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Disciplinary Note

# VIRTUES ACROSS CULTURES AND DISCIPLINES: FROM PROVERBS AND PAUL TO CONFUCIUS

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## Introduction

Given the increasingly diverse and globalized world we live in, Herdt's inspiring work on the pagan and Christian sources of classical traditions in virtue ethics has encouraged me to explore and uncover ethical and religious virtue traditions in the worlds of the ancient Near East and China. Herdt's discussion of "virtues among non-Christians" is suggestive because it raises the question of what makes a virtue Christian (or not) in particular contexts that I work with, i.e., pre-biblical and extra-biblical cultures, traditions, and texts.

This Brief offers a cross-cultural method for understanding virtues. It points to the centrality of cross-cultural borrowings in Old Testament wisdom literature. It then applies this method to construct a Christian Chinese conversation between classical Confucianist ethics and Pauline theology on virtues. My intention is to discern a cross-disciplinary approach to theology across academic fields, thus enriching Global Faculty Initiative conversations on virtues.

## A Method of Cross-cultural Biblical Interpretation

Descriptively, "cross-cultural interpretation" refers to the use of diverse cultural resources by the biblical authors or biblical interpreters. Those resources include language, philosophy, and folklore. The contexts of the biblical authors are ancient Near Eastern for the OT or Greco Roman for the NT. And biblical interpreters engaging in cross-cultural work are those like Aquinas in his use of Aristotelian ethics, or my own use of Confucian ethics to dialogue with Pauline theology.

Prescriptively, "cross-cultural interpretation" finds a biblical mandate to bridge gaps between the gospel and cultures, between faith and contexts, between theology and disciplinary research—all in the interests

of mutual transformation. All peoples are situated at culture-and-faith intersections. The cross-cultural method pays attention to contexts for a mutually creative process of transforming both cultures and biblical hermeneutics. This essay therefore seeks to show the benefits of bringing pagan and Christian wisdom into respectful and robust conversation.

The biblical cross-cultural method goes beyond binaries of “yes” or “no” (Yeo 2018: 46–47). This can be seen at work in Paul’s conversation with the Corinthians: in this cosmopolitan context he invokes a crucified Christ to critique Greek wisdom and Jewish religion (1 Cor 1:17–2:5). Yet, in the Athenian pagan context of idol worship, Paul tries to lead his philosophical audience from their notion of an “unknown god” to Jesus and his resurrection (Acts 17:18).

## Old Testament Wisdom on Virtues

In a cross-cultural biblical reading, many scholars are either too quick to speak of the “common grace” of international wisdom or too swift to judge non-Yahwistic wisdom as inferior to Israelite wisdom. Israelite ethicists in the OT intercultural world (Yeo 2012: 97-125) are aware of Near Eastern wisdom literatures which are comparable to those in the OT––Sumerian, Old Babylonian, Akkadian of Mesopotamia, Egyptian, and West Semitic. The book of Proverbs, for instance, presents diversified forms and content regarding basic virtues, such as trust, hope, love, speech, kindness, generosity, justice, self-control. [ 1 ] Sparks concludes that ancient scribal scholars and communities “engaged in an *active* intercultural exchange of literature and ideas” (Sparks 2005: 56, 78-79; emphasis mine). Near Eastern texts comparable to Proverbs include the Instructions of Shuruppak, the Instructions of Amenemope, and the Dialogue of Šube’awilum.

The discourse of extra-biblical virtues in Proverbs is not simply about ethical concerns. It also has a religious dimension—albeit from a polytheistic worldview. Proverbs adapts the Egyptian principle of *ma’at* to express the Israelite idea of Yahweh’s order, justice, and truth. Proverbs seems to see Woman Wisdom as an alternative to *ma’at*, thus renaming, indigenizing, and fulfilling *ma’at* (the virtues of order, justice, and truth) in Yahweh’s personhood and character. Proverbs is written as practical guidance to Israelite young men on how to flourish in society and discern order in areas such as homemaking, love relationships and business affairs (Prov 1–9; 31). By personifying wisdom in feminine imagery, Proverbs’ hermeneutical move contrasts the choice Israelites faced between following the Woman Wisdom (*hokma*) of Yahweh that leads to life, or following woman folly (idols and goddesses) that leads to death. In Proverbs wise people are teachable (1:5; 9:8-9), and by learning, they develop a character with sound judgment. Fools however, especially in cultures doubly distorted by arrogance and diffidence, are unteachable, and thus becoming ignorant.

Proverbs highlights the twofold unique contribution of Israelite wisdom. First, its Yahweh-centered ethics, where “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” is a precondition of human flourishing and acting wisely. Second, the Jewish *torah* (“instruction” or “teaching”) presents the “commandments” as underpinnings of the virtuous life (Longman 2024). In other words, Proverbs presents a *theological* ethics

of one's relationships with self, others, and creation based on a relationship with Yahweh and his rules for life. Proverbs does not advocate a *moral* theology alone that makes virtues an end in themselves. Moral theology which lacks friendship with God runs the risk of gaining wisdom and virtues independent of God (cf. "wise in their *own* eyes" Prov 3:7). It risks alienation from one's source of life, and using divine wisdom as a tool to justify one's behaviors or own convenience.

Perhaps surprisingly, Proverbs suggests not that "*love* of God is the beginning of wisdom" but rather "fear" (*yira'*). The English word "love" that translates the Hebrew term suggests the unconditional relationship one has with God, fitting a person to move toward friendship with God. But the wisdom of God is to move a person toward *obedience*, and so we have the English word "fear"— a deep reverence that forms and leads one to faithful obedience through the virtue of courage, avoiding the extremes of cowardice or rashness.

Thus Proverbs seeks to ground the virtue of wisdom on God and God's law. Wisdom enhances three dimensions of our life:

1. navigating *successfully* the vicissitudes of life, e.g., through prudence, discretion, and insight;
2. living a *good* life by doing "righteousness, justice, and equity, [and walking] every good path" (Prov 2:8-9); and
3. living a *flourishing* life that bears fruit for oneself and others (Prov 11:28). In contrast, self-serving wisdom is folly (14:8-9) that harms oneself, others, or the community (14:34).

## Dialogue between Confucian Ethics and Paul on Virtues

Just as the authors of Proverbs (especially 22:17–24:34) incorporate aspects of Egyptian wisdom, I propose that there is much value in bringing Galatians into dialogue with the *Analects*, the Confucianist pre-biblical wisdom collection. Cross-cultural hermeneutics is a mutual process whereby the biblical teachings re-interpret Confucian virtues, and the Chinese Bible has long used Confucian semantics to translate and express biblical moral teachings.

A comprehensive study comparing biblical virtues with the Confucian "four cardinal principles and eight virtues" [ 2 ] exceeds the scope of this response, let alone if one wants to dialogue with the four Aristotelian-Thomist cardinal virtues and three theological virtues that Herdt mentions. Despite multiple differences between the two virtue traditions of Confucius and Paul, we can explore whether there is a mutually enriching effect in a conversation between Paul and Confucius on the sanctifying life as divine grace coupled with acquired virtues (see Herdt's "how are the virtues acquired?" section).

The OT tends to regard virtues such as wisdom as both divine gifts and human disciplines. Thus obeying God's laws means having communion with God, which in turn blossoms into a virtuous life benefiting oneself and others. In the NT, the question of human agency in virtue is often underscored—as it is also in Reformation theologies between the contested views of Luther (justification over sanctification) and Calvin

(progressive sanctification). Addressing his gentile audience, Paul accentuates the role of the Spirit of God in producing fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5–6) as one lives in Christ (3:26–29) by participating in his work of salvation and in the sanctifying work of the Spirit (Gal 3:27; 5:16). Paul maintains that those who profess to be followers of Christ are required also to do the things which are consonant with the example of Christ. For Paul, "perfection" is a *theological* goal of being fully human, namely, to be Christlike.

Confucius, however, speaks of human *moral* actualization, and teaches the union of *li* and *ren.* The Confucian *li* is decorum in everyday social engagement. *Ren* means human-relatedness—specifically as love or humaneness—which is the cardinal principle of human relationships that "display virtue and renew the people" (*Great Learning* 1:1). The ritualizing interaction (*li*) with others naturally enables a person to be virtuous. For example, honor and respect are virtues that are cultivated in the social etiquette of the young towards the old within an extended family. In one's adult life, respect is then extended to public figures such as government officials (*Analects* 1:5, 15:8) and rulers (*Analects* 6:2). *Li* is the structure that forms *ren* as a virtue, and *ren* is the fountainhead of all the virtues. In Confucian ethics, the virtue of *ren* is about the cultivation of the heart—a metaphor for the seat of rationality and emotion, i.e., the sensitivity and empathy one has toward others.

Given my particular cross-cultural context, as a Christian-Chinese scholar, I seek a "mutually flourishing" approach to the virtues. First, can Paul learn from *the Analects*? The answer is "yes." A *Chinese* Christian can gain insights by expressing Paul's theology in the ethical terms of Confucius. This in turn provides *Chinese* Christians with indigenized and practical ways to live out Christian virtues in *Chinese* society. It could bridge the gap for Chinese Christians between "*belief* in God" and "*living* as children of God" (Gal 3:23-4:31). Moreover, the theological ethics of the Pauline epistles have often been read by Chinese churches solely as doctrinal teaching about loving God. However, Confucius in *the Analects* advocates that everyone actualizes the mandate of Heaven (*Tian*) by committing oneself to *ren* (humaneness), because loving others makes human beings human.

Can Confucius learn from Galatians? Confucius does share Paul's awe and reverence in matters related to life and death. But, for example, can Paul's understanding of the personhood of God (to speak, to love, to feel) redress inadequacies in Confucius's understanding of *Tian*? Can the particular knowledge of God's personhood guide a *Christian* Chinese to live a virtuous life and to fear God? The answer is "yes."

Let me give an example of fruitful cross-cultural dialogue on the role of rites (*li*) in the cultivation of virtues. Whereas rites in Confucius' ethics have the goal of forming virtues, for Protestants, Christian rites such as baptism and the Lord's Supper do not have as their primary purpose the cultivation of Christian virtues. Orthodox and Catholic Christians, however, would agree with Confucius. Over the years, as a Christian Chinese, my own reading of the *Analects* on *li* and *ren* has shifted. While I see all-encompassing love as the power of the Holy Spirit that creates and sustains us, I am increasingly aware that Christ's Chinese followers are also fed and renewed through many cultural rites other than the Lord's Supper (which Christian Chinese call "the holy rite," *sheng-li*). The tea ceremony, for example, cultivates friendship and instils virtues of honor and love for neighbors. Not all non-Christian virtues are to be

rejected.

The “mutually flourishing” approach aims to overcome the fear of judging and condemning others as “heretic” (not in accord with orthodoxy) or “syncretistic” (not pure faith). It also aims to overcome the fear that leads to building borders or walls. For me to speak of “Paul’s way of *li* and *ren*” in bearing the fruit of the Spirit is to imitate his “Law of Christ” hermeneutic (Gal 6:2) of using the best resources of Jewish and gentile Christian identifiers to signify their oneness in the God of Jesus (Gal 2:20). This overcomes not only the Jewish missionary’s ethnocentrism in coercing gentile believers to observe Jewish practices, but also the gentile world of licentiousness in “the works of the flesh” (Gal 5:18-21).

A Christian Chinese approach expresses Paul’s reinterpretation of laws and Spirit via Confucius’ understanding of *li* (rites) and *ren* (humaneness). A Pauline theology that is short on ethics is being “enfleshed” with Confucian ethical insights for a Chinese audience and society. Conversely, Confucius’ understanding of *ren* and full humanity is comparable to––and thus finds its fulfillment in––Paul’s understanding of Jesus Christ as God’s Son who loves all people sacrificially.

Confucius could agree with Paul, who writes that the purpose of the freedom God gives is to reach out to others—“love in becoming slaves to others” (Gal 5:13). Paul’s way of highlighting cruciform love enriches Confucius’ understanding of *ren*. And Paul would agree with Confucius in seeing virtue (*de*) as the expression of heaven, and *ren* as the essence of being human.

For a Chinese Christian who lives in the unity of Confucian ethics *and* Pauline theology, I embrace divine grace as the foundation of ethics and cruciform love. Rites (*li*) become the way for Christians to be *ren-ren* (people who love others). The ideal Confucianist person of virtues, who has perfect love, wishes good to others even if divine goodness does not come to oneself.

## The Global Faculty Initiative as a Cross-Disciplinary and Cross-Cultural Forum

Wisdom and virtue are cousins. Both of them call us academics to pursue God in our research and teaching, so that the world might witness ways to live life fully and flourishingly in the power of God’s Spirit.

How can faith and our academic fields work together? I suggest that we begin with the “fear of God,” and know that “faith does not hinder knowledge; on the contrary, it liberates knowledge, enables it really to come to the point and indicates to it its proper place in the sphere of varied, human activity” (von Rad 1972: 68).

Further, the theological virtue of “fear of God” places knowledge in its proper perspective. God holds all wisdom. Thus God’s followers, through direct revelation (Bible study), observation and reflection on general revelation from our academic fields, live into a wisdom-conscious hermeneutics of reading God’s world. We should resist binary thinking. It is not either culture or faith. Culture speaks to faith as faith speaks to culture. As our conversation between Confucius and Paul on the virtues well illustrates, a fully

rounded understanding of the virtues in any given cultural context requires respect for the tradition of the culture as it encounters the revelation of the gospel.

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## End Notes

[ 1 ] Virtue refers to “goodness” (Isa 63:7), “excellence” (Phil 4:8; 1 Pet 2:9; 2 Pet 1:3); or “splendor/praise” (Isa 42:8, 12, 43:21; Hab 3:3; Zech 6:13). For more, see Keefer 2021: 51-53.

[ 2 ] “—*li* (propriety, rites); *yi* (righteousness, justice); *lian* (integrity); *chi* (shame); *zhong* (loyalty); *xiao* (filial piety); *ren* (humanity, benevolence); *xin* (trustworthiness)” (Yeo 2008)

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