

Human Immortality in Aristotle and Mencius[©]

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Abstraction

With regard to the ultimate end/ideal of human life, Aristotle's view looks very far away from Mencius': Aristotle takes it to be *eudaimonia* (happiness), while Mencius views it as *Ch'eng-Sheng* (becoming a sage). But, in this paper I argue that, while deeply going into their theories, we find that they share the very basic view: whoever reaches the ultimate end/ideal of human life becomes immortal (in spiritual sense), though there still are some differences between them. First, I inquiry onto the question: What kind of activity human engages can make him/her become immortal for both? Secondly, I focus on the foundation for such kind of activity in Aristotle and in Mencius. For Aristotle, the activity is a God-like activity, i.e. *theoria* (contemplation); whereas for Mencius it is a

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Heaven-like activity, i.e. continuously bringing out moral activity to the world and invisibly helping others to cultivate their virtue with no intention. As to the foundation, in Aristotle, it is *nous* (reason, intellect, mind), but in Mencius, it is *Hsin* (Human nature) or *Hsing* (Mind). Though they look so different at issue, they in several important respects are very similar or the same: (1) Aristotle's God and Mencius' Heaven are the same in the sense of their always being active. (2) For both, the human has a double identity, i.e. being human and being partially divine, and, of the two, being human has priority in human life. (3) In their view, the highest life or ideal can be actualized not for the many but for the few only. For Aristotle, that is the god-like man (whose life is immortal) but such sort of human is rarely found, and for Mencius only the sages who reach the highest level of life can attend (such as Yao, Shun and Confucius,) are actually capable of becoming as great as Heaven, i.e. immortal. (4) For both Aristotle and Mencius, the foundation for human's becoming immortal is immanent in human's life; based upon it, human can become immortal in terms of his/her own effort. And (5), their ethics, unlike most ethical theories, reach something immortal and contain a religious dimension.

Key words: human immortality, *eudaimonia* (happiness), *ch'eng-Sheng* (becoming a sage), *theoria* (contemplation), virtue-cultivation, god-like, heaven-like.



Human Immortality in Aristotle and Mencius

With respect to the ultimate end of human life, there are two sorts of the best possible life in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*¹. One is practical, the other theoretical. According to the practical account, (offered in I.7 and through X.5, described as secondary at 1178a9,) the best possible life is a practically good life, the life of good and virtuous action, morally virtuous action. According to the theoretical account (stated in NE X.7-8), *eudaimonia* (happiness)², the ultimate end of human life, is identical with the activity of *sophia* (philosophical wisdom),

1 The English translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* (abbreviated as NE) which I use for this paper is the one translated By W. D. Ross, collected in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon, New York: Random House Inc., 1941.

2 The traditional translation for *eudaimonia* in Aristotle is happiness. But, as some commentators have noticed, this translation is possibly misleading. This word, as Aristotle tells us at 1095a19-20, for most Greeks means living well and doing well, those are identical with being happy (*eudaimon*); and for Aristotle himself it is not a contented feeling and a pleasant state of mind, which the English word "happiness" tends to suggest, but an activity of human soul (1098a14-15). See, for example: John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, pp. 89-90, n.1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); J.L. Ackrill, "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*," in *Essays on Aristotle*, edited by A. Rorty, p. 24 (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980); A. Kenny, "Happiness," in *Moral Concept* (edited by Joel Feinberg, pp. 43-52. London: Oxford University Press, 1969); W.D. Ross, *Aristotle: A Complete Exposition of his Works and Thought*, (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1959), p.186; and so on. Though these people's views have also been attacked, it shows that it is possibly misleading to translate *eudaimonia* as happiness. So in the following I will use the transliteration "*eudaimonia*", instead of happiness.



i.e. *theoria* (contemplation)³, and the best possible life for human beings is a contemplative life, i.e. a godlike life.

Mencius⁴ takes becoming like the greatest sages to be the ultimate ideal of human life. This for him, however, like the practically good life for Aristotle, is not the highest ideal that a human being can reach. The highest ideal that human beings can reach, according to Mencius, is to flow in the same stream as Heaven and Earth, which means that their lives go beyond being humans and become immortal (surely in spiritual sense), like Heaven and Earth, for their lives are as great as *T'ien* (Heaven) and *Di* (Earth) through continuously bringing out virtuous activities to the world and cultivating others' lives without intentionally doing anything. (cf. 3A:4, 7A:1, 7A:13)

Aristotle and Mencius differ on human immortality. For Aristotle, the approach for human to become immortal is to engage in *theoria* (contemplation), (1177b31-34) while for Mencius it is continuously to bring the virtues into being and

3 In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the word "*theoria*" is used to cover a very wide range of activity: So long as one closely observes or studies (*theorein*) something, one can be said as being engaged in *theoria* (cf. 1140a11, 1141a25, 1169b33). But when it is used to mean the sort of activity that is identical with *eudaimonia* in NE X.7-8, it is limited to the activity in which one exercises the intellectual virtue of *sophia* (philosophical wisdom). As the activity of this virtue, *theoria* (contemplation) is not seeking knowledge but bringing the knowledge that one already has into one's mind (cf. Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, pp. 15-16, footnote 2. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989). Its object is eternal, unchangeable, and immaterial. For Aristotle, this knowledge might include Theology, Mathematics, and Physics.

4 The views of Mencius in this paper are basically according to what he says in the Book of *Mencius*, and, as to the quotations, I follow James Legge's translation (*The Works of Mencius*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), except special note.



cultivate others with one's own virtue imperceptibly.⁵ The foundation for becoming immortal for Aristotle is a purely theoretical subject, i.e. *nous* (mind, intellect, reason), whereas for Mencius it is a practical subject, i.e. *Hsin* (mind). In the following, through comparing their views on human immortality, I will show that the disagreement between Aristotle and Mencius is not as great as the above comparison seems to suggest.

1. The Highest Ideal of Human Life

1-1. *Theoria* and *Eudaimonia* – A Godlike Life

Aristotle has two arguments⁶ for *theoria* being *eudaimonia*.⁷ One refers to the attributes of *eudaimonia*, the

5 Aristotle mentions the concept of “immortal” in *Ethics* (NE 1177b31-34), but does not have a thematic study on it nor analyzes what it is in his ethical theory, like Mencius. But, in some sense, it seems very different between both and therefore making such a comparison on “Human Immortality in Aristotle and Mencius” is not proper. For “immortal” in Aristotle is a concept for soul, meaning that it does not die with the body’s death, while for Mencius it is a concept about spiritual life. However, what is more important for us here is this: For Aristotle, the soul of human is the non-matter part of human life, which is consisted with body (mater/the material part of human life) and soul; the soul of human is immaterial. And for Mencius, to say that human life can be immortal, the “immortal” here, clearly, does not point to human’s bodily life but human’s spiritual life, which is immaterial. Accordingly, the concept of “immortal in these two thinkers’ theories exists some difference (one points to the soul, the other the spiritual), however, they both are pointed to the immaterial life of human. Since so, we have no reason to say that we cannot make such a comparison on “Human Immortality in Aristotle and Mencius”.

6 We might say that Aristotle gives three arguments in book ten of the *Nicomachean Ethics* if the one at X.8, 1178b23-32 is counted as one.

7 At NE X.7, 1177a18, Aristotle takes *theoria* (contemplation) to be complete/perfect happiness, not only happiness. And at 1177b24-25, he



other refers to god's activity. According to the inquiry he makes before giving the theoretical account of *eudaimonia*, *eudaimonia* is the best, most continuous, most pleasant, most self-sufficient, and most leisurely activity of all human activities. Besides these, it is loved only for its own sake (1177a18-b26). All these attributes, according to Aristotle, are found in the actualization of *sophia*, i.e. contemplation. Contemplation is therefore the complete/perfect *eudaimonia*⁸ of man (1177b24-26). The other argument goes thus (1178b8-23): Gods are thought to be blessed (*makarios*) and happy (*eudaimon*) above all other things. They live and are active, but they do not make or do. The only sort of activity they engage in and enjoy is contemplation. Hence, contemplation must be *eudaimonia*, and the *eudaimonia* for humans must be some form of contemplation.

Theoria is therefore defined as *eudaimonia* and is viewed as co-extensive with *eudaimonia* (1178b27-28), and animals incapable of engaging in contemplation cannot enjoy *eudaimonia* (1178b23-24). Of living beings, only the gods and human beings are capable of contemplating truth and having *eudaimonia*.

The only sort of activity that the gods have is *theoria*. To contemplate truth is therefore to engage in godlike activity and to live a contemplative life (*bios*) is to live a godlike life, i.e. a happy life. But here the godlike life for Aristotle does not mean a life exactly the same as the gods'. The gods' life is constituted

claims that *theoria* is the complete/perfect happiness of man if it be allowed a complete term of life. These two suggest that, compared with practical activities, contemplation is more complete/perfect, or more final.

8 It is complete or perfect *eudaimonia*, according to Aristotle, because none of the attributes is incomplete.



by *theoria* alone, so the happiness-activity and the happy life (*bios*) are coincident in the case of the gods; but, in the case of our humans, they are not coincident.⁹ The reasons are two. First, we cannot contemplate truth perpetually as the gods do. And second, our life cannot be constituted by contemplation alone (1178a24-27), for we are composites of soul and body; our nature is not self-sufficient for contemplating truth. To contemplate truth, our body must be healthy and have food and other attention (1178b32-1179a1). A contemplative life for humans is not constituted by *theoria* alone; it must contain the necessities of life (1178a24-26, 1178b33-1179a1). So, to live a godlike life is not to live a life exactly the same as the gods', but to live a life that involves the godlike activity, i.e. contemplation.¹⁰

1-2. The Contemplative Life and the Practically Good Life

Both the practically good life and the contemplative life require some external goods, and both are the ultimate ends of human life. But, in Aristotle's mind, the contemplative life is better and higher than the practically good life. It is better and higher because the activity in terms of which it is defined as the contemplative life is higher and better than the activities in virtue of which a life is said to be practically good. That it is better and higher can be seen from the following points (1177a19-1177b24): (i) *Nous* (reason) is the divine element in

9 See Sarah Broadie, *Ethics With Aristotle*, p. 55, footnote 22 (New York, Oxford: Oxford University press, 1991). Also, see John M. Cooper's discussion about the use of the word "*bios*" in Greek, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, p. 160 (Cf. footnote 1).

10 The contemplative life does not make us gods; it only makes us god-like. This is in accord with Aristotle's view that one wouldn't want some good, no matter how good it is, if it requires one to lose his identity as a human being (1159a8-12).



us (1177a14-18, 1177b26-27). It is not only the best thing in us, its objects are eternal and unchangeable (1139b23-24, 1141a17-19) and the best of knowable objects. So, the activity of reason, i.e. *theoria*, is the best of our activities. (ii) Contemplation is more self-sufficient than the practically good activities. To do practically and morally good actions, some external goods such as other people, money, power, etc., are necessarily required. But to engage in contemplation, we do not rely upon them as much. Because of this, (iii) contemplation is more continuous than morally and practically good activities. (iv) Contemplation is more pleasant than morally and practically activities and is the most pleasant activity in human life. For *nous*, is most truly our self and its activity is most naturally our own. (v) All practical and moral activities are not leisurely, while *theoria* is. And (vi), both contemplation and practically and morally good activities are good in themselves, but practically good actions are at the same time desired for the sake of *eudaimonia*, while contemplation is itself *eudaimonia*. There is no end beyond *Theoria* and services as that for the sake of which it is desired, while there is such an end, i.e. *eudaimonia*, beyond practically and morally good actions and service as their end (1177a20-26, 1178a25-1178b5). Compared with the practically good activities, contemplation is more final and more complete/perfect. So, the contemplative life is better and higher than the practically good life.

The contemplative life is therefore the highest sort of life that human beings can live. Such a life is not typically human. The typical human life for Aristotle is the practically and morally good life, for reason (*nous*) is the divine element in us but it is not the whole of our nature. Our nature as such combines reason and passions, body and soul. Corresponding to this, practical/moral virtues, and the life according to them, are more human. For they are the virtues of the composite nature



and the life of such a composite being (1177b26-31, 1178b6-8, 1178a8-20). We can live a contemplative life only while the divine part is present in us, not while our nature as such is present (1177b26-28). It is a life beyond the merely human. The highest life that humans are capable of living is a life between the human's life and the god's life.

Aristotle leaves unclear¹¹ the relation between the practically good life and the contemplative life. But from his views about the relation between practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and philosophical wisdom (*sophia*), we can get some hint for the relation here. We know that, for Aristotle, both practical wisdom and philosophical wisdom are the virtues of the rational part of our human soul. But practical wisdom is linked with

11 There are three kinds of interpretation here: (1) An inclusive view that takes these two sorts of life to be combined together, for example, J. L. Ackrill ("Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. by A. Rorty, pp.15-33), T. H. Irwin ("The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Ethics" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. by A. Rorty, pp. 35-54), A. W. Price (*Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), D. Devereux ("Aristotle on the Essence of Happiness," in *Studies in Aristotle*, ed. by Dominic J. O'Meara, pp.247-260), T. D. Roche, J. M. Cooper (*Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), and "contemplation and Happiness: Reconsideration," *Synthese* 72, pp. 187-216), etc.; (2) an intellectual view that regards these two to be separable and views the contemplative life as *eudaimonia*, for example, Richard Kraut ("Two Conceptions of Happiness," *The Philosophical Review* 88, pp.167-197, and *Aristotle on the Human good*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), Anthony Kenny ("Happiness" in *Moral Concept*, ed. by Joel Feinberg, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 43-52), S. R. L. Clark (*Aristotle's Man: Speculations upon Aristotle's Anthropology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), etc.; and (3) a view that takes the best life to be practical but not completely practical yet occasionally engaging in *theoria*, for example, Sarah Broadie (*Ethics With Aristotle*, pp. 411-438).



moral virtue and thereby linked with the passions of the soul. According to book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, without practical wisdom, no one can be morally good; without being morally good, no one can be practically wise (1144a36-37, 1144b30-32). We are further told that if one has practical wisdom, one will have all other moral virtues (1145a1-3). Practical wisdom involves all practical/moral activities and is the key to having them and to living the practically good life. As to the relation of it to *sophia*, according to Aristotle (1145a7-12), it is like the relation of medicine to health: Medical science does not use health but aims to bring out health and prescribes for the sake of health; similarly, *phronesis* does not control philosophical wisdom but aims to bring it into being and issues commands for its sake. Practical wisdom is in service to the coming into being of philosophical wisdom. Practical life makes provision for the coming into being of contemplative life.

With this view, there are two pictures of the highest life for humans. Both contain contemplation, but one also includes practically good activities, while the other contains contemplation (and the necessities of life) only. In X.8, 1179a10-15, Aristotle gives Solon as the example for the former and Anaxagoras the example for the latter. This strongly suggests that for him humans can live these two sorts of life: They are the two highest lives possible for humans.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says nothing about how to combine the practically good life and the contemplative life or whether there is a necessity to combine both. But he clearly tells us that to live a godlike life all through one's life would be too high for man (1177b26). And immediately after stating this, he urges us to cultivate the divine part of us and to become as immortal as we possibly can (1177b31-34). Besides, at NE X.8, 1178b28-30 he claims: "Happiness extends ... just so far as contemplation does, and those to whom contemplation



more fully belongs are more truly happy..." In addition, at 1178b5-7, Aristotle tells us this: In so far as the theorizer is a man and lives with a number of people, he chooses to do virtuous acts. Taking all these together, Aristotle's attitude tends to be this: Occasionally¹² engaging in contemplation in the practically good life is the highest life for humans, and that the more contemplation one engages in, the better life one lives.¹³

Here it is worth noticing what Aristotle reminds us of at NE X.8, 1178b5-7: In so far as the theorizer is a man and lives with others together, he chooses to do virtuous acts and needs the aids for living a human life. What Aristotle reminds us here implies this: We, human beings, have a double identity, i.e. being human beings and being partial divine beings, and, of the two, the identity of being human beings, and thereby, the practically good life, has priority though it alone is not the highest life for us.¹⁴

Now let us move to see the highest ideal that human beings can reach and its relation to the ultimate ideal of human life in Mencius.

12 Here, I follow Sarah Broadie's view about the best life in Aristotle. See her book *Ethics With Aristotle*, pp. 411-438.

13 This accords with what we saw before, that is, for Aristotle a godlike life is not a life exactly the same as the gods'.

14 This in a sense is giving some limitation to the priority of contemplation: It implies that Aristotle does not urge us to do everything to maximize the opportunities for contemplation.



1-3. Becoming Heaven-Like in Greatness and Becoming a Sage

1-3.1 *T'ien-Tao* (the Way of Heaven)

"*T'ien*" (Heaven), for ancient Chinese, is the highest and greatest being. In their eyes, *T'ien* does not only create all beings, It also nourishes all creatures. These are commonly thought as the two essential functions and virtues of Heaven¹⁵. To become such a great being (that has the power to create all beings and to cultivate all creatures) is impossible for humans. But, from Mencius' point of view, human being can get his/her virtuous merit as great as Heaven's and get his/her life flow in the same stream as Heaven's. This, for him, is the highest degree that human beings can reach¹⁶ (cf. 2A: 2-3, 3A:4, 7A:1 & 13).

As to the Way of Heaven's creating beings and cultivating creatures, Mencius says nothing directly in his corpus. But some views about it are implicit in the passages of 7A:1 and 7A:13.

According to these two passages, (i) the sage's bringing the virtues into being is very like Heaven's creating the beings -- it is a natural and continuous doing¹⁷ (7A:1, 7A:13); and (ii) the

15 "*T'ien-Te*" (the virtue of Heaven) in Chinese tradition means the essential essence, or the essential function or merit, of Heaven.

16 Everyone can in principle become as great as Heaven for Mencius, but, realistically speaking, (see below) only the great sages can reach it.

17 Cf. Prof. Tsung-San Mou's commentary on 7A:1 and 7A:13 (*On the Perfect Good*, Taipei: Student Books Co., Ltd., pp. 131-134, pp. 137-139). So the passage of 7A:1 tells us if we fully exert our nature, [i.e. if we fully actualize the virtues,] we will experience and know why *T'ien* is the ultimate source of all beings.



great sage's cultivating others' lives with his virtue is very like Heaven's cultivating the creatures¹⁸ (7A:13): *T'ien* never intentionally cultivates the creatures, nor does It take any form or leave any trace, so that all creatures are cultivated by Heaven but they do not know it and it looks like they cultivate themselves.

1-3.2 The Most Accessible and Feasible Way

According to Mencius (7A:1 & 7A:13), each human can in principle engage in the two Heaven-like activities and become as great as Heaven. But (i) in the history of mankind only the greatest sages such as Yao, Shun, and Confucius actually became so great (cf. 2A:2-3, 3A:4, 7A:13); and (ii), to become like these sages is learnable, but to become as great as *T'ien* is not learnable. As we just saw, Heaven never does Its works intentionally, nor does It take any form or leave any trace.¹⁹ So It provides nothing for us to learn to be like It. But the greatest sages are different. Though the ways they bring the virtues into being and cultivate others' lives with their virtue are both similar to the way Heaven does Its jobs, these sages leave some trace for us to follow and to learn to become like them. The trace is the way they lived their lives, the way they did things, and, more importantly, the way by which they cultivated their virtues and became capable of engaging in the Heaven-like activities. By following their ways to live, to do things, and to cultivate our nature and virtue, we can learn how to become like them and thereby to become as great as Heaven.

18 See Chu Hsi's commentary on 7A:13.

19 So the passage of 7A:13 he tells us that all creatures do not know who cultivates their lives: It looks like no one does it but they do it themselves.



Taking (i) and (ii) together, we can conclude that, for Mencius, to become like the greatest sages is the only, or at least the most accessible and feasible, way to become as great as Heaven.

1-3.3 *T'ien-Tao* (the Way of Heaven), *Hsing-Fenn*

(Human Duty), and *Chen-Sheng* (Becoming a Sage)

For Mencius, to become heaven-like, one needs to become a sage first. But this for him does not mean that *Chen-Sheng* is desired for the sake of becoming heaven-like.

According to the passage of 7B:24, for the sage to experience and know *T'ien-Tao* (the Way of Heaven) is just like actualizing the human virtues for humans: It is what he/she should do. But here we should notice that to experience and know the Way of Heaven in this passage (like in the passage of 7A:1) refers only to the sage, i.e. the sort of person who fully actualizes his/her nature.²⁰ And, according to 7A:21, to do what the nature of a human being determines that one should do is to actualize one's *Hsing-Fenn*, i.e. one's due task as a human being. What one's *Hsing-Fenn* is, according to this passage, is to actualize the virtues which are rooted in one's mind/nature, i.e. the human virtues such as *Jen*, *Yi*, *Li*, etc. To experience and know the Way of Heaven is not included. Taking these two passages, i.e. 7A:21 and 7B:24, together, (1) What is essential to one as a human being is not to experience and know

20 It is in terms of this that I agree with Yung-Ming Wong that for Mencius only the sages are capable of fulfilling the heavenly course and becoming heaven-like: In principle for everyone it is possible, but in reality, one has to cultivate one's virtue well and become a sage, then one is actually capable of doing it. My view here is different from Tsu-Han Yung's. For Yung-Ming Wong's and Tsu-Han Yung's views, see *Meng-Tzu I-Li Shu-chae* (*An Analytical Interpretation of Mencius' Thought*, Taipei, Taiwan: Legein Society, 1983) pp.21-22.



T'ien-Tao but to actualize the immanent human virtues; (2) only for the sage to experience and know the Way of Heaven is what he/she should do, at least, is what he/she should try to fulfill. These imply that only when one has become a sage, is one actually capable of experiencing and knowing *T'ien-Tao*, the Way of Heaven. The practical necessity here of pursuing *Chen-Sheng* before one pursues heaven-like greatness, need not be the motivation for which the actualization of human virtue and that of sagehood is desired. According to Mencius' concept of *Hsing-Fenn*, to actualize the human virtues is everyone's duty as a human being. Everyone should actualize them just because it is his/her nature to do it. Accordingly, to actualize the immanent human virtues, and thereby to become a sage, is not and should not be desired for the sake of anything else, including becoming actually capable of fulfilling the heavenly course and becoming heaven-like, though it can make one actually capable of doing it. Similarly, in order to get a teaching position in a university, one needs to get a Ph. D. degree. But it is not necessary to suppose that he/she seeks the degree for the sake of teaching in a university. It can be sought for some other reason, for instance, to prove one's ability to do philosophy, or something else.

For Mencius, as we saw above, becoming a great sage is interlinked with becoming as great as Heaven. And, according to his theory of human nature, if one fully exerts one's nature, one can become a great sage like Yao, Shun, or Confucius (cf. 3A:1 & 7A:1). As a matter of fact, to exert one's nature fully, according to Mencius, not only can lead one to become a sage, it can further lead one to experience and know the Way of Heaven (7A:1) and to become as great as Heaven. The foundation and the path for both are the same.²¹

21 The difference between the two is only that the latter is higher than the



No matter how similar they are, they mean different things to human life. To become as great as Heaven, we are taking *T'ien*, the highest and greatest being, as the model and seeking to go beyond what we are as human beings; while to learn to become like the greatest sages, we are taking human beings as the models and seeking to become the greatest human beings. If to actualize the peculiar nature of the human, i.e. to actualize the human virtues, is to actualize what one as a human being is, then fully to actualize one's nature and become a sage is to become a fully actualized human being, while to become heaven-like in greatness is to go beyond being human. That is to say, as for Aristotle, for Mencius man has two identities. One is being a human, the other is being partially divine. To become a sage is to actualize fully one's identity as human, while to become heaven-like in greatness is to actualize one's identity as partially divine. Sage is the highest form that one as a human being can attain, and becoming heaven-like is to become a being between human and Heaven. Along with this, what implies in Mencius' view that to actualize the immanent human virtues is one's *Hsin-Fenn*, but to experience and know *T'ien-Tao* is not, turns out to be this: Fully to actualize one's identity as a human is prior to the pursuit of becoming heaven-like in greatness. That is to say, for human beings, to become actually human beings is more important than to go beyond being humans.

1-4. Comparison

From the above, we can see that Mencius' understanding of Heaven is rather different from Aristotle's apprehension of the gods, so their views about the approach to immortality are somewhat different. For Aristotle, the only sort of activity that

former. So one has to go further after becoming a sage if one wants to become as great as Heaven.



the gods have is theoretical, i.e. contemplation; so, the approach to becoming godlike is also theoretical, i.e. to engage in contemplation. But for Mencius the essential works of Heaven are practical, i.e. continuously to create all beings and to cultivate all creatures; so, the approach to becoming heaven-like in greatness is also practical, that is, continuously to bring the virtues into being and imperceptibly to cultivate others' lives with one's virtue. Besides, these two thinkers' understandings of the relation between the two final ends are also different. For Aristotle, one is desired for the sake of the other, that is, the practically good life is desired for the sake of the contemplative life; but, according to Mencius, *Chen-sheng* cannot be desired for the sake of becoming heaven-like in greatness. In addition, in Mencius' ethics, the two are similar in their essence, but in Aristotle, they are different: One is practical, the other is theoretical.

However, Aristotle and Mencius are very close in the following respects. First, Aristotle's gods are similar to Mencius' idea of Heaven since they are always active. Second, their views about the relation between the two final ends are similar. For Aristotle the practically good life makes provision for the theoretical life's coming into being, and for Mencius becoming a sage is the most accessible and feasible way to become as great as Heaven. Third, both share the following view: the human has a double identity, i.e. being human and being partially divine, and, of the two, being human has priority in human life. Fourth, for both Aristotle and Mencius, the highest ideal of a human being is not to be human nor to be god or Heaven but to be between both: to surpass being merely human to become like the gods or Heaven. Fifth, for both Aristotle and Mencius, the highest life or ideal can not be pursued as human. The highest ideal is not proper for the many but for the few only. For Aristotle, the godlike man is rarely found (1145a27-30), and for



Mencius only the sages are actually capable of becoming as great as Heaven. And sixth, their ethics, unlike most ethical theories, reach something immortal and contain a religious dimension.

2. The Transcendental Foundation of Becoming

Immortal

As has been seen, for both Aristotle and Mencius, human beings can in principle become immortal. And the possibility, for Aristotle, clearly consists in the fact that each human is by nature endowed with nous (mind, intellect, reason), while for Mencius it is because each human has *Hsin* (mind) by nature. Now I shall compare these thinkers' views about the foundation of becoming immortal. I shall argue that though these two thinkers' views on the matter have some differences, they share something very fundamental.

2-1. *Nous* and Godlike activity

The role that nous plays in godlike activity for Aristotle can be seen in his understanding of how human thinking can be like god's. The function of nous, as Aristotle points out in the *De Anima* (429a23), is to enable us to think and to judge. These two can be used practically and theoretically. The one referring to god's activity is the theoretical ones. For there is nothing productive or practical in god's life, as we mentioned before.²²

22 Hence, unlike some commentators, (for example, Amelie O. Rorty) I do not take the object of contemplation to be humanity or something other than the objects of the first philosophy, which includes Mathematics, Theology, and Physics. Amelie O. Rorty's view, see her article "The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, pp. 377-394 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1980).



2-1.1 God's Thinking

God's thinking, according to Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1074b32), is thinking itself. But "God's thinking itself" here is not equal to "God's self-contemplation", a sort of heavenly Narcissus.²³ The self at issue just indicates that the subject, i.e. God, and Its object, i.e. what God thinks, are identical. It does not mean that the subject is at the same time the object.²⁴ What God thinks, according to Aristotle, is of pure thought, and what It thinks about is what is best, and God is that which is best (Meta. 1072b17-34, 1174b26-27). All Its objects are immaterial and internal, and Its thinking is eternal (Meta. 1075a10).

2-1.2 Human Thinking

Our *nous* is that gives rise to our thinking. And our nous, according to Aristotle, has no positive nature of its own. It is potentially like the forms of its objects, it also takes in the forms while it thinks. But all forms are not originally in it. It has to receive them from the external objects and become them (*De Anima* 429a14-16, 21-24). After becoming what it thinks, (i.e. the form of its object,) our nous becomes capable of thinking itself (*De Anima* 429b5). The "itself" here is its object; the self is that which our nous becomes after the first sort of thinking, that is, the form it receives. After becoming its object, *nous* and its object are identical. Hence mind is also its object (Meta. 1072b20ff). In this stage of thinking, the mind thinks of what it

23 See Richard Norman, "Aristotle's Philosopher-God," P. 63 & P. 67, *Phronesis* 14, 1969: 63-74. The main reason for which "God thinks itself" does not mean "God contemplates itself", according to Norman, is that in the reasoning the subject is God and the object is not God but pure perfection and about pure perfection. The subject and the object are not one and the same one thing in the reasoning though God is itself pure perfection. To be sure, God thinks of and about pure perfection, not God.

24 Ibid.



received in the first sort of thinking: Its object is within itself and without matter. Thus, though we need to get the forms from the external objects and also we cannot think things eternally, unlike the gods (cf. *Meta.* 1072b23-29), due to having the second sort of thinking, to think things like the gods do is possible for us.

2-1.3 The Foundation: *Nous*

Due to nous we are by nature endowed with capacity to engage in theoretical thought, the godlike activity. Nous is the foundation. As the foundation, mind consists of two parts: passive intellect and active intellect. The passive intellect is potentiality to become all things, while the active intellect is always active and makes all things (*De Anima* 430a14-16)²⁵. No matter how different these two intellects are, it is very clear that they both are essentially noetic and, as the foundation of human's becoming immortal, *nous* is a purely theoretical thinking subject. This, as we will see, is very different from the foundation for Mencius.

It is very apparent that for Aristotle if we can become immortal, we do not become it by relying upon the transcendent and external beings, i.e. the gods, or their grace or their special revelation or some sacramental performances: We rely upon our own effort, i.e. exerting the theoretical function of our nous. Aristotle's view is very unlike that of divine-ethics/religious ethics. This is very important for us. For, as we will see, it is at this point that Aristotle and Mencius are very fundamentally similar to each other on immortality.

25 See J.A.Smith's English translation, collected in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon, New York: Random House, 1941.



2-2. *Hsin* and Heaven-Like Activities

The two Heaven-like activities for Mencius, as we saw above, are bringing the virtues into being and cultivating others' lives with one's virtue. Now let us see how it is humanly possible to engage in these two activities like Heaven's doing Its works.

2-2.1 The Possibility of Engaging in the Heaven-like Activity of Creation

We have mentioned that for Mencius all virtues are originally rooted in our mind, so to actualize the virtues in our doings is just natural to us. And we know that all things which we might need to do or need to do in our daily life for Confucians are within the field with which the virtues are concerned, so for the Confucians our daily life is everywhere the chance to actualize the virtues, that is, we can constantly bring the virtues into being if we want. It is at the basis of these two that for Mencius we can do something like Heaven's creating the beings, i.e. naturally and constantly to bring the virtues into being. Now let us move to see how it is possible for us to engage in an activity like Heaven's cultivating the creatures with Its virtue.

2-2.2 The Possibility of Engaging in the Heaven-Like Activity of

Cultivating Others' Lives

T'ien's cultivating the creatures, like Its creating the beings, is everywhere. The way *T'ien* cultivates the creatures, as we mentioned before, is this: It never intentionally cultivates the creatures, nor does It take any form or leave any trace, so all creatures are cultivated by Heaven but they do not know it and it looks like they cultivate themselves. The three features of



T'ien's cultivating the creatures are *unintentionality*, *unknowability*, and continuity.

For Mencius, as we can see from his theory of human nature, to cultivate one's nature and to cultivate one's virtue are one thing. And, according to him, the virtuous person's ideal is this: If possible, he/she would like to get all the people in the world to be good and virtuous²⁶ (7A:9). He further follows Confucius' idea that no other way can influence people to be good more effectively than virtue (2A:1). For him and for all Confucians, if one cultivates one's virtue well, one will be able to influence others with one's virtue, and the better one cultivates one's virtue, the more one can influence others. And, in Mencius' view, to its utmost degree, one can make all people whom one passes transform to be good, without their knowing who makes them do so, like the way Heaven nourishes the creatures²⁷ (7A:13; 7B:25.8).²⁸ That is to say, if one cultivates one's virtue to its utmost degree (that is, if one becomes a very great sage like Yoa, Shun, and Confucius) then: (i) Without intention, one can influence others to be good with one's virtue, and it will look like no one makes them change but they do the change themselves; and (ii), one can thus influence others any time and any place, so, to its utmost extent, all people whom

26 Since Mencius staked out this as the ideal of the virtuous, all subsequent Confucians take it as their ideal.

27 In 7B:25.8, Mencius says: "The unknowable of a sage is called as *shen* [marvelous]." The word "*shen*" here is used to describe how marvelous a sage is while he influences others' lives with his virtue: It is so great and so invisible, so it is almost beyond people's knowledge.

28 Cf. D.C.Lau's translation of this passage (*Mencius*, New York: Penguin Books, 1970). What the sage-kings of Yao and Shun, and the sage of Confucius, influence to people are the examples here. See Chu Hsi's commentary on this passage.



one passes can be unobtrusively influenced to be good. In short, the influence can be made unintentionally, continuously, and unknowably, like Heaven's doing Its works.

There are another two reasons for which people can be thus influenced by the sage's virtue. The first reason is that for Mencius everyone is by nature "leaning-toward-the-admirable-virtue" (6A:6), or to say it differently, each person's mind is by nature "liking the virtues" (6A:7). And the second reason is that if one cultivates oneself well, not only one's doings but also one's appearance will change. So, if one cultivates one's virtue well, one need not do anything to cause others' attention about it; others will and can see it from one's doings and appearance (cf. 7A:21). And while people see how great one's virtue is, their nature of leaning-toward-the-admirable-virtue will be brought out and they will desire to have the nice virtues themselves, and, because of this, they will make a change themselves. Thus, the sage does not need to do anything to make people do any change, people will be invisibly influenced to have a change themselves. And because the sage does nothing to change them, it looks like no one makes them do such a change but they made the change themselves. The influence can thus be made unintentionally and unknowably.²⁹ And since for the Confucians our everyday life is everywhere the chance to actualize the virtues, our everyday life is everywhere the chance to see how great the sage's virtue is. That is to say, the sage can constantly thus influence others. The sage's cultivating others'

29 If to cultivate the creatures is one of the works of Heaven, then, in this sense, the sage is not only engaging in a Heaven-like activity but also participating in Heaven's work. And if Heaven has the virtue of cultivation because It cultivates the creatures, then here the sage should also have it since he takes part in Heaven's work.



lives with his/her own virtue can therefore be made like Heaven's cultivating the creatures.

2-2.3 *Hsin*: The Foundation

According to the above, if we fully exert our nature, we will be able constantly to bring the virtues into being and to get others invisibly influenced by our virtue to be good; and if we do so, we will experience something like Heaven's creating the beings and cultivating the creatures and thereby become as great as Heaven. This clearly shows us that for Mencius to become immortal we do not rely upon anything other than ourselves; especially we do not rely upon an external and transcendent God or Heaven, or its grace or its revelation or some sacramental performances to do so. This is possible for us, according to Mencius, because we are all by nature endowed with *Hsin*, i.e. the mind.

As the foundation, *Hsin*, like Heaven, is a practically creative subject; but, unlike *T'ien*, our mind does not create all beings. What our *Hsin* creates are the virtues and virtuous activities. And, as the source of all virtues and all morally good actions, according to the example given in 2A:4 of suddenly seeing a child about to fall into a well, *Hsin* for Mencius is not only the place where the human virtues are rooted, it is also what drives us to bring the virtues into being while the circumstances fit, i.e. it drives us to take morally good actions and embody the virtues in our doings. To be sure, it does not only give us the right rules for our actions, it also provides us the feelings required for acting morally and drives us to act according to the feelings. As such, *Hsin* is not a merely practical reason, that can issue the right rules for our actions, it is also the emotional subject, that provides the feelings required for the virtues and virtuous activities. In other words, the Mencian foundation of becoming immortal is a mixed entity of



reason and feeling, different from Aristotle's *nous* as the foundation of immortality.

2-3. Comparison

In sum, Aristotle and Mencius are rather far away from each other with regard to "How humans can engage in Godlike/Heaven-like activity and become immortal?" For Aristotle, this is possible because our *nous* (reason) is capable of engaging in theoretical thinking, while for Mencius it is because our *Hsin* (mind) or *Hsing* (human nature) is by nature capable of bringing the virtues into being and by nature leaning-toward-the-admirable-virtue". According to Aristotle, the activity is theoretical and immaterial, whereas for Mencius it is practical and material. The foundation for Aristotle is a purely theoretical subject, on the one hand; on the other hand, for Mencius it is a practical subject. And, according to Aristotle, the two parts of the foundation, i.e. *nous*, are essentially noetic; while for Mencius *Hsin* as the foundation is a mixed entity of reason and feeling.

Though Aristotle and Mencius thus differ on human immortality, they share a very important view with respect to it. That is, though their ethics touch something immortal for man and contain a religious dimension, unlike divine-ethics/religious ethics, they do not place the foundation of becoming immortal in something outside ourselves, i.e. not consisting in a transcendental and external being. The foundation for them is immanent in us. That is to say, for them we do not rely upon a transcendent and exterior personal God's grace or special revelation or some sacramental performances to reach the goal of becoming immortal.³⁰ For both Aristotle and Mencius, if

30 Cf. Sarah Broadie's view about the religious dimension of Aristotle's ethics. Ibid.



such goal is attainable for us, it is our own effort that leads us to reach it.

3. Conclusion

According to the above understanding, we can conclude that, with regard to human immortality, Aristotle's views are not completely different from Mencius'. They have some views different from each other, but, at the same time, some views shared with or similar to each other. Of them, the most important for us is this: for both Aristotle and Mencius, the highest ideal of a human being is not to be human nor to be god or Heaven but to be between both: to surpass being merely human to become like the gods or Heaven, i.e. to become immortal like the gods or Heaven. Here, they share the very basic view that involving or engaging in the god-like activity or the Heaven-like activity is the way for human to become immortal.

But we should not neglect the difference between Aristotle's god and Mencius' Heaven. For this difference brings out other differences between both at issue. (1) For Aristotle, the only sort of activity that the gods have is theoretical, i.e. *theoria* (contemplation); so, the approach to becoming godlike is also theoretical, i.e. to engage in contemplation, and immaterial. But for Mencius the essential works of Heaven are practical and material, i.e. continuously to create all beings and to cultivate all creatures; so, the approach to becoming heaven-like in greatness is also practical, that is, continuously to bring the virtues into being and imperceptibly to cultivate others' lives with one's virtue. (2) With regard to the possibility of human's becoming immortal, they are not also the same. (i) For Aristotle, human is possible to become immortal because our nous (reason) is capable of engaging in theoretical thinking, while for Mencius it is because human's *Hsin* (mind)



or *Hsing* (human nature) is by nature capable of bringing the virtues into being and by nature leaning-toward-the-admirable-virtue". The foundation for Aristotle is a purely theoretical subject, but for Mencius it is a practical subject. (ii) In Aristotle, the foundation, i.e. *nous*, is essentially noetic; while in Mencius *Hsin/Hsing* as the foundation is a mixed entity of reason and feeling.

However, Aristotle and Mencius are very close in the following respects. (1) Aristotle's gods are similar to Mencius' idea of Heaven since they are always active. (2) For both, the human has a double identity, i.e. being human and being partially divine, and, of the two, being human has priority in human life. (3) In their view, the highest life or ideal can not be pursued as human. The highest ideal can be actualized not for the many but for the few only. For Aristotle, the godlike man (whose life is immortal) is rarely found (1145a27-30), and for Mencius only the sages (such as Yao, Shun and Confucius,) are actually capable of becoming as great as Heaven. (4) For both Aristotle and Mencius, the foundation for human's becoming immortal is immanent in human's life. For them we do not rely upon a transcendent and exterior personal God's grace or special revelation or some sacramental performances to reach the goal of becoming immortal. For both Aristotle and Mencius, if such goal is attainable for us, it is human's own effort that leads man to reach it. And (5), their ethics, unlike most ethical theories, reach something immortal and contain a religious dimension.



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