Cicero and Confucius: Similitude in Disguise

It is no doubt an exciting enterprise to put Cicero and Confucius in juxtaposition for comparative deliberations. They appear similar in their lifelong interest in politics and philosophy as well as in the ultimate failure of their respective political ambitions. Their visions of philosophy are apparently in agreement, particularly on the point of laying great emphasis upon practice and contingency. And they are alike in leaving, each in his own way, a great influence on posterity, which would eventually extend well beyond the confines of their respective birthplaces. These similarities seem indeed to invite a promising comparison; a closer look, however, reveals a number of significant dissimilarities. This is evident, for example, in the accessibility of basic textual sources: the Roman person wrote a great deal while the Chinese man spoke but left no writings behind. It is hardly possible to bridge the gap existing between the very different historicocultural milieus in which they were situated: the Chinese can be called the founder of a great tradition whereas the Roman is sandwiched historically between the two great traditions of (prior) Athens and (later) Jerusalem, and thus perhaps cannot. In this sense, the role Cicero had to play was that of transmitter and modifier of tradition.

The purpose of the present essay, however, does not lie in proving the case for comparative incompatibility by drawing attention to dissimilarities. Rather, I wish to argue that any comparison of Cicero and Confucius needs to place them in their proper cultural contexts, which can only highlight their dissimilitude.

1 Biographical Background

Confucius (552–479 BCE) was born during the so-called age of ‘Warring States’ in the state of Lu, which was then divided up and ruled by a corrupt oligarchy of three dukes. Despite his humble birth (as an illegitimate child) and local education (at a village community school), at the age of fifteen, as he recalls, he set his mind to becoming a scholar. In the course of time he would distinguish himself as a kind of independent scholar and spiritual leader, but he never went into...
public service. At the age of thirty-six, he left his native Lu for the first time and, out of sympathy, sought to join the former duke of Lu who was then exiled in the neighboring state of Qi. With the demise of the duke he returned to Lu after nearly seven years’ absence. During the period of Yang Hu’s tyranny (505–501) he was invited, but refused, to enter government service. When the tyranny had subsided and Lu became more or less united under a new duke, Confucius took a position as a local governor. He was quickly promoted and accompanied the duke’s retinue for peace negotiations with Qi and received credit for his contribution. He was not successful, however, in his officially-endorsed attempts to put a stop to the persistent oligarchic influence of the ‘three dukes’. One year later, now age fifty-six, Confucius once again departed Lu and set out with a few of his disciples in search of the ideal ruler. Although the quest, which lasted a full fourteen years, did not accomplish its aim, it had the effect of enriching and deepening his philosophy. After his return home at the age of sixty nine, he spent his remaining five years training and educating his disciples, in addition to which he undertook a project of editing the classics. He is said to have passed away peacefully.

Cicero (106–43 BCE) was born in Arpinum, a small city belonging to the Roman Empire. The Empire in those days was run under a republican system pursuing an expansionist policy. Perhaps because of such a policy and style of governance, Rome was continuously beset with troubles both at home and abroad: e.g., the civil war between Sulla and Marius or the military encounters with Mithridates.² Born as he was into a family belonging to the knightly class, i.e., non-aristocratic, Cicero was fortunate enough to be sent to Rome by his father for an elite education and training, a requirement for those aiming at a successful career in the cursus honorum. While there, he distinguished himself and, according to one account, incurred the political ire of the dictator Sulla by successfully representing a plaintiff against the latter’s friend. This is said to have been the cause of Cicero’s departure from Rome for Athens under the pretext of studying abroad. Another account, no less convincing, tells us that the duress of the legal profession so broke his voice and health that he chose to make a virtue of necessity by going to Athens, the home of philosophy and rhetoric, to rebuild his body and refresh his mind.

Cicero and Confucius invite comparison concerning their travel abroad, one way or another: in Cicero’s case, to elude Sulla’s vengeance; in Confucius’s case,

² Any comparative attempt, therefore, to see similarities here with the ‘Warring States’ at the time of Confucius is misguided if for no other reason than that China’s political framework did not constitute anything like an empire.
to join the exiled Duke. It is likely that they profited much in their intellectual
development from their respective stays in Athens and Qi, both of which were
superior in cultural refinement to their homelands. Nevertheless, it is obvious
that Athens and Qi are by any account incomparable. With the Platonic and Ar-
ristotelian tradition behind it, Athens was regarded throughout the Hellenistic
world as the center of learning, to which there is nothing comparable in Confu-
cius’s intellectual world at the time of the ‘Warring States’. Furthermore, and this
is crucial, Athens had an enviable language of its own, different from that of
Rome, in which all educated people in the Hellenistic world were expected to
be fluent. By contrast, China, not only the China of Confucius’ day but through-
out its whole history, was and still is immune to such wholesale cultural in-
fluence from abroad. Sinocentrism, which was symbolically manifest in the inven-
tion of its own ideographs, functioned and functions as a robust bulwark against
foreign influence.

That Cicero had access to such a traditional center of high culture and learn-
ing as Athens while Confucius had no counterpart is of great consequence. This
meant that whatever philosophy Cicero would construct, it could hardly be free
of all anxiety over outside influence. It makes little sense to talk of ‘originality’, a
concept peculiar to modernity; but finding himself under the cultural hegemony
of such a rich and powerful tradition of Greek philosophy, Cicero must have had
a sense of cultural inferiority as, indeed, his philosophical writings attest to at
various points. The three major philosophical schools (Epicurean, Stoic, and
Sceptic) out of which Cicero framed his own dialogical deliberations all come
from Greece. Behind everything, of course, stand Plato and Aristotle. Particularly
noteworthy is the negative influence of the former: Cicero went largely against
the grain of Plato’s metaphysical idealism in favor of his own down-to-earth
pragmatism. Things are completely different with Confucius. As a counterpart
of the three Hellenistic schools, one might advance the figures of Mencius,
Laozi, and Zhuangzi, but all of them came after Confucius and their thinking
arose in response to his (the view that Laozi was either older than or contempo-
rary with Confucius is now rejected). There was thus no figure of Plato’s stature
to or against whom Confucius might have referred in attempting to construct phi-
losophy of his own. As the originator of Chinese philosophy, Confucius is more
comparable to Plato. There was no such option for viewing Cicero.

To pick up the thread of Cicero’s career, after returning from a two-year stay
abroad he quickly rose up the ladder of the cursus honorum (from quaestor to ae-
dilis to praetor to consul). Indeed, his rise took place in the shortest possible pe-

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period allowed by Roman politics, being named consul at the age of forty-three. If this moment represents the acme of Cicero’s career, in the case of Confucius, the moment came when, in his early fifties, he was given a post in the dukedom of Lu and distinguished himself in peace negotiations with Qi. Still, the similarity is only skin-deep. It would have been impossible for Confucius in his small city-state monarchy to attain an honor similar to that which Cicero was accorded within a vast republican Empire.

The Catiline conspiracy, which Cicero brilliantly suppressed at the zenith of his career, turned out to be the cause of his downfall. The reason is that he had the conspirators, all of whom were Roman citizens, executed without trial, despite the fact that Roman law stipulated that no citizen be executed without trial. The illegality of his action could never have escaped the notice of his vigilant enemies, who slowly cornered Cicero and finally forced him into exile in Greece. Fortunately, the efforts of his friends succeeded in having him recalled after a year and a half. Not only was his exile overturned, his return was celebrated in triumph in the full Roman sense of the word. It is next to impossible to find anything comparable in the life of Confucius, who was no stranger to exile.

At the time of his return from exile, Cicero was forty-nine years old and had by then been a member of the Senate, a post for which every ex-consul was eligible. Six years later, another ex-officio duty required him to go to Cilicia (now in Turkey) to serve as provincial governor for two years. Remarkable in this period was the fact that, in the face of a military crisis, Cicero (perhaps contrary to our expectation) successfully demonstrated his prowess as an officer in command. As far as we know, no such instance of heroism is recorded in the life of Confucius.

In the same year that saw Cicero back in Rome, Caesar crossed the river Rubicon to mark the beginning of an intense civil war, culminating in the Battle of Pharsalus. In this decisive battle between Caesar and Pompey, Cicero, after his accustomed hesitancy, chose the losing side of Pompey. At the age of fifty-eight Cicero found himself among the rebels. A year later, he came to a settlement with Caesar, in which the latter flaunted his generosity and demonstrated Cicero’s resignation to compromise. Under the dictatorship of Caesar that followed and continued for over two years (until his assassination about two years before Cicero’s own death), Cicero’s remaining days in politics were spent in increasing despair, but he managed to transform his political sterility into a period of intellectual fertility, as if to endorse the hope he had expressed in his early years that he would like to devote himself to intellectual pursuits writing (in otio), if only political engagements (in negotio) would leave him the time. The chief aim of his writings lay not in the unfolding of his own ideas
but in the transmission of the Greek philosophical heritage à la mode romaine, flavored, of course, with his own predilections. He continued to write ferociously until, one year before the end of his life, he was forced to flee the pursuers sent by Mark Antony, a dominant power in the post-Caesarian disorder. In the end, Cicero was captured and beheaded at the age of sixty-three.

Confucius, in contrast, returned home at the age of sixty-nine after many long years of exile and seems to have spent his remaining years in politically stable circumstances. By that time, like Cicero, he had probably lost hope in the politics of the day and turned to engagements in otio. For one thing, as already mentioned, he undertook the scholarly project of editing the classics, which in some way resembles Cicero in retirement. But at the same time, he undertook the training of disciples, an important divergence from Cicero. In sum, Cicero’s dramatic, even tragic, death stands in marked contrast with the peaceful final moments Confucius is said to have enjoyed.

2 Dissimilarities

All in all, our two heroes seem to share a lifelong interest in ethics as well as an aspiration to engage in Realpolitik. Regarding the former, each left behind, directly or indirectly, an influential body of thought. As for the latter, each brought his political ideals to bear on the powers that be and ended in failure. The historical periods they lived through were marked by war, social disorder, and political machinations, partly to their benefit (e.g., social mobility) and partly to their detriment. In passing, we may note another feature common to their lives: the scant presence or significance of the female sex, with the sole exception of Tullia, the hapless daughter Cicero doted upon. Their mothers scarcely made their presence felt, while their fathers loomed large. This may, however, have been a pattern typical of the age in which they lived.

As remarked above, any number of dissimilarities stand out. To begin with, the social and political conditions and systems under which each received his intellectual formation and built his career differed considerably. Cicero’s republican empire had its own distinct structures of education and bureaucracy, not to mention its legendary army. Conditions in Confucius’s dukedom of Lu, one of (about ten) warring states competing by force and fraud for dominance, were altogether different. Indeed, the very concept of war, or for that matter learning, belies comparison. Furthermore, in what were fundamentally different circumstances, Cicero, a conservative republican, tried to defend and maintain the traditional order and social system against its dictatorial destroyers, while Confu-
Cicero is often regarded in modern studies as a revolutionary in his attempt to put an end to the dominant hereditary system and feudalist monarchy.⁴

Still more conspicuous are the diverse circumstances under which each of them received his intellectual formation and built his own philosophical position. Cicero’s thinking would not have been what it was had it not been for the Greek philosophical tradition, the superiority of which obliged him to study modes of thought that were linguistically and culturally foreign to him. The great tradition initiated by Plato and Aristotle underwent considerable change and innovation in the process of being handed down, and by Cicero’s time, the Hellenistic period that had come to dominate the philosophical scene was composed of three competing schools of thought: the Epicurean, the Stoic, and the Sceptic, the last of which traced itself back to Plato, if only remotely. In De finibus bonorum et malorum and De natura deorum, therefore, we find a dialogue between three dramatis personae, each of which represents one of those three schools. Needless to say, the form of ‘dialogue’ itself, with its characteristic penchant for skepticism, was also of Greek, and more precisely Platonic, origin.

The nature of Plato’s influence on Cicero is not immediately evident and is often difficult to identify in detail, but it can safely be said that despite the stance of Scepticism that he had learned from Carneades, a somewhat remote descendant of the Platonic academy, he maintained a characteristically critical attitude toward Plato’s transcendent way of thinking, which stems essentially from the metaphysical frame of reference that elevated the status of his ‘Ideas’. We see this, for instance, in the surviving fragments of Cicero’s quite original renderings of Plato’s Republic, (demonstrating Cicero’s pragmatic and contingent worldview) and Laws (where Plato’s predilection for the transcendent are duly emasculated and diluted).⁵ But whether opposing or accommodating the Platonic heritage, Cicero could not have formed his own ideas without recourse to the tradition of Greek philosophy in general and Plato in particular.

Things are completely otherwise with Confucius. There was little previous philosophical tradition that could have served him the way that Greek philosophy served Cicero. Admittedly, there was an intellectual trend towards what we may call ‘classicism’, i.e., respect for and devotion to things ancient, but it would hardly have measured up to the maturity and authority the Greek tradition had come to enjoy. Confucius was free from the ‘anxiety of influence’ that fell upon Cicero almost as a matter of ineluctable destiny. Confucius was the founder

⁴ Cf. Creel (1949), Ch. 10 and Shirakawa (1972), Ch. 3.
of a religio-philosophical sect or school, which was to loom large in the years and centuries to come. ‘Ciceronianism’, it is true, would later make its appearance in the Renaissance, but this was largely a matter of rhetoric. What is arguably more important is that Confucius left no writing of his own. Like Socrates and Jesus, he communicated entirely by word of mouth, mainly in the form of a dialogue, with disciples or those eagerly seeking advice. What came to be compiled as his sayings (the *Analects*) were to serve for a long time as the pivotal text on which not only so-called ‘Confucianism’ would be formed, but also against which various counter-schools like the Legalist were to take shape. In short, the history of China, and for that matter the entire history of East Asia, is inconceivable without Confucius. It is not necessarily the case that the history of Rome, or for that matter the entire history of Western Europe, would be inconceivable without Cicero.

### 3 Similitude in Disguise

Differences in fundamental outlook, as I believe I have shown, are so greatly in evidence as to render misleading any attempt at a simple comparison of similarities. This does not mean, however, that there are no prospects whatsoever for a productive comparison of these two philosophical magnates.

The key, it seems to me, lies in the recognition that they shared in and belonged to the same world of immanent (as opposed to transcendent) order, but while Cicero, due to his intellectual formation based on the Greek tradition, was historically positioned to attend to its nature and specificities, Confucius was not. Here the fundamental, if oversimplified, distinction between the world of immanent order and that of transcendence is significant because any intercultural analysis – particularly when it comes to cultures as different as East and West – overlooks underlining differences in ‘cultural orientation’ can only end up as irrelevance or lead to misunderstanding. Here, what eminent Western scholars of Chinese philosophy have to say about philosophical intercultural analysis deserves full treatment.

The dominant philosophical preoccupations of cultures are often a function of tacit assumptions made early in their self-narratives, and are often reflected in their languages. Greek metaphysical preoccupations melded with Judeo-Christian beliefs to produce a ‘God-model’, where an independent and superordinate principle determines order and value in the world while remaining aloof from

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it, making human freedom, autonomy, creativity, and individuality at once problematic and of key philosophical interest. On the Chinese side, commitment to the processional, transformative, and always provisional nature of experience renders the “ten thousand things [or, perhaps better, ‘events’] (wanwu)” which make up the world, including the human world, at once continuous one with another and, at the same time, unique. Thus, the primary philosophical problem that emerges from these assumptions is *ars contextualis*; how do we correlate these unique particulars to achieve their most productive continuities?\(^7\)

In their cultural assumptions, the Greco-Judeo-Christian worldview – that is, the general worldview of the Western world’s heritage – stands in sharp contrast to what we find in China. The former (‘God-model’) is characterized by an absolute, ‘transcendent’ principle that determines order and value in the world ‘from without’. The latter (*ars contextualis*-model) is marked by a pervasive ‘immanent’ principle that determines *from within* the entirety of correlations that make up the universe. In the Western intellectual tradition, what is at stake is the discovery and grasp of the One/Real behind the many/appearances as a means to solve the riddle of the meaning of life, a riddle that has so thoroughly permeated the Western intellectual tradition. In discovering this ‘One’, we discover ‘objectivity’ itself: a privileged position outside of the world from which objective and hence universal statements about it, unconstrained by time or context, can be made.\(^8\)

In contrast, what matters most in the Chinese worldview is the activity of harmonious integration into a comprehensive Way (*dao*) of universal, natural, and social processes and relations, where there is no sense of either necessity or “reason for seeking a *transcendental* answer to the question of why we are in the world”,\(^9\) *i.e.*, for pursuing some underlying ultimate reality. Disciplines like epistemology or logic are alien to such an outlook, since they are the product of a ‘God-model’, at the basis of which, as Anne Cheng of Collège de France lucidly puts it, rests “la conviction que le réel peut faire l’objet d’une description théorique dans une mise en parallèle de ses structures avec celles de la raison humaine.… La démarche analytique commence par une mise à distance critique, constitutive aussi bien du sujet que de l’objet. La pensée chinoise, elle, apparaît totalement immergée dans la réalité: il n’y a pas de raison hors du monde”.\(^10\)

‘Reason’ in its typical ‘Western’ philosophical sense of the word is a function of the objectification of reality/world as against subjectivity and thereby makes

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theoretical analysis of it possible. This is hardly the case with the Chinese way of thinking. Even such a supreme concept as *tian*, the purposed counterpart to the English word ‘Heaven’, is not transcendent enough: “*tian* is both what our world is and how it is”.¹¹ It is immanent in both structure and disposition. By the same token, *yi* (the equivalent of justice/right) is far more down-to-earth and contingent: “one’s sense of appropriateness that enables one to act in a proper and fitting manner”.¹² And *zhi* (the equivalent of knowledge/wisdom) is far more pragmatic and performative or perlocutionary: “to know is to authenticate in action”.¹³ Similarly, *ren* (the human counterpart and a foundational idea of humanity and personhood) is not easily susceptible to individualistic and individuating ways of conceiving of human beings but is rigorously conceived in relational terms based on “the Confucian assumption that one cannot become a person by oneself”.¹⁴

Given the dramatic (or dialectic) mode of expression in which most of his philosophical works were written, Cicero’s worldview is not easy to deal with. His expression is to a great extent a reflection of his basic philosophical stance of Scepticism, not in its stronger sense of agnosticism but in its softer sense of guarding against dogmatism. In this same sense, Cicero makes a habit of pitting the other two major schools of Hellenist philosophy against each other, the Stoic against the Epicurean. It is a clear measure of his philosophical position that of the two, the Stoic is always given preferential treatment over the Epicurean, of which admittedly Cicero is said to be inordinately critical. Cicero may thus be called an ‘undogmatic Stoic’. But the Stoicism in question here is not of the old type represented by Cato, for instance, but “[t]he type of Stoicism professed by Panaetius and Posidonius”, which in J. G. F. Powell’s view “apparently laid stress not on the unattainable ideal of the wise and virtuous man, but on the nearest approach that was possible to it in real life”.¹⁵ In a self-enclosed amalgam of theory and practice, the emphasis definitively falls on the latter. Thus when Powell goes on to say, “the Stoicism mediated by Cicero placed emphasis on such concepts as the divinity of Nature, the marvels of divine providence and the natural kinship of all living things”, the terms ‘divinity’ and ‘divine’ need to be taken not in a transcendent sense but in an immanent one.

It is not hard to see broad parallels between the worldviews of Cicero and Confucius in terms of their immanent constitutions. What Powell points out as

Cicero’s emphasis on “the natural kinship of all living things”, for instance, correspond nicely to what we have seen as the Confucian vision of “ten thousand things (wanwu) that make up the world, including the human world”, grasped as “at once continuous one with another, and at the same time, unique”. Cicero’s view of justice as well has a far greater affinity to Confucius than to Plato in its underlying principle of *ars contextualis*, as a recent eminent student of Cicero rightly argues, “since for him, any meaningful political proposals need a basis in reality, justice and injustice cannot be analyzed before we have a concrete sense of the environments in which they occur”.¹⁶ The idea of ‘friendship’ emergent in Cicero’s *De amicitia*, approaches the Confucian idea of *ren*, which is conceived on the “assumption that one cannot become a person by oneself”. On the whole, what Woolf has to say as a summary of Cicero’s philosophy holds true of Confucius as well: “a philosophy located in the real world, committed to scrutinizing and being scrutinized all the more intently for its refusal to stay aloof”.¹⁷

Not to harp too long on the same string, such parallels and similarities only amount to similitudes in disguise. For one thing, there is no trace of the Sceptic in Confucius. For another, Stoicism itself, in its essentials, is as materialistic as Epicureanism, making it a far cry from the kind of spiritualism we find in Confucius. No less significant are the differences each of these worldviews shows in its reception by posterity, which, like everything handed down, has its share of ups and downs, shifts and changes. However much Confucius’s thought appears to represent undertones to later Chinese thought, the fortunes of Cicero’s thought need to be seen in a totally different light. In this connection, it is worth reminding ourselves yet again of the unique position that Cicero occupies in the history of Western philosophy. Although he is known to have played an important role as a transmitter (with significant modifications) of Greek ideas to the Roman world and thereby paved the way for intellectual developments in the Latin Christian Middle Ages, the immanent bent of Cicero’s philosophical outlook and position stood little chance of fusing with the philosophical tradition of Athens with its transcendent and superordinate orientation. Still less likely was it to survive the Christianizing process and establishment of the Middle Ages, whose world was structured exactly on what we referred to as “the God-model”.¹⁸ Furthermore, since the revival of interest in Cicero during the Renaissance was less

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¹⁸ A comparison of Cicero’s *De amicitia* with Aelred of Riveaul’s *De spirituali amicitia* offers us a good instance of Christian critique of Cicero’s idea of friendship. I dealt with this issue in my presentation at the Turin conference, September 2017.
due to his philosophy than to his oratorical skills, and since it is in fact only recently that Cicero has been admitted to the honorary hall of philosophy,\textsuperscript{19} it would not be far off the mark to conclude that Cicero remains a kind of anomaly in Western philosophy. Granted, the anomaly does suggest a kind of affinity, or at least a kind of ‘similitude in disguise’, to the general direction of Eastern philosophy, and in this sense there is something intriguing about the juxtaposition. There may yet be new and alternative vistas open to philosophy at large by further examination of the insights and experiences of the two great ancient empires East and West, with Confucius and Cicero as their respective representatives.\textsuperscript{20} Meanwhile, we do well to approach such ‘similitude in disguise’ with caution.

\textsuperscript{19} As Powell (1995) writes right at the beginning of his edited collection, “As Cicero reaches his 2,100\textsuperscript{th} birthday [in January 1995], his philosophical works are being taken more seriously by scholars than they have been for generations” (Introduction, p. 1).

\textsuperscript{20} One possible approach among others to this huge theme seems to me through the so-called “the Axial Age” controversy. For this, see Bellah (2001) and Runciman (2001). The latter, from the viewpoint of Roman civilization, takes the controversy in the negative light.