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Nature and the Value of Learning in Classical Chinese Philosophy and in Augustine—A Comparative Study

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Abstract: This paper compares Augustine's view on the value of learning to classical Chinese philosophy (Laozi, Confucius, Mengzi, Xunzi, Zhu Xi). While Laozi has a quite negative notion of learning as leading humans away from true nature, most Confucians esteem learning highly as the only way to human perfection. Similar to the Confucians, the early Augustine sees knowledge and learning as a way for humans to ascend to divine truth. In his mature works, however, Augustine points out more clearly the dangers of learning: it can make humans proud instead of humble, causing them to rely on their own power instead of confessing their weakness and their need for divine grace. His hesitations on the value of learning bear some similarity to Laozi's view.

Keywords: learning; knowledge; self-knowledge; nature; Confucianism; Daoism; humility; faith; grace

1. Introduction

The first half of this paper is dedicated to Laozi's *Daodejing* and to Confucian philosophy. It includes Confucius' own thought as well as its interpretation by the Confucian philosophers Mengzi (Mencius) and Xunzi, and the Neo-confucian philosopher Zhu Xi. The focus lies on the topics of knowledge and learning in relation to human nature. Do knowledge and learning allow human nature to unfold and come to perfection? Or is learning contrary to nature and, as such, an impediment to the realization of full humanity? Of course, I cannot give a comprehensive interpretation of these Chinese philosophies here. Rather, I will only select but a few significant passages.

The second half of this paper deals with the thoughts of Augustine. Knowledge and learning are important topics to him, as they were to the ancient philosophers before him. Augustine, too, inquires into the value of learning and its relationship to human nature. Does knowledge lead humans to moral perfection, or does it prevent them from reaching true wisdom? In Chinese philosophy and in Augustine's thought, there are both positive statements about the value of learning and caveats. Even though the Chinese and the Augustinian ways of thinking differ in many respects, I believe it is still possible to compare their respective ideas about learning and its relation to human nature. The following will offer such a comparison.

2. Laozi and the *Daodejing*

The *Daodejing* treats the idea of learning and its relation to nature in numerous chapters. Some statements on learning are quite negative, even shockingly dismissive. For example, in the third chapter, it states that the sage (sheng ren), in the exercise of government, fills the bellies of his people but empties their minds (xin), constantly keeping them without knowledge (wu zhi).¹ National education appears to Laozi to be especially corruptive, for in chapter 19 he suggests "Abandon sageliness (zhi) and discard wisdom; Then the people will benefit a hundredfold." The impartation of knowledge (zhi) to the people, he claims, would destroy the state.² But even to individual persons, Laozi advises "Abandon learning and there will be no sorrow" (20). The path of learning (xue) is, for Laozi, in



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direct opposition to the life according to the Dao, which aims at non-intervention (*wu wei*): “The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. The pursuit of Tao is to decrease day after day. It is to decrease and further decrease until one reaches the point of taking no action” (48). The critique of knowledge and learning, moreover, corresponds to a negative evaluation of speaking. The sage (*sheng ren*) practices not speaking (*bu yan*) and does not express himself (cf. 2; 43); “Nature says few words” (23); “It [the Dao of heaven] does not speak (*bu yan*), and yet it skillfully responds to things” (73). According to Laozi, knowledge, learning, and the transmission of knowledge are damaging both for individual persons and for the community.

What is the basis of this negative judgement? One reason for it surely must lie in the notion of the Dao itself. Although the Dao is the primal power that brings forth everything—heaven, earth, and the ten-thousand things, the Dao itself cannot be named or predicated (1). The Dao is like an “empty bowl” or a “bottomless” abyss (4). It is colorless, inaudible, incomprehensible, limitless, and unnamable. It has the form of formlessness and approximates nothingness (14). Its nothingness, emptiness, and formlessness prevent us from having a knowledge or a concept of the Dao. The unnamability and unknowability of the Dao are not grounded in its changeability, however. Rather, Laozi repeatedly describes the Dao as constant. It is “eternal” and “steadfast” (16); it “depends on nothing and does not change” (25); “The Dao is eternal and has no name” (32).

In Daoism, the idea of naturalness plays a special role. The *Daodejing* states that the perfect person who practices the Dao is like “uncarved wood” (28). Moreover, it compares the sage to an “infant which has not yet smiled” (20). The sage is “ignorant”, “indiscriminate”, “dull”, “dark”, and drifting like the sea; he “makes no distinctions” (20). Particularly striking is the significance of softness for Laozi. He repeatedly introduces the oppositional pair of “soft-hard” and “weak-strong”: “The weak and the tender overcome the hard and the strong” (36). The hard ages quickly and soon dies. The soft, in contrast, lives longer. Laozi thus compares the “good person” (*shan*) with water (8), which is soft, adapting to everything without quarrel (8).

In an ethical respect, this softness entails not seeking advancement, not striving for the top, not aspiring to power, not conveying directives, and not taking possession (cf. 2). “Dao models itself after nature (*zi ran*)” (25). Correspondingly, whoever lives according to the Dao retracts himself, allows nature to take its course, and thus achieves great things. Chapter 38 of the *Daodejing* is particularly radical. According to Laozi, the Dao is not just the supreme way of living, but the only true one. Other practical principles like virtue (*de*), goodwill (*ren*), justice (*yi*), and legality stand for increasing degrees of intervention and are just signs of a lack of Dao.

Laozi even regards knowledge as an intervention through which the knower breaks from his natural position and encroaches upon nature. For this idea, his teaching on the togetherness of opposites appears to play a significant role. Being and nothingness mutually generate each other as do the opposites heavy and light, long and short, and up and down (2): “The Dao which is bright appears to be dark”; “The great square has no corners” (41). Laozi seems to believe that knowledge and speech say what things are and what they are not. Knowledge renders the togetherness of oppositions invisible and thus misses the true nature of the Dao and all things that emerge from it. Knowledge even corrupts the nature of the knower because knowledge forms one’s character, but the person who lives according to the Dao is like “uncarved wood”, that is, he is unformed.

Laozi nevertheless does offer a positive conception of learning in a special sense. The sage knows himself (cf. 72) and others (cf. 33). Moreover, he knows the world without having to step outside, and he sees the Dao of the heavens without having to look through the window (cf. 47). This knowledge, however, entails a non-knowing knowledge or a knowledge of ignorance: “To know that you do not know is the best” (71). The sage is aware of the separating character of knowledge and thus recommends a non-knowing association with things and other humans, which alone can correspond to the Dao-nature of reality.

In principle, however, Laozi has a negative view on knowledge and learning. Knowledge obscures the nature of reality and misses the Dao. The perfect human is the natural human. He is ignorant, formless, and soft. Laozi understands softness as restraint and humility towards nature. The wise person strives neither for power nor for knowledge because such striving would be contrary to the Dao.

3. Learning and the Goodness of Human Nature in Confucianism

In contrast to Daoism, Confucius esteems knowledge and learning greatly. In his treatise “The Great Learning” (Da xue), one of the four classics of the Chinese Confucian tradition, he establishes a strong connection between the virtue of a person and her knowledge. In Chapter 2, Confucius speaks about the cultivation of personality, the rectification of the heart, and sincerity as being based in knowledge. “Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified”.³ According to Confucius, the extension of knowledge and the investigation of things is indispensable for the acquisition of virtue both for the individual and, in the case of a ruler, for good government. In this context and in many others, Confucius highlights the moral value of learning. To pick out just one, the famous passage from the beginning of the “Analects” (Lun yu), Confucius says “Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?” (1,1). The idea of self-cultivation through obedience to the laws of propriety but also through learning and knowledge stands in the center of Confucius’ thinking.

A few centuries after Confucius, philosophers in the Confucian tradition developed views on human nature as a theoretical basis for the practical idea of self-cultivation. The resulting notions of human nature were not uniform, however, but very diverse. The Confucian philosopher Mencius is well known for his positive view of human nature. In his “Gaozi” (part I), he is in dialogue with another philosopher who believes that human nature by itself is neutral with respect to good and evil, as water is neutral with respect to flowing east or west—each direction is equally possible. Mencius replies “Water indeed will flow indifferently to the east or west, but will it flow indifferently up or down? The tendency of man’s nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. There are none but have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards.”⁴ According to Mencius, human nature naturally tends toward the good as water flows downwards by its very nature. Thus, a good life is a life according to human nature, and a bad life is a life contrary to human nature. In another passage of “Gaozi”, Mencius asserts “Benevolence is man’s mind, and righteousness is man’s path. How lamentable it is to neglect the path and not pursue it, to lose this mind and not know to seek it again! When men’s fowls and dogs are lost, they know to seek for them again, but they lose their mind, and do not know to seek for it. The great end of learning is nothing else but to seek for the lost mind”.⁵ For Mencius, learning aims at acquiring self-knowledge, and self-knowledge composes the basis of all virtues. Learning, therefore, leads to moral perfection.

The Confucian philosopher Xunzi, on the other hand, developed the view that human nature is evil. In his only extant work, which carries his name as a title, he attacks Mencius’ idea of the goodness of human nature. “The nature of man is evil; [. . .]. Man’s inborn nature is to seek for profit and gain. [. . .] By inborn nature one is envious and hates others. [. . .] By inborn nature one possesses the desires of ear and eye and likes sound and beauty. If these tendencies are followed, lewdness and licentiousness result, and the pattern and order of propriety and righteousness disappear. Therefore to follow man’s nature and his feelings will inevitably result in strife and rapacity, combined with rebellion and disorder, and end in violence”.⁶ He suggests that it is only through civilizing activity, i.e. through developing rules of propriety and laws of conduct, that humanity acquires goodness. The wise man, and especially the wise ruler, is honored because he can transform nature by laws. For Xunzi, as for Mencius, any human being can become a sage by observing the laws. “If in his practises and studies day after day for a long time, he concentrates his mind,

has unity of purpose, thinks thoroughly and discriminately, and accumulates goodness without stop, he can then be as wise as the gods, and form a trinity with heaven and earth" (23).⁷ Xunzi emphasizes the need for self-cultivation and learning as much as Mencius does, but, for him, moral education does not lead back to the (supposedly good) human nature, but away from evil human nature.

In his endeavor to establish a metaphysical foundation for the teaching of Confucius, Zhu Xi, the most important thinker of Neo-Confucianism, interprets Confucius' statement in "Great learning" (Da xue) 2, with the assistance of Mencius' observation concerning the goodness of human nature. Zhu Xi suggests that "human nature in all cases is good, but in becoming aware of this goodness, there are those who lead and those who follow. Those who follow in becoming aware of it must emulate what those who lead in becoming aware of it do. Only then can they understand goodness and return to their original state".⁸ Learning is thus estimable because, by learning, the learner finds her way back to her own good nature. Zhu Xi distinguishes between the sages, who lead on the path of learning, and the students, who follow the sages. But, for both, it is a matter of becoming aware of one's own good nature. According to Zhu Xi, it is by learning that one both becomes aware of one's own goodness and approximates this goodness. Learning, therefore, has a moral goal. It makes one a better person. Indeed, it allows one to discover one's true self and to realize it.

In his "Analects", Confucius explains "At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right".⁹ The education process thus begins with learning and leads to insight into "heaven's decrees"—that is, into the order of the world stemming from heaven. Ultimately, for Confucius, the entirety of human striving, including "desires", conforms to the knowledge of heaven's decrees. In his commentary on this passage, Zhu Xi explains that the goal of learning consists in the recognition of the principle of all things. Through this knowledge, a person can lead her life in accordance with the decrees of heaven—that is, she can realize her own human nature completely and be moral in a comprehensive sense.¹⁰ Accordingly, moral perfection presupposes study and the acquisition of knowledge.

In another passage of the "Analects", Confucius claims that the ability to draw analogies from what is near at hand can be called the way to true goodness. Zhu Xi interprets and elucidates this statement as the capacity for empathy. The educated person recognizes the same heavenly principle in all humans because they all possess the same human nature. For this reason, he can sympathize with others.¹¹ By means of compassion, the educated person is capable of repressing all self-serving interests. Moreover, as Confucius writes, "Is virtue a thing remote? I wish to be virtuous and lo virtue is at hand" (7,30).¹² Zhu Xi links this statement to the goodness of human nature that is present in each person and thus close to everyone. Whoever truly wants to be good will be. In principle, only the will is required. Consequently, if someone does not achieve human perfection, then it is not because it is unachievable but because he is not resolved enough.

Overall, in Confucianism, the goal of obtaining knowledge, including knowledge of things and self-knowledge, is ethical improvement. One's egotistical interests may be negated and others may be treated according to the rule: "What you do not wish for yourself, don't do unto others". The Confucians mostly interpret moral progress as a return to the good nature of each human being. The exception is Xunzi, who sees it as a turning away from bad human nature. Like Laozi, Confucius and Zhu Xi use the expression "the Way" (Dao). Whereas, for Laozi, a life according to the Dao excludes knowledge, in Confucianism, knowledge of the nature of all beings and of oneself is precisely the presupposition of a life according to the Dao, for it is only through such knowledge that one comes to know the law of heaven and to live in moral perfection. In contrast to Laozi, who believes that learning makes humans miss their ultimate goal, the Confucians consider

learning the necessary means for reaching this goal. While Laozi has a critical view of learning, the Confucians see learning in a positive and affirmative light.

4. Augustine's Reflections on Nature and Learning, Compared with Chinese Thinking

4.1. Nature and Form as Works of God

The ancient and medieval Christian tradition agrees with Laozi and Zhu Xi in stressing the significance of nature as a measure of human action. Its concept of nature, however, is much closer to Confucianism than to Daoism. In its understanding of nature, early Christianity is heir to ancient Greek philosophy in which nature plays a central role. Most of the philosophical ethic of antiquity is rooted in the ideal of a life according to nature (*secundum naturam vivere*).¹³ Albeit with certain modifications, Augustine, and with him many medieval thinkers, adopted this idea. Nature, in this tradition, means something similar to what Zhu Xi understands by it—namely, the essence of things and of the human. This essence is conceived as something determinate that one can bring to expression by means of a definition.

According to Augustine, God, the Creator, bestowed everything with a certain nature, i.e., essence (this is similar to the Neoconfucian view of the nature of all beings stemming from the decree of heaven). Augustine frequently cites biblical wisdom literature, where it is written “You have ordered everything by measure, number, and weight” (Proverbs 11,21). He interprets the essence and all the attributes of things that can be comprehended by numbers as works of God. Whoever studies the nature of things and practices the science of numbers recognizes the laws and structures that God, the Creator, placed in nature. Knowledge, therefore, entails a reflection on that which God has planned. For Augustine, whoever acquires knowledge of real beings retraces God's thoughts.

Whereas Daoism conceives nature as that which is natural in contrast to that which was made by intervention, Augustine interprets nature as that which was created by God in contrast to that which was made by humans. Although the image of the creator as a divine craftsman was always rejected¹⁴, because it does not capture the idea of creation from nothing¹⁵, the Christian understanding of divine creation does indeed have some proximity to human action insofar as the divine creator and the human craftsman both have a preconceived knowledge of what they are going to make. The Daoist ideal of non-intervention (*wu wei*) seems incompatible with Augustine's understanding of nature as a product of divine action. Thus, the Daoist critique of knowledge as a form of intervention is not easily applicable to an Augustinian framework, because, for Augustine, knowledge means understanding the thoughts of the God who created nature.

Augustine has a positive view of the definiteness and the formedness of all beings. Determinateness and form are effects of divine creation. While Laozi states, “The Dao of heaven does not speak”¹⁶, Augustine insists that God does speak, since his word is the principle of all creation.¹⁷ God even is a word. The Gospel of John says as much where it is written: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God” (Jn 1,1). Augustine takes this to mean that all determinacy and form goes back to God and his word, which is the form of all things.¹⁸ For Augustine, form means perfection. This pertains also to the human soul. In Augustine's view, education leads to the formation of the soul. Through learning and moral practice, a person's soul gains more and more unity and order¹⁹, and the soul of the saint is perfectly formed. While for Laozi the sage is like “raw material” (“uncarved wood”), ignorant and indeterminate²⁰, for Augustine the sage is knowing and fully unified and stable.²¹

Self-knowledge is a very important form of knowledge for both Augustine and the Confucians. According to Augustine, acquiring self-knowledge is a necessary step for the ascent of the soul from material beings towards God. In the *Soliloquia*, he plainly asserts that all he strives for is knowledge of God and of the soul.²² He writes, “Eternal God, I want to know me and you.”²³ Augustine elaborates the connection between self-knowledge and knowledge of God in *De libero arbitrio*. He claims that self-reflection of the human

mind reveals two things. First, the human mind stands above all material beings because it possesses abstract concepts and unchangeable rules (like those of logic and mathematics) by which it makes judgments on these beings. Second, since the human mind is a changeable entity, it cannot have created these unchangeable rules of judgment itself but must have received them from an eternal being above the human mind, namely God.²⁴ The human mind, therefore, becomes aware of God's existence through self-reflection. In Augustine's view, self-knowledge is a precondition for the knowledge of God. Like the Confucians, he also claims that it is a necessary step on the way to human perfection.

The dispute between Mencius and Xunzi on the goodness or evilness of human nature is reminiscent of Augustine's distinction between original human nature and fallen nature. From an Augustinian standpoint, Mencius was right with regard to the human nature created by God. For Augustine, human nature was created good, i.e., harmonious, well ordered towards God, and capable of eternal life and happiness. Through sin, however, it was corrupted. For Augustine, primeval sin was not only a moral failure; it also altered human nature for the worse.²⁵ Xunzi says "The nature of man is evil"; "And by evil is meant imbalance, violence and disorder"; and "It is the original nature [...] of man to love profit and seek gain"²⁶. These sentences could have come directly from Augustine's mouth when speaking about humans as they are now, i.e., after sin. However, Augustine claims that even in the state of moral corruption, traces of the original goodness of human nature are preserved, most importantly the natural desire for God that manifests itself as a desire for happiness and truth.²⁷ The natural longing for peace composes another such trace. Augustine envisions peace as a reestablishment of the original order within the soul, between soul and body, and among human beings in society²⁸. Augustine still calls a life according to nature—that is, original nature—the happy life, which would be impossible for Xunzi to maintain. Mencius' statement that human nature has a tendency toward the good as water has a natural tendency to flow downward recalls Augustine's words: "My love is my weight."²⁹ Like weight naturally pulls downward, love naturally pulls toward God, who is the highest good. In spite of his negative view on fallen human nature, Augustine still has some proximity to Mencius' and Zhu Xi's idea of the goodness of human nature because, for Augustine, traces of that goodness persist even in fallen humanity.

4.2. Faith, Humility, and Learning

On the one hand, the early Christian thinkers inherited the ancient Greek culture of knowledge and its high estimation of learning. In this regard, Augustine's thought bears similarities to Confucianism and Neo-confucianism. On the other hand, Augustine did not accept the idea that knowledge inevitably leads to human perfection or that it is even a necessary precondition for it.

In his early works, Augustine underlines the importance of knowledge and learning for the perfection of human beings. *De ordine* 2 gives an account of training in the liberal arts as a precondition for the ascent to the vision of God. Even here, however, Augustine points out that knowledge needs to be complemented by faith in divine authority, so that it can lead the human to real happiness.³⁰ His mature writings criticize knowledge and learning more sharply. In *Confessiones* 4, Augustine tells a story about how he as a young man studied all the liberal arts books he could get hold of and easily surpassed his peers in scientific knowledge, but this knowledge did not benefit him because he had turned away from God and did not love him but temporal goods instead. He observes that the unlearned people of the church were closer to God than he was at that time because they loved God even though they had no learning.³¹ This story demonstrates a stark difference between Augustine and Confucian and Neo-confucian thinkers regarding the idea of wisdom and perfection. To explain this difference, we must describe Augustine's position more precisely.

Over time, with an increasing focus on the idea of divine revelation, Augustine distanced himself from the ancient culture of knowledge. For Augustine, there is no rational proof for the fact that God revealed himself in Jesus Christ and that this human

individual was the incarnate son of God. This fact, he observes, must be accepted through faith. Therefore, the proper human response to God's act of love and self-humiliation is gratefulness to God and the love of God. Through humility, humans open themselves up for God's grace, without which they cannot reach the perfection and happiness that constitute the goal of life. Augustine's emphasis on humility, faith, and love in the field of anthropology brings forth a sharper distinction between reason and will than in ancient Greek philosophy. While for Plato knowledge necessarily leads to love of the true good³², for Augustine, insight into the truth can remain fruitless if a person lacks humility toward God. According to Augustine, knowledge of God remains useless, or is even detrimental, if a human being does not have faith in the son of God who became man to redeem all humanity.

Augustine's *Tractates on the Gospel of John* contain his most impressive reflections on this subject matter.³³ In these tractates, he explicates the relationship of philosophy and Christian faith by assuming, modifying, and augmenting Plato's image of the cave.³⁴ According to Augustine, we do not have to rise up from a cave into the light of day as Plato imagines; we rather need to scale a mountain from the plains. Just as Plato depicts someone who, having emerged from the cave, beholds the sun from the earth's surface, Augustine depicts a mountain climber who sees the truth, the goal of life, and the destined homeland from a mountain peak. However, for Augustine, this homeland is not reached by sight alone. It resides in the distance and is only glimpsed from afar, for between the mountain summit and the homeland there is a sea that must be overcome, the sea of life. The means of passage is a ship constructed of wood, namely the wood of the cross. It is only onboard this ship that humans can cross the sea and truly reach the homeland glimpsed from the mountain peak.

The image used by Augustine is readily deciphered. The view from the mountain peak represents the noetic vision of divine light, which symbolizes the highest achievement of knowledge. By extending this image with the element of the sea, however, Augustine makes apparent his reservation against knowledge. The metaphysical vision of God does not entail that one has reached the goal, he argues, for this vision is merely a contemplation from afar. Therefore, Augustine draws a distinction between the sight of God and an abiding with God, between the intellectual vision of God and the willful adhesion to God, between the glimpse of the highest good and the ability to travel to the homeland and dwell there.³⁵ He acknowledges that philosophy does attain to such a vision, but he does not believe that it provides the means to reach the goal of life.

Augustine further elaborates his depiction by distinguishing three types of humans: the great ones, the little ones, and the proud ones. Of the great ones, he writes "It is good. . . and best of all, if it be possible, that we both see whither we ought to go, and hold fast that which carries us as we go. This they were able to do, the great minds. . . ; they were able to do this, and saw that which is. For John seeing said, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' They saw this, and in order that they might arrive at that which they saw from afar, they did not depart from the cross of Christ, and did not despise Christ's lowliness".³⁶ The great humans—and Augustine obviously counts the evangelist John among them—can see; they dispose of the noetic vision of the divine, and simultaneously they trust in the cross in order to traverse the sea and arrive at the envisioned reality. Through philosophy, they possess the highest form of knowledge, and through religion, their will is entirely oriented toward God. To learn and to believe, to see the good itself and to love it over everything else, this is the best way to live according to Augustine.

Of the second type of humans, the little ones, Augustine writes "But the little ones who cannot understand this, who do not depart from the cross and passion and resurrection of Christ, are conducted in that same ship to that which they do not see, in which they also arrive who do see".³⁷ Consequently, philosophical training, pinnacle in the intellectual vision of the Platonists, is not necessarily required in order to arrive at the goal. Those who cannot see also reach the longed-for homeland if they merely board the ship of faith

and trust that it will bring them to the desired place. Augustine thus repels the elitism of Western classical antiquity, which allows only the few who have access to the good of education a chance at happiness. From a Christian point of view, this possibility is open to all, even to those who, due to a lack of learning, cannot attain a vision of the eternal but faithfully appropriate the teachings of God through trust in the authority of Holy Scripture. This is what Augustine means when he writes “For no one is able to cross the sea of this world, unless borne by the cross of Christ. Even he who is of weak eyesight sometimes embraces this cross; and he who does not see from afar whither he goes, let him not depart from it, and it will carry him over”.³⁸

Augustine classifies the pagan Neoplatonist philosophers among the third type of humans, the proud ones. What the apostle Paul says in his epistle to the Romans applies to them: “Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (Rom 1,22). Their foolishness does not reside in not knowing God, Augustine claims, but in the fact that they saw him and still could not summon the humility to recognize the son of God become human in Jesus Christ. Augustine writes “They were able to see that which *is*, but they saw it from afar: they were unwilling to hold the lowliness of Christ, in which ship they might have arrived in safety at that which they were able to see from afar and the cross of Christ appeared vile to them. The sea has to be crossed, and do you despise the wood? Oh, proud wisdom!”³⁹ These philosophers became fools because they assumed that knowledge alone would be sufficient for human perfection.

Augustine claims that the incarnate son of God is not accessible by philosophy but only by faith. Since the way for us to become humble and open ourselves for God’s grace entails recognizing God’s self-humiliation in taking on human flesh, faith is required for the healing of the soul. All attempts to become virtuous through one’s own efforts are principally fruitless. Even worse, they bear witness to human pride and haughtiness. With the humility of the divine *logos* as the model, one must become meek, admit one’s weakness, and shed tears of confession. According to Augustine, if we humbly admit our inability to attain the good, then God in his grace might bestow on us the strength to change our lives and to live according to our insight. It should be observed, however, that Augustine does not completely renounce the value of knowledge. His abiding commendation of learning is evident in the figures of the first group of humans, the perfect ones. For they do possess philosophical insight. While Augustine believes that whoever is able to learn and study should do so since reason is an integral part of being human, he makes clear that learning is not necessary for reaching life eternal.

In contrast to the Confucians, Augustine delimits the value of education for the attainment of wisdom in two ways. First, he claims that knowledge is not necessarily required to attain wisdom; rather, knowledge can be replaced by faith. Augustine’s position accords here with the Confucian claim that everybody can become a sage, though Augustine is even more radical in extending the opportunity of happiness to all human beings. While the Confucians assert that every human being can turn into a sage through learning, Augustine maintains that everybody can become a saint even without learning. One must keep in mind that in the ancient world learning was expensive; it required much free time and a high social status and was thus reserved for the elite of society. By reducing the relevance of learning, Augustine opens the possibility of happiness for everyone.

Second, Augustine is wary of the potential for the accumulation of knowledge to corrupt one’s character, especially by encouraging pride and arrogance. The educated tend to boast of their cognitive abilities. Such pride inhibits the insight that humans are dependent on God to become virtuous. The emergent “proud wisdom” puffs people up, whereas true wisdom presupposes a humility such that God’s gracious assistance may be received to acquire not just full knowledge but also a good will.

In fact, the biggest point of contrast between Augustine’s thinking and Confucianism centers on the question whether humans possess the power to make themselves virtuous or are powerless without the help of God. Confucius states “Is virtue a thing remote? I wish to be virtuous and lo virtue is at hand”⁴⁰, and Zhu Xi interprets this as saying that

whoever truly wants to be good will be, because only the will is required for achieving true goodness. According to Augustine's doctrine of grace, however, the human will to be good is not strong enough. By itself it is unable to overcome the bad passions and the egotistical desires of fallen human nature. Only with the help of God's grace can a human being achieve goodness of the will. Therefore, humans must humbly acknowledge their own moral incapacity and weakness so they may receive God's help.

At this point, an unexpected congruence between Augustine's and Laozi's thought becomes visible. Even though there are many differences between their metaphysical concepts, they share to some degree a critical view of knowledge and learning. Laozi's ideas of simplicity, softness, renunciation of power, and non-intervention (*wu wei*) find a parallel in Augustine's recommendation of humility, weakness, and passivity toward God's grace. Both Laozi and Augustine dismiss the trust in one's own strength as a sign of pride and arrogance. They are both sensitive to the way that learning can lead to pride, arrogance, and an overreliance on one's own power, thereby separating the human from the Dao or from God.

5. Conclusions

The Chinese tradition possesses different and divergent evaluations of education and its significance for the realization of human nature. The *Daodejing* speaks negatively of knowledge. Because the Dao itself is formless and ungraspable, the person who wants to conform to the Dao should be ignorant, refrain from distinctions, and become like unworked wood. The sage is humble toward the Dao. He does not intervene, he is not presumptuous, and he does not strive for power.

In Confucianism, a contrarian evaluation of education prevails. Knowledge of the world and of oneself leads to a better moral disposition and, finally, to virtue. Self-cultivation is central to the Confucian conception of humanity. It begins with learning and ends with the acquirement of justice and empathy. Except for Xunzi, the Confucians predominantly interpret the path of education as a return to the original, good human nature, which, having been buried by the negative influence of civilization, must be uncovered anew.

In many respects Augustine's thoughts on nature and learning approximate those of Confucius and the Confucian tradition. Like the Confucians, Augustine emphasizes the importance of knowledge for the understanding of nature. Learning is a first step in the ascent of the soul to God. Augustine also asserts that self-reflection is indispensable to moral progress. He can even bridge the differences between Mencius and Xunzi concerning the goodness or badness of human nature. However, Augustine's position stands in contradistinction to the Confucians insofar as he believes that knowledge is not a necessary requirement for the attainment of wisdom and for the restoration of human nature. Indeed, Augustine observes that educated persons run the added risk of becoming proud and arrogant and thus of going astray from true wisdom. For true wisdom presupposes humility before God, and the humble person alone is receptive to the grace of God that leads him to virtue and to the perfection of his will. This critique of education and the motive of humility distance Augustine from Confucianism and bring him into surprising proximity to the *Daodejing's* representation of the sage as ignorant, simple, and powerless.

The objection may be raised that this analysis overestimates the similarities between Augustine and the Chinese philosophers. According to this objection, they are not truly comparable because, for Augustine, every human effort for knowledge is carried by the supernatural grace of God, whereas Daoism and Confucianism do not posit such divine assistance and instead consider all striving for education a purely human enterprise. Against this objection, however, stands the fact that Augustine never contests the truth of the knowledge of Plato and the Neoplatonists, even though they were pagans. According to Augustine, these philosophers rightly taught that God is the cause of being, the ground of knowledge, and the goal of human life.⁴¹ And Plato correctly claimed that whoever imitates, knows, and loves God is wise and that whoever participates in God is blissful.⁴²

Moreover, it should be remembered that Augustine reports in his *Confessions* that he had his first temporary visions of divine light at a time in his life before he had converted to Christianity.⁴³ At that point in his development, Augustine resembled a pagan philosopher who, from a mountain top, looks upon the distant homeland but who had not yet crossed the path of humility that leads down the mountain to the ship of faith in Christ. The claim is false, therefore, that for Augustine every knowledge acquisition presupposes the supernatural grace of God. For, according to Augustine, Plato, Plotinus, and he himself before his conversion all experienced the noetic vision of divine light—and thus the pinnacle of knowledge—without disposing of the special grace from God, which God gives humans on account of faith in Christ. Like the Chinese philosophers, Augustine considers the cognitive faculty a natural capacity belonging to all humanity.

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Notes

- 1 In the following I will quote the English translation of the “Daodejing” after: (*A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* 1963, pp. 139–76). The “Daodejing” is traditionally attributed to Laozi, but it is controversial if the Daodejing even had a single author.
- 2 “In ancient times those who practiced Tao well did not seek to enlighten the people, but to make them ignorant. People are difficult to govern because they have too much knowledge. Therefore he who rules the state through knowledge is a robber of the state; He who rules the state not through knowledge is a blessing to the state” (65).
- 3 Confucius is quoted after the “Chinese Text Project”: <https://ctext.org/liji/da-xue>, accessed on 27 November 2023. English translation by James Legge.
- 4 Gaozi (part I), chapter II 2, in: (Legge 1970, pp. 395–96).
- 5 Gaozi (part I), chapter XI 1.–4., in: “The Works of Mencius”, *ibid.* p. 414.
- 6 “Xunzi” chapter 23, quoted after: (*A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* 1963, p. 128).
- 7 *Ibidem*, p. 134.
- 8 Quoted after (Gardner 2003, p. 31).
- 9 Confucius, *Analects* 2, 4. Quoted after <https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng>, accessed on 27 November 2023 (Translation James Legge).
- 10 Cf. Gardner 2003, p. 46.
- 11 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 60.
- 12 Confucius, *Analects* 7,30. Quoted after <https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng>, accessed on 27 November 2023 (Translation James Legge).
- 13 Cf. Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 5, 24–26.
- 14 Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 11,7.
- 15 Augustine, *De vera religione* 35–36; *Confessiones* 12,7; *De Genesi ad litteram* 1,14,28.
- 16 Cf. Laozi, *Daodejing* 73.
- 17 Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 11,11.
- 18 Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione* 81; 113.
- 19 Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione* 113; *De civitate dei* 19,11–14, where Augustine explains peace including order and unity as the highest goal for all human beings, especially for the just ones.
- 20 Cf. Laozi, *Daodejing* 20.
- 21 For the wise human’s perfect knowledge cf. Augustine, *Soliloquia* 1,13,3; 1,14,1; 1,15,1–3. For the stability of the soul cf. *De libero arbitrio* 1,22,77–78.
- 22 Cf. Augustine, *Soliloquia* 1,7,1.
- 23 “Deus semper idem, noverim me, noverim te” (*Soliloquia* 2,1,1).
- 24 Cf. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 2,3,7–16,41.
- 25 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei* 14,12; *De natura et gratia* 81.
- 26 Xunzi 23, quoted after: (*A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* 1963, p. 128).
- 27 Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 10,29; 10,33.
- 28 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei* 19,12.

- 29 Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 13,10; *De civitate dei* 19,12.
- 30 Augustine asserts that philosophy promises perfect knowledge, but hardly liberates anybody from vices and bad ways of living because it lacks the motivational power of religion (cf. *De ordine* 2,16).
- 31 Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 4,30–31.
- 32 Cf. Plato, Protagoras 352a–357e.
- 33 Augustine, In *Johannis evangelium tractatus*. Also instructive is *Confessiones* VII 27. For the following explications, cf. (Brachtendorf 2008, pp. 261–74). Furthermore cf. (Brachtendorf 2005, pp. 119–88).
- 34 Cf. Plato, *Politeia* VII, 514a–517a. Cf. Augustine, In *Johannis evangelium tractatus*, tr. II.
- 35 For the distinction between seeing and holding cf. also Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* II 36, 141; 41, 161.
- 36 Augustine, In *Johannis evangelium tractatus*, tr. II 3.
- 37 *Ibid.*, tr. II 3.
- 38 *Ibid.*, tr. II 2.
- 39 *Ibid.*, tr. II 4.
- 40 See note 12 above.
- 41 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei* 8,4.
- 42 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei* 8,5.
- 43 Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 7,16 und 7,23.

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