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Augustine and Confucian Virtues: Mencius and Augustine on the Proper Motivations for Moral Conduct

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Abstract: In this essay, we analyze Mencius's ethics through the lenses of Augustine's critique of pagan virtue and its tendency to self-love. In the first part of this essay, we outline the basic conceptual framework of Augustine's theory of virtue and the brunt of his criticism of the pagan virtue tradition. In the latter part, we explore how Mencius manages to avoid the Augustinian charge against the pagans that they render virtue subservient to honor, and how he largely agrees with Augustine on what place public performance of virtuous deeds should have. At the same time, Mencius's emphasis on loving virtue for its own sake at times slides into expressions of taking delight in one's own virtue, a subtler form of self-love that Augustine identifies especially in the Stoic philosophy. While Mencius gives space to the role of Heaven in his ethic, he lacks the theocentric pathos of Augustine, which includes, inter alia, an acknowledgment of our human frailty and deep dependence on God's grace. Although Mencius's ethical ideas ultimately correspond rather to those that Augustine associates with pagan virtue, Mencius represents at least a "higher" form that finds meaningful common ground with Augustine on several important issues.

Keywords: Augustine; Mencius; pagan virtue; Confucianism; comparative ethics



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1. Introduction

In this essay, we endeavor to compare a Confucian and a Catholic philosopher, namely, Mencius and Augustine.¹ On the surface, such a comparison may strike one as surprising. Living over half a millennium apart from each other in very different cultures, steeped in their own distinctive intellectual traditions, these two thinkers might seem to have little in common. However, their life circumstances are not without similarities. Both Mencius and Augustine lived in periods of political disruption and social decay. Mencius lived during the Warring States period, marked by immense bloodshed between competing states and the collapse of the traditional feudal social order and ritual system. Augustine experienced firsthand the disorientation of a culture in which the traditional pagan religion and ethic grew ever weaker, proving incapable of satisfying many people's existential needs, and he witnessed the breakdown of the Roman Empire as it was overrun by barbarians. Both Mencius and Augustine were inspired to find a solid moral basis to help cure these ills, but while the former longed for the return of an idealized past, the latter turned to the Christian religion that was replacing the more ancient pagan world and indeed became the official state religion during his lifetime, and while the former focused more immediately on rectifying the this-worldly social order, the latter looked to the Heavenly City that sojourns on this earth and to the eschatological end. Broadly speaking, the thoughts of these two great philosophers are certainly different in numerous aspects, but they also share not only a common moral pathos but also many concrete ideas about the normative moral life. And for thinkers of their stature who have reflected on similar questions, even if there is no influence of the one on the other or indeed a common intellectual source, we can expect a comparison of their ideas to be intrinsically valuable and illuminating. We should add that, while each thinker greatly impacted the subsequent development of their respective

tradition, neither one can be taken as a generic representative of Confucianism or Catholicism conceived as monoliths, for both of these are diverse traditions that have harbored debates on matters large and small.

Bryan van Norden (2001) has previously conducted a comparative analysis of these two thinkers' views on the origin of evil and the topic of will, with Ann A. Pang-White (2023) recently comparing their respective views on gender and sexuality.² We will here focus instead on Mencius's and Augustine's views on the proper motivations to act virtuously, a topic on which both philosophers have reflected deeply. In violation of chronological order, we will first discuss Augustine's position. This is because Augustine famously articulates his conception of the ideal manner of living virtuously also in contrast to the pagan virtue tradition. After analyzing his criticisms of the pagan tradition and his positive vision of how the Christian should instead approach the virtuous life, we will turn to Mencius. In particular, we will consider whether and to what extent Mencius's ideas can hold up to Augustine's standards. While concluding unsurprisingly that Mencius cannot escape all of Augustine's charges against pagan virtue, the important part of the analysis will be to specify those aspects of Mencius's thought that find common ground with Augustine and those that fail to do so.

It is worth making clear at the outset that our method of analyzing Mencius's ethics by means of Augustinian categories does not imply an evaluative judgment of the relative superiority of one ethical theory over the other. The conclusion that Mencius fails to meet certain criteria of the true virtue as established by Augustine could easily be turned on its head to make the argument that it is Augustine who makes unreasonable and perhaps even morally questionable demands. At the same time, our selected approach of analyzing the ethics of Mencius through an application of Augustinian categories does not seem without its value. After all, it is a common—and in principle, justified—practice to compare philosophies typologically even when there is no genetic relationship between them, as doing so can shed light on specific structures of thought that one might have otherwise not perceived. In the case of Mencius's ethical theory, including his theory of moral motivation, much has already been gained in terms of a more precise understanding of its structure by means of comparison with Kantian and other Western ethical frameworks.³ It does not appear that Augustine has been included as a *comparandum* in much of such discussions, even though he has exerted an immense influence on Western discussions of the ideal motivations for moral actions (cf. Herdt 2008). Reading Mencius through the lenses of Augustine's critique of pagan virtue can helpfully illuminate aspects of his thought, some of which are familiar but others of which have not perhaps been so emphasized in the scholarship. For example, as we will have occasion to see, the sliding from taking delight in virtue to taking delight in one's own possession of virtue is something that appears subtly in the *Mencius* but might be missed if one were not reading the text with Augustine in the background. And while one can of course still disagree with the notion that one should condemn the latter action,⁴ one should at least acknowledge that the Augustinian analysis of the different kinds of virtue, evaluative as they are in the original context, proved useful in raising the question also with respect to the philosophy of Mencius. It is in this spirit that we engage in the present examination, hoping not to elevate one theory over another, but to demonstrate the productivity of Augustinian categories in helping one grasp essential features of Mencius's thought.

Another clarification should be made. Our use of Augustinian categories is in part also motivated by the fact that his basic principle of what constitutes moral action is helpfully schematized in a gradated manner to reflect a hierarchy of ethical systems that includes various "pagan" ideas and culminate in Christianity. Thus, even when one perceives that Mencius does not agree with the ideals of Augustine, one can still find a place for him within the broader Augustinian scheme of these alternative conceptions of virtue. We will argue that, according to this general framework, Mencius's ideas will largely fall into the category of what Augustine considers to be notions of the (philosophical) pagan virtue tradition. However, if and when we speak of Mencius as representing "pagan" ideas, we strictly mean

that he articulates conceptions of the virtuous life that correspond to those specific ideas of what should motivate our moral action that Augustine identifies in the “pagan” tradition. The term “pagan” itself is a derogatory designation for the heterogeneous non-Christian and non-Jewish traditional culture of the Mediterranean world against which Christianity came to define itself. We certainly make no claim here that Mencius himself or Confucianism more broadly can be simply collapsed within this tradition and cultural sphere, nor do we wish to be understood to suggest that Mencius shares—beyond, at any rate, the specific ethical ideas at stake here—the (in any case divergent) broader values, customs and mores of the ancient Greco-Roman world.

2. Augustine on Pagan Virtue and the Proper Motivations for Moral Conduct

One of the most defining features of Augustine’s ethics is his concern with the proper motivations for moral conduct. While deepening insights found in the Scriptures (especially but not only the New Testament), the sustained reflection that we find on this topic is also consonant with the broader and highly innovative exploration of the inner life that Augustine opens up in his oeuvre. In his *Confessiones*, Augustine recounts with painstaking detail and openness how the moral failings of his earlier life were caused in large part by his misplaced goals, his ambition and desire for honor caused by his sense of pride.⁵ His schooling in classical rhetoric made him look down on the unadorned literary style of the Bible (*Conf.* III.5.9), and even the Platonic books that helped him find a more profound intellectual understanding of Christianity were given to him by a man “swollen with immense pride” (*Conf.* VII.9.13: *immanissimo typho turgidum*) and, tellingly, did not include anything equivalent to the Incarnation and Kenosis doctrine, which emphasize divine humility (*Conf.* VII.9.14). Augustine’s life experience led him to believe that no small part of what made Christianity so exceptional was its inner distance from what the pagan society and philosophers upheld as our reasons to pursue excellence. It offered a different path that consisted in, first, humility, second, humility and third, humility.⁶

The tension between pagan virtue and Christian virtue becomes increasingly pronounced in Augustine’s own development, especially with his emphasis on grace, original sin and human weakness in his later works. The traditional pagan, and particularly Roman virtues that had been lauded by orators for countless generations, fell suspect to his critical eye. In his magnum opus, *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine launched a famous attack on pagan virtue. Adducing classical authors as source texts, he observes how it was commonly accepted that one pursued virtue for honor and glory. Indeed, this is indicated by the close proximity of the Temples devoted to Virtue and Honor (V.12.3). A rare exception would be Cato, who is said by Sallust not to have sought virtue, but to have been followed by it. This reflects a higher ideal of virtue: *melior est virtus, quae humano testimonio contenta non est nisi conscientiae suae*—“Better is the virtue which is not content by any human witness except that of one’s own conscience” (V.12.4).⁷ However, Augustine notes that even as upstanding a man as Cato did not perfectly follow this model but did seek some honors. Roman society never succeeded in ridding itself of its obsession with glory. The few condemnations of love of praise, such as those made by Horace, for example,⁸ are far outweighed by the repeated promotion of ambition and striving for honor and fame (V.13). Augustine upholds Christianity as constituting a much needed and healthy corrective of this value system. First, Christianity elevates love of righteousness over desire for glory (V.14: *saltem cupiditas gloriae superetur dilectione iustitiae*). Going even further, Augustine states, concerning the Apostles:

“Namque ne propter humanam gloriam boni essent, docuerat eos magister illorum dicens: ‘Cavete facere iustitiam vestram coram hominibus, ut videamini ab eis; alioquin mercedem non habebitis apud patrem vestrum, qui in caelis est’ (Matt. 6:1). Sed rursus ne hoc perverse intellegentes hominibus placere metuerent minusque prodessent latendo quod boni sunt, demonstrans quo fine innotescere deberent: ‘Luceant,’ inquit, ‘opera vestra coram hominibus, ut videant bona facta vestra et glorificent patrem vestrum, qui in caelis est’ (Matt. 5:16). Non ergo ‘ut videamini ab eis,’ id est hac intentione, ut eos

ad vos converti velitis, quia non per vos aliquid estis; sed "ut glorificent patrem vestrum, qui in caelis est," ad quem conversi fiant quod estis".

"For lest they be good for the sake of human glory, their Master taught them, saying: "Be aware of doing your righteousness before people, that you may be seen by them; otherwise, you will not have a reward from your Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 6:1). But then again, lest, misunderstanding this, they fear to please men and be of less benefit by hiding that they are good, demonstrating with what end in mind they ought to become known, he said: "Let your deeds shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Not therefore "that you may be seen by them," i.e., with this intention that you would wish them to be turned to look at you, because by yourselves you are not anything; but "that they may glorify your Father, who is in heaven," that converted to Him, they may become what you are".

Virtue should be pursued not for one's own glory, but rather for the greater glory of God. This means that one, on the one hand, should not hide one's virtues, but, on the other hand, one should also be humble enough to admit that they do not truly in any exclusive way belong to us.⁹ At the same time, Augustine has no illusions that Christians, by their membership in the Church, meet this ideal. In his 394 *De sermone Domini in monte*, Augustine makes very similar comments on the two Matthean passages cited above (see DSD I.7.18 on Matt. 5:16 and II.1.2 on Matt. 6:1), warning Christians against becoming hypocrites like the Pharisees and exhorting them to act morally in a public manner, but with the intention not of aggrandizing their reputations but of leading others by their moral example toward God.¹⁰ Augustine also condemns those who would hold both intentions in their minds, advocating instead a "simple and clean heart" without loyalty to two masters (DSD II.2.9). The phrase *cor simplex et mundum* acts as a refrain in this work to underline the purity of intention required by Christ of his would-be followers.¹¹ One can say that Augustine himself tried to reach this ideal by his writing of the *Confessiones*, a public exposition of his life wherein he admits his many flaws while also directing those readers who find anything laudable about him to praise not him but God.¹²

Augustine's insistence on the ordering of one's moral intentions toward God leads him to make the well-known claim that true virtue is impossible without true piety (*De Civitate Dei* V.19). True virtue must come with a sense of dependence on the grace of God.¹³ Later in the same work, Augustine reaffirms that true virtue is only possible when it is oriented and referred to God:

Proinde virtutes, quas habere sibi videtur, per quas imperat corpori et vitiis, ad quodlibet adipiscendum vel tenendum rettulerit nisi ad Deum, etiam ipsae vitia sunt potius quam virtutes. Nam licet a quibusdam tunc verae atque honestae putentur esse virtutes, cum referuntur ad se ipsas nec propter aliud expetuntur: etiam tunc inflatae ac superbae sunt, ideo non virtutes, sed vitia iudicanda sunt.

Just so, the virtues which [the mind] seems to itself to have, through which it commands the body and the vices to acquire or hold on to whatever it desires, unless it refers them to God, also these themselves are rather vices than virtues. For although then virtues are deemed by some people to be true and honest when they are referred to themselves and are not sought for the sake of something else, even then they are inflated and proud, and therefore must not be judged as virtues but as vices (De Civitate Dei XIX.25).

It should first be noted that the comment that these pagan virtues are vices is expressed in stronger language than *De Civitate Dei* V.19, where it seems to describe pagan virtue as a partial and imperfect virtue.¹⁴ More important for the present argument is why exactly, for Augustine, referring virtues to themselves is vicious. Jennifer Herdt interprets this as follows (Herdt 2012, p. 126): "While Augustine appears to be saying here that choosing virtue for its own sake is prideful and vicious, in fact the claim being made is that even when virtue is sought *with reference only to the agent him or herself*, rather than for the sake of winning praise and glory from others, it is nevertheless corrupt." This reading is con-

firmed by *De Civitate Dei* V.20. Describing those philosophers—he has in mind particularly the Stoics—who place the telos of the human good in virtue itself (*finem boni humani in ipsa virtute constituunt*), he claims that they, by spurning the judgments and praises of others, in fact act to please themselves. Thus, this would refer to seeking virtue for one's own sense of satisfaction in having achieved a high standard, a pride in one's own merit.¹⁵ This passage in book 19 therefore should be understood as a sober reflection on human nature, stressing that if people are not oriented toward God that they must inevitably be directed toward themselves in self-love, unhealthily proud of their own achievements due to their ignorance of what they owe to God's grace.¹⁶

In sum, Augustine's definition of virtue is conceived in theocentric rather than anthropocentric terms. This means that virtue must have reference to God as its end and is also based on the grace of God. On one hand, humans should not regard virtue as the final end in itself. Rather, only when man pursues God can virtue be established. This is met by the following criteria (borrowing terms from Gaul 2009, p. 245): (1) The "cognitional requirement" means that virtue should be defined as right reason (*recta ratio*), for a ground stone of Augustine's ethic is the distinction between enjoyment (*frui*) and utilization (*uti*). Therefore, it is important to recognize the ultimate end of human life by making use of reason (*ratio*). In this respect, Augustine also bases the cardinal virtues on the correct judgment, following the ancient intellectual tradition. (2) The "volitional requirement" means that virtue is defined as rightly ordered love (*ordo amoris*) that is based on the love of God (cf. *De Civitate Dei* XV.22). In *Epist.* CLV, Augustine reconstructs the four cardinal virtues in terms of clinging to God (*adhaerere Deo*), which is centered on the love of God. That is, in order to be a virtuous person, one must love God. On the other hand, virtue does not lie in human power, but rather is dependent on God's freely given grace.

3. Mencius on Virtue, in Comparison with Augustine

Having sketched above some of the most important contours of Augustine's thought on this topic, we can now turn our attention to Mencius. Mencius is one of the most profound and influential thinkers of the Confucian philosophical tradition and, for the purposes of this argument, well suited to represent the Confucian ethical stance vis-à-vis Augustine. The question we ask ourselves here is, namely, whether Mencius's conception of the virtuous life should be considered just one other iteration, in a different cultural key, of the "flawed" pagan ideals of virtue that Augustine criticizes or whether instead Mencius's philosophical thinking contains within itself the intellectual and moral resources to avoid those supposed pitfalls identified above. While of course Mencius cannot meet in any formal sense Augustine's strict criterion of possessing the "true faith" as a necessary prerequisite for true virtue, this does not mean that he necessarily lacks functional equivalents or approximations of those features of the Christian religion that, in Augustine's eyes, would save one from the prideful features of pagan virtue.

For Mencius, the path of moral cultivation consists most fundamentally in nourishing the "four sprouts" (四端 *si duan*, see 2A6), basic innate feelings that when developed lead to the flourishing of the four virtues of humaneness (仁 *ren*), righteousness (義 *yi*), ritual propriety (禮 *li*) and wisdom (智 *zhi*). The sprouts themselves are (in sequence, corresponding, respectively, to the four virtues) the "feeling of pity and compassion" (惻隱之心), the "feeling of shame and aversion" (羞惡之心), the "feeling of modesty and compliance" (辭讓之心), and the "sense of right and wrong" (是非之心). Mencius's famous claim that nature is good is predicated on the idea that these innate feelings, *when properly cultivated*,¹⁷ lead to moral flourishing and virtuous behavior. While much could be elaborated on this point, for the purpose of this present essay, we will focus on what Mencius considers to be the proper motivations for engaging in this process of cultivation.

Let us begin with one passage in the *Mencius* that sounds, on the surface, very similar to the traditional Roman discourse on virtue: 孟子曰：仁則榮，不仁則辱。今惡辱而居不仁，是猶惡溼而居下也。如惡之，莫如貴德而尊士，賢者在位，能者在職。 "*Mencius said, "One who is humane will be distinguished; one who is inhumane will be disgraced. Now, to dislike*

disgrace yet abide in inhumanity is like disliking dampness yet abiding in a low place. If one dislikes disgrace, there is nothing better than to honor Virtue and to esteem men of service, giving positions to the worthy and offices to the capable" (2A4).¹⁸ Mencius here apparently appeals to the ruler's desire for honor to incite him to virtue. Is virtue nothing other than a means for the politically powerful to attain glory? In 4A3, Mencius asserts that humaneness is essential for the stability of the state and for the maintenance of the ruler's position. He concludes with a similar image: 今惡死亡而樂不仁，是猶惡醉而強酒。"Now, to dislike death and ruin and yet to take pleasure in not being humane is like disliking drunkenness and yet forcing oneself to drink to excess." Taken together, these passages might suggest that Mencius has an instrumental view of virtue as a means for the ruler to acquire honor or political power. If so, Mencius would be a clear representative of the "vicious" pagan conceptions of virtue. To interpret these passages in this way, however, neglects both the considerations of the audience and many other statements that suggest a far more complex and morally refined understanding. Before jumping to any conclusions, therefore, we must turn to other passages that may shed further light on Mencius's thinking.

The view that Mencius is ultimately concerned to use virtue to maximize benefits runs into serious difficulties when confronted with a passage like 6A10: 孟子曰：魚，我所欲也；熊掌，亦我所欲也，二者不可得兼，舍魚而取熊掌者也。生，亦我所欲也；義，亦我所欲也，二者不可得兼，舍生而取義者也。"Mencius said, "I desire fish, and I also desire bear's paws. If I cannot have both of them, I will give up fish and take bear's paws. I desire life, and I also desire righteousness. If I cannot have both of them, I will give up life and take righteousness." (6A10). Surely Mencius cannot believe that humaneness and righteousness are just a means to profit or aggrandize oneself if he would be willing to die for them. In the aforementioned passage 4A3, Mencius also states, 士庶人不仁，不保四體。"And if a scholar or an ordinary person is not humane, he will be unable to protect his four limbs." However, we have just seen that this cannot be taken to mean that Mencius is implying that virtues like humaneness and righteousness are simply techniques for the preservation of life. As such, to return more specifically to the issue of honor, if the statement "Now, to dislike death and ruin and yet to take pleasure in not being humane is like disliking drunkenness and yet forcing oneself to drink to excess" does not mean that humaneness is subservient to avoiding death and ruin, so too the parallel assertion "to dislike disgrace yet abide in inhumanity is like disliking dampness yet abiding in a low place" should not imply that humaneness is advanced as an indirect means of acquiring honor and avoiding disgrace. Mencius is elsewhere explicit that one should not be motivated to act morally for the sake of recognition. In a discussion with Song Goujian, Mencius advises him to be content whether or not his talents are acknowledged by others: 人知之，亦囂囂；人不知，亦囂囂。"If someone recognizes your talent, be content; likewise, if none recognizes your talent, be content." (7A9). The true source of contentment, Mencius explains, is honoring virtue and delighting in righteousness. If one is recognized, one should be content to have the opportunity to better influence other people for the better, but even in a state of impoverishment, one can always cultivate one's own virtue and find solace therein.¹⁹ In another passage, the sage king Shun is singled out for praise by Mencius because he was able to regard the admiration that all under heaven felt toward him as a bundle of grass. Instead, what mattered to him was fulfilling his filial duties (4A28).

Mencius does believe that virtue is an end in itself, and yet he is also convinced that virtue has an efficacy in bringing order to the world, an order that tends to benefit all, including also the moral agent.²⁰ Virtue has positive consequences for the individual and the state, but Mencius would also stress that these consequences come about most successfully precisely when they are secondary byproducts of a love of virtue for its own sake and not pursued *intentione recta*. In 7A8, he observes, 古之賢王好善而忘勢—"The exemplary kings of antiquity loved goodness and forgot power." There is no suggestion here that the former came at the expense of the stable possession of power; quite the contrary. At the same time, it may be impracticable to persuade many rulers to love virtue without consideration of its benefits,²¹ and while acting virtuously motivated by these self-interested considerations

will not lead one to achieve the level of the sage rulers of the past, it may lead to at least moderate moral improvement. For the ruler to have some virtue is better than for him to have no virtue, not simply for the ruler but also for the people of the state at large, and so we should understand Mencius's appeals to the benefits of virtue also as his way to accommodate himself to his audience (Cf. Bai 2022, p. 381).

Mencius and Augustine both agree that love of virtue should triumph over love of glory, but in neither case does this result in them condemning a public display of moral deeds per se. Both promote public performance of virtue for the transformative moral benefits it brings about in others. In Mencius, we find this reflected in an even stronger degree than Augustine. He shares the general Confucian conviction in the charismatic influence of virtue. Mencius adduces Confucius as an example:

以力服人者，非心服也，力不贍也；以德服人者，中心悅而誠服也，如七十子之服孔子也。《詩》云：『自西自東，自南自北，無思不服。』此之謂也。」

“When one uses force to make people submit, they do not submit in their hearts but only because their strength is insufficient. When one uses Virtue to make people submit, they are pleased to the depths of their hearts, and they sincerely submit. So it was with the seventy disciples who submitted to Confucius. The ode says, “From the west, and from the east,/From the south and from the north,/No one thought of not submitting.” This is what was meant”. (2A3)

Moreover, while upholding the example of Confucius and, even more spectacularly, the sage kings of old, he sees this principle at work on the more mundane level as well: 身不行道，不行於妻子—“If a man himself does not practice the Way, it will not be practiced by his wife and children” (7B9). Whereas the Legalist philosopher Han Fei would mock this idea of trying to influence humans through virtue, claiming that seventy is a depressingly small number of close disciples for a man as virtuous as Confucius and adducing the example of rotten children with upright, caring parents (see Hanfeizi 49, “The Five Vermin”), Mencius not only believes in the descriptive claim that virtue has a strong influence in practice but also embraces the normative principle that we should strive for virtue in order to be a positive force on others.²²

Whereas Mencius emphasizes these positive effects of the visibility of virtue even more fulsomely, Augustine shows more concern for the dangers involved in acting before an audience, namely, the tendency to hypocrisy. One passage in the *Mencius* held up by scholars as demonstrating Mencius's strong condemnation of hypocrisy is his discussion with his disciple Wan Zhang 萬章 on the *xiangyuan* 鄉原, commonly translated “village worthy”. In the *Analects*, Confucius comments very tersely that the village worthy is the thief of virtue (17.13: 鄉原，德之賊也。), a statement reprised by Wan Zhang, who asks Mencius why they are so condemned by Confucius since, after all, an entire village may praise such a person. The reply of Mencius may be quoted at length:

非之無舉也，刺之無刺也；同乎流俗，合乎汙世；居之似忠信，行之似廉潔；眾皆悅之，自以為是，而不可與入堯舜之道，故曰德之賊也。

孔子曰：『惡似而非者：惡莠，恐其亂苗也；惡佞，恐其亂義也；惡利口，恐其亂信也；惡鄭聲，恐其亂樂也；惡紫，恐其亂朱也；惡鄉原，恐其亂德也。』

“Blame him—you find nothing blameworthy. Reprove him—there is nothing to reprove. He conforms to prevailing customs; he harmonizes with an impure age. In his commitments, he seems loyal and trustworthy; in his actions, he seems incorruptible and untainted. The crowd is pleased with him, and he considers himself to be right. It is not possible to enter the Way of Yao and Shun together with him, and he was therefore called the ‘thief of Virtue’”.

Confucius said, “I dislike something that appears to be what in reality it is not; I dislike the weed for fear it will be confused with the grain; I dislike flattery for fear it may be confused with rightness; I dislike verbal facility for fear it may be confused with trustworthiness; I dislike the music of Zheng for fear it may be confused with authentic music; I dislike violet

for fear it may be confused with vermillion; I dislike the village worthy lest his qualities be confused for Virtue". (7B37)

The language of appearance (似 *si*) in both Mencius's own words and in those cited of Confucius makes it understandable why interpreters have understood the criticism of the village worthy to be a critique of hypocrisy.²³ However, it is important to appreciate that the emphasis of this passage is quite different from the Augustinian discussions of hypocrisy.

Mencius's concern here is not really to dwell on the discrepancy between the inner motivations and the outer action. If anything, we find this concern more clearly articulated earlier in the discussion when Mencius and Wan Zhang discuss another type of person, described as 狂—"madly ardent." Mencius describes them as follows: 其志嚶嚶然，曰『古之人，古之人』。夷考其行而不掩焉者也。 "*Their resolution led them to ostentatious invocations of 'The ancients! The ancients!' But, impartially assessed, their actions did not measure up to their words*" (7B37). The inability to conform word and deed is a recurring concern in many Confucian texts, and we find it expressed here with reference to those people who bloat themselves on grand moral rhetoric that they are unable to substantiate. However, the village worthy is explicitly contrasted with such people, and indeed, he criticizes the latter. As Mencius explains, 『何以是嚶嚶也？言不顧行，行不顧言，則曰：古之人，古之人。行何為踽踽涼涼？生斯世也，為斯世也，善斯可矣。』闒然媚於世也者，是鄉原也。 "*He is the sort of person who might say, 'Why are you so ostentatious? Your words are not supported by your actions, nor are your actions supported by your words, yet you invoke "The ancients! The ancients!" Why are you so self-possessed, so cold? We are born into this world and must be of this world. It is quite enough simply to be good.' Eunuch-like, he ingratiates himself with a whole generation—such is the village worthy.*" The "madly ardent" and "village worthy" represent two contrasting versions of those who have fallen aside of the "middle way" (中道 *zhongdao*). The former indulges his fancy in grandiose ambitions but lacks the moral discipline to fulfill them, while the latter simply gives up on any great moral aspirations whatsoever.²⁴ Thus, when Mencius claims that the village worthy seems (似 *si*) loyal and trustworthy, the question is not so much that he is subjectively insincere, but rather that the contemporary social standards of what these virtues consist in, standards that he uncritically follows, are themselves already so mediocre so as not to count as true loyalty or trustworthiness. Stephen Angle has rightly emphasized how the village worthy is subtly but importantly distinct from the hypocrite: "The problem with village worthies, therefore, was that they thrived in and actively encouraged a culture of doing no more than one's duty—and they did this at a time when the collectively understood duties were too minimal to lead to genuine moral progress for individuals or for the society" (Angle 2013, p. 185). This passage has to be carefully read in accordance with the entire flow of the rhetoric and argument in order to see what exactly Mencius is criticizing in each case. The "madly ardent" is closer to a hypocrite than the village worthy, but even here, Mencius does not dwell per se on the self-interested motives of such people by claiming, for example, that they are seeking honor and respect from others. It is fair to say that while hypocrisy is something disliked by Mencius, Augustine's penetrating and relentless critique of the psychology of the hypocrite is something that is comparatively lacking in the Chinese philosopher.²⁵

4. The Crux of the Comparison

We can now turn to a more fundamental question, namely, the issue of the highest motivational end for these two philosophers. We have seen that for Augustine, the answer is unambiguously God. We must act to serve and render glory unto God. As noted already, in Augustine's mature works, virtue is defined as an order of love (*ordo amoris*). Regarding love, Augustine saw love as a gift from God, and it was only through the Holy Spirit that man could change the orientation of his will and attain inner renewal. In contrast with pagan virtue, Augustine was not content to define love only in terms of knowledge, but also as a gift from God (*De Trinitate* VIII.10.14). In *De spiritu et littera* 3.5, Augustine demonstrates the effect of the Holy Spirit on the will: *ut hac sibi velut arra data gratuiti muneris inardescat inhaerere Creatori atque inflammetur accedere ad participationem illius veri luminis—*

“in order that by this earnest, as it were, of the free gift granted to him, he may ardently desire to cleave to the Creator, and may burn to enter upon the participation in that true light.” By introducing grace, virtue is not the attainment of the mind cultivated solely by man himself in the knowledge of God, but is the result of God’s love. In order to be virtuous, the divided will, which is based on Paul’s teaching of conflict between flesh and spirit, should be firstly united by God’s grace. This means correct behaviors are not sufficient. It requires that humans have a revolution with the help of God’s grace. In other words, the love of the sensible world should be purified by theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. Thus, those who claim that virtue is the highest good but detach virtue from God will inevitably fall into self-love.

How does Mencius relate to this? On the one hand, he speaks of the moral person’s duties to Heaven. 盡其心者，知其性也。知其性，則知天矣。存其心，養其性，所以事天也。殀壽不貳，修身以俟之，所以立命也。 “By fully developing one’s mind, one knows one’s nature. Knowing one’s nature, one knows Heaven. It is through preserving one’s mind and nourishing one’s nature that one may serve Heaven. It is through cultivating one’s self in an attitude of expectancy, allowing neither the brevity nor the length of one’s life span to cause any ambivalence, that one is able to establish one’s destiny” (7A1). Mencius not only believes, therefore, that our virtues have their origin in Heaven, but he also sees the moral life as a way of serving Heaven (事天 *shi tian*). This is elaborated elsewhere: 有天爵者，有人爵者。仁義忠信，樂善不倦，此天爵也；公卿大夫，此人爵也。 “There is the nobility of Heaven and the nobility of man. Humaneness, righteousness, loyalty, and truthfulness—and taking pleasure in doing good, without ever wearying of it—this is the nobility of Heaven. The ranks of duke, minister, or high official—this is the nobility of man” (6A16). All the same, it must be admitted that Mencius’s conception of Heaven is not easy to pin down, and scholars have proposed diverse interpretations, usually centering on the ambiguous moral status of this concept.²⁶ For while passages like the aforementioned suggest that Heaven is a moral entity, elsewhere Heaven is said to be responsible for the cases both when the Way prevails and when it does not (4A7). We will not be able to offer an in-depth analysis of the differences between the Mencian notion of Heaven and the Christian and specifically Augustinian concept of God in this essay. To be sure, a notion like freely given divine grace is lacking in Mencius’s worldview, and it is after all this experience of grace that allows for the deepest possibility of gratitude toward and humble dependence on God. Augustine would certainly deem already this a major. Keeping more strictly to the chosen theme, we may note that Mencius does not frame our duty toward Heaven as motivation for moral conduct in as central and exclusive a manner as Augustine. Gratitude toward Heaven does not figure as a potential source of motivation. Mencius also does not explicitly frame our moral influence upon others as a means to lead others to revere Heaven.

Moreover, Mencius elsewhere states, 君子有三樂，而王天下不與存焉。父母俱存，兄弟無故，一樂也。仰不愧於天，俯不忤於人，二樂也。得天下英才而教育之，三樂也。 “The noble person has three delights, and being ruler over the world is not among them. That his father and mother are both alive and his older and younger brothers present no cause for concern—this is his first delight. That he can look up and not be abashed before Heaven, look down and not to be ashamed before others—this is his second delight. That he can get the most eminent talents in the world and educate them—this is his third delight” (7A20). The reference to not feeling abashed before Heaven was an important source of inspiration for the late Ming dynasty Wang Zheng 王徵 that prepared him for his conversion to Catholicism and subsequent advocacy for a theo (Tianzhu 天主)-centric Confucian-Catholic synthesis.²⁷ However, in the Mencian passage, the reference to Heaven is only included as the second of three delights and thus not placed in a clearly supreme position. It should also be appreciated that Mencius—in contradistinction to Augustine—formulates the object of delight not so much as Heaven itself, but rather as the subjective state of feeling unashamed before it. This leads one to suspect that Mencius may be liable to the aforementioned “vice” that Augustine attributed to those who allegedly delight in virtue for its own sake, namely, that they in fact most admire their own personal possession of virtue.

This suspicion is reinforced by Mencius's specific comment: 反身而誠，樂莫大焉。 "To turn within to examine oneself and find that one is sincere—there is no greater joy than this" (7A4). Here, we apparently have precisely the sort of self-love that Augustine would condemn. Mencius's ethics in this sense is liable to what Augustine diagnosed in the more respectable strand of pagan philosophical virtue. While his ethics includes an important space for serving Heaven, something that could be creatively expanded upon by later Chinese Catholics, his own articulation of this is (to his credit or not) too underdetermined to correspond to the Augustinian demands. Furthermore, Mencius seemingly lacks the radical pathos according to which serving Heaven should overcome all forms of self-love, even love of one's own virtue. Nonetheless, an important qualification should be made. While Mencius does seem to indulge in expressions of virtuous people engaging in self-adoration, to claim that this is his highest moral motivation does not accord with any explicit statement of Mencius, although to be fair, Augustine also identifies this as the covert intention of the Stoics. While the gentleman may delight in his virtue, never does Mencius say or unambiguously suggest that one ought to act in order to feel this delight. This is an important distinction, and it thus still raises the question of what is the highest object of motivation to which Mencius appeals. To provide a more suitable answer, we must actually scrutinize the very terms of the question.

Mencius sidesteps the basis framing that Augustine present in his ethics, insofar as Augustine essentially reduces the morality of our conduct to what we intend by our action. For the latter, even if we act "correctly," fulfilling our expected duties and not committing harmful actions, we can still not be considered truly good if we do not know to what end we are acting (cf. Wang 1938, p. 116). However, for Mencius, the highest expression of the moral life is one where motivation tout court plays a reduced role. Mencius elaborates on this point in 7B33:

堯舜，性者也；湯武，反之也。動容周旋中禮者，盛德之至也；哭死而哀，非為生者也；經德不回，非以干祿也；言語必信，非以正行也。君子行法，以俟命而已矣。

"Yao and Shun had it as their nature; Tang and Wu returned to it. When every expression of one's countenance and every movement of one's body is exactly in conformity with ritual, this is the ultimate in flourishing Virtue. Weeping for the dead should be out of grief and not for the sake of the living. Following the path of Virtue without deviation is not for the sake of an emolument. Speech must be trustworthy and not for the sake of acting correctly. The noble person carries out the law and awaits his destiny; that is all".

While Tang and Wu returned to virtue by a deliberate process of recovery, Yao and Shun had virtue as their nature. Hence, all of their behavior conformed to moral principles without being forced by others or even themselves. Whereas the example of mourning and following the path of virtue both show that they did not act to please others or otherwise seek external benefits, more interesting is the claim that one should not be trustworthy in one's speech in order to rectify one's conduct. What could be wrong with that? The key point seems to be that virtuous behavior should ideally not even be carried out with the intention of being virtuous, but should flow forth as naturally as authentic grief in the face of a tragic loss. As soon as one tells oneself, "I should grieve the passing of so-and-so," one is not truly grieving. In the same way, the fullest expression of virtue arises when one does not even have to tell oneself to be virtuous. We find this same idea encapsulated in another description of Shun: 由仁義行，非行仁義也。 "Humaneness and righteousness were the source of his actions; he did not just perform acts of humaneness and righteousness" (4B19). In other words, his virtues were so naturally ingrained in him that his moral conduct emerged spontaneously without deliberate reflection or conscious deliberation between alternatives.

In practice, Mencius knows that practically no one is in the position of Yao and Shun. Although he insists that all people can in principle become a Yao or a Shun due to their inherently good nature (6B2), he is well aware that most of our natures have been corrupted. We have lost our original mind, but can seek it again through learning (6A11). However, Mencius stresses that this process is one that involves a careful balance between trying in-

tionally to cultivate virtue and letting things grow and develop naturally: 必有事焉而勿正，心勿忘，勿助長也。 “Always be doing something, but without fixation, with a mind inclined neither to forget nor to help things grow.” (2A2). Mencius memorably elaborates on the image of counterproductively helping things grow through the example of the farmer who pulls on his crop to make it grow faster only to uproot the plants and cause them to wither. If we follow this middle path, however, we can at least approximate the moral ideal established by Yao and Shun.²⁸ What is important for the purpose of our comparison is that we here see Mencius offering an alternative to the Augustinian premise that we are always driven by some specific intention, and that hence the moral person is the one who has trained his gaze to the loftiest principle, namely, God. For Mencius, one is most effusively virtuous and hence most in tune with one’s Heaven-endowed nature precisely when one reaches a point where one does not have to directly intend to act morally.

This moral state envisioned by Mencius is ultimately only possible due to his more optimistic anthropology, and thus Augustine would hardly be persuaded.²⁹ As he states, *Et quis est usque adeo sapiens, ut contra libidines nullum habeat omnino conflictum?* — “And who is so wise that he has absolutely no conflict against the passions?” (*De Civitate Dei* XIX.4.3). Firstly, for him, true virtue can only be realized in the afterlife or in the eschatological state (cf. *Epist.* CLV). From this aspect, none of the virtues on the earth are perfect, including the pagan virtues. Secondly, based on the doctrine of original sin, Augustine insists that human nature is broken after the fall and cannot be saved by the human self. Thus, virtue cannot be established simply on nature and reason. As Brett Gaul observes (Gaul 2009, p. 240), “For Augustine ... the idea that we can attain such a stable state in which temptation has no pull on us is sheer pagan pride and self-deception.” Yao and Shun represent moral ideals inconsistent with the fallen state of humanity, and hence Augustine would probably consider the promotion of natural, spontaneous virtuous practice in their model to be dangerous and bound to lead to negative results.

5. Conclusions

This article has investigated the ethics of one of the most important figures of Confucian philosophy through the lenses of Augustine’s critique of pagan virtue. We hope this essay may contribute to comparative East–West ethical discussions. We have observed that while Mencius is exempt from the charge of instrumentalizing virtue as a means to acquire honor or power, and generally agrees with Augustine on the place of public performance of virtue, he still expresses ideas that Augustine identifies in particularly the more philosophical strands of the Western pagan virtue tradition. Mencius’s promotion of taking delight in virtue does not stop the moral agent from taking delight in his own virtue in a form of self-love. Further still, the highest state envisioned by him wherein virtue pours forth from the moral person who no longer needs to actively resolve to act virtuously represents a conception of humanity that would be, according to Augustine, prideful in its lack of acknowledgment of our deeply rooted, common frailty and the redemptive power of God’s love and grace. Whether or not one agrees with Augustine’s evaluative judgements, it speaks for the perspicacity of Augustine’s analysis of pagan virtue that his categories can productively be applied to and illuminate the structure of ethical teachings of whose existence he had not the slightest knowledge.

To close, however, we may observe that, historically speaking, when Catholicism began missionizing in China from the late 16th century, the Confucian reaction was not to see their own tradition as possessed of traits leading to self-love. Rather, they viewed with suspicion the Catholic theory of postmortem rewards and punishments in Heaven and Hell, respectively, as inducing people to act morally for self-interested reasons. In the sixth *juan* or chapter of Matteo Ricci’s famous *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義 (“The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven”), the Chinese interlocutor asks the Westerner how talk of Heaven and Hell is compatible with the teaching of the sages that we should consider only humaneness and righteousness (仁義 *renyi*), and not benefit (利 *li*), in what is a transparent allusion to *Mencius* 1A1.³⁰ The Mencian discourse of loving goodness for its own sake made Confucians

hesitant to accept that our desire for Heavenly rewards should motivate our action. In the case of Augustine, the distinction is subtle: he is cautious and critical of those who would act in a calculating way to receive Heavenly rewards, and yet a truly ordered love of God could not but cause one to act with a longing to enjoy eternal peace with Him (cf. [Kent 2006](#), p. 215). Thus, we can say that the Confucian criticism of a common tendency in Christianity is one with which Augustine could have partly sympathized on the basis of his own principles.

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Notes

- ¹ We refer throughout this essay to Mengzi (孟子) by his Latinized name most familiar to Westerners.
- ² For other important comparative studies that involve either Mencius or Augustine, see [Yearley \(1990\)](#) and [Stalnaker \(2006\)](#).
- ³ For a recent, sophisticated analysis of Mencius's ethics in this vein, see [Bai \(2022\)](#). Interestingly, it is precisely through this comparison that Bai appreciates what is unique about Mencius: "The conclusion, then, is that Mencius is a very sophisticated consequentialist with regard to some aspects of morality, a non-Kantian deontologist with regard to certain other aspects of morality, and a Nietzschean with a strain that Nietzsche would resent. Perhaps the simplest thing to say is that Mencius is a Mencian after all" (p. 387).
- ⁴ One might follow, for instance, David Hume's "decidedly anti-Augustinian rehabilitation of pride as a virtue" ([Herdt 2008](#), p. 308).
- ⁵ For a discussion of the centrality of this theme to the *Confessiones*, see [Baumann \(2020\)](#). Cf. further [Baumann \(2009\)](#).
- ⁶ See *Epist.* CXVIII.3.22.
- ⁷ Throughout this essay, we provide our own translations of Augustine.
- ⁸ Augustine adduces Horace, *Epist.* 1.1.36-37 and *Carm.* 2.2.9-12. Augustine positively cites the former passage again in his *Epist.* CCXXXI.3 as part of a discussion about not seeking praise for oneself.
- ⁹ See also *Sermo* LIV, where Augustine makes this same point.
- ¹⁰ For further discussion of Augustine's treatment of hypocrisy in this text, see [Herdt \(2008\)](#), pp. 59–60.
- ¹¹ In his 392 *Epist.* XXII.7-8, Augustine discusses the corrosive moral effects of pride, emphasizing the same point that honor must be directed to God and also mentioning that, despite his best efforts, he is sometimes personally guilty of taking delight in others praising him.
- ¹² See *Epist.* CCXXXI.6, in which Augustine responds to Darius's request for a copy of the *Confessiones*: *ibi inspice me, ne me laudes ultra quam sum ... Et si quid in me tibi placuerit, lauda ibi mecum quem laudari volui de me, neque enim me, quoniam "ipse fecit nos et non ipsi nos"* (Ps. 100(99):3). "There [i.e., in the *Confessions*] look at me, lest you praise me more than I am ... And if something in me pleases you, there praise together with me Him whom I wished to be praised concerning me, and not me, since "It was He who made us, and not we ourselves" (Ps. 100(99):3).
- ¹³ CD V.19: *Tales autem homines virtutes suas, quantascumque in hac vita possunt habere, non tribuunt nisi gratiae Dei.* "But such people do not attribute their virtues, however many they may be able to possess in this life, to anything if not the grace of God".
- ¹⁴ As [Gaul \(2009\)](#) argues, *pace Irwin (1999)*, the stricter formulation reflects the mature position of Augustine's thought on the topic.
- ¹⁵ On the Stoic view, cf. also Augustine, *Epist.* CXVIII.3.15: *Nam cum seipso sibi quasi suo bono animus gaudet, superbus est.* "For when the mind rejoices in itself as if in its own good, then it is proud".
- ¹⁶ For further discussion on why Augustine criticizes those who would pretend to seek virtue for its own sake, see [Wang \(1938\)](#), pp. 40–43).
- ¹⁷ This is an essential qualification. Cf. e.g., 6A8, where we have this use of the language of nourishment (養).

- 18 For the English translation of *Mencius*, we cite while occasionally adapting the version of Bloom (2009), which is both elegant and rather literal.
- 19 It is natural to compare this passage with *Analects* 1.1.
- 20 This is of course not absolute. Mencius acknowledges that external circumstances may not favor the virtuous (cf. 7A9, discussed above). At the same time, Mencius is optimistic in the sense that he believes that in the long run, virtue is more successful than vice: 孟子曰：「不仁而得國者，有之矣；不仁而得天下，未之有也。」“Mencius said, ‘There have been cases where one who is not humane has gained control of a state but never a case where one who is not humane has gained control of all-under-Heaven.’” (7B13).
- 21 In 7B1, Mencius explicitly laments the inhumaneness of King Hui of Liang.
- 22 See Cottine (2016) on the importance of “role modeling” in Confucian thought.
- 23 Cf. esp. Sung (2016), who understands the village worthy to be what she calls an “appearance-only hypocrite,” which refers to hypocrites who do not so much internally contradict their external behavior by holding opposite views, but rather act externally to please people without having any firm beliefs of their own.
- 24 One must thus heavily qualify the assertion of Slingerland (2003) 132 that “Mencius, like Confucius, therefore reserves his most vicious criticism not for the profligate or glutton, but for the hypocritical ‘village worthy’ (*xiangyuan* 鄉原), who accommodates himself to the fallen ways of his contemporaries while still claiming to follow the Way of the ancients and of Heaven”.
- 25 To be sure, this is not to say that hypocrisy does not receive significant attention from Confucians. Angle (2013, pp. 182–86) observes that while Mencius does not seem very focused on this vice, Confucius in the *Analects* is much more concerned about it. For nuanced discussions, see especially Puett (2005, pp. 56–61), Perkins (2006) and Ivanhoe (2007).
- 27 Wang Zheng mentions the impact this passage had upon him in his 1628 *Weitian airen jilun* 畏天愛人極論 (“Ultimate Discussion on Fearing Heaven and Loving Human Beings”). The original Chinese text and English translation of the relevant passage can be found in Wang (2014, p. 12) and Starr (2022, p. 80) respectively.
- 28 For a much fuller and very rich account of Mencius’s views on naturalness and spontaneity in moral conduct, see Slingerland (2003, pp. 131–73).
- 29 Cf. Wolterstorff (2012) 165 on Augustine’s rejection of the Stoic view that everyone can become a sage, “that is, to become fully virtuous and thereby to free oneself from all negative emotions and consistently to do the virtuous thing”.
- 30 For analyses of this *juan* of the *Tianzhu shiyi*, see Ferrero (2019) and Hosle (forthcoming).

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