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THE CONCEPT OF THE MEAN IN CONFUCIUS AND PLATO

I

In several ways, Confucius and Socrates have much in common.¹ Both founded the dominant intellectual traditions of their culture, both achieved their influence by teaching rather than writing, both thought that the key to virtue was knowledge, both attempted to put their ideas into practice by entering political life, and both were unsuccessful because of their inability to overcome corruption within their societies. But these resemblances are merely formal, and when we turn to the content of their thought, at first glance Confucius and Socrates seem to represent opposite extremes. One was a proponent of rigorous social conventions to be obeyed without question, for whom propriety and loyalty were cardinal virtues. The other was an iconoclast who devoted his life to confronting conventional values and unexamined obedience, challenging them with natural value and independence of mind, for whom courage was a cardinal virtue and loyalty was not, and who was condemned to death for his disrespect of tradition. If, however, we bear in mind that one was living in a feudal monarchy and the other in an obstreperous democracy, many if not all of the differences may be regarded as reflecting a difference of emphasis rather than a difference of values.

Confucius may not have been a gadfly in Socrates' sense (*Apology* 30a), but for all his espousal of the learning of traditions rather than the challenging of them, his disciples were told by an official that "Heaven shall use the master as a wooden bell" (*Analects* 3:24), a metaphor not unlike that of the gadfly since the function of such a bell is to rouse or awaken the people.² And for all his insistence on the conventions of propriety, he said, "If a man is not humane, what has he to do with propriety?" (3:3). On the other side, Socrates, for all his iconoclasm and defiance, argues strenuously in the *Crito*, *Republic*, and *Laws* in favor of respecting and obeying the law.

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It is hardly surprising that Confucius and Socrates cannot really represent opposite extremes, because each of them saw goodness as a mean,³ rather than as something to be achieved by extreme measures. Both saw the mean as the key to successful government. Speaking of the two legendary sage-kings that he took as a model, Confucius relates that Yao told Shun, "Faithfully adhere to the mean and thy rule shall extend to the Four Seas' ends; heaven's blessings shall last throughout thy reign" (*Analects* 20:1). And in Plato's *Laws* the Athenian says,

If one gives a greater degree of power to what is lesser, neglecting the mean . . . then everything is upset. . . . There does not exist, my friends, a mortal soul whose nature will ever be able to wield the greatest human ruling power when young and irresponsible, without becoming filled in its mind with the greatest disease, unreason, which makes it become hated by its closest friends. When this comes about it quickly destroys it and obliterates all its power. Guarding against this, then, by knowing the mean, is the task of great lawgivers.⁴

Socrates' conception of goodness as a mean⁵ is not as explicit as that of Confucius, but it is very much in evidence nevertheless. In the *Apology* and other dialogues, Socrates speaks of his "divine sign," which "always turns me away from what I was about to do but never urges me forward."⁶ Socrates is guided not by positive precepts but by an awareness that to do otherwise is either to go too far or not far enough, and that is in principle the doctrine of the mean. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates points out that with courageous people, their boldness and fears are not disgraceful, whereas the fears of the cowardly and the boldness of the foolhardy are disgraceful, because cowardly people fear too many things—not only things that they ought to fear—while the foolhardy fear too few—not even things that they ought to fear (359b–360d). So here, as later in Aristotle, courage emerges as a mean between the excessive fear of cowardice and the excessive boldness of foolhardiness. And since throughout that dialogue all the virtues are essentially the same for Socrates, they must each be a mean, even if Plato had not yet formulated the term itself.

At the beginning of the *Theaetetus-Sophist-Statesman* trilogy, Theodorus tells Socrates of his surprise at the exceptional balance of Theaetetus's character: "I would not have supposed it to exist, nor do I see it elsewhere. Rather, those who are as sharp as he is, and quick and with retentive memories, are also for the most part quick tempered, . . . manic rather than courageous. Those on the other hand who are more sedate are also somewhat sluggish when they come up against their studies, and are forgetful" (144a–b). At the end of the trilogy the statesman's task will be to produce this rare combination in the citizens generally. Normally, the Eleatic visitor says, those who tend toward moderation and those who

tend toward courage have opposed natures (306a–311b). The moderate type “lacks drive and a certain sharp and active quickness,” and may even be simple-minded; whereas the courageous type “is lacking in justice and caution” and “inclines towards brutality” (311a–b). The statesman’s job will be to weave these two natures together to remove their initial incompatibility by giving them “a really true and firm opinion about the beautiful, just, good, and their opposites” (309c).

There is a comparable passage in the *Analects*:

Zilu asked: “Should I practice something as soon as I hear it?”

The Master said: “How can you practice something as soon as you hear it when your father and eldest brother are alive [and must be consulted]?”

Ran You asked: “Should I practice something as soon as I hear it?”

The Master said: “Yes, practice it as soon as you hear it.”

Gongxi Hua said: “When You [Zilu] asked: ‘Should I practice something as soon as I hear it?’ Master said: ‘Your father and eldest brother are alive.’ But when Qiu [Ran You] asked: ‘Should I practice something as soon as I hear it?’ Master said: ‘Yes, practice it as soon as you hear it.’ I am puzzled. May I venture to ask why?”

The Master said: “Qui tends to hold back; therefore, I urged him on. You has the courage of two men; therefore, I held him back.”⁷

Both thinkers recognize the existence of natures that are related to each other not only as extremes but as polar opposites, so that they must lead the two in opposite directions to arrive at a correctness of temperament. At the same time, there appears to be a crucial difference between Confucius’s strategy and Plato’s: Whereas Plato has the statesman bring the one-sided personalities closer to the mean by giving them “a really true and firm opinion about the beautiful, just, good, and their opposites,” Confucius does so by giving them conflicting one-sided opinions about the just and good. This appearance of disagreement is misleading, however, for Confucius is forever trying to teach his students the nature of the just and the good, and would no doubt have preferred Zilu and Ran You to have achieved the internal wisdom to recognize and embrace the mean on their own. Only because of their failure to do so did Confucius adjust his advice to each of their mentalities so as to bring about the mean in their actions. Similarly, although Socrates, like the Eleatic visitor’s statesman, always tried to teach his students the nature of the just and the good, he understood that a teacher could never ensure the success of that endeavor. As he says in the *Protagoras*—in the presence of two of his most notable failures, Alcibiades and Critias—he does not believe that virtue is teachable, at least not completely so.⁸

When it comes to dealing with people who have not attained virtue, Socrates is just as willing to speak differently to different people as Confucius is. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates remarks that the *techne* (craft or skill) of rhetoric involves

classifying the kinds of speech and soul, and the way the kinds of soul are affected, going through all the reasons, matching the kinds of speech to the kinds of soul, and teaching which kind of souls, by which kind of speeches, by causal necessity, will in one case be convinced and in another case unconvinced. (271b)

The dialogues give ample evidence of Socrates' practice of this *techné*—tailoring his words to the character of his partner in dialogue—although to a different end than that of the rhetoricians: They appeal to their audience's preconceptions to persuade them of something regardless of its truth, whereas Socrates regards the preconceptions as obstacles to be overcome to gain acceptance for the truth. The reduction of his listener to a state of *aporia* or helplessness is one example of this, and has no parallel in Confucius, but another example very much resembles the story just cited of Zilu and Ran You in *Analects* 11:20. If Gongxi Hua had read the *Apology* and *Crito* he might have asked Socrates, "At your trial when you spoke to the Athenians about one's duty to the law if the law was unjust, you said that one need not obey the law. In jail when you spoke to Crito about one's duty to the law if the law was unjust, you said that one must obey the law. I am puzzled. May I venture to ask why?" Certainly many others have been perplexed by this, if not Gongxi Hua. Numerous attempts have been made to show that the contradiction is only apparent,⁹ but there is certainly an appearance of contradiction, and the most likely explanation for it is that in the *Apology* Socrates is speaking to an audience that is too conservative in its attitude toward law and traditions, so he contrasts his own position with the extreme of obedience, whereas in the *Crito* his audience shows too little respect for the law, and he contrasts his own position with the opposite extreme of self-indulgence.

II

We know that something is an excess or deficiency because it either exceeds or falls short of the mean. We know that something is at the mean because it is neither excessive nor deficient. In the face of this circularity, which can never be completely overcome, why should we embrace the conception of virtue as a mean, when conceptions of virtue as an extreme can be specified with precision?

One such conception is the puritanical or ascetic understanding of virtue; it begins from the fact that our natural inclination is to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. But the pursuit of pleasure is selfish insofar as it puts us into competition with others, and self-defeating insofar as it inevitably leads also to pain (as the hedonistic Epicureans were keenly

aware). Giving in to those inclinations results in vice, and consequently opposing them by an effort of will results in virtue. Accordingly, the greater the resistance to and avoidance of pleasure, the greater the virtue. On that view, what would normally be a reasonable enjoyment of pleasure becomes a corrupt and decadent self-indulgence, and a prudent avoidance of pain may be seen as a lazy and cowardly self-indulgence. In opposition to this way of thinking, the concept of virtue as a mean proposes a model on which virtue is seen as moderation, and fanaticism can be seen to be a vice, not the epitome of virtue. The concept of virtue as a mean is more in tune with our intuitions.

Another example of a conception of virtue that offers a precise formulation rather than a vague circularity is utilitarianism, whether the modern Bentham-Mill model or its ancient counterparts in philosophers such as Mozi and Protagoras. Utilitarians can define with apparent precision what they mean by the good, which is usually some form of material well-being, and would determine deficiency as the failure to achieve as much goodness as possible. Because the good is conceived as something like the greatest good for the greatest number, there can be no such thing as excess. Here again, however, the very attempt to achieve precision threatens to turn morality into something one-dimensional and therefore contrary to our intuitions. Mozi's utilitarianism leads in the direction of puritanism, not because pleasure is an evil, as with ascetic puritans, but because arts and culture seem to have little to contribute to material well-being. Similarly, English utilitarianism has had to defend itself against the fear that it leads to an "end justifies the means" mentality in which the well-being of people who represent minorities must be sacrificed, counterintuitively, for the well-being of those in the majority.

In the *Statesman* the Eleatic visitor says:

a law would never be able, by comprehending accurately what is best and most just for everyone at once, to enjoin what is best. For the dissimilarities among human beings and actions, and the fact that nothing is ever, so to speak, at rest in human affairs, do not allow any art to declare a simple rule in any case regarding all people and for all time. (294b)

For the same reason, any ethical doctrine that claims to be able to identify the right course of action with the precision of a law will be no more successful than were Cephalus and Polemarchus at the beginning of the *Republic*. Instead of precision, what the concept of the mean offers is a sensitivity to nuance and subtlety. The value of the concept of the mean is that it accords more with our intuitions about what kinds of things really are good; it does not dismiss those intuitions either as unpurified apparitions of our natural hedonism or as symptoms of a sentimentality undisciplined by rational calculus. Its lack of precision is exculpated by its implicit denial that precision in such matters is possible. No inflexible

formulation can capture the fluid and infinitely variable nature of events and circumstances. We know that something is good not positively, because we can compare it with a pregiven definition of the good, but only privatively, because within the context of the present situation it seems improper either to do less or to do more.

Nevertheless, if all that the doctrine of the mean can offer us is our own intuitions, mutually supporting each other by circular arguments, its content is not only vague but disintegrates into the relativism of individual perceptions. We do not need moral teachers like Confucius and Socrates to tell us what our intuitions are—no one knows that better than we do ourselves. Accordingly, those who propound the conception of goodness as a mean must offer us something against which to measure our intuitions, some way to perceive more clearly what the mean truly is, or what is truly a departure from the mean. Confucian learning and Socratic education can contribute to our moral abilities by expanding our knowledge and sharpening our critical faculties so that we become more aware of what strategies are most likely to achieve our goals. But if our goals are determined in accordance with our intuitions, these would be left untouched unless our teachers can also give us a way to increase our intuitive powers. I want to suggest that this is the function of the Confucian golden rule and of the Socratic conception of virtue in terms of *techné*.

III

The golden rule appears repeatedly in Confucian literature, stated in both its positive and negative forms. Positively, for example, "A man of humanity is one who, wishing to establish himself, helps others to establish themselves and who, wishing to gain perception, helps others to gain perception" (*Analects* 6:30). An example of the negative form occurs when Zigong asks, "Is there one single word that one can practice throughout one's life?" and Confucius replies, "It is perhaps *shu*, like-hearted considerateness. What you do not wish for yourself do not impose on others" (15:24, after Huang). Confucius may not have been the first to formulate the golden rule, but its importance for him can hardly be overestimated if he considers it to be an encapsulation of morality in general, a "single word that one can practice throughout one's life."¹⁰ In this he is followed by *The Great Learning*, which compares the golden rule to a measuring square by which even the ruler may regulate his conduct:

[T]he ruler has a principle with which, as with a measuring square, he may regulate his conduct. What a man dislikes in his superiors, let him not show it in dealing with his inferiors; what he dislikes in those in front

of him, let him not show it in preceding those who are behind; what he dislikes in those behind him, let him not show it in following those in front of him; what he dislikes in those on the right, let him not apply it to those on the left; what he dislikes in those on the left, let him not apply it to those on the right. This is the principle of the measuring square.¹¹

The image of the golden rule as a measuring square implies a connection between the golden rule and the mean, since the mean refers to the correct degree of measure, which is what a measuring square would determine. How can the golden rule lead to a conception of goodness as a mean? The golden rule directs us toward certain actions and away from others, but it employs a two-valued model rather than a three-valued one; it sees actions simply as right or wrong, not as either deficient, correct, or excessive. The explanation lies in the fact that the golden rule is designed as a check on our selfish impulses. In opposing them, it presupposes them, and the two together result in a model of right action that is flanked by two opposed possibilities of error. The golden rule works on the assumption that we want good things for ourselves and, therefore, when we apply the rule, we will do good to others. But once we seek to apply the rule, there is the danger of complete self-sacrifice. Perhaps I would like it if my superiors resigned their jobs to make way for my promotion. Perhaps I would like it if everyone I knew gave me all their possessions except what they would need in order not to have to borrow from me. According to the golden rule, taken in the abstract, I might feel that it was morally incumbent on me to resign my job and give away my possessions. What prevents the golden rule from deteriorating into that kind of extremism is the understanding that our basic self-interest can be taken for granted and relied upon to protect us from such excesses. Our native self-interest pushes us toward an extreme of selfishness and exploitation of others. The purpose of the golden rule is to teach us empathy with our potential victims so we do not treat them worse than ourselves. It does not explicitly tell us not to treat them better than ourselves only because that much is understood: Not only should we treat others the way we ourselves would like to be treated, but we should also treat ourselves the way we would like to be treated. This self-evident point provides the transition from the golden rule's two-valued model to the doctrine of the mean's three-valued model. The golden rule warns us away from excessively selfish behavior, but it takes for granted that our native self-interest will warn us away from behavior that is not self-interested enough.

Because the golden rule must be employed in the context of a certain level of self-interest and other variables that cannot be precisely specified, such as those which attend to the uniqueness of every set of circumstances, it can not be applied mechanically like the rules for employing an

actual measuring square. People frequently act with good intentions and yet unwisely. They fail to make allowances for the differences between themselves and others, and so apply the principle too literally and inflexibly. If talented musicians believe that their parents should have forced them to practice, and apply this to their children whose talents and interests may be very different, they may not be doing their children good but harm. It is no easy matter to decide when it is appropriate to employ the principle and when it is not. Or even if we apply the principle in the right kinds of situations, and to people who are similar to ourselves in the relevant ways, our self-knowledge may be deficient or compromised by self-deception, so that we are mistaken about the way we would really like to be treated, and once again we would behave improperly. The effectiveness with which the golden rule is employed depends on the person who is employing it, and the difficulty of its application does not escape Confucius. When Zigong says, "What I do not wish others to impose on me, I also do not wish to impose on others," Confucius replies, "Ci, this is beyond your reach" (*Analects* 5:12).

The Great Learning proposes a sequence of steps by which the kind of character and state of mind may be achieved that are necessarily to the proper application of the golden rule:

When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere; when the will is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified, the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world. From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation.¹²

The actual reference to the golden mean (quoted earlier) is in the context of the final inference—"peace of the world depends on the order of the state"—but since "cultivation of the personal life [is] the root or foundation," this cultivation must describe the proper character and state of mind in which the golden rule can be employed effectively. Cultivation of the personal life is necessary for the regulation of the family because our impartiality would be compromised by feelings of love, hate, fear, reverence, pity, and disrespect. Therefore, unless we can overcome these prejudices we will not be able to regulate our family.¹³ Cultivation of our personal life is achieved by rectification of the mind because the mind will be correct only if it is not affected by wrath, fear, fondness, or anxiety.¹⁴ It follows that if we can make our minds correct, our judgement will not be affected by passions and will not be compromised by prejudice. How, then, can we can make our minds correct in the face of the importunities of our passions?

At this point the Confucian and Socratic positions are very close, because the answer of *The Great Learning* lies in terms of self-knowledge, the extension of knowledge, and the investigation of things, just as in Socratic philosophy, virtue is knowledge, and especially self-knowledge. If *The Great Learning* originally contained explanations of "the extension of knowledge" and "the investigation of things," they are now lost. All that remains is the explanation of "making the will sincere," which leads to rectification of the mind:

What is meant by "making the will sincere" is allowing no self-deception, as when we hate a bad smell or love a beautiful color. This is called satisfying oneself. Therefore the superior man will always be watchful over himself when alone. When the inferior man is alone and leisurely, there is no limit to which he does not go in his evil deeds. Only when he sees a superior man does he then try to disguise himself, concealing the evil and showing off the good in him.¹⁵

The examples of the bad smell and beautiful color are chosen because they are especially resistant to self-deception. If something smells repulsive it is virtually impossible to convince ourselves that we really like the smell, just as, if we find the colors of a sunset beautiful it is virtually impossible to convince ourselves that we do not really like them. But if the issue is self-deception, what is the relevance of the inferior man's attempt to disguise himself before the superior man, but not when he is alone? There it seems that the issue is not self-deception but the deception of others. The connection is that self-deception arises because of our concern for how we are perceived by others. In attempting to appear a certain way, we may begin to believe that we really are that way, and if we come to believe it, we have fallen into self-deception. Since the golden rule cannot operate if we do not know what we ourselves would like and what we would not like, self-deception must be eliminated. We may wish to be treated well by others, but if we have put on a false humility to impress others, and to impress our own self-regard, we may fail to treat others well because we have deceived ourselves into thinking that we ourselves do not wish to be treated that way.

Suppose, however, that we are honest with ourselves, and know that what we want is riches and power. In that case, we might refuse to apply the golden rule at all. But from what has been said so far can we not still be said to have attained sincerity of the will, since we are not guilty of self-deception? If we look at the examples in that context, an additional element becomes clear. The examples of not deceiving ourselves that the passage gives, are not simply "when we hate a certain smell or love a certain color," but rather when we hate a "bad" smell or love a "beautiful color." It is not sufficient not to be deceived about what we love or hate; we also have to love what deserves to be loved and hate what

deserves to be hated.¹⁶ If people genuinely hated the color of a sunset or loved the smell of sewage, there would be something faulty in their perceptual faculties or their power of judgement. In the same way, if people love money and power more than they love their fellow human beings, and more than they love the virtue of humanity or humaneness, then something is wrong with their intellectual perceptions or their judgement—they are ignorant or confused. Socrates, too, and even Epicurus, argued that if those who pursue corporeal pleasure or political power as the good truly understood the price that they pay for their pursuits, they could not have continued in their pursuit. Here as well, sincerity of the will is not only authenticity or honesty about our emotions, but is also a matter of seeing things as they really are and for what they are really worth. That is why the key to sincerity is not merely honesty, but the extension of knowledge. For *The Great Learning*, as for Socrates, virtue is knowledge.

The way to extend our knowledge, the text tells us, is by the investigation of things. Does this refer to investigating the nature of all things, or only of the things that pertain to the self and the will? The former alternative is advanced by Zhu Xi, and corresponds to the Plato of the *Timaeus*, who believed that in order to understand the presence of the good in the cosmos—and therefore contribute to our own goodness—we must understand the nature of things in detail. The latter alternative is advocated by Wang Yangming, and corresponds to the Socrates of the *Phaedrus*, who has no interest in investigating things that are not directly relevant to his self-understanding (229e–230a).¹⁷ Regardless of whether we interpret “the investigation of things” in the broadest sense or only in the sense of moral matters, what is important is that the foundation of sincerity—the root of the golden rule—lies in knowledge as well as candor. We must make every effort to achieve not only self-understanding but also understanding of what is good and bad. These two, knowledge and candor, are the key to our ability to effectively employ the golden rule and, using it as a measuring square, to discern the mean in concrete situations.

When we turn to the last of the Confucian texts under discussion, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, we find that although the tone is often more poetic and Taoist than the *Analects* and *The Great Learning*, the themes and general point of view are continuous with them. One of the opening sentences repeats the words of chapter 6 of *The Great Learning*: “Therefore the superior man is watchful over himself when alone.”¹⁸ Whether we translate *zhong* in the title *Zhongyong* as “mean” or (as is sometimes proposed) “equilibrium,” it too indicates that the Confucian “Way of the superior man” lies between extremes. Once again the golden rule is central, and once again the difficulty of applying it can hardly be more strongly emphasized:

Confucius said . . . “What you do not wish others to do to you, do not do to them. There are four things in the Way of the superior man, none of which I have been able to do. To serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me: that I have not been able to do. To serve my ruler as I would expect my ministers to serve me: that I have not been able to do. To serve my elder brothers as I would expect my younger brothers to serve me: that I have not been able to do. To be the first to treat friends as I would expect them to treat me: that I have not been able to do.”¹⁹

If Confucius himself—at least the Confucius of *The Doctrine of the Mean*—cannot apply the golden rule, what chance is there for us? And if we are doomed to fail, how can this be the right path to morality? The answer was given in the previous chapter, where Confucius says of the Way of the superior man, “Men and women of simple intelligence can put it into practice; and yet in its utmost reaches there is something which even the sage is not able to put into practice.”²⁰ The fact that we (and Confucius himself) are unable to succeed completely does not mean we are unable to put it into practice at all. Nor does it mean that we should be satisfied with our partial success: “There are superior men who act in accordance with the Way, but give up when they have gone half way. But I can never give up.”²¹

Here too sincerity is the key to achieving the Way, and sincerity applies not only to lack of deception about what things we value, but also to an understanding of what is valuable in itself, that is, the good—or at least to our constant effort to achieve such an understanding: “If one does not understand what is good, he will not be sincere with himself. Sincerity is the Way of Heaven. To think how to be sincere is the Way of man.”²² How are we to achieve it? Some people may be capable of achieving a state of simplicity and purity comparable to Taoism’s “uncarved block of wood,” but *The Doctrine of the Mean* differs from Taoism in insisting that for some the goal may need to be achieved by accretion rather than simplification: “Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused [the Way] is called mean. When these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony.”²³ The “mean” here is similar to the Taoist state of simplicity, while “harmony” refers to the attainment of the same wisdom by the ordering of complexity. Later we are told:

Some are born with the knowledge [of wisdom, humanity, and courage]. Some learn it through study. Some learn it through hard work. But when the knowledge is acquired, it comes to the same thing. Some practice them naturally and easily. Some practice them for their advantage. Some practice them with effort and difficulty. But when the achievement is made, it comes to the same thing.²⁴

They come to the same thing because if we are born with sincerity our nature itself will give us knowledge, but if we must acquire

knowledge, then that knowledge will in turn lead to sincerity: "It is due to our nature that enlightenment results from sincerity. It is due to education that sincerity results from enlightenment."²⁵ Since each leads to the other, both must be present in the outcome, and "the superior man [both] honors the moral nature and follows the path of inquiry and study."²⁶ The difficulty of this path is emphasized by the importance placed on a refusal to give up, echoing the passage from chapter 11 cited above:

Study it extensively, inquire into it accurately, think over it carefully, sift it clearly, and practice it earnestly. When there is anything not yet studied, or studied but not yet understood, do not give up. When there is any question not yet asked, or asked but its answer not yet known, do not give up. When there is anything not yet thought over, or thought over but not yet apprehended, do not give up. When there is anything not yet sifted, or sifted but not yet clear, do not give up. When there is anything not yet practiced, or practiced but not yet earnestly, do not give up. If another man succeed by one effort, you will use a hundred efforts. If another man succeed by ten efforts, you will use a thousand efforts.²⁷

In all three works, then, the good is conceived as a mean; the "measuring square" by which the mean can be determined is the golden rule; and the state of mind that can employ the golden rule is called sincerity, and is constituted by self-knowledge and knowledge of the good. The importance of both kinds of knowledge figures prominently in the Platonic dialogues as well, as does the conception of goodness as a mean. Nowhere in the dialogues, however, does Plato propose the golden rule as a measure of the mean.

IV

In Plato's philosophy, the role of the golden rule, as the measuring square of the mean, is filled instead by *techne*, although not *techne* in the narrow sense of a precise set of rules as is sometimes supposed. The concept of virtue as a mean makes its first appearance—although the term itself does not appear—near the end of the *Protagoras* (359b–360d), in a passage cited in section one. Earlier Socrates had said,

Since the salvation of our life has shown itself to consist in the right choice of pleasure and pain—of the more and less, the greater and smaller, and the further and nearer—then first of all does it not show itself to be a measuring, a consideration of their excess, deficiency, and equality in relation to one another? And since it is measurement, is it not clear that, of necessity, it is a *techne* and *episteme*? What *techne* and *episteme* it is we will consider at a later time. (357a–b, interjections omitted)

This passage has led some readers to believe that Plato was aiming at a precise hedonistic calculus of the type that utilitarians would later devise, but nowhere do the dialogues propose anything of the kind.

The *Republic* repeats the need for a principle of measurement like the one called for in the *Protagoras*. At the end of the myth of Er, Socrates speaks of the importance of studying the good life and says we must "seek out and learn this study . . . [that provides] the ability (*dunaton*) and *episteme* of distinguishing the good from the bad life" (*Republic* 618c). We must know how to combine things with one another or separate them, for example,

knowing how beauty, combined with poverty or wealth and with what kind of character of the soul, produces good or evil, good birth and bad birth, private life and governing, strength and weakness, ease of learning and difficulty of learning, and all such things regarding the soul, both natural and acquired, so that from all these things—and looking at the nature of the soul—he will be able to choose rationally between the better and worse life, calling a life worse which leads him to become more unjust, better if it leads him to become more just, and disregarding all other considerations. . . . He would know how to always choose the mean among such lives, and avoid each of the extremes.²⁸

Since what is sought is conceived as a mean rather than a maximum, a rigorous formal calculus of the utilitarian sort could not be what is envisioned. The same conclusion holds for the *Protagoras*. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, the most reasonable assumption is that the *Republic* provides us with the best indication of where Plato's thought was leading when he spoke of a *techne* and *episteme* of measurement for our actions in the *Protagoras*, even if he could not have formulated the position of the *Republic* when he wrote the *Protagoras*.

The views put forward in the *Statesman* seem to be a further development of what is said in the *Republic* passage, and in the *Statesman* Plato explicitly distances himself from the application of precise measurement to the moral mean. The Eleatic visitor maintains that the *techne* of measurement has two species:

One is with respect to the shared largeness or smallness of things toward one another. The other is with respect to the necessary essence of coming into being. Doesn't it seem to you that, in the nature of it, we must say that the greater is greater than nothing other than the less, and, again, the less is less than the greater and nothing else? But what about this? With regard to what exceeds or what is exceeded by the nature of the mean, whether in words or actions, must we not also say that it really exists? And that in this lies the chief difference between those of us who are bad and those who are good? . . . If someone does not allow that the nature of the greater stands in relation to anything other than the less, it will never stand in relation to the mean. Isn't that so? Would we not destroy the kinds of *techne* themselves and all their

works with this doctrine, including indeed the *techne* of statesmanship that we have been seeking? For all these presumably are on guard against anything that is in excess of or deficient to the mean, which they do not regard as nonexistent but as something difficult that exists in relation to their activity. And when they preserve the mean in this way, all of their works are good and beautiful. . . . For if this [mean] exists those [*technai*] exist, and if those exist this exists also; but neither one of them can ever exist if the other doesn't. (*Statesman* 283d-e, 284a-b, d, interjections omitted)

A precise calculus of relative pleasures belongs to the first kind of measurement, "the shared largeness or smallness of things toward one another." There is no question of the "right degree," but only of relative size. One number is large or small relative to another, but no number is, in itself, any more correct than any other; the entire range of numbers is nothing but a series of quantitative relationships. The precision of numerical measurement must be combined with a way of measuring the right degree, a mean between too little and too much, which is not discovered by precise numerical calculation, but in some other way. As in the *Protagoras*, it is connected with *techne*—the *Republic* passage used the more general term "ability" (*dunaton*)—and in particular, "the *techne* of statesmanship that we have been seeking." Precisely what is the nature of the connection between *techne* and the mean? How does the nature of *techne* enable us to discern and apply the mean?

Because *techne* differs from unconceptualized experience by the formulation of precise rules and measures, we might expect it to be associated with relative measure (arbitrarily chosen units of precise measurement) rather than the mean. The reason that it is not can be seen from the Eleatic visitor's description of the second kind of measure as comprising "whatever measures things in relation to the mean, the fitting, the timely (*kairos*), the needful, and anything else that dwells in the middle away from the extremes" (*Statesman* 284e). In book 2 of the *Republic*, Socrates says that if someone who is working at a *techne* "lets the right moment (*kairos*) go by, the work is ruined" (370b). What is remarkable about *techne* is that it bridges the two kinds of measure: It formulates and relies on precise rules, but the rules only function properly if the practitioner also has the sensitivity to discern what the moment calls for, the *kairos*. Thus, for example, Socrates says in the *Phaedrus* that someone who is naturally suited to it will attain the *techne* of rhetoric to a notable degree if they supplement their natural ability with "both *episteme* and practice" (269d). For the rhetorician must have both "adequate knowledge [of the various kinds of speeches and souls, and how they are related] and in addition must be able to discern these things in practical affairs and follow them clearly with his senses" (*Phaedrus* 271d-e). Accordingly, to perfect his *techne*, the rhetorician must

acquire not only knowledge about these matters, but also “the understanding of when it is timely (*kairos*) to speak and when to stop, when to speak briefly, or piteously, or hyperbolically, and all the other kinds of speech he has learned—when they are timely (*eukairian*) and when they are untimely (*akairian*)” (*Phaedrus* 272a). For Plato, this dual aspect of *techne*, rather than the golden rule, is the measuring square. How, then, do we attain it?

The answer is most visible in the education of the guardians who are to govern the just city by means of the *techne* of ruling.²⁹ They will not be able to achieve infallibility, any more than Confucius was able to apply the golden rule infallibly, and the city will ultimately fail because at some point the rulers will apply the calculation governing procreation, contrary to *kairos* (*para kairon*, *Republic* 546d). Even if their *techne* is not infallible, however, it is our model for the best we can hope to achieve in the application of justice.³⁰

The education of the guardians comprises two stages that correspond to the two aspects of *techne*: knowledge of principles and sensitivity to *kairos*. The road from the cave to a vision of the good results in an understanding of first principles, and the road from enlightenment back into the cave results in the ability to apply those principles in whatever way the moment calls for. The upward road is characterized by progressive education in the mathematical *technes* of arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, and harmony, until the student is ready for dialectics. The mathematical character of these studies achieves two things. First, it turns us away from the potentially corrupting world of appetite: “all other kinds of *techne* are directed to human opinion and appetites, or generation and composition, or to serving things that grow and things that are put together” (*Republic* 533b). Mathematical studies, by contrast, aim at what is incomposite and eternal, and the eternal and unchanging cannot be objects of appetite. Second, mathematical thinking leads us to a greater understanding of the nature of reality, for “this thing in common that is employed by every *techne*, *dianoia*, and *episteme*. . . [is] the humble matter of distinguishing the one and the two and the three. I mean, in short, number and calculation” (522c). This is the *Statesman*’s first kind of measure, where relative sizes and quantities are calculated, but not the “just right” of the mean.

When the guardians return to the cave, something new must be added to counteract the impetus of mathematics and dialectics away from the composite world of generated things. In terms of motivation, this is an appeal to their sense of duty: “We will say, ‘You have received a better and more complete education than the others, and are more able to participate in both realms. You must take your turn at going down then to the common dwelling place of the others and habituate yourselves to

see the things in the dark'” (*Republic* 520b–c). Their appetites will be held in check during their reentry into the world of corporeal concerns by a prohibition against possessing any private property beyond what is absolutely necessary (416d), touching gold or silver, or even be under the same roof with it (416e–417a).³¹ Those steps are only a preparation for their efforts at habituating themselves to seeing things in the dark of the cave. The habituation itself begins when they are thirty-five, and required to “hold command in war and other offices suitable for youth” (539e). For the next fifteen years they gain experience (habituation) in various kinds of *techne* related to ruling. It is their habituation and experience that enables them to recognize in the moment how to apply the knowledge and understanding that their education produced in them.

V

The two aspects of *techne*—knowledge of principles and sensitivity to *kairos*—correspond respectively to the extension of knowledge and the golden rule in Confucian philosophy.³² Both philosophies recognize two components to moral goodness: the formation of what we might call a good will—good intentions informed by an understanding of the nature of goodness—and an ability to effectively translate our good intentions into actions. In Confucius, the former is sincerity of the will, and the latter, the measuring square of the golden rule; in Plato, the former is the conversion of the soul through a vision of the good (*Republic* 518c–519b, 516d), and the latter, the ability to apply it in the way that the moment requires, as a *techne* applies its principles through a sensitivity born of experience. Nevertheless, there are important differences in both components.

For Plato, the kind of knowledge characteristic of *techne* is eventually superseded by a more abstract knowledge, *episteme*, which culminates not in the practical knowledge of *techne*, but in the pure intelligibility of the forms. When *The Doctrine of the Mean* says that “There is nothing more visible than what is hidden and nothing more manifest than what is subtle,”³³ it agrees up to a point with the allegory of the cave, that the reality to which we are initially blind is ultimately more manifest than the one we first can see. But it would not develop the contrast between the visible and the hidden into the conception of a realm of incomposite and unchanging being accessible only to thought, in opposition to the composite realm of becoming that is accessible only to the senses. Nor would it take knowledge of the good to mean a kind of contemplation that turns us away from the world of action. Not until some 1500 years later in neo-Confucianism, especially that of Zhu Xi, will something like

Platonic dualism enter the Confucian tradition (even there, it is more like Neoplatonic emanationism, which makes dualism derivative from monism). Yet even Zhu Xi would not approve of it, if it takes our attention away from the material world.³⁴

When it comes to the downward moment, when we seek to apply in concrete situations our knowledge of and commitment to the good, there is another important difference. Confucianism locates the measuring square of action—the golden rule—in the subjectivity of the agent. If I want to know what is right I must look within myself. Plato locates it in the object: The moral agent recognizes what is appropriate to behaving toward someone, the way the practitioner of *techne* recognizes what is appropriate to making or doing something. What makes this an effective strategy is that the nature of *techne* is to seek the advantage of its object—to make or do something as well as possible—rather than the advantage of its practitioner (*Republic* 341c–342e). Accordingly, the Confucian and the Socratic approach these matters in an almost dialectically opposite way. The Confucian asks, “What would be the right action taken toward me from the point of view of my self-interest?” and then takes that action toward someone else. The Socratic, by contrast, asks, “What would be the right action from the standpoint of *techne* toward its object, rather than from the standpoint of my self-interest?” The results, however, will coincide, since in both cases the model consulted gives us a practical way to recognize when the principle of goodness is successfully applied in practice, and the mean is achieved.

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ENDNOTES

1. For the sake of convenience I shall follow the conventions of identifying “Confucius” with the Confucius of the *Analects* (although I shall also follow the convention of taking *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean* to be “Confucian”), and “Socrates” with the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues; rather than with actual (but unknowable) historical personages. I agree with Charles Kahn (*Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996] that even the early Platonic dialogues, with the possible exception of the *Apology*, are Platonic and not merely Socratic. Accordingly, when I refer to “Plato” in the title of this article, it is a Plato who includes the Socrates of his dialogues rather than being contrasted with him historically.
2. See Chichung Huang, *The Analects of Confucius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 66, and Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 25. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Confucius are to the Huang translation and numbering of the *Analects* (although the hyphenization of some names has been dropped in accordance with the style of this journal).
3. Confucius calls it “a sublime virtue indeed” (Huang 6:29; traditional 6:27; see, for example, Arthur Waley’s translation, *The Analects of Confucius* [London: George Allen and

- Unwin 1938], and Chan, *Source Book*). I see no reason to follow Huang (1997) in limiting the mean to the exact observance of the rituals. Huang considers the best clue to the nature of the mean to be 11:16 (traditional 11:15), in which Confucius says that Shi goes too far and Shang not far enough, and that both are equally wrong. After pointing to a similar story in the *Records of the Rituals*, where Zigong asks "What constitutes the mean here?" and Confucius replies, "The rituals," Huang concludes that "what the constant mean signifies is following the rituals to the letter, no more and no less" (p. 25). However, since Zigong asks "What constitutes the mean here," Confucius's answer applies only to this one example, not to every instance of the mean. Moreover, there are other analects that are just as much illustrations of the mean as the story about Shi and Shang, and which do not refer to the rituals. According to 7:37 "Confucius is affable but dignified, austere but not harsh, polite but completely at ease." Chan (1963) seems quite justified in calling this "The Confucian mean in practice" (p. 33). See also 11:21 and 13:21.
4. *Laws* 691c; cf. *Statesman* 283d–284d.
 5. As distinct from that of the Eleatic visitor in the *Statesman* and the Athenian visitor in the *Laws*.
 6. Socrates *Apology* 31d. "The usual prophetic voice of the divinity in previous times always spoke to me very frequently and opposed me even in very trivial matters, if I was about to do something that was not right . . . It could not be the case that the usual sign would not have opposed me, if I was not about to do something good" (*Apology* 40a–c; cf. *Euthydemus* 272e, *Phaedrus* 242b).
 7. *Analects* 11:20; cf. 11:16: "Zigong asked: 'Between Shi and Shang, which is the worthier?' The Master said: 'Shi goes beyond whereas Shang falls short.' Zigong said: 'Then Shi is the superior?' The Master said, 'To go beyond is the same as to fall short.'"
 8. Likewise, the Eleatic visitor concedes the necessity of supplementing teaching with intermarriage between the two opposed temperaments (*Statesman* 310a–e).
 9. For a recent example, see David Gallop, "Socrates, Injustice, and the Law: A Response to Plato's *Crito*," *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1998): 251–265.
 10. "What you do not wish for yourself do not impose on others" appears also in 12:2, where Huang (1997) writes that it is "believed to be an old proverb" (p. 126 n. 4).
 11. Chapter 10, p. 92 in Chan (1963; all references to *The Great Learning* are to this edition).
 12. *The Great Learning*, pp. 86–87.
 13. *Ibid.*, chapter 8, p. 90.
 14. *Ibid.*, chapter 7, p. 90.
 15. *Ibid.*, chapter 6, pp. 89–90.
 16. Cf. Mencius: "If he does not understand goodness he cannot be sincere with himself" (4A:12). The same statement appears in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 20, p. 107 in Chan (1963; all references to *The Doctrine of the Mean* are to this edition). Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Mencius are from D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). In this case I have substituted Chan's (1963) "sincere with himself" for Lao's "true to himself."
 17. Whether or not the discrepancy in Plato is only dialectical—following from the contexts of two very different dialogues—will not concern us here since our discussion of Plato will focus primary on the *Republic*.
 18. *The Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 1, p. 98.
 19. *Ibid.*, chapter 13, pp. 100–101.
 20. *Ibid.*, chapter 12, p. 100.
 21. *Ibid.*, chapter 11, p. 100.
 22. *Ibid.*, chapter 20, p. 107.
 23. *Ibid.*, chapter 1, p. 98. In the *Republic* there is a comparable distinction. It is possible to achieve a state of simplicity where the whole soul together is turned toward the good so that emotions never arise in opposition to reason (518c–d, 519b) and any behavior that is not good is unthinkable (516d). But when the soul is not at one with itself and the good, and the appetitive and spirited emotions arise in opposition to the dictates of reason about what is good, then virtue can still be achieved by means of a "harmony" of the three elements, if each is permitted to perform its own proper function without interference from the others (cf. "each and all attain due measure and degree"; 443d–444a).
 24. *The Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 20, p. 105.

25. Ibid., chapter 21, p. 107.
26. Ibid., chapter 27, p. 110.
27. Ibid., chapter 20, p. 107.
28. Socrates *Republic* 618b–619b. The term translated as “mean” is *to meson* (Aristotle uses both *meson* and *mesotēs*), whereas the *Statesman* and *Laws* use *to metrion*.
29. For the *Republic*’s conception of ruling as a *techne*, see 341d–342e, 374e, 466e, 488d–489a, 493d; cf. *Statesman* 284a. I have discussed in detail the *Republic*’s treatment of *techne*, education, justice and the mean, in “Philosopher-Rulers: How Contemplation Becomes Action,” *Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001: 335–356).
30. Even justice is at one place said to be a *techne* (*Republic* 332d), but the context makes it unclear whether that designation is intended to be taken seriously.
31. Later, Socrates extends the prohibition in a most un-Confucian way to families, so every guardian will have the same relationship to all members of the opposite sex in common and to all children in common, “to prevent them from tearing the city apart by applying the word ‘mine’ not to the same things, but each to something different” (*Republic* 457b–c).
32. According to Mencius (5B:1; p. 150), “Confucius was the sage whose actions were timely,” that is, *kairos*.
33. *The Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 1, p. 98.
34. Zhu Xi’s respect for Chen Yi leads him in one place to speak of meditation in a conciliatory way: “Chen Yi sometimes also taught people sitting in meditation. But from Confucius and Mencius upward, there was no such doctrine. We must search and investigate on a higher plane and see that sitting in meditation and the examination of principle do not interfere with each other, and then it will be correct” (*Complete Works of Master Chu* 2:44a–b, p. 608 in Chan [1963]). By “examination of principle,” he means a primarily empirical kind of investigation, however, and he does not speak tolerantly of types of meditation that lead away from such investigation: “To be serious does not mean to sit still like a blockhead, with the ear hearing nothing, the eye seeing nothing, and the mind thinking of nothing” (2:22a, p. 607); and “As soon as they open their eyes from meditation, what they try to get hold of is again gone from them as before” (60:21a–b, p. 650).

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