

Chinese neo- confucian vs aquinas ethics



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Saint Thomas Aquinas was one of the greatest philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages whose ethics concerning the idea of a virtuous person were comparable in many respects to Chinese neo-Confucian ethics about the superior man. In regards to governance, Aquinas believed that the ruler should be governing in the best interest of the people and look to improve society as a whole. The neo-Confucian stance on governance was essentially the same, as it advocated for a ruler that had humanity or humaneness and was a junzi, or gentleman. In terms of happiness, however, Aquinas believed that happiness in life was only fleeting, and true happiness lay in the afterlife, and thus the most religious in life were truly the happiest. On the other hand, neo-Confucianism believed that happiness was within oneself, and could be discovered through finding the way or the path. Furthermore, Aquinas believed that there were four types of law, which included eternal law, natural law, human law, and divine law, which man had to obey. Neo-Confucianism, however, had essential "laws" that covered filial piety and various relationships one had in life. Lastly, Aquinas had many beliefs on ethical issues that ranged from heresy to suicide, while neo-Confucian ethics were mainly concerned with establishing social harmony through rites and rituals.

For Saint Thomas Aquinas, a virtuous ruler was one that prioritized welfare, unity, and peace. He believed that the king should be the most rational human being, as he was God's representative on earth and had to lead his people. For example, "If men were intended to live alone as do many animals, there would be no need for anyone to direct him towards his end, since every man would be his own king under God, the highest king, and the

light of reason given to him from on high would enable him to act on his own." (pg 14) The idea of furthering a society was an important factor in the tasks and duties a king had to uphold. The actions that he took should not only be reasonable but also follow God's path for him to build a particular type of government. Thus, a king who governed over the people had to combine both religious and rational thoughts together in order to fully govern to the best possible extent. However, even if the king were to not follow the path that was meant to be taken and instead act in his own interest, thereby creating a tyranny, the people still had to endure, as it was their duty to follow the king. This idea aligned perfectly with neo-Confucian ideas about ren, human relationships, and humaneness. The idea of human relationships between one's relations to oneself, one's superiors, and to the common people encompass the ruler and the common people. Even if the ruler were to be at fault in any way, it was of utmost importance that the commoners still respect the ruler and know his place in the hierarchy. Likewise, the ruler was to be aware of the desires of the masses and do all that he could to appease them and improve their quality of life. " Only the humane person is able to like others and is able to hate others." (III, 1-3) Thus, the ruler must have the quality of humanity, and be able to attend to difficult matters before enjoying the rewards of his policies. To be able to eat bitter before sweet is an essential part of being a ruler, and one who is unable to tolerate hardships is unfit to be a ruler. Thus, Saint Thomas Aquinas' ideas regarding governance are very similar in comparison to neo-Confucian ideals regarding their rulers. Both sides called for capable rulers who were able to provide for their societies to improve, but also called for respect towards those rulers despite their shortcomings.

Happiness is defined in very different ways through different times and societies. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose ideas on happiness were borrowed from Aristotle and incorporated into Christian teachings, happiness in this life was fleeting, and true happiness lay in the afterlife. "Some partial happiness can be achieved in this life, but true perfect happiness cannot." (pg42) Thus, the actions one took in this life were not meant to provide for their happiness, but to elevate them in the afterlife so that they could go to heaven and be happy. Instead of saying that philosophers are the happiest people like Aristotle, Aquinas chose to replace the First Cause with God and stated that the happiest people were the most religious, such as prophets or saints. This placed huge importance on the church, which had a massive influence on the people of the Middle Ages Europe, and this influence spreads to even today's time, in which people dedicate their lives to religion in the hopes of living a happy afterlife. In fact, the concept of charity was also a theological virtue which was the transformation of one's possessions in life into a symbol of faith. Since one's happiness could not be achieved on earth, there was no point in having possessions, as they could not define true happiness, and these possessions only held one back from God. In neo-Confucianism, happiness was more aligned with one's self-improvement and journey than with discarding material wealth. "The natural person desires without craving and acts without excess." (passage 3). According to neo-Confucian ideals, by following the Dao, or the way, which was different for each person, one would be able to experience personal satisfaction and happiness. Furthermore, the superior man must stick to the path and follow a life of self-perfection and self-cultivation. Through constant self-improvement, one would be able to

become a superior man and be happy. Thus, the neo-Confucian ethic placed more of an emphasis on the importance of actually living one's life, instead of merely preparing for the afterlife, which Aquinas believed was essential.

Regarding the concept of laws, Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that there were four kinds of laws, those being eternal law, natural law, human law, and divine law. Eternal law is God's rational governance of all things, while natural law is the participation of all rational creatures in the eternal law. Human law is self-explanatory and is the laws humans make on earth, while divine law is laws made by God. "Therefore law must concern itself in particular with the happiness of the community." (pg 44) Furthermore, all four types of these laws were supposed to follow four conditions, those being laws being determined by reason, directed toward a common good, being made by a law-maker, and must be made public. These laws are all essentially made through the use of reason, and also meant to be followed rationally. Thus, the core concept of Aquinas' belief in laws was the use of ratio, or reason. On the other hand, neo-Confucian "laws" focused more on the relationships between individual members of society. Although these laws are not explicitly stated, it was more of a general rule that filial piety is a huge part of Chinese life. For example, in The Analects, "The Master said: A young man should be filial within his home and respectful of elders when outside, should be careful and trustworthy, broadly caring of people at large, and should cleave to those who are ren. If he has energy left over, he may study the refinements of culture (wen)." (page 2). By actively pursuing a life of passion and filial piety at home and in public, one would be able to cultivate a sense of ethical righteousness and become a better person. This

passion for respect would inflame a strong sense of loyalty to the state and their family, allowing for a better society and individual. This shows that neo-Confucian ethics regarding law was meant to better individuals instead of simply compelling them to follow laws according to reason. Furthermore, piety to the spirits and gods was also a very important part of neo-Confucian life, as it provided the basis for respect for ancestors and parents, which then eventually translated into society as a whole. In comparison, while Aquinas' belief in the essence of laws was simply to allow for society to stay in order through reason, neo-Confucian laws were meant to allow for one to improve oneself.

Lastly, Saint Thomas Aquinas tackled many ethical problems that plagued the societies of the middle ages, including those of heresy, war, and homicide. He believed that these were the main sins that one could commit in life and placed great emphasis on avoiding these, for the consequences were extremely severe. "As for the heretics themselves they have committed a sin that deserves not only excommunication by the church but their removal from the world by death." (pg 63) Due to the strong hold that religion held over Europe at the time, heresy was considered one of the main sins that would get one executed and even summoned to hell in the afterlife. Those who went against the doctrine of the church were considered heretics who had strayed from God and gone over to the devil's side and were summarily executed for what was considered the greatest sin at the time. However, the church could also have mercy on the heretic if he were to admit to his crimes and promise to stick to religious piety, which gave him a chance to redeem himself. Thus, the virtuous believer was not only deeply

religious but was also forgiving towards sinners, attempting to bring them back to God. Furthermore, the virtuous person also partakes only in wars that were waged for just causes and with the right intentions. In other words, it was considered a sin to have wars for evil intentions, although this is certainly the case in most circumstances today. Third of all, homicide, suicide, and even self-defense were all considered to be sinful and against the marks of a virtuous person. Homicide is obviously against virtuous ethics, as one would not only have to embrace evil to take the life of another man but would also be taking a life given by God. Suicide was generally the same concept, that by killing oneself, one was also violating God and natural law, as life was a gift from God. However, even self-defense was considered to be a sin and unethical, as intent to kill someone through self-defense was considered evil. In neo-Confucian standards, an ethical and superior man was expected to perform rites and rituals that would elevate him to become a better person in society. " Guide them with virtue, regulate them with ritual, and they will have a sense of shame and become upright." (II-3) These rites and rituals were expected to form the foundation of his good behavior and to provide one with the virtues that were expected of a superior man. The respect one displayed towards his ancestors during these rituals and rites were a sort of practice meant to translate its way into everyday life. Thus, the neo-Confucian ethics were more concerned with internalized development that was meant to help a person self-develop into an ethical superior man, while Aquinas believed that the ethical man would refrain from committing sins. In this way, the neo-Confucian ethics go a step further and almost seem to mold a man into a shape that fits society and allows for him to function as a higher member, while Aquinas' ethics merely prevent one

from becoming an unethical member of society. In addition, these rites or rituals allowed the relations between each member of society to foster and created steady relationships between superiors and inferiors, family members, and even with ancestors. On the other hand, Aquinas' ethics of the virtuous person didn't focus as much on the positive relationships between members of society and instead focused primarily on religion. Thus, neo-Confucian ethics were able to change human nature according to the idea of the superior man or gentleman, while Thomas Aquinas' ethics were meant to keep one deeply religious and prevent one from committing sins that would go against God.

Saint Thomas Aquinas was a spectacular philosopher who had an extremely strong presence all over Europe through the form of his doctrines and ethics. He was able to spread his deeply pious ideas throughout Europe on how to be a virtuous person and how to be an ethical member of society. His teachings were able to lead many on the path to God and instruct them on how to reach heaven in the afterlife through one's actions in this world. Chinese neo-Confucianism was similar on this level; Zhu Xi was a prominent Chinese philosopher who analyzed Confucius' Analects and was able to develop the idea of the superior man and how to be a gentleman in Chinese society. His teachings paved the path for the members of Chinese society to act in a way that allowed them to reach their own full self-potential and become a higher functioning member of society. However, there are major differences in the ways that Aquinas and neo-Confucianism instruct one on how to be an ethical and virtuous person, primarily in that Aquinas focused almost solely on religion, while neo-Confucianism focused on the internal

self. While their ideas regarding governance were similar in many respects, the ideas regarding happiness, law, and ethics as a whole were vastly different. All in all, Aquinas' rational theology and neo-Confucianism were vital in instructing one how to be an ethical virtuous person in society.