth, the nature of ultimate truth itself, and the scope of the effects one who is self-determined or virtuous has on others and the rest of the world.

Let me begin with Aristotle. He does not think that human beings are by nature good or bad, but they are by nature able to acquire the moral virtues and become good. Aristotle provides his account of human nature in his human function argument (NE I.7). Rejecting that the life of nutrition and growth as well as the life of sense perception are uniquely human functions, because they are shared with plants and animals, respectively, Aristotle claims that the human function is the life of activity of that part of the soul that has reason. Dividing the human soul into the rational part that possesses reason and the non-rational part that does not have reason, Aristotle in turn sub-divides the rational and non-rational parts. He divides the non-rational part into the vegetative and desiring parts and the rational part into the speculative and deliberative parts. Whereas the vegetative part cannot be controlled by reason at all, the desiring part (made up of our appetites and emotions) can listen to reason and be controlled by it. When perfected through habituation, our appetites and emotions result in the moral virtues of justice, temperance, courage, mildness, etc. Whereas the speculative part is directed at unchanging objects and results in demonstrative knowledge and wisdom when perfected, the deliberative part is directed at changing objects and results in practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) when perfected. Whilst the speculative part can be perfected through teaching and experience, the deliberative part cannot be perfected through teaching. Rather, *phronêsis* requires the possession of all the moral virtues which are acquired through habituation, so that one would not only know what is good for oneself in various situations, i.e., the particulars, but also what is good for all human beings in general. None of these requirements for

*phronêsis* is achievable by just knowing unchangeable truths or experiencing particulars. Thus, *phronêsis* cannot be taught or acquired through experience alone.

Despite the fact that Aristotle's account of the human soul or nature is structured to deal with different objects, such as the changeable and unchangeable things, and is by nature teleologically oriented toward its respective perfections, the human soul is not by nature already good. As a result, left to one's own resources, an individual for Aristotle is neither already good nor will become good. On the contrary, Mencius maintains that human nature is good. Mencius says, "All humans have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others" (2A 6.1).<sup>1</sup> He appeals to the "alarm and compassion" that anyone would feel when witnessing a child who is about to fall into a well, as evidence for human compassion. According to Mencius, this human reaction isn't due to any ulterior motive to gain the approval of the child's parents, one's friends or neighbors, or to one's being aggravated by the child's cries. It could only stem from a genuine compassion toward any other's suffering. Elaborating, Mencius claims, "if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human" (2A 6.4) and goes on to include the feeling of disdain, deference, and the feeling of approval and disapproval as necessary to being human. He maintains that these feelings are the beginnings of the virtues of benevolence, righteousness/appropriateness, ritual propriety and wisdom, respectively, saying, "If you let people follow their feelings (original nature), they will be able to do good. This is what is meant by saying that human nature is good."<sup>2</sup>

That human beings are capable of certain feelings such as anger, fear, love, etc. is not a fact that Aristotle would dispute. However, to say that certain feelings, such as those Mencius mentions, are already sprouts of specific virtues that make someone capable of the full virtues is a claim with which Aristotle would disagree. For instance, Aristotle would dispute Mencius's remark, "The feeling of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The feeling of disdain is the sprout of righteousness [appropriateness]. The feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom" (2A 6.5). More elaborately, Aristotle wouldn't disagree with Mencius's view that the possession of the four feelings is as natural to human beings as their possession of four limbs (2A 6.6). This is because Aristotle himself includes the appetites and emotions under the nonrational or desiring part of the human soul which all human beings possess. Nevertheless, he would not go as far as Mencius to say that having these feelings is already having the *beginnings* of the virtues of benevolence, appropriateness, propriety and wisdom for the following reasons.

First, Aristotle separates feelings from virtues. Whereas one isn't praised or blamed for having certain feelings, Aristotle maintains that one is praised for having virtues and blamed for having vices. Put otherwise, Aristotle thinks that one is not

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Mencius are from *The Essential Mengzi*, translated by Bryan W. Van Norden, (Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1963)(Chan hereafter.) p. 54, Mencius continues, "If man does evil, it is not the fault of his natural endowment." (*Mencius* 6A:6).

to be praised or blamed for the capacity to have, or for having certain feelings, e.g., of fear and anger. But having the virtues of courage and justice are praiseworthy while lacking them incurs blame. Second, Aristotle says that virtues result from making choices whereas feelings come and go without being chosen. E.g., we can feel fear when being attacked by a bear without choosing to feel the fear, whilst the virtue of courage is only actualized when one chooses to stand firm in a fearful situation. Finally, Aristotle maintains that one is moved by something outside when one has a feeling, whereas a virtue stems from an internal state of readiness to act, say with courage, justice or generosity, i.e., a virtue of character that has been cultivated over time.

Moreover, Aristotle would disagree with Mencius's claim that what makes one human is the possession of these four specific feelings. What is clear from Aristotle's human function argument is that instead of feelings, the activities of the rational part of the soul, namely, speculation and deliberation, are essential to making one human. More specifically, rather than the four feelings constituting the beginnings of the four virtues, Aristotle would say that feelings need to be controlled by the rational part of the soul before one can function as a human being, and become a good. Nevertheless, to be more precise, we ought to note that the differences between Aristotle's and Mencius's accounts of feelings stem from their different views of human nature. Whereas Aristotle locates feelings in the desiring, non-rational part of the soul, which require reason's (deliberation's) control before one can be morally virtuous, Mencius doesn't separate human nature into the rational and non-rational part, let alone have one part of one's mind control the other. Instead, what Mencius regards as the human mind is not separate from the heart that feels. Hence, the human mind (*xin* 心) is always the heart-mind for him, which heart-mind is not only capable of feeling but thinking and reflecting (*si* 思). Since the heart-mind can not only feel but also understand the inherent virtue each feeling is, and the perfection toward which each is inclined, feelings are not separate from virtues for Mencius, unlike Aristotle.

Concerning the question of self-determination then, if construed as an ability to know the truth about one's human nature and rule oneself or determine one's own goodness, it seems that Mencius's account allows for a greater degree of self-determination than Aristotle's. For Aristotle, unless one lives in a community with others who already know scientific truths and can act as our teachers, it seems that one will never realize one's potential for contemplating such truths. Similarly, unless there are exemplary individuals such as *phronimoi*, along with good legislation regarding the types of actions that are good to habituate, and parents who provide a good upbringing informed by the laws, it would be impossible for someone to know the virtues and cultivate himself into a virtuous person for Aristotle. In contrast, because the four feelings or sprouts of the four virtues are inherent in someone for Mencius, and he even identifies these sprouts with their respective virtues of benevolence, appropriateness, propriety and wisdom, it seems that someone can know his human nature and determine what's good for himself independently of others in a community. Mencius says, "Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We

inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them” (6A 6.7). Continuing, Mencius asserts that just by reflecting on our hearts (*xin* 心) and the feelings inherent in them, we will understand our human nature and our potential for goodness. On the contrary, it is when we fail to reflect on these inherent feelings that we become bad. Thus, it seems entirely up to the individual to grasp his nature and determine his goodness. However, a closer look would reveal the impossibility of self-determination (for the majority of people) unless one lives in the human community with certain characteristics for Mencius. Thus, his view of whether self-determination (insofar as the majority is concerned) is contingent on a community isn't as different from Aristotle's as one might have expected from the above contrast between how they structure human nature.

It seems that even Mencius requires some kind of human contact to trigger one's self-reflection and knowledge of human nature before self-determination is possible. For instance, he reported that when the sage king Shun was young, he lived in the wild and interacted with deer and pigs so that he resembled the wild people living deep in the mountains. Nevertheless, Mencius reported that the moment Shun heard a good saying or deed, “it was like a river overflowing its banks, torrential, so that nothing can stop it” (7A 16.1). This anecdote gives the impression that a single instance of a good action or speech about a good action suffices to trigger Shun's reflection and realization of his inherent virtues. A hint that such a trigger is not unique to the sage but more widely shared can be inferred from Mencius's assertion, “We and the sage are of the same kind” (6A 7.4). This means that as human beings, we share the same good human nature as the sage, and take pleasure in it. Mencius cites the *Odes* that Confucius observes to have correctly illustrated the Way in depicting the relation between things and their norms:

Heaven gives birth to the teeming people.

If there is a thing, there is a norm.

This is the constant people cleave to.

They are fond of this beautiful Virtue. (6A 6.8)

This passage means that we have a natural inclination to be good because it is the norm of human nature. As such, it seems that we are like the sage king Shun in requiring just one instance of virtue to propel us toward goodness. Again, Mencius illustrates people's natural attraction toward the highest Confucian virtue of benevolence/humaneness (*ren* 仁), and thus toward a benevolent ruler by saying, “People turn toward benevolence like water flowing downward or animals running toward the wilds” (4A 9.2).

Despite people's natural inclinations toward the virtues, and their apparent resemblance to the sage king Shun in requiring just one instance of virtue (in word or deed) to trigger their virtues, upon closer inspection, it seems that Mencius too, like Aristotle, holds that a more robust community of virtue is needed for people to cultivate the virtues and realize their good nature or engage in self-determination. This is because the ordinary person isn't entirely like the sage for Mencius.<sup>3</sup> Despite

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<sup>3</sup> For how the majority of us are not like the sage, see 6A 15.1 and 7B 32.2.

the fact that our hearts are like the sage's in sharing the preference for order and appropriateness, Mencius says, "The sages first discovered what our hearts prefer in common" (6A 7.8). From this remark, we may infer that without the sages, we may not know the virtues that give us pleasure. If the sage requires one instance of virtue to trigger his virtues, ordinary people may, and will, need more as we shall see. Why are the sages the first to know what the virtues are when all human beings are similarly endowed with the sprouts of virtue? Mencius thinks that it's because the sages never lost their original hearts: "there are things one desires more than life, and there are also things one hates more than death. It is not the case that only the worthy person has this heart. All humans have it. The worthy person simply never loses it" (6A 10.5, cf. 4B 12.1). Comparing people's human nature to trees on Ox Mountain that are subject to deforestation without any opportunity for regrowth, Mencius illustrates how one might mistakenly think that human nature is not good just as one might mistakenly think that the nature of Ox Mountain is barren when one has only been exposed to their states of deprivation. Despite the goodness of human nature, the analogy with Ox Mountain shows that nurture is required in addition to nature for people to cultivate their virtues. Concerning Ox Mountain and human nature, Mencius says of each: "if it merely gets nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow. If it merely loses its nourishment, there is nothing that will not vanish" (6A 8.3).

More elaborately, despite the fact that human nature is already good for Mencius because of the innate sprouts of virtue, not unlike Aristotle, Mencius too would insist on some kind of instruction and cultivation to grow and perfect these incipient virtues. He says, "The Way of the people is this: if they are full of food, have warm clothes, and live in comfort but are without instruction, then they come close to being animals" (3A 4.8). Comparing this assertion with Aristotle's human function argument, one can't help but notice that these two agree that merely satisfying one's appetitive desires is animalistic and isn't sufficient to make one human. Rather, cultivating the mind or rational part is key to humanity. Reflecting on the topic of self-determination, we can understand why perfecting the mind is so significant because it is what enables us to determine ourselves, as opposed to animals which are determined by their appetites. It is with the human mind that we can choose to pursue the truth and the good rather than letting our animalistic appetites determine us. So these two thinkers not only agree that the virtues perfect human beings, but agree too in explaining these perfections in their accounts of human nature. Given their agreement that cultivation is required to realize the virtues, let's examine more closely their views on cultivation.

Aristotle offers a theory of habituation by detailing the conditions that must be satisfied for one to have the moral virtues. Insisting that it's not just the correct actions that suffice for making one virtuous, Aristotle requires that the one performing the correct action must satisfy the following conditions. Not only must the morally virtuous know that he is performing a virtuous action, he must choose the action for its own sake rather than for some other motive, do the act from a state of virtue and take pleasure in his action. More elaborately, virtuous action for Aristotle is a mean between two extremes that is relative to one, rather than the same for all human beings. Depending on one's capacities and circumstances, what

is courageous entails something different than for someone with different capacities and/or in a different circumstance. E.g., what's courageous for someone who can't swim is different from a good swimmer. And what's courageous for a good swimmer varies with the circumstances. Even a good swimmer shouldn't venture into a stormy ocean to rescue someone, but pursue some other option that'll be successful.

Mencius would agree with Aristotle about the requirement of knowing that one is performing a virtuous act in order for one to be virtuous. Since Mencius maintains that the sprout of wisdom already inheres in the human mind and that reflection would enable one to know and enact one's inherent capacity for goodness, virtuous actions must be committed with knowledge. Mencius says, "the function of the heart is to reflect. If it reflects, then it will get it. If it does not reflect, then it will not get it" (6A 15.2). Combined with his remark, "Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them" (6A 6.7), it is clear that Mencius maintains that reflection and knowledge are always bound up with being virtuous. Thus, he'd agree with Aristotle that knowledge is a requirement for being virtuous. Where they differ is that knowledge of what is virtuous does not already inhere in human nature for Aristotle.

Mencius would also agree with Aristotle that a virtuous action must be chosen for itself rather than for some other motive. This is shown in his agreement with Confucius that people who are called village worthies are in actuality the "thieves of virtue" (7B 37.11). Village worthies are people whose actions accord with the accepted conventions of virtue so that they seem to be virtuous. However, they really aren't virtuous because their actions aren't chosen for themselves but merely for their appearances. Mencius says, "[Village worthies] are in agreement with the current customs; they are in harmony with the sordid era in which they live. They seem to dwell in devotion and faithfulness; their actions seem to be blameless and pure. The multitude delight in them; they regard themselves as right. But you cannot enter into the Way of Yao and Shun with them" (37.11). Mencius then quotes Confucius saying, "I hate the village worthies out of fear that they will be confused with those who have virtue" (37.12). Further support for the requirement of choosing a virtuous action for its own sake is shown in Mencius's requirement of sincerity for virtue. He claims that someone in a subordinate position can only gain his superior's confidence if he could gain his friends' trust, which in turn can only be achieved by serving his parents in a way that makes them happy. Ultimately, making his parents happy can only be achieved by being sincere and sincerity can only be achieved if one were "enlightened about goodness" (4A 12.1). Mencius concluded this line of reasoning by saying that sincerity is "Heaven's Way . . . [and] reflecting upon [sincerity 誠 *cheng*] is the human way" (4A 12.2-12.3); someone who is sincere will always be able to inspire others to act virtuously. If sincerity is required for virtue, then one cannot but choose a virtuous action for its

own sake (i.e., sincerely), rather than for the sake of appearing virtuous while being morally bankrupt.<sup>4</sup>

Having established that one can only choose a virtuous action sincerely/for its own sake if one is also wise about goodness, which goodness arises from reflecting on one's inherent sprouts of virtue for Mencius, it follows that he would also agree with Aristotle that virtuous actions must be performed from a state of virtue. This is because Mencius would say that only someone who is virtuous could perform a virtuous act with sincerity and knowledge that he is performing a virtuous act.

That a virtuous action is performed with pleasure is also a characteristic that Aristotle and Mencius share. This is evident when Mencius says, "The ten thousand things are all brought to completion by us. There is no greater delight than to turn toward oneself and discover Genuineness [sincerity]" (7A 4.1-4.2). Again, commenting about the sage emperor Shun's character, Mencius says, "He was good at unifying himself with others. He put himself aside and joined with others. He delighted in copying from others in order to do good" (2A 8.3-8.4).

Finally, Mencius and Aristotle would agree too on how a virtuous action is a mean between two extremes that is relative to one's situation and capacity, even though Mencius is unlike Aristotle in that he doesn't give an account of a numerical mean that is contrasted with a mean that is relative to one. Analyzing the 'courage' exhibited by Bogong You who is overly rash, and Meng Shishe who is overly cautious, Mencius recommends the courage of Zengzi because it is neither rash nor cautious, but based on his confidence in being upright. If Zengzi discovers that he is upright, he will proceed against "tens of thousands of people who oppose" him, whilst Meng Shishe would be deliberate about whether he'll achieve victory and Bogong You will attack regardless of the slightest insults (2A 2.4-2.8).<sup>5</sup> Here, Zengzi's willingness to sacrifice himself for a right cause instead of acting rashly or overly cautiously (based on a calculated likelihood of victory), is similar to Aristotle's view of courage being a mean between two extremes of rashness and cowardliness. Zengzi's character reveals that his capacity for virtue enables him to act courageously, and because both Bogong You and Meng Shishe lack the virtue, they are prevented from being courageous.

Despite a general agreement between these two authors about the requirements for being virtuous, they differ on their views of the state that is

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<sup>4</sup> See 6A 10.5 where Mencius says, "there are things [righteousness/appropriateness, *yi*] one desires more than life, and there are also things [unrighteousness] one hates more than death. It is not the case that only the worthy person has this heart. All humans have it. The worthy person simply never loses it." See also 3B 2.3 where Mencius distinguishes between the great man and someone who merely adheres to ritual propriety. Whereas obedience is key for the latter, the former emphasizes practicing "the great Way of the world" regardless of undesirable consequences to oneself.

<sup>5</sup> See 2A 9.1-9.3 for Mencius's analysis of Bo Yi who was too constrained and Liuxia Hui who was too lax about serving a corrupt leader, whereas a gentleman would be "neither too constrained nor lacking in dignity" in such circumstances. See 2B 3.1-3.3 for Mencius's analysis of the different situations that determine when accepting a grant from someone is appropriate or inappropriate.

conducive to the cultivation of virtues as well as the relation between the family and the state.

Let me begin with their different views of the family and the state. Aristotle thinks that the *polis* is prior to the family and the individual, as a whole of which they are parts, just as the human body is prior to the hand, as a whole of which the hand is a part. Just as a hand cannot function apart from the human body, likewise, neither the individual nor the family can perform its function apart from the state. This is because the state provides the self-sufficiency within which the individual and the family can function well. More elaborately, whereas the family makes possible daily life, it is only in the context of a *polis* that a self-sufficient life is possible for Aristotle. Only when we can look beyond trying to satisfy our daily needs, that is, when we are self-sufficient, can we live a good life. For Aristotle, not only does a *polis* provide the self-sufficient life, but if it is a good one (by looking out for the common good rather than the interests of the rulers themselves), it also legislates laws that make possible the citizens' habituating the moral virtues and realizing their human function well.

Unlike Aristotle, Mencius prioritizes the individual and the family over the state. Mencius says, "People have a common saying: 'The world, the state, the family.' The root of the world lies in the state; the root of the state lies in the family; the root of the family lies in oneself." (天下之本在國，國之本在家，家之本在身 4A 5.1). Far from thinking that the state is what makes for self-sufficiency and the laws to guide an individual's habituation and ability to become virtuous, Mencius thinks that it is an individual's virtue that makes possible a good family, followed by a good state, then culminating in the good of everything under heaven, that is, the world. As we've seen above, only when one is sincere (i.e., "enlightened about goodness"), can one serve one's parents in a way that makes them happy, and that in turn can secure the trust of one's friends and the confidence of one's superiors. In short, the good of the family and the state hangs on an individual's knowledge of goodness. This reasoning follows from Mencius's account that allows for a greater degree of self-determination than Aristotle's. Because human nature is already good for Mencius, the virtues are accessible by simply reflecting on one's feelings. Moreover, since a sage never loses his original heart, he is able to know the virtues when triggered by only one instance of virtue. Accordingly, Mencius believes that only a sage ruler can rule a state and enable its people to become virtuous. He says, "it is fitting only for the benevolent to occupy high positions. If those who are not benevolent occupy high positions, they will disseminate their evil upon the multitude. If those above lack a Way to assess by, those below will lack laws to abide by" (4A 1.7-1.8). Continuing, he says, "if those above lack propriety, and those below have not learned, then thieves will arise" (4A 1.9-1.10). Mencius's confidence in the effectiveness of one sage ruler to affect everyone's virtue stems from the fact that human nature is endowed with the incipient virtues so that even if one were not a sage, constant experiences of the ruler's virtuous actions will inspire the people to become virtuous. After all, human nature dictates that human beings are naturally drawn to virtue and take pleasure in goodness.



Upon comparison with Aristotle, Mencius's faith in the sage ruler may initially look like Aristotle's prioritizing the state for providing the right legislation to habituate the people. But that's only an appearance. Even though both authors agree that the ultimate goal of a state and of the rulers is to make the ruled good, they differ on how the virtues are transmitted, and the number of people who can become completely virtuous. In contrast to Mencius's requirement that only the benevolent sage ruler should rule, apart from monarchical rule, Aristotle accepts a variety of regimes based on differences in wealth, poverty, and occupations of the people. Whether the state is ruled by a monarchy, an aristocracy or polity (middle class) depends on the types of people in it. He says,

The society appropriate to kingship is one of the sorts which naturally tends to produce some particular stock, or family, pre-eminent in its capacity for political leadership. The society appropriate to aristocracy is one which naturally tends to produce a body of persons capable of being ruled, in a manner suitable to free men, by those who are men of leading in their capacity for political rule. The society appropriate to government of the constitutional type [i.e., the "polity"] is one in which there naturally exists a body of persons possessing military capacity, who can rule and be ruled under a system of law which distributes offices among the wealthy in proportion to merit. (1288a7-15)

Moreover, depending on the wealth, poverty or occupation of the inhabitants of a state, Aristotle envisions a variety within the same type of rule, e.g., there could be a democracy that includes the rich and the poor, or one in which birth determines one's citizenship. There could be a democracy made up of citizens who engage in trade, mechanics, or agriculture such that lacking the leisure to rule, laws rather than citizens, are sovereign.<sup>6</sup> In short, Aristotle acknowledges that a variety of regimes can make different types of states self-sufficient, and even though many of them are not ideal, they are practical for people living in their circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

What separates Aristotle's view of the state and its people most from Mencius's is that whereas Mencius requires a completely virtuous king to rule the people who would also be capable of becoming completely virtuous,<sup>8</sup> Aristotle doesn't require complete virtue from either the ruler or the ruled even though he'd agree that in theory, complete virtue from both rulers and ruled is ideal. Thus, whilst the state takes priority over the family and the individual for Aristotle because it makes possible self-sufficiency which is a prerequisite for pursuing virtue (despite the fact that virtue may not be attained by all), for Mencius, the virtuous individual takes priority over the family and the state because by being a benevolent ruler, he ensures the achievement of complete virtue by all. The result is that

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<sup>6</sup> *Politics* IV, 4-5. See also *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (CUP 2007), p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> *Politics* IV, 11-12, especially 1296 b10 -13. See also *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (CUP 2007), p. 177, p. 184.

<sup>8</sup> "If a ruler is benevolent, no one will fail to be benevolent. If a ruler is righteous, no one will fail to be righteous." 4B 5.1

Mencius's account of human nature starts from a single sage ruler who could determine his own virtue more than Aristotle's *phronimos*. More elaborately, whereas Mencius's sage takes one instance of virtue from another to trigger his incipient virtues, Aristotle's *phronimos* requires years of habituation, not to mention the political conditions (i.e., an ideal state with other *phronimoi* as exemplars) that are required for his perfection. Similarly, since Aristotle maintains that the state enables self-sufficiency that is a prerequisite to the good life, which need not make everyone virtuous, the consequence is that fewer people will partake of self-determination compared to Mencius's view of the state which benevolent ruler is supposed to make all of his people good.

Another difference between Mencius's and Aristotle's view of self-determination stems from how they structure human nature differently. Whereas Aristotle distinguishes the two rational parts of the soul, hence distinguishing the speculative part that is perfected in wisdom from the deliberative part that is perfected in *phronêsis*, Mencius's mind not only doesn't distinguish between a theoretical and practical, but unites the feelings with the mind, which feelings are relegated to the non-rational part for Aristotle. Aristotle's distinction between the theoretical and practical part of rationality enables him to argue for how the activity of the theoretical part is more self-sufficient than the practical in being more independent of other human beings and external goods. From my analysis above, it also shows that the speculative part is more independent of the *polis* than the deliberative part. Given that the speculative part is directed at unchangeable objects such as scientific truths and first principles, its perfection is also immune from the particular circumstances that call for less than ideal but practical constitutions, unlike the deliberative part's perfection. Comparing Aristotle's speculative part of the rational soul with Mencius's heart/mind, they seem to be on a par in being relatively independent of external conditions (i.e., the political state) for their perfections. Nevertheless, these two thinkers differ in that whereas Aristotle prioritizes the speculative part and its perfection in the activity of contemplation over the deliberative part and its perfection in the activity of *phronêsis*, Mencius doesn't separate the theoretical from the practical, let alone prioritize the former over the latter.

Ultimately, we can trace the highest virtue for each of these thinkers to the first principle or source of everything for each. The priority that Aristotle attributes to the speculative part and its perfection in wisdom is based on his account of God as the primary substance that satisfies the conditions of being most definable, knowable, one/united and separable/independent.<sup>9</sup> Modeled upon these conditions for primary substance, the activity of contemplative wisdom satisfies all these conditions by thinking about unchangeable objects, making it the most divine of activities. Just as God determines Himself and doesn't depend on anything else,<sup>10</sup> contemplation is the activity in which one is most capable of self-determination and

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<sup>9</sup> *Met.* 1028a31 & 1029a28.

<sup>10</sup> God doesn't depend on anything because his activity is to think of His own thinking. (*Met.* 1074b35)

self-sufficiency for Aristotle. In accord with God's self-sufficiency and independence, He doesn't engage in *phronêsis* for that would make Him depend on others. Similarly, because the life of *phronêsis* isn't self-sufficient but depends on others who need one's help, Aristotle ranks it as contributing to a secondary happiness instead of primary happiness which is secured by contemplation.

Unlike Aristotle's God qua first principle that is separate from everything else, so that there is nothing that human beings can do to affect Him, Mencius's Heaven qua first principle is not only the cause of everything, but whatever it causes can be completed by human beings.<sup>11</sup> As we've already seen earlier, Mencius's claim is that everything that Heaven causes to exist comes with a norm that is also what is good for it. Moreover, people are not only naturally drawn to the norm that is constant, but they delight in the good (6A 6.8). Thus, Mencius maintains, "The ten thousand things are all brought to completion by us. There is no greater delight than to turn toward oneself and discover Genuineness [sincerity]" (7A 4.1-4.2). Recall that sincerity is about being enlightened (*ming* 明) about goodness (*shan* 善) (4A 12.1). Since Heaven not only causes the ten thousand things but also their norms, which dictate their virtues, sincerity is Heaven's Way (4A 12.2). Modeling the human highest good on his first principle, Mencius claims that reflecting upon sincerity is the human Way (4A 12.2). This means that the human way must be enlightened about goodness, and when one knows the goodness of all things, one can complete them. Starting with a human being, Mencius says, "To fully fathom one's heart is to understand one's nature. To understand one's nature is to understand Heaven. To preserve one's heart and nourish one's nature is the way to serve Heaven." (7A 1.1-1.3). Put otherwise, by preserving one's heart that is endowed with the sprouts of virtue and nourishing them, one brings to completion the nature and norm that Heaven created in one. Thus, reflecting on what is good for our nature leads to sincerity or enlightenment about what is good for us; an activity that mirrors sincerity as Heaven's Way. Realizing our human virtues then, is a service to Heaven because we're helping Heaven achieve what it started. For Mencius, just as we can know our good by reflecting on our nature, which understanding is also an understanding of Heaven (sincerity), we can also know the natures and goodness of everything else that is created by Heaven and serve Heaven by completing them. This means that the scope of virtue for Mencius is broader than Aristotle's contemplative and practical wisdom. Whereas both wisdoms for Aristotle leave the rest of the world untouched, and practical wisdom is only directed to other human beings, Mencius's virtue extends to the whole world's good. Thus, Mencius's first principle of Heaven is different from Aristotle's God in being open to service from human beings.

Mencius's account self-determination also differs from Aristotle's in number and unity. Whereas Aristotle would separate self-determination through contemplative wisdom from self-determination through *phronêsis*, because his God is contemplative but not practical, Mencius doesn't separate theoretical from

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<sup>11</sup> See P. J. Ivanhoe, "Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 6 (2007): 211-220.

practical wisdom because Heaven is not just theoretical while excluding the practical. Rather, Heaven is the source not only of the norms and natures of things, but also their goodness. Sincerity is Heaven's Way because it not only prescribes the norms and natures of things, but also provides the resources for everything to reach their goodness. Modeled upon this unity of theory and practice, Mencius's account of self-determination maintains that reflection is key to wisdom/knowledge about the virtues and human nature as well as non-human nature, and asserts that this knowledge of nature comes hand in glove with the activity of nourishing one's nature and completing the nature of the ten thousand things. Thus Mencius's 'self-determination' unites theory and practice.

Comparing Aristotle and Mencius on self-determination reveals that their metaphysics of human nature is inseparable from the good and how both are bound up with their respective first principles. Aristotle's self-sufficient and independent God led to his conclusion that contemplative wisdom is a higher form of self-determination than *phronêsis*. Mencius's lack of distinction between the theoretical and practical in his concept of Heaven led to his conclusion that self-determination is not just a theoretical understanding of Heaven, but is always bound up with the practical completion of the natures one has theoretically grasped. By situating the principles of truth and goodness in human nature, Mencius offers an account that makes self-determination more accessible when a good political state is absent. Separating theoretical from practical self-determination, Aristotle secures the accessibility of theoretical self-determination from the fluctuations of a *polis*. But Aristotle's separation of theory from practice also shrinks the accessibility of practical self-determination to those living in a good *polis*, not to mention its scope of impact being limited to the human realm. In contrast, Mencius's self-determination is not only accessible to everyone, but promotes the good in the rest of the non-human world.