

# A Chinese Reading of Epictetus

Paul R. Goldin

(Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, PA)

**ABSTRACT:** After decades of attempts, comparisons between classical Chinese and Greco-Roman philosophy have had limited success. While there have been some productive lines of inquiry (for example, comparing early Confucian ethics to virtue ethics as represented by Aristotle), the overall record is disappointing because concepts such as Plato's theory of forms or Aristotle's emphasis on syllogism have proved incommensurable with most classical Chinese ways of thinking. But much of the problem can be attributed to the habit of comparing Chinese thinkers to Plato and Aristotle without asking whether they are the most suitable philosophers for this purpose. For most of the twentieth century, Hellenistic philosophy was scarcely considered. Yet very recently, provocative similarities have been identified between Chinese philosophy and Stoicism, especially Epictetus. In this paper, I argue that these parallels are even more significant than previous scholarship has recognized (I hope to convince the reader that some of them are staggering), and conclude by asking why we find such parallels in the first place. My claim will not be direct or even indirect transmission; this is a case, to borrow a distinction from evolutionary biology, of analogous rather than homologous development.

**Keywords:** Epictetus, Stoicism, *Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi*, comparative philosophy

## *Introduction to the Problem*

After decades of attempts, comparisons between classical Chinese and Greco-Roman philosophy have had limited success. While there have been some productive lines of inquiry (for example, comparing early Confucian ethics to virtue ethics as represented by Aristotle),<sup>①</sup> the overall record is

---

**Author Bio:** Paul R. Goldin is Professor of Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, PA. Email: [prg@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:prg@sas.upenn.edu).

**Acknowledgements:** I am indebted to Martin Kern, Harvey Lederman, and Benjamin Morison for helpful comments and references.

① E.g., Bryan W. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 350–57. Other recent studies are anthologized in Stephen C. Angle and Michael Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).

disappointing because concepts such as Plato's theory of forms<sup>①</sup> or Aristotle's emphasis on syllogism<sup>②</sup> have proved incommensurable with most classical Chinese ways of thinking. But much of the problem can be attributed to the habit of comparing Chinese thinkers to Plato and Aristotle without asking whether they are the most suitable philosophers for this purpose. For most of the twentieth century, Hellenistic philosophy was scarcely considered.<sup>③</sup> Yet very recently, provocative similarities have been identified between Chinese philosophy and Stoicism, especially Epictetus. I shall argue below that these parallels are even more significant than previous scholarship has recognized (I hope to convince the reader that some of them are staggering), and conclude by asking why we find such parallels in the first place. My claim will not be direct or even indirect transmission;<sup>④</sup> this is a case, to borrow a distinction from evolutionary biology, of analogous rather than homologous development.

To my knowledge, the first explicit comparison of Epictetus to Chinese philosophy was made by Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–1998) in his magnum opus, *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編 (first published in 1979–1980), where he cited *Discourses* 1.18 and *Encheiridion* 16 in connection with Chinese ideas about maintaining imperturbability in the face of raging emotions.<sup>⑤</sup> This not only was remarkably late, in view of the manifold and profound parallels to be examined below, but also failed to attract immediate attention, inasmuch as fuller comparisons were not undertaken until the present century. But much progress has been made in the last twenty years.

### *Parallels Observed by Other Scholars*

This section will be crisp, because there is no need to rehearse details that have already been published elsewhere, though I shall add my own observations where appropriate. In many cases, there

① On the inapplicability of Plato's theory of forms to Chinese metaphysics, see, e.g., Brook Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li 理 and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, 2013), 22–24.

② On the classical Chinese preference for non-deductive argumentation, see Paul R. Goldin, *The Art of Chinese Philosophy: Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 13–27.

③ A rare exception: several of the papers in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, 1996), apply Martha C. Nussbaum's concept of therapeutic arguments (as in her *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Martin Classical Lectures 2 [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], esp. 13–47).

④ Thus my perspective is completely opposed to that of Christopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⑤ *Guanzhui bian*, 4th edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 3:1107; this is one of the passages translated into English in *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters*, tr. Ronald Egan, Harvard–Yenching Monograph Series 44 (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1998), 390. Cf. David Machek, "'Emotions That Do Not Move': Zhuangzi and Stoics on Self-Emerging Feelings," *Dao* 14.4 (2015): 521–22.

are other passages that amplify or complicate the theme.

The first parallel has been aptly articulated by Earle J. Coleman: “Stoics and Daoists alike affirm that there is a commanding unity in the universe, a connectedness of all, ever-developing things; in short, nature is a living continuum.”<sup>①</sup> In Chinese philosophy, this “commanding unity” is usually called *dao* 道 (the Way); some texts, such as *Zhuangzi* 莊子, occasionally use *tian* 天 (Heaven) or even *di* 帝 (the Deity) virtually interchangeably with *dao*, but others, such as *Laozi* 老子 and *Xunzi* 荀子, keep these terms strictly distinct. In Greek philosophy, equivalent keywords include *theos*, *logos*, *nomos*, and so on. A.A. Long describes the concept as simply as “the way things are,” that is, “both the microscopic and macroscopic structure of the world and the foundation of all values,”<sup>②</sup> a description that could apply equally to the *dao*. (This parallel is not limited to Stoicism, for one finds *logos* in senses reminiscent of *dao* in other Greek thinkers as well.)<sup>③</sup> The operative metaphor, of course, is different: *dao* is “the right path,” and did not even have any cosmological dimension in archaic contexts. It is closer to the Greek *hodos* than *logos*.<sup>④</sup>

The habit of looking to nature for foundational patterns and metaphors is well attested in both Epictetus and Chinese philosophy. For example, when Epictetus claims that friends influence one another like neighboring coals (*Discourses* 3.16.1–2), this is not truly an *argument* unless it rests on the deeper assumption that certain general patterns in nature underlie observable phenomena as ostensibly disparate as the mutual influence of friends and pieces of coal.<sup>⑤</sup> Arguing from alleged natural patterns is so typical of Chinese philosophy, and amply treated in current scholarship,<sup>⑥</sup> that no more needs to be said here.

David Machek has pointed out that the concept of a providential universe leads in both Stoicism

① “Aesthetic Commonalities in the Ethics of Daoism and Stoicism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 29.3 (2002): 387. Cf. Machek, “Emotions That Do Not Move,” 528. The obtuseness of “Daoism” as a philosophical category has been repeatedly noted, but I shall use it here because, in practice, the investigators surveyed here have used it to mean simply *Zhuangzi*. Severe misunderstanding is thus unlikely.

② *Stoic Studies*, Hellenistic Culture and Society 36 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 192; see also his *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 21–27. Consider the misgivings in Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 160–62.

③ Cf. Qian, *Guanzhui bian*, 2:408; *Limited Views*, 259. More recently, see Jiyuan Yu, “*Logos* and *dao*: Conceptions of Reality in Heraclitus and Laozi,” *Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems*, ed. Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 105–19.

④ Cf. Goldin, *The Art of Chinese Philosophy*, 110.

⑤ The theme of judiciousness in the selection of friends is common to Epictetus (e.g., *Discourses* 3.16.1–6, 4.1.177, and 4.2.1–10) and Confucianism (e.g., *Analects* 1.8 and the highly metaphorical 9.27), because of the recognition that they can influence one’s conduct.

⑥ E.g., Goldin, *The Art of Chinese Philosophy*, 18–19. For some thoughts on the weaknesses of analogical reasoning in Chinese thought, see Yuet Keung Lo, “From Analogy to Proof: An Inquiry into the Chinese Mode of Knowledge,” *Monumenta Serica* 43 (1995): 141–58.

and Daoism to *amor fati*:<sup>①</sup>

Since we cannot change what is destined for us, we will be better off when we accept it rather than when we rebel against it. Given the Stoic cosmology, there is a strong justification for this injunction: since the world is rationally and providentially administered, we can think of things as they happen to us as a medicine administered to us by a doctor.<sup>②</sup>

Machek illustrates the Stoic submission to fate with references to Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus,<sup>③</sup> and goes on to cite parallels in *Zhuangzi*. Yet there are several other passages in both Epictetus and *Zhuangzi* that are even more striking.

Lift up your head, like a person finally released from slavery. Dare to face God and say, “From now on, use me as you like. I am of one mind with you, I am your peer.” Whatever you decide, I will not shrink from it. You may put me where you like, in any role regardless: officer or pauper, here or overseas.<sup>④</sup>

Keep Cleanthes’ verse handy:

*Lead me, Zeus, lead me, Destiny.*

Do I have to go to Rome? Then I go to Rome. To Gyara? All right, I will go to Gyara instead. To Athens? Then Athens it is. To jail? Well then I go to jail.<sup>⑤</sup>

Compare the following very famous passage from *Zhuangzi*, where the fictional Ziyu 子輿, racked with a disfiguring disease, has just been asked by his friend Zisi 子祀 whether he resents it.

“No, how could I detest it? Suppose my left arm were transformed into a rooster; I would comply and keep track of the time of night. Suppose my right arm were transformed into a crossbow; I would comply and look for an owl to roast. Suppose my buttocks were transformed into wheels and my spirit into a horse; I would comply and ride—why would I ever need a car? Moreover, what we obtain, we obtain because it is the right

① I am not aware that any ancient Stoic used the phrase *amor fati*; rather, the source is Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*.

② “Stoics and Daoists on Freedom as Doing Necessary Things,” *Philosophy East and West* 68.1 (2018): 184.

③ Machek highlights *Encheiridion* 17; compare also *Discourses* 1.12.28–35 (on the absurdity of complaining about one’s parents) and 2.17.21–25 (on Medea’s tragic struggle against fate). Tragedy, in Epictetus’s view (*Discourses* 1.4.27 and 2.16.31), is the result of self-defeating admiration of “externals” (*ta ekstos*).

④ Tr. Robert Dobbin, *Epictetus: Discourses and Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 2008), 116. Since I am not a specialist in Greek, all quotations from Epictetus in this paper will be taken from Dobbin. Translations from Chinese are my own, but in each case I shall cite a leading published alternative.

⑤ *Discourses* 2.16.42. Tr. Dobbin, 202.

time; what we lose, we lose because of the flow. If we are at peace with our time and dwell in the flow, sorrow and joy cannot enter into us. This is what the ancients called ‘unencumbered.’ Those who are unable to release themselves are tied down by objects. Moreover, things do not last longer than Heaven. So why should I detest it?”<sup>①</sup>

亡，予何惡！浸假而化予之左臂以為雞，予因以求時夜；浸假而化予之右臂以為彈，予因以求鴉炙；浸假而化予之尻以為輪，以神為馬，予因而乘之，豈更駕哉！且夫得者，時也，失者，順也；安時而處順，哀樂不能入也。此古之所謂縣解也，而不能自解者，物有結之。且夫物不勝天久矣，吾又何惡焉！

Soon thereafter, a third friend falls ill and echoes Ziyu’s view, ridiculing those who wish to remain human forever as though they were metal that wished to dictate to the smith how it should be fashioned. Epictetus’s example of coming to terms with the loss of one’s wife and children (*Discourses* 4.1.159–60, an indication that he envisioned only male students) recalls famous passages in *Zhuangzi* 18 too.<sup>②</sup> The same is true of coming to terms with one’s own death, which is unavoidable and in any case not necessarily frightening.<sup>③</sup>

Another Stoic response is the theme of knowing contentment, especially the wisdom not to seek it in fortune, fame, or even health, which one cannot control. This has been compared to both the Daoist and Buddhist understanding of suffering as the consequence of unenlightened attachment to material and hence impermanent things.<sup>④</sup> (One important difference, perhaps inadequately emphasized, is that Buddhist and Stoic ontology are radically different: for most Buddhists, the phenomenal world is not simply beyond our control, but indeed empty or insubstantial.<sup>⑤</sup> I do not read Epictetus as saying that

① Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1896), *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, ed. Wang Xiaoyu 王孝魚, *Xinbian Zhuzi jicheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 3A.6.260–61 (“Da zongshi” 大宗師). Compare the translation in Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, *Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies* 80 (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970), 84.

② Cf. Coleman, 393. For another example of Epictetus’s attitude toward wives and children, see *Discourses* 1.11.

③ E.g., *Discourses* 2.1.17, 4.1.105–6, and several passages in *Encheiridion* (3, 7, and 14); compare the parable of the captive concubine, who comes to regret having shed tears before she experienced her fate, in *Zhuangzi jishi* 1A.2.103 (“Qiwu lun” 齊物論).

④ David B. Wong, “The Meaning of Detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism,” *Dao* 5.2 (2006): 207–19; also Coleman, 386–87.

⑤ Aptly noted by Mathew T. Kapstein, “Stoics and Bodhisattvas: Spiritual Exercise and Faith in Two Philosophical Traditions,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, ed. Michael Chase et al. (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2013), 106. Compare, more generally, David J. Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 83–84. Thus the Buddhist reformer Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903) was impressed by Epictetus, but his own philosophy remained distinct; cf. Mark L. Blum, “Kiyozawa Manshi: Life and Thought,” in *Cultivating Spirituality: A Modern Shin Buddhist Anthology*, ed. Mark L. Blum and Robert F. Rhodes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 57–59.

fortune is *ontically* insubstantial.) For both Epictetus and *Zhuangzi*, freedom is possible only when we sunder such bonds to impermanent sources of happiness. Epictetus's lectures on "freedom" (*eleutheria*, esp. *Discourses* 4.1) become all the more poignant when we bear in mind that he was a former slave. There is no single Chinese word in *Zhuangzi* that corresponds to Epictetus's freedom, but the text certainly agrees that as long as one's happiness depends on external factors, one is not in command of one's life.<sup>①</sup>

Stoics and *Zhuangzi* thus counsel regulation of emotions and desires, for even though these may arise involuntarily, we still have the power to determine whether and how we will act on them, and folly will be requited by discontent. There is disagreement as to whether each tradition advocates *extirpating* emotions.<sup>②</sup>

Lastly, Coleman makes an important observation not echoed, as far as I know, in any other publication: Stoics and Daoists value well-wrought expression.<sup>③</sup> In Epictetus, the idea is most clearly expressed in *Discourses* 2.23.1–2:

Everyone would read with greater ease and pleasure a book written in a legible hand. And so it is with a speech: everyone would listen with greater ease to one composed in well-wrought and well-organized prose. So we must not say that there is no such thing as a faculty of expression.<sup>④</sup>

While I wholeheartedly agree with Coleman that *Zhuangzi*, with its delightful parables, dialogues, and poetic language, could not have been written by authors who did not enjoy innovative literary expression, the most explicit statements of the power of elegant speech are found in Confucian texts.<sup>⑤</sup> And this lays the foundation for the next section: while the insights recapitulated above are valid and significant, they barely scratch the surface because previous inquiries have needlessly limited the scope to *Zhuangzi*.<sup>⑥</sup>

① R.A.H. King, "Freedom in Parts of the *Zhuangzi* and Epictetus," in *Ancient Greece and China Compared*, ed. G.E.R. Lloyd and Jingyi Jenny Zhao, in collaboration with Qiaosheng Dong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 88, suggests *you* 遊, "wandering," as the closest analogue of *eleutheria*, but there are two other candidates: *xianjie* 縣解, the term rendered above as "unencumbered," and *xiaoyao* 逍遙, "free and distant."

② Cf. Machek, "Emotions That Do Not Move," 525 and 535–38. Nussbaum, 359–401, argues that Epictetus and other Stoics do indeed require extirpation on the part of the practitioner.

③ Coleman, 385.

④ Tr. Dobbin, 140.

⑤ The relevant scholarly literature is too large to be cited *in extenso* here. The classic study remains Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898–1948), *Shi yan zhi bian* 詩言志辨, Kaiming wenshi congkan (Shanghai, 1947). Many key sources are assembled in Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Harvard–Yenching Institute Monograph Series 30 (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1992), 19–56.

⑥ Thus the survey of differences between "both philosophical traditions, Chinese and Greek" in Machek, "Stoics

### *Parallels Not Observed by Other Scholars*

For a comparatist, what is most fascinating about Epictetus is that there are counterparts to his ideas in many, if not *all*, of the predominant classical Chinese philosophical texts. This phenomenon will have to be explained, but first, the evidence needs to be presented and analyzed. This section will necessarily be more extensive than the previous one.

In the modern world, Epictetus is probably best known for his comments on punishment. Many political prisoners have reported drawing strength from Epictetus's conception of the mind as a citadel (*akropolis*, *Discourses* 4.1.86) that mere physical abuse should not be able to subdue.<sup>①</sup> Philosophically speaking, this attitude toward punishment is subsumed under Epictetus's general insistence not to try to control "externals," but to focus doggedly on the one thing we can: *prohairesis* (for which Long proposes "volition"; many translators opt for simply "will").<sup>②</sup> But Epictetus was evidently interested in punishment as a particularly instructive example, because he returned to it repeatedly, e.g.:

"I will put you in chains."

"What's that you say, my friend? It's only my leg you will chain, not even God can conquer my will."

"I will throw you into prison."

"Correction—it is my body you will throw there."

"I will behead you."

"Well, when did I ever claim that mine was the only neck that couldn't be severed?"<sup>③</sup>

---

and Daoists on Freedom as Doing Necessary Things," 191–94, is vitiated by the author's treatment of *Zhuangzi* as representative of all Chinese philosophy. The only comparative studies of Stoicism and a Chinese tradition other than Daoism are R.A.H. King, "Mencius and the Stoics—*Tui* and *oikeiōsis*," in *The Good Life and Conceptions of Life in Early China and Græco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. R.A.H. King, Chinese–Western Discourse 3 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 341–62; and Rui Zhu, "*Kairos*: Between Cosmic Order and Human Agency: A Comparative Study of Aurelius and Confucius," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34.1 (2006): 115–38.

① Compare Marcus Aurelius 8.48. In the United States, one of the most famous examples of the mental "citadel" is James Bond Stockdale, *Courage under Fire: Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior*, Hoover Essays 6 (Stanford: Stanford University, 1993), but let me not pretend that this is a philosophically searching work. The best sections describe Stockdale's harrowing experiences in the Hanoi prison system, and his resolution not to betray his comrades in the face of torture.

② Long, *Epictetus*, 28. Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 181–95, uses "will" provisionally in building the larger argument that, for Epictetus, *prohairesis* is self—an interpretation anticipated by Charles H. Kahn, "Discovering the Will: From Aristotle to Augustine," in *The Question of 'Eclecticism': Studies in Later Greek Philosophy*, ed. J.M. Dillon and A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Culture and Society* 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 253.

③ *Discourses* 1.1.23–24. Tr. Dobbin, 7.

No despot, thief or court of law can intimidate people who set little store by the body and its appurtenances.<sup>①</sup>

What can they do to us, or for us, after all? The things they have power to do are of no interest to us; and as for the things we do care about, these they are powerless to affect.<sup>②</sup>

“But the tyrant will chain—” What will he chain? Your leg. “He will chop off—” What? Your head. What he will never chain or chop off is your integrity (*prohairesis*).<sup>③</sup>

These and similar passages are reminiscent of this pregnant line from “Encountering Sorrow” (“Lisao” 離騷),<sup>④</sup> the rhyme-prose (*fu* 賦) that opens the collection called *Lyrics of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭):

Though my body be dismembered, I would still not change; for how could my mind be chastened through punishment?<sup>⑤</sup>

雖體解吾猶未變兮，豈余心之可懲。

It was *this* parallel that first drew my attention to Epictetus, because the reliance in both texts on an underlying mind-body contrast is unlikely to be coincidental and suggests—like a promising trial excavation—yet more data awaiting discovery. Until recently, Chinese intellectual history was still in thrall to the myth that pre-Buddhist Chinese writing was devoid of mind-body problems,<sup>⑥</sup> and the significance of this parallel might have escaped notice. The nature of the distinction drawn between mind and body, it should be noted, is not exactly the same. The author of “Encountering Sorrow,” like most Chinese writers with implicitly dualistic paradigms, understood the heart or heart-mind (*xin* 心) as a fleshy part of the body; it was simply the part of the body where mental processes take place, as a modern dualist would regard the brain. Epictetus, however, does not portray *prohairesis* as a part of

① *Discourses* 1.9.17. Tr. Dobbin, 26.

② *Discourses* 1.9.21. *Ibid.*

③ *Discourses* 1.18.17. Tr. Dobbin, 47.

④ E.g., *Discourses* 1.2.19–21, 1.17.25–27, 1.19.7–9, 1.24.13, 1.25.9, 1.29.5–13, 1.30.2–3, 2.2.4–9, 2.6.27.

⑤ Jin Kaicheng 金開誠 *et al.*, *Qu Yuan ji jiaozhu* 屈原集校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 1:48. Compare the translation in David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1985), 71.

⑥ See, e.g., Edward Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), and Paul R. Goldin, “The Consciousness of the Dead as a Philosophical Problem in Ancient China,” in King, ed., *The Good Life and Conceptions of Life in Early China and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 59–92.

the body; it is a faculty with which we are blessed (and which we can develop), but it is not material in any respect. Nevertheless, this unexpected point of convergence can serve as a springboard for deeper comparison.

**(a) Epictetus and Confucian Texts, Especially *Mencius* and *Xunzi***

Epictetus contrasts mind and body not for some academic purpose, but to distinguish between the aspects of ourselves that should and should not concern us, and, by the same token, the aspects where happiness can and cannot be found. Because human beings have both mind and body, we stand between gods and animals.<sup>①</sup>

Two elements are combined in our creation, the body, which we have in common with the beasts; and reason and good judgement, which we share with the gods. Most of us tend toward the former connection, miserable and mortal though it is, whereas only a few favour this holy and blessed alliance.<sup>②</sup>

This is almost exactly how the tension between the animal and moral facets of our nature is related in *Mencius* 孟子: most human beings ignore their higher faculties, which are endowed by Heaven, and consequently slide toward bestial conduct.

That by which people differ from birds and beasts is slight. Common people abandon it; the noble man preserves it.<sup>③</sup>

人之所以異於禽獸者幾希，庶民去之，君子存之。

We learn from a nearby sentence that the phrase “that by which people differ from birds and beasts” 人之所以異於禽於獸者 refers to the heart, with its indwelling virtue:

That by which the noble man differs from other people is his preservation of his heart.<sup>④</sup>

君子所以異於人者，以其存心也。

This is because our hearts are implanted with “Four Beginnings” (*siduan* 四端), that is, the capacity for the virtues of humanity (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), ritual (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi*

① Cf. Long, *Epictetus*, 142–79; Nussbaum, 325–26.

② *Discourses* 1.3.3. Tr. Dobbin, 11. Cf. *Discourses* 1.12.26–27 and 1.20 generally.

③ *Mencius* 4B.19. Compare the translation in James Legge (1815–1897), *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1893–95), 2:325.

④ *Mencius* 4B.28. Compare the translation in Legge, 2:333.

智). Whoever does not possess these four capacities in his or her heart is not human (*Mencius* 2A.6). Similarly, we are born with “greater parts” (*dati* 大體) and “lesser parts” (*xiaoti* 小體), that is the heart and the other organs, respectively; most people follow their lesser parts and become corrupted by appetite and desire, but the rare few follow their greater parts and become “great people” (*daren* 大人, *Mencius* 6A.15).

Just as Epictetus believes we are responsible for our own happiness or unhappiness and must not blame others (*Discourses* 1.9.34, *Encheiridion* 5),<sup>①</sup> Mencius believes we are responsible for our own morality or immorality and must not blame our surroundings. A sharp reader may observe that Epictetus speaks of happiness and fortune and Mencius *morality for its own sake*, but the contrast is not as great as it may seem, for both Stoics and Confucians are convinced that happiness is attainable only through reasoned moral action.

*Xunzi* provides even stronger parallels with Epictetus’s *prohairesis*. “For every challenge,” Epictetus says, “remember the resources you have within you to cope with it.”<sup>②</sup> One such “resource” (*dunamis*) is that of thought or intellection (*dianoia*):

Thus, it is stupid to say, “Tell me what to do!” What should I tell you? It would be better to say, “Make my mind adaptable to any circumstance.” Saying “Tell me what to do” is like an illiterate saying, “Tell me what to write whenever I’m presented with a name.” If I say “John” and then someone else comes along and gives him “Jane” instead of “John” to write, what is going to happen? How is he going to write it? If you have learned your letters, though, you are ready for anything anyone dictates. If you are not prepared, I don’t know what I should tell you to do. Because there may be events that call for you to act differently—and what will you do or say then? So hold on to this general principle and you won’t need specific advice.<sup>③</sup>

Where Epictetus entreats us to bear in mind the “general principle” (*katholikos*) and train our minds to adapt to any circumstance, *Xunzi* also praises those who use their heart-minds to apprehend the Way, because then they can master any particular skill:

Farmers have refined their skill at fieldwork, but cannot be made Director of the Fields; merchants have refined their skill in the marketplace, but cannot be made Director of the Markets; craftsmen have refined their skill at producing vessels, but cannot be made Director of Vessels. There are those who cannot do any of these three skills, but can be placed in charge of the three offices. It is said: There are those who have refined their skill at

① Compare *Zhongyong* 中庸 14: “In archery there is something that resembles the noble man: when you miss the target, turn and seek [the reason] in yourself” 射有似乎君子，失諸正鵠，反求諸其身。

② *Encheiridion* 10. Tr. Dobbin, 225. Cf. *Discourses* 2.16.11–14.

③ *Discourses* 2.2.21–25. Tr. Dobbin, 83.

the Way, and those who have refined their skill at things. Those who have refined their skill at things treat each separate thing as a separate thing; those who have refined their skill at the Way treat each separate thing as part of an all-inclusive thing. Thus the noble man derives unity from the Way, and uses it as an aid in canvassing things.<sup>①</sup>

農精於田，而不可以為田師；賈精於市，而不可以為賈師；工精於器，而不可以為器師。有人也，不能此三技，而可使治三官，曰：精於道者也，精於物者也。精於物者以物物，精於道者兼物物，故君子壹於道而以贊稽物。

Two further, even deeper parallels: (1) both Epictetus and Xunzi regard the mind (or *prohairesis*, in the case of Epictetus) as the faculty that commands all the others, and (2) both thinkers demand that we use this unique resource to study the timeless patterns of the universe and apply them to our lives.

Look, what puts the other faculties to use? The will. What administers all of them? Then, what destroys the person as a whole, sometimes by hunger, sometimes by hanging, sometimes by jumping off a cliff? The will. Is there anything in the human sphere, then, that takes precedence? How can anything subject to obstruction be stronger than something that is not? ... (Here Epictetus acknowledges that the other faculties have value too.) But if I'm asked to name the greatest element of all, what am I to say? The faculty of speech? I cannot. It is the faculty of the will, when rightly applied, since it controls speech as well as every other faculty, great and small. It is by putting this right that a good person becomes good; when its purpose fails, he turns bad.<sup>②</sup>

#### Compare Xunzi:

The mind is the lord of the body and the master of godlike insight. It issues commands but does not receive commands. It prohibits on its own; it employs on its own; it considers on its own; it takes on its own; it acts on its own; it ceases on its own. Thus the mouth can be forced to be silent or to speak; the body can be forced to contract or expand; the mind cannot be forced to change its intention. If it accepts [something, the mind] receives it; if it rejects [something, the mind] forgoes it.<sup>③</sup>

心者，形之君也，而神明之主也，出令而無所受令。自禁也，自使也，自奪也，自取也，自行也，自止也。故口可劫而使墨云，形可劫而使誦申，心不可劫而使易意，是之則受，非之則辭。

① Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1917), *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, ed. Shen Xiaohuan 沈嘯寰 and Wang Xingxian 王星賢, *Xinbian Zhuzi jicheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 15.21.399–400 (“Jiebi” 解蔽). Compare the translation in Eric Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 230.

② *Discourses* 2.23.16–18 and 27–28. Tr. Dobbin, 142 and 143. Compare *Discourses* 2.23.6–10.

③ *Xunzi jijie* 15.21.397–98 (“Jiebi”). Compare the translation in Hutton, 229.

The detail that both Epictetus and Xunzi thought immediately of contrasting the mind with the mouth suggests that they were engaging audiences accustomed to extolling artful speech, a hint at some broad commonalities in their intellectual worlds, to be explored further below.

Thus Epictetus and Xunzi also believe that, because we have minds, we have the capacity to resist temptation by reflecting on it and choosing a wiser and nobler course.<sup>①</sup>

With these thoughts [i.e. the fortitude of those like Socrates, who resisted sexual temptation] to defend you, you should triumph over any impression and not be dragged away. Don't let the force of the impression when it first hits you knock you off your feet; just say to it, "Hold on a moment; let me see who you are and what you represent. Let me put you to the test."<sup>②</sup>

Xunzi makes a similar point by reminding us that, in extreme cases, people can choose to commit suicide out of conviction (recall Epictetus's reference to death by hanging or jumping off a cliff), even though they love life more than anything else. The only explanation is the power of the rational heart-mind.

People's desire for life is deep; their hatred of death is deep. Yet when people discard life and cause their own death, this is not because they do not desire life or because they desire death. Rather, this is because it is not [morally] acceptable for them to live; it is acceptable for them only to die. Thus when one's desires are excessive but one's actions do not reach [the same degree], it is because the heart-mind brings them to a halt.<sup>③</sup> 人之所欲生甚矣，人之所惡死甚矣；然而人有從生成死者，非不欲生而欲死也，不可以生而可以死也。故欲過之而動不及，心止之也。

The possibility of suicide brought on by depression—that is, *not* “desiring life”—does not seem to concern Xunzi here. Rather, the point is that a heart-mind worthy of admiration is capable of overriding the most basic impulse of all, namely self-preservation, if it is incompatible with a moral life.<sup>④</sup> If we permit ourselves to tread an unworthy path, we cannot blame our emotions or desires, but must accept that our heart-mind has failed to exert the requisite discipline.

① Cf. Gretchen Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 27.

② *Discourses* 2.18.23–24. Tr. Dobbin, 123. Cf. *Discourses* 2.23.12: we should be able to overcome temptation through *prohairesis*.

③ *Xunzi jijie* 16.22.428 (“Zhengming” 正名). Compare the translation in Hutton, 244.

④ Here too there are parallels with Stoicism: see, e.g., Miriam Griffin, “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide,” *Greece and Rome* 33.1 (1986): 72.

A fragment preserved in Stobaeus (Musonius Rufus allegedly quoting Epictetus) is also highly reminiscent of Xunzi; though the attribution to Epictetus is open to doubt,<sup>①</sup> it is still an authentic Stoic voice, and hence merits consideration here:

The nature of the universe was, is and always will be the same, and things cannot happen any differently than they do now. It's not just mankind and the other animals on earth that share in the cycle of change, but also the heavens and even the four basic elements: up and down they change and alternate, earth becoming water, water air, and air in turn becoming fire—with an analogous change from above downwards. If we try to adapt our mind to the regular sequence of changes and accept the inevitable with good grace, our life will proceed quite smoothly and harmoniously.<sup>②</sup>

For Xunzi too, the idea of the constancy (*chang* 常) of the Way is fundamental (*Xunzi* 17).<sup>③</sup> Heaven's processes (*tianxing* 天行) do not change from one epoch to the next; although Heaven never intercedes directly, human affairs are certain to succeed or fail according to a timeless pattern that Heaven determined before human beings existed.

Are order and disorder due to Heaven? I say: The revolutions of the sun, moon, and stars, and the cyclical calendar—these were the same under Yu and Jie. Since Yu brought about order and Jie disorder, order and disorder are not in Heaven. ... Heaven does not stop winter because people dislike cold; Earth does not stop its expansiveness because people dislike great distances; the noble man does not stop his right conduct because petty men rant and rave. Heaven has a constant Way; Earth has its constant dimensions; the noble man has a constant bearing.<sup>④</sup>

治亂天邪？曰：日月、星辰、瑞曆，是禹、桀之所同也，禹以治，桀以亂，治亂非天也……天不為人之惡寒也輟冬，地不為人之惡遠也輟廣，君子不為小人之匈匈也輟行。天有常道矣，地有常數矣，君子有常體矣。

To be sure, there are important differences: for Epictetus (or Musonius Rufus), the goal of directing one's mind toward the nature of the universe is to attain “an altogether balanced and harmonious life” (*panu metrios kai mousikos bios*), whereas Xunzi wishes to build a harmonious

① Thus Long, *Epictetus*, 176.

② Fragment 8. Tr. Dobbin, 211. Compare *Discourses* 2.14.12–13, where Epictetus says that we must learn the gods' dispositions so that we can emulate them.

③ *Xunzi jijie* 11.17.306–8 (“Tianlun” 天論).

④ *Xunzi jijie* 11.17.311 (“Tianlun”). Compare the translation in Hutton, 177–78.

government and society on apperceived cosmological foundations.<sup>①</sup> We shall return to this point below.

One final point of similarity between Epictetus and Xunzi: both rank life forms in a hierarchy, with plants at the bottom, animals in the middle, and human beings at the top. We stand at the apex because we have intelligence, which we use to domesticate other species.

So what is the divine nature? Is it flesh? Be serious. Do we associate it with real estate and status? Hardly. It is mind, intelligence and correct reason. So look no further than there for the substance of the good. Of course, you won't find it in plants and animals. In man, however, it consists in just those qualities that distinguish him from other animals. Since plants do not even have the power of perception, "good" and "evil" are not applicable to them.<sup>②</sup>

Epictetus then presents the example of a donkey, which is useful to humans, but is not on their level, because it lacks the capacity to reason. Otherwise, it would refuse to obey.

Compare Xunzi:

Water and fire have *qi* but no life; grasses and trees have life but no awareness; birds and beasts have awareness but no morality. Human beings have breath and life and awareness, and they have morality in addition. Thus they are the most noble [beings] in the world. They do not have the strength of an ox, nor do they run like a horse, but oxen and horses are used by them. Why is this? I say: People can form societies; [animals] cannot form societies. How can people form societies? Through division [of labor]. How can division proceed? I say: morality.<sup>③</sup>

水火有氣而無生，草木有生而無知，禽獸有知而無義，人有氣、有生、有知，亦且有義，故最為天下貴也。力不若牛，走不若馬，而牛馬為用，何也？曰：人能羣，彼不能羣也。人何以能羣？曰：分。分何以能行？曰：義。

Once again, Xunzi appeals to government and society (and advances his vision of a stratified society, with wise gentlemen advising a sage king at the top), whereas Epictetus has us domesticating donkeys without the need for a body politic; but both locate our primacy among species in our ability

① Epictetus (Fragment 9) and Xunzi (*Xunzi jijie* 11.17.313) also draw the similar inference that weird celestial phenomena need not frighten us.

② *Discourses* 2.8.2–4. Tr. Dobbin, 92. Cf. *Discourses* 1.16.1–5, 1.28.20, and 2.10.2.

③ *Xunzi jijie* 5.9.164 ("Wangzhi" 王制). Compare the translation in Hutton, 76. This passage is often compared to the "ladder of souls" in Aristotle's *De Anima* 413a23: e.g., Lisa Raphals, "Human and Animal in Early China and Greece," in Lloyd, Zhao, and Dong, ed. *Ancient Greece and China Compared*, 146.

to reason, *which is also* our ability to reason morally.<sup>①</sup>

With such a strong commitment on each side to training the mind and studying the patterns of nature in order to live in it most productively, it is no surprise that both Stoics and Confucians stress independent judgment and learning for one's own sake rather than to impress others.

"I want everyone I meet to admire me, to follow me around shouting, 'What a great philosopher!'" And who exactly are these people that you want to be admired by? Aren't they the same people you are in the habit of calling crazy? And is this your life ambition, then—to win the approval of lunatics?<sup>②</sup>

Is your goal to educate or be praised? Right away the answer comes back, "What do I care for the praise of the vulgar masses?"<sup>③</sup>

Compare the very famous lines from the Confucian *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語):

The Master said: "I am not vexed that others do not know me; I am vexed that I do not know others."<sup>④</sup>  
不患人之不己知，患不知人也。

The Master said, "In antiquity, people learned for their own sake; today, they learn for the sake of others."<sup>⑤</sup>  
古之學者為己，今之學者為人。

Thinking and judging for oneself, not merely following the most popular or convenient standard, and carrying on with equanimity in an unappreciative, if not outright contemptuous, world are cornerstones of the Confucian way of life.

All this mental training requires regular practice, another basic conviction of both Stoics and Confucians. *Discourses* 2.18 is probably the fullest expression of this ideal in Epictetus, as in the opening lines:

Every habit and faculty is formed or strengthened by the corresponding act—walking makes you walk better,

① This is not to say that either philosopher was completely accurate in his characterization of animal behavior. For observations on such misrepresentations, see Roel Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, 2002), 84.

② *Discourses* 1.21.3–4. Tr. Dobbin, 53.

③ *Discourses* 3.23.7. Tr. Dobbin, 169.

④ *Analects* 1.16 and 14.32. Compare the translations in Legge, 1:145 and 287.

⑤ *Analects* 14.25. Compare the translation in Legge, 1:285.

running makes you a better runner. If you want to be literate, read, if you want to be a painter, paint. Go a month without reading, occupied with something else, and you'll see what the result is. And if you're laid up a mere ten days, when you get up and try to walk any distance you'll find your legs barely able to support you. So if you like doing something, do it regularly; if you don't like doing something, make a habit of doing something different. The same goes for moral inclinations.<sup>①</sup>

Compare this passage, where Mencius asserts that the accumulated effects of regular moral conduct improve the substance of the heart-mind:

[The disciple Gongsun Chou said:] "I venture to ask: wherein lie your strengths, Master?"

[Mencius] said: "I know words. I am good at nourishing my flood-like *qi*."

"I venture to ask: What do you mean by 'flood-like *qi*'?"

"It is difficult to say. It is the kind of *qi* that is greatest and firmest. If it is nourished with uprightness and is not damaged, it fills in the space between Heaven and Earth. It is the kind of *qi* that is the companion of righteousness and the Way. Without it, [the body] starves. It is engendered by the accumulation of righteousness and is not obtained through sporadic righteousness. If there is something in one's actions that does not satisfy the heart, then [the flood-like *qi*] starves."<sup>②</sup>

“敢問夫子惡乎長？”

曰：“我知言，我善養吾浩然之氣。”

“敢問何謂浩然之氣？”

曰：“難言也。其為氣也，至大至剛，以直養而無害，則塞於天地之間。其為氣也，配義與道。無是，餒也。是集義所生者，非義襲而取之也。行有不慊於心，則餒矣。”

Before this, nourishing one's *qi* was usually understood as a bodily activity, such as callisthenics or meditation.<sup>③</sup> For Mencius, by contrast, the secret is to accumulate righteousness day in and day out. Morality is good for your health.

One part of this regular practice, in both Stoicism and Confucianism, is scrupulous self-examination.

<sup>①</sup> *Discourses* 2.18.1–5. Tr. Dobbin, 121.

<sup>②</sup> *Mencius* 2A.2. Compare the translation in Legge, 2:189–90.

<sup>③</sup> The early example of *Neiye* 內業, which I suspect was the implicit target of Mencius's critique, is discussed in Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*, Translations from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 101–23. For a general survey of techniques of nourishing *qi*, see Joseph Needham *et al.*, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954–), V.5, 142–81.

Surrounded as we are by such people—so confused, so ignorant of what they’re saying and of whatever faults they may or may not have, where those faults come from and how to get rid of them—I think we too should make a habit of asking ourselves, “Could it be that I’m one of them too? What illusion about myself do I entertain?”<sup>①</sup>

Followed by other searching questions. The “triple self-examination” (*sanxing* 三省) attributed to Confucius’s disciple Zengzi 曾子 is much simpler, but in the same spirit:

Everyday I examine myself on three counts. In planning on behalf of others, have I failed to be honest with myself? In associating with friends, have I failed to be trustworthy? Have I transmitted anything that I do not practice habitually?<sup>②</sup>

吾日三省吾身：為人謀而不忠乎？與朋友交而不信乎？傳不習乎？

It is only to be expected that philosophies that require unflagging commitment to discipline and moral practice produce daily self-examinations of this kind.

In the same vein, Epictetus and Confucians look askance at impractical book learning. In the *Analects*, the Confucian perspective is presented in the very first line:

The Master said: “To study and then practice [what you have learned] at the right time—is this not indeed a delight?”<sup>③</sup>

子曰：“學而時習之，不亦說乎？”

Confucius and all subsequent Confucians have regarded morality as a matter of thinking first but then acting appropriately, and insist that study is vain without timely application.<sup>④</sup>

The idea is less immediately apparent in Epictetus, because his school at Nicopolis seems to

① *Discourses* 2.21.8–9. Tr. Dobbin, 133. Compare the celebrated self-interrogation attributed to Quintus Sextius in Seneca, *De ira* 3.36, discussed in Sorabji, 195–97; also Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, tr. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2002), 198–202.

② *Analects* 1.4. Compare the translation in Legge, 1:139. For a defense of my interpretation of *zhong* 忠 as “being honest with oneself in dealing with others,” see “When *Zhong* 忠 Does Not Mean ‘Loyalty,’” *Dao* 7.2 (2008): 168–70.

③ *Analects* 1.1. Compare the translation in Legge, 1:137, but I strenuously disagree with Legge’s “with a constant perseverance and application” for *er shi xi zhi* 而時習之, which means “and to practice it at the right time.” Cf. *Analects* 13.5.

④ There is a prominent discourse against book learning in *Zhuangzi* too (e.g., the tale of Wheelwright Bian 輪扁, *Zhuangzi jishi* 5B.13.490–91 [“Tiandao” 天道]), but the argument is fundamentally different: an author’s full meaning cannot be contained in a book because of the limitations of language.

have had a bookish curriculum with subjects beyond what his student Arrian chose to record in the *Discourses*.<sup>①</sup> But several of Epictetus's comments about what and why we study, often with reference to the legacy of the early Stoic Chrysippus, show that he too believes there is no point in mastering the material unless one makes an effort to put it into practice.

So who is making progress—the person who has read many of Chrysippus' books? Is virtue no more than this—to become literate in Chrysippus? Because, if that's what it is, then progress cannot amount to anything more than learning as much Chrysippus as we can. We are agreed, however, that virtue produces one thing, while maintaining that the approach to it, progress, results in something different. “This person can read Chrysippus already by himself. You are making progress, by God,” someone says sarcastically. “Some progress that is!”... Make it your goal never to fail in your desires or experience things which you would rather avoid; try never to err in impulse and repulsion; aim to be perfect also in the practice of attention and withholding judgement.<sup>②</sup>

If there is a difference, it is that Confucians decry self-cultivation that does not demonstrably affect the rest of the world. The very reason for learning is to help bring about the moral “transformation” (*hua* 化) of society that characterizes the reign of a sage king. In the passage above from Epictetus, self-cultivation is the supreme end too, but not necessarily for the sake of improving *others*. Still, Stoics are not all as selfish as a Confucian might rashly judge them. Another fragment from Stobaeus (once again, Musonius Rufus allegedly quoting Epictetus) recounts Lycurgus the Lacedaemonian, who reformed a youth who had blinded him in one eye: “The person you gave me was violent and aggressive; I'm returning him to you civilized and refined”.<sup>③</sup> A Confucian would praise Lycurgus to the skies: he is just like Shun 舜, the future sage king who knows that his half-brother is trying to kill him, yet gently coaxes the miscreant toward a more sociable path (*Mencius* 5A.2).

One final parallel between Epictetus and Confucianism: one of Epictetus's many criticisms of Epicureanism is that it denies the natural affection for one's children.<sup>④</sup> This innate or intuitive

① Cf. John M. Cooper, “The Relevance of Moral Theory to Moral Improvement in Epictetus,” in *The Philosophy of Epictetus*, ed. Theodore Scaltsas and Andrew S. Mason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 10–12; also Long, *Epictetus*, 44. The fullest study of Epictetus's attitude toward logic remains Jonathan Barnes, *Logic and the Imperial Stoa*, *Philosophia Antiqua* 75 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), Ch. 3.

② *Discourses* 1.4.6–9 and 11. Tr. Dobbin, 12–13. There are many similar passages: *Discourses* 1.17.18, 1.29.35, 2.1.31–36, 2.17.34–36, 2.19.6–10 (expressing doubts about the practicality of the so-called Master argument), 2.23.40–41, 3.5.17, and 4.4.11–18.

③ Fragment 5. Tr. Dobbin, 211.

④ See *Discourses* 1.23.3–10. On natural affection for family members, see also *Discourses* 1.11.17–18 (cf. Reydams-Schils, 78 and 122–23).

judgment is elsewhere called *oikeiōsis* (lit. “affinity”). Stoics affirm its existence,<sup>①</sup> but it is problematic, because it potentially undermines the primacy of *prohairesis*.<sup>②</sup> (What about an affinity for copulating promiscuously? Overeating? Taking advantage of a foolish neighbor or unsuspecting ally? Why are *some* natural inclinations deemed right and proper, and others execrable? Much moral training is required.) Regardless, according to Epictetus, Epicureanism is objectionable because it requires us to act in manner contrary to our nature. Of all the Confucians, it is Mencius who deployed such arguments most fulsomely, for example, in his argument that failing to bury one’s parents decorously is a violation of wholesome natural impulses.<sup>③</sup>

### (b) Epictetus and Non-Confucian Texts, Especially *Zhuangzi*

Although previous comparisons with Epictetus, as mentioned above, have focused on *Zhuangzi*, there are several significant parallels that they have failed to observe. The first has to do with “defacing the currency” (a concept borrowed from Cynicism),<sup>④</sup> that is, demonstratively rejecting conventional vices and hypocrisies. In Epictetus, “currency” (*nomisma*) refers to the pleasures to which people have become addicted (the examples in *Discourses* 3.3.11–13 are silver, sex, and hunting), and by which they can therefore be corrupted. Ply the proconsul with his coveted silver, and he will grant whatever you wish.<sup>⑤</sup> *Zhuangzi* despises conventionalism and commercialism as well;<sup>⑥</sup> there is no shortage of examples. One of the most memorable is *Zhuangzi*’s loudly indecorous response to his wife’s death: he sits with his legs splayed, banging on a basin and singing.<sup>⑦</sup> Several of the so-called knock stories<sup>⑧</sup>

① See, for instance, *Discourses* 2.11.2–4. Cf. Long, *Epictetus*, 79–80.

② See, e.g., Gisela Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 281–97; and Annas, 262–76.

③ See *Mencius* 3A.5. Two other parallels worthy of note: (1) In *Discourses* 2.10.4–11, Epictetus emphasizes that we play multiple social roles at once (citizen, son, brother, perhaps also councilor or father); this can be compared with the profound emphasis on role ethics in Confucianism, for which see, e.g., Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011). (2) In *Discourses* 3.4.2–5, Epictetus asserts that the people take their cue from their superiors’ conduct, whether it be positive or negative; this is also a basic conviction of Confucian ethics (cf. Goldin, *The Art of Chinese Philosophy*, 46–47).

④ Diogenes Laertius 6.20 (*paracharaxai to nomisma*).

⑤ For a vivid example from nearby Nicopolis ad Istrum, consider a recently reassembled stele inscription, dated to 198 CE, that quotes a letter from Emperor Septimius Severus (r. 193–211) thanking the town for a large bribe in silver (archaeologyinbulgaria.com, November 12, 2020).

⑥ The best study remains Judith Berling, “Self and Whole in Chuang Tzu,” in *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values*, ed. Donald J. Munro, Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies 52 (Ann Arbor, 1985), 101–20.

⑦ *Zhuangzi jishi* 6B.18.614 (“Zhile” 至樂).

⑧ This useful phrase derives from A.C. Graham, *Chuang-tzū: The Inner Chapters* (London and Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1981; rpt., Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett, 2001), 135.

depict eccentric individuals whose authenticity (*zhen* 真) lies in their readiness to flout behavioral norms, such as the draftsman who responds unrushed to his lord's summons, then retires to his quarters, where he is spied squatting naked. The perceptive lord infers from this display that he has found an "authentic draftsman" (*zhen huazhe* 真畫者).<sup>①</sup>

Thus Epictetus and *Zhuangzi* converge in their antipathy for government service. Two passages in the magnificent opening chapter in *Discourses* 4 refer to the perils and indignities: when one has become a favored courtier, the price is one's autonomy and equanimity (4.1.45–50), and one might even be reduced to kissing the hand of a bigwig's slave in one's shameless quest for glory and honor: "So don't parade before me in your pride because you are a consul or a praetor—I know how you came by these offices, and who presented them to you".<sup>②</sup> The passage immediately brings to mind one of the most mordant in *Zhuangzi*:

Among the men of Song there was one Cao Shang (the name means "mercenary government employee"), who was sent by the King of Song as an ambassador to Qin. When he set out, he received several chariots; the King [of Qin] was so delighted with him that he added a hundred more. When he returned to Song, he saw Master Zhuang and said: "I could not readily dwell in a ramshackle lane in a miserable hamlet, weaving my own sandals in embarrassing poverty, with a withered neck, and jaundiced as though missing an ear. But I excel at immediately reaching an understanding with a lord of myriad chariots and having my own retinue of a hundred chariots." Master Zhuang said: "When the King of Qin has an ailment, he summons a doctor. One who pops his boils or drains his carbuncles receives one chariot; one who licks his hemorrhoids receives five chariots. The lower the location to be cured, the greater the number of chariots. Did you cure his hemorrhoids, sir? How else would you have received so many chariots? Go away!"<sup>③</sup>

宋人有曹商者，為宋王使秦。其往也，得車數乘；王說之，益車百乘。反於宋，見莊子曰：“夫處窮閭阨巷，困窘織屨，槁項黃馘者，商之所短也；一悟萬乘之主而從車百乘者，商之所長也。”莊子曰：“秦王有病召醫，破癰潰痤者得車一乘，舐痔者得車五乘，所治愈下，得車愈多。子豈治其痔邪？何得車之多也？子行矣！”

For just this reason, *Zhuangzi* declares that he would rather drag his tail in the mud like a humble turtle than be treasured in the royal hamper as a desiccated oracle bone.<sup>④</sup> How best to avoid recruitment? Do not be useful.

① *Zhuangzi jishi* 7B.21.719 ("Tian Zifang" 田子方).

② *Discourses* 4.1.149. Tr. Dobbin, 192. Cf. *Discourses* 1.19.26–29 and 1.29.60–63.

③ *Zhuangzi jishi* 10A.32.1049–50 ("Lie Yukou" 列禦寇). Compare the translation in Watson, 356–57.

④ *Zhuangzi jishi* 6B.17.603–4 ("Qiusui" 秋水); cf. *Zhuangzi jishi* 7A.19.648 ("Dasheng" 達生), which likens self-important mandarins to sacrificial hogs.

Well, you don't call a fighting cock that's bloodied but victorious unfortunate, but rather one who lost without receiving a scratch. And you don't yell "Good dog!" at one that doesn't hunt or work; you do it when you see one panting, labouring, exhausted from the chase.<sup>①</sup>

In *Zhuangzi*, the same examples would have been formulated thus: the best way to avoid being bloodied in a cockfight is to be an incompetent cock; the best way to avoid exhaustion from the chase is to be an incompetent dog. Then no one will think of exploiting you for your skill. Several other passages reprise the theme of useless trees that grow unimpeded because no one abuses them for their fruit or timber.<sup>②</sup>

Finally, although Epictetus's relaxed Greek contrasts greatly with the lapidary style of most classical Chinese texts, there are enough commonalities on the level of expression that a few shared metaphors stand out. One of the most common is that of the doctor who offers cures based on reasoned and experienced diagnosis (e.g., *Discourses* 2.13.12–13, 2.14.21–22, 2.17.8–9, 3.20.10, 3.23.30–31), just as Mohists took it as their obligation to "cure" (*zhi* 治) society in the same way that a doctor cures disease. Two others are more specific and more striking. Those who thoughtlessly pursue conventional values are as unfree as caged animals (*Discourses* 4.1.24–29). *Zhuangzi*, similarly, bemoans those who allow themselves to be "corralled by things" 囿於物, and reminds us that the pheasant fares better when it scampers along the marsh than it does in a cage, even if it is treated royally.<sup>③</sup>

The next one astonished me, because it is such a common image in classical Chinese texts:

The soul is like a bowl of water, with the soul's impressions like the rays of light that strike the water. Now, if the water is disturbed, the light appears to be disturbed together with it—though of course it is not.<sup>④</sup>

I believe the oldest Chinese version of this oft-invoked simile is in *Xunzi*:

Thus the human heart is like a bowl of water. If you place it straight [in front of you] and do not move it, the sediment and impurities will go to the bottom, and the pure and clear [water] will go to the top, so that you will be able to see your stubble and eyebrows, and inspect the creases [in your face]. If the slightest breeze should

① *Discourses* 4.1.124. Tr. Dobbin, 189.

② Cf. John S. Major, "The Efficacy of Uselessness: A Chuang-tzu Motif," *Philosophy East and West* 25.3 (1975): 265–79; more recently, Albert Galvany, "Discussing Usefulness: Trees as Metaphor in the *Zhuangzi*," *Monumenta Serica* 57 (2009): 71–97.

③ *Zhuangzi jishi* 8b.24.834 ("Xu Wugui" 徐無鬼). *Zhuangzi jishi* 2A.3.126 ("Yangsheng zhu" 養生主).

④ *Discourses* 3.3.20–21. Tr. Dobbin, 148.

pass over it, the sediment and impurities will be stirred from the bottom, and the pure and clear [water] will be disturbed at the top, so that you will not [even] be able to get a correct outline of your body. The heart is also like this.<sup>①</sup>

故人心譬如槃水，正錯而勿動，則湛濁在下而清明在上，則足以見鬚眉而察理矣。微風過之，湛濁動乎下，清明亂於上，則不可以得大形之正也。心亦如是矣。

### *Differences and Explanations*

There are some important differences; I do not mean to suggest that one can simply pick up Epictetus and pretend that he was a Chinese philosopher like any other. Most noticeably, Chinese philosophers do not keep referring to Zeus and “the gods,” but this rhetorical habit is not significant, because virtually all Chinese philosophers believe in Heaven or the Way (or both), which are not very different, as we have seen above, from Epictetus’s concept of *theos*. No Chinese philosopher ever declares that we should act in a manner *contrary* to the orientation of Heaven or the Way.

Some Chinese philosophers, especially Confucians, are committed to moral governance, and would have chided Epictetus for his indifference to politics. Above, we noticed more than once that even when Xunzi offers parallel observations, he manages to work in a role for government. Other Chinese philosophers are content to let others manage government, and counsel the wise to lead a serene life by steering clear. But few, if any, would have shared Epictetus’s extreme lack of concern for other people’s misfortune.<sup>②</sup> Passages like this seem totally alien:

Whenever you see someone in tears, distraught because they are parted from a child, or have met with some material loss, be careful lest the impression move you to believe that their circumstances are truly bad. Have ready the reflection that they are not upset by what happened—because other people are not upset when the same thing happens to them—but by their own view of the matter. Nevertheless, you should not disdain to sympathize with them, at least with comforting words, or even to the extent of sharing outwardly in their grief. But do not commiserate with your whole heart and soul.<sup>③</sup>

Such jarring moments are few, however; overall, the impression of a pre-modern Chinese reader

① *Xunzi jijie* 15.21.401 (“Jiebi”). Compare the translation in Hutton, 231.

② There is a philosopher who, according to his detractors, was unwilling to sacrifice a single hair for the sake of the world: Yang Zhu 楊朱. It is far from clear that this is what Yang truly believed (or whether he even existed), and this perspective had no later adherents. The fullest study is Attilio Andreini, *Il pensiero di Yang Zhu (IV secolo a.C.) attraverso un esame delle fonti cinesi classiche* (Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2000).

③ *Encheiridion* 16. Tr. Dobbin, 227. Cf. *Discourses* 3.3.17–19.

would have been that Epictetus was working within a similar society and came to similar conclusions about how to live productively within it. On both sides, the intended audience consists of elite males, of the kind who own slaves (Chinese philosophers do not refer to slaves with the same regularity, but there were indeed slaves in that society too) and are likely to be studying philosophy and oratory with a view to a political career. On both sides, the master is not necessarily an author: just as Arrian had to compose the *Discourses* and *Encheiridion* for us to know Epictetus's philosophy, the disciples of teachers like Confucius and Mencius had to gather their memories and commit them to writing,<sup>①</sup> for the masters themselves wrote nothing. And on both sides, the country is ruled by a despot surrounded by officials who are sometimes conscientious, but just as often self-serving and sycophantic. Thus both Epictetus (*Discourses* 1.19.4–6 and 4.1.60) and Han Fei (e.g., *Han Feizi* 17) are keenly aware that one curries favor with a tyrant; one does not love him.

Why does Epictetus prove to be a much meatier *comparandum* for Chinese philosophy than Plato or Aristotle? After all, much the above was true of their society too. A.A. Long's incisive survey of the differences between Hellenistic philosophy and that of Plato and Aristotle is helpful because it turns out that, one by one, the distinctive features of Hellenistic philosophy, especially Stoicism, swing the calculus closer to China. As the purpose of philosophy is now understood to be aiding in the conduct of a happy and productive life, the ideal that emerges is that of the "wise man" (*sophos*) to be studied for his exemplary conduct,<sup>②</sup> as opposed to the Aristotelian *phronimos*.<sup>③</sup> This ideal being open to anyone, considerations of class or ethnicity start to melt away. Moreover, the urge to associate one's philosophical tradition with heroes like Socrates or Confucius led in both cultures to elaborate lineages with putative founders.<sup>④</sup>

The three paragons most frequently named by Epictetus are Socrates, Diogenes the Cynic, and Zeno of Citium,<sup>⑤</sup> but, as we have seen in the case of Lycurgus, there are others. In China, the model

① See, e.g., Michael Hunter, *Confucius beyond the Analects*, Studies in the History of Chinese Texts (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017); and *idem*, "Did Mencius Know the *Analects*?" *T'oung Pao* 100.1–3 (2014): 33–79.

② Consider the famous comment attributed to Seneca (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.62), who, denied the opportunity to write a will before his death, tells his friends that he can leave them just one thing, but the most beautiful of all: the pattern of his life (*imago vitae suae*).

③ Aristotle thus resembles Mencius as a highly unusual figure in his own context, whom adoring posterity has made to seem more representative than he really was. For the case of Mencius, see Paul R. Goldin, *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 55.

④ A.A. Long, "The Socratic Legacy," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra *et al.* (Cambridge, 2008), 618–21. For intellectual lineages in China, see, e.g., Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan, "Constructing Lineages and Inventing Traditions through Exemplary Figures in Early China," *T'oung Pao* 89.1–3 (2003): 59–99.

⑤ Cf. Malcolm Schofield, "Epictetus on Cynicism," in Scaltsas and Mason, eds. *The Philosophy of Epictetus*, esp. 71–75.

*par excellence* is Confucius, but here too there are many others, from the several sage kings (*sheng* 聖 or *shengwang* 聖王) to the less exalted but still admirable “noble men” (*junzi* 君子), i.e. those whose conduct can be judged noble, regardless of whether they are noble-born.<sup>①</sup> The idea that we can learn by emulating other people’s strengths and reforming their weaknesses has been central to Chinese philosophy for centuries,<sup>②</sup> and has fostered the associated conviction that we must assess people’s actions fairly—including our own.

I cannot explain why, of all the Hellenistic branches, it is Stoicism that provides the most fertile ground for comparison with China, but perhaps future studies will reveal similar parallels with Epicureanism (though not most forms of hedonism),<sup>③</sup> for example, in the philosophy of Philodemus. In any case, the evidence presented here prompts a general and falsifiable thesis: these are the courses that philosophy can be expected to follow when it is conceived as a chosen *way of life*. I invite others to confirm or refute this thesis by identifying a third such tradition, and asking whether it displays the same characteristics.

## 愛比克泰德與中國哲學

金鵬程

(宾夕法尼亚大学, 东亚语言与文明学系, 费城)

**摘要：**數十年來，古代中國與古希臘、古羅馬哲學比較研究之成果相當有限。雖然部分研究方向可見成效（例如早期儒家哲學與亞里士多德德性倫理學之比較），但因柏拉圖理型論、亞里士多德三段論等古希臘、古羅馬哲學概念與古代中國哲學並不相通，整體研究成果仍然未如人意。個中原委，很大程度在於學者逕將古代中國思想家與柏拉圖、亞里士多德加以比較，而未考慮其作為比較對象是否最為適切之習慣。在大半個二十世紀，希臘化時代的哲學較少為人關注，然而近年學者留意到中國哲學與斯多葛主義尤其是愛比克泰德哲學的相合，頗具啟發。本文提出此等相合遠較學界所想更為重要（我希望說服讀者有些重合相當驚

① See, e.g., Yuri Pines, “Confucius’ Elitism: The Concepts of *junzi* and *xiaoren* Revisited,” in *A Concise Companion to Confucius*, ed. Paul R. Goldin, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy 65 (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 164–84.

② For the *Analects*, see Amy Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: The Good Person Is That*, Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory 15 (New York and London, 2012).

③ Cf. Michael Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book* (New York: Zone, 2018), 41–42. Nylan does not refer to the “Yang Zhu” chapter of *Liezi* 列子, which was pronounced “hedonist” by A.C. Graham in his *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, 1990), 273–81, but it is both late and eccentric.

人)，並在總結中反思我們找到這些相合的根本原因。本文並不以直接或間接傳承立論——借用演化生物學術語言之，此為同功而非同源發展之現象。

**關鍵詞：**愛比克泰德 斯多葛主義 《莊子》《荀子》 比較哲學