A Comparison of the Philosophical Developments in Greece and China during the 5th Century B.C.

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by

John O’Brien

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The purpose of this thesis was to study the ideas and teachings of Confucius and Socrates in order to better understand the relationship between these two distinctive and immensely important responses to socio-political crises. The methods I used to make this comparison included a study of primary and secondary sources, which formed the background for my discussions. For the analysis, I principally relied on the texts specifically attributed to the teachings of Socrates and Confucius (a note on the authorship and authenticity of these sources is included before the analysis). Based on these accounts, I drew comparisons between the two philosophers (and Plato) and noted the points of contrast as well. In this way, I found a number of significant similarities, namely in pedagogical method and emphasis on virtue. These values had a clearly pragmatic application in preparing individuals for roles of leadership and in creating a well-ordered, ideal society. The major difference that I found was in the idea of inherited nature in relation to the necessity of proper development. In conclusion, these philosophies seem very much to be similar responses to their respective situations, and those solutions contain meaningful commonalities that cross cultural boundaries.
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Approved by:

______________________, Advisor
(Dr. Peter Rose)

______________________, Reader
(Dr. Yihong Pan)

______________________, Reader
(Dr. Judith de Luce)

Accepted by:

______________________, Director,
University Honors Program
PREFACE

Confucius and Socrates emerge in history as two of the greatest thinkers of the East and the West respectively, and as the founders of the philosophic traditions that followed. What factors produced them and what influences helped shape their solutions to the problems they saw? Looking cross culturally, are there any striking similarities between the two thinkers who lived within one hundred years of each other, or are their differences even more significant? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to compare the political environments in which Socrates, Plato, and Confucius all lived, as well as the philosophic traditions that they relied upon and the current trends in thinking of their societies. They attributed the socio-political crises of their times to the corruption of rulers and a general decline in the morality of the people; the solutions they proposed were grounded in philosophical inquiry and were intended to create an ideal state and society if followed. This paper will examine and compare the responses of Socrates, Plato, and Confucius in four different areas: education, politics, society, and ethics. Granted these four subjects are intricately overlapping, it may be more instructive to look at them separately.

It may be helpful to first create a list of initially perceived similarities to work with. First, both thinkers grew up and taught in times of abrupt change and social upheaval. In each society there was a divergence from traditional beliefs in gods and in virtue, which were replaced by more humanistic and self-seeking ideas (perceived as moral decline). Both thinkers were educators who gathered loyal disciples, and they formed a system of philosophical reasoning as the basis for their teachings. They began a
vision of an ideal society that took root in their followers, who developed stricter
doctrines and more practical applications. Before going into a proper analysis of the texts
attributed to the teachings of Socrates and Confucius, it seems appropriate to include a
complete, but succinct, background for context.

For Socrates, an Athenian, the Peloponnesian War and the subsequent defeat of
Athens by Sparta, followed by the reign of the Thirty Tyrants, were all horrifying events
that challenged previously held beliefs in Athenian cultural superiority and political
hegemony. More importantly, a class of professional teachers, who were called Sophists
and had been emerging during this period, was rethinking fundamental ideas on human
nature. At the same time China was experiencing the disintegration of its empire, with
feudal lords aspiring to raise the military power of their states at the cost of others. This
lack of obedience to the emperor and disregard for human life reflected a decline in the
traditional belief structures that had previously upheld Chinese society. Clearly, for both
philosophers there was an opportunity to establish some sense and order to societies that
were torn with uncertainty and disorder.

While Socrates was not strictly a traditionalist, he did form a line of reasoning,
which worked off of and supported his philosophic precursors. By the late 5th century
B.C., the pre-Socratic philosophers had a relatively strong presence in Athens. Confucius
more plainly harkened back to China’s glorious and austere past, at least as it was
conceived, and even spent a fair portion of his time editing the books that came to be
known as the Confucian Classics. In the case of Confucius it is clear that teaching was
not his initial career choice. However, after wandering the Chinese countryside in a
series of futile attempts at politics, he retired to his home state of Lu. Socrates, far more
sedentary, only rarely left the city of Athens, and he never considered himself to be a Sophist, claiming that he did not instruct for a fee. In the Apology he states, “As little foundation is there for the report that I am a teacher, and take money; this accusation has no more truth in it than the other” (Loomis 35-6, Apol.). Nevertheless, in every real sense Socrates was a teacher, and he, like Confucius, attracted a large body of followers who, through varied perspectives, carried on and developed his philosophical framework. Also, neither man actually wrote down any of his teachings, but rather the students of each later recorded the conversations of their masters, often in the form of dialogues or sayings. Perhaps most importantly however, is the fact that both thinkers sought to establish certain principles of moral philosophy, which were either lacking or in a derelict state for both the Greeks and the Chinese.
BACKGROUND

Confucius lived about one hundred years before Socrates. The dates of birth and death for the former are 551 B.C. and 479 B.C., respectively. Confucius was born into a minor noble family, but while he was still young his father died. His family thrust into poverty, Confucius was forced to take on manual labor jobs to support himself. While in his teens, however, he committed himself to learning. “At fifteen I devoted myself to learning, and at thirty stood firm. At forty I had no doubts, and at fifty understood the Mandate of Heaven. At sixty I listened in effortless accord. And at seventy I followed the mind’s passing fancies without overstepping any bounds” (Confucius 11-2). Confucius eventually achieved a minor administrative post, but he was forced to leave it due to political intrigue. He spent his middle years wandering the countryside, trying in vain to become an advisor to a ruler. Finally, Confucius returned to his home state of Lu, devoting the remainder of his life to editing classical literary works and teaching large numbers of pupils.

Socrates on the other hand, was born in 470 B.C. and died in 399 B.C. He was born into the artisan class, a stonemason by trade. Not much is known of his early life, although he did serve as a hoplite during the Peloponnesian War. One of the major turning points in his life was his friend Chaerephon’s visit to the Delphic Oracle, in which he was told that there was no man wiser than Socrates (Loomis 37, Apol.). Socrates, upon hearing this, set out to find the truth in the riddle. In this process, he developed his manner of inquiry, engaging those men who claimed to be the wisest and systematically proving otherwise. Also during this time, Socrates attracted a small body of followers from the aristocratic class, and he taught them by means of philosophical
dialogues. In the *Apology*, Socrates admits to serving on the Council around 406 B.C., but he otherwise avoided direct participation in politics (Loomis 50, *Apol*). He was tried in court in 399 B.C. on charges of creating new divinities and corrupting the youth, for which he was found guilty and executed.

Despite the resemblances in social and political instability and the resulting philosophical responses, there were considerable differences in the situations of the East and West. First, the systems of government and political boundaries of Greece and China were in striking opposition. Athens, the center of Greek philosophy and culture in the 5th century B.C., conformed to the model of the Greek *polis* but exceeded most others by both the size of its territory and the extent of its prosperity. A city-state in very simple terms, the *polis* represented the ideal socio-political institution. In 510 B.C. Cleisthenes restructured the Athenians according to geographic location and created ten tribes, upon which the military and political systems were based (Boardman 32-3). Although it practiced democracy in perhaps its truest sense in the ancient world, Athens nonetheless only granted citizenship to freeborn Athenian males. Slavery was common and was an essential component of their economy. By the middle of the 5th century, following the conclusion of the Persian Wars, Athens was at the center of a thriving confederation of democratic cities. Increasingly, Athens began to dominate the affairs of its allies, taking control of the taxes raised. The empire grew rich threw these taxes, as well as trade, which paid for the mighty navy seeing to its protection.

As these imperialistic trends developed the idea of the *polis* grew stronger, and opportunities of wealth allowed a new, rich elite class to emerge. This democratic form of government was very unique, and operated on a number of assumptions. First, it
required those capable of voting to be well informed and active in the affairs of the city. A democracy can only be successful when its members are active participants with the well being of the *polis* in mind. There was also always the problem of some potential demagogue rising to power and establishing himself as a tyrant. However, strict provisions were made to keep that from happening. For one, the position of general was the only one that could be held repeatedly, and should someone appear to be a threat to the democracy, a vote of 6,000 would result in his ostracism. At the end of each term all members of office were help up to public scrutiny, and could have to pay a fine for any abuses or misconduct. Rotation of office kept power groups such as the aristocracy from becoming entrenched in the government. The aristocratic class represented a challenge to Athenian democracy in the form of oligarchy, which stems from underlying Greek ideals of the nobility being best and most beautiful.

China’s political situation at this time was vastly different. To begin with, it was a continental nation, based far more on inland trade and warfare as compared to the Athenian naval empire. During the Zhou Dynasty, beginning around 1050 B.C., differing ethnic groups with very unique and often advanced cultures existed along the periphery of the state (Ebrey 33). Like Greece, the Kingdom of Zhou had a very clear idea of who they were as a people in relation to others, calling themselves Hua-Xia. This differentiation, however, was more a matter of cultural difference than racial bias, and ‘barbarians’ were encouraged to become sinicized, that is to take on the culture of the Chinese (Pan 22-4). Confucius ironically remarks of them, “Those wild tribes in the far north and east – they still honor their sovereigns. They’re nothing like us: we Chinese have given up such things” (Confucius 22). The Greeks also made very clear the
distinctions between themselves and foreigners. The view of the *barbaros* as a foreigner eventually changed to equate with enemy, and the belief in Greek cultural superiority took shape as national propaganda (Boardman 45). The Zhou Dynasty, considering themselves to be descended from the ancient Xia and inheriting the culture and territory of the Shang, believed their kingdom to be at the center of the world. This is reflected in the name *Zhongguo*, ‘Middle Kingdom,’ which would later be applied to China and remains to this day.

Besides geographical disparities, China’s political institutions were far different. In this case it is impossible not to directly include a discussion of Chinese religion along with their political structure because, traditionally, the two are directly linked. Like the Greeks, the Chinese were extremely patriarchal, which would play a critical role in the concepts of relationships articulated by Confucius. There was also a very distinct hierarchy, with the king at the top and extending to feudal lords. The proper functioning of this system was necessary for the governance of such a large area (although at that time China was significantly smaller; the Zhou Dynasty only controlled territory in several of China’s modern provinces).

The role of religion was essential to the legitimacy of the king’s rule. Ancestor worship was a major component of ancient Chinese religious beliefs, and the hierarchies of the spirit world in many ways reflected those of the material sphere. Accordingly, the king’s ancestor spirits were the most important and influential in the affairs of the spirit world. Appeasing them had a number of purposes. Common throughout all of the populace was a need to propitiate ancestor spirits and avoid the menace of hungry ghosts. They were considered to play an important role in the production of offspring; therefore
to ensure male lineage, it was necessary to make sure that one’s ancestors were properly
appeased. The king, called “Son of Heaven,” was the only person allowed to make
sacrifices to heaven at the capital, and on occasion he would travel around the state
making offerings at various shrines and temples (Ebrey 32). Also, he would perform
rituals and beseech his ancestors for intervention. They could then intercede on his
behalf (the king, who represented the interests of the people), and influence the decisions
of the gods. In this way, the king was regarded as having indirect control over natural
events (and sometimes military ones) and was held responsible for them.

The Zhou kings, in order to legitimize the overthrow of their predecessors,
asserted the claim that kings were to be held accountable to their duties. Should a
dynasty continuously fail in meeting its obligations, shown by natural disasters (most
prominently flooding or drought) and a general decline, then it was in the proper order of
things, in fact for the benefit of the people and by the decree of the gods, that another
individual rise and replace it. Tianming, the Mandate of Heaven, was the formal doctrine
by which the moral cosmic order upheld the legitimacy of a ruler (Chai 24). Therefore,
although the Zhou established a new dynasty, they adopted and continued the traditional
beliefs, which had previously upheld Chinese society. The Zhou king set up feudal states
ruled by relatives, and in addition to the royal army, each state had its own military force.
These ties were initially strengthened by the placement of loyal relatives into positions of
power in the surrounding states.

Although not as thoroughly entwined as in China, the political institutions in
Greece were hardly divorced of the state religious cults. Civic duty included fulfilling
obligations to the gods, and the state carried out these functions through regular festivals
and the construction of temples to various deities. The Parthenon was one such achievement of the Athenians, and stood as a symbol of pride and power. This state religion played a part in the political system through ritualistic devices, adding a sense of solemnity and gravity. It also served in making oaths binding, and therefore had strong legal implications. This background is pertinent in regards to the relationship between state religion and politics; as can be construed from Socrates trial, pretences of religion could conceal deeper political motives. More important to Socrates in particular, however, was the Oracle as Delphi. As Guthrie points out, the Oracle’s willingness to please probably outweighed any other reasons for its response, but regardless, this important religious symbol legitimized Socrates’ mission (at least in his own mind) by giving it alleged divine sanction (Guthrie 406-7).

It is relevant to look at the written records of Greek epic and tragedy alongside the pre-Socratics, in order to understand more fully the context in which Socrates developed his new philosophy. Ethics, which received less attention than other subjects and lacked a consistent system of analysis in the inquiries of thinkers prior to Socrates, are expressed in the mythological literary tradition. As fictitious as the heroic world Homer depicted might have been, it would have provided the Greeks at the time of Socrates with an idealized and glorious past moral code, in contrast to their present situation. In the works of Homer a certain old, heroic code can be seen, as well as a transition toward a new aristocratic society. Initially, ethics are perceived through a shame culture, in which leaders are validated through their martial and diplomatic abilities. When Phoinix spoke to Achilles during the latter’s wrath, he addressed this issue. “Still a boy, you knew nothing of war that levels men to the same testing, nothing of assembly where men
become illustrious” (Homer, *Iliad* 9.443). In the warrior society of the *Iliad*, increasing one’s honor is a primary concern. In addition to its social implications, honor is also directly related to the amount of material rewards one receives (Pulleyn 39). In this way, one’s moral code revolves around a system of public honor and disgrace, making one informally accountable for one’s actions. There is a shift away from this social conscience toward a guilt culture, in which one’s actions are guided by a belief in divine justice and retribution. The gods then, play an important role in ideas of morality during the time of Homer. Also, throughout the *Iliad* they serve as devices to explain the rationale of human behavior. Athena restrains Achilles’ hand after the hubristic injustice of Agamemnon. She represents the logical processes that govern Achilles’ decision.

This view of human morality and depiction of the gods is transformed in the later succession of Greek tragedians. These works portray very complicated and difficult situations that are usually resolved in a manner that is far from ideal, but leaves a rather clear message nonetheless. In the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, Orestes is left with the brutal task of taking revenge upon his father’s murderer, his mother Clytemnestra. The last book of that trilogy, *The Eumenides*, provides important insight not only into the legal system of the Greeks but also addresses important issues of kinship and morality. In this case, the Furies come to Orestes seeking vengeance on behalf of Clytemnestra and charge him with the matricide. Athena, who happens to have been born by Zeus alone, resolves the issue by asserting a purely male line of descent in Orestes. Extreme as this case may be, it represents a concern for justice, which carries ethical implications.

The tradition of tragedy continues with Sophocles who began, as he himself had said, in the Aeschylean style. However, his later works show a redefinition of the terms
associated with the traditional aristocratic celebration of inherited excellence. This issue is explored in the *Antigone* during the confrontation of sisters, in which Antigone questions whether her sister is noble or born base by noble parents (Rose 270).

Sophocles lived throughout most of the 5th Century B.C., and his writing is an indication of the effects of democratization on the heroic/aristocratic ideal. Yet despite the impossible situations in which he places his characters, they make choices that reaffirm their noble identities. Antigone’s decision to defy Creon and bury her brother would have been considered her natural obligation by the Greek audience, and its life and death consequences are indicative of the absolutist world Sophocles portrays (Boardman 190).

Euripides, the last of the tragic authors, marks a radical shift in traditional beliefs. He deserves special emphasis in this thesis both because his life coincided with Socrates’ and he represents a contemporary response, suggestive of the ideological atmosphere in which Socrates formed his system of inquiry. The works of Euripides offer a powerful critique and repudiation of the traditional views of gods and their relationship with humans. The Greeks never considered the members of their pantheon to be perfect beings, but Euripides goes further, placing them almost below humans in their eternal pettiness and extremist personifications. *Hippolytus* concludes with a resolution of the key male personages, Hippolytus and his father Theseus, which exonerates both characters. These two figures are thereby elevated above the gods who created the conflict (i.e. Aphrodite’s jealousy over Hippolytus’ devotion to Artemis).

Nevertheless, in many of Euripides’ other works people are shown at their absolute worst. Medea’s slaughtering of her own children negates whatever sympathy might have been felt for her plight as a woman. However, she is still a powerful
character, whereas her antithesis, Jason, is entirely impotent and represents the worst aspects of the aristocratic class. Euripides also responds to the bellicose, imperialistic mood of Athens with the *Trojan Women*, in which the horrors of war are described in full. Written after the utter destruction of the island of Melos by the Athenians, the *Trojan Women* could very easily be construed as a social commentary against the atrocities of that attack. It is relevant that his plays rarely won any public accolades; only four of his ninety-two plays won awards in theatrical competitions (Boardman 190-1). The amount of social condemnation within his plays is largely speculative, such as the feminist elements of *Medea*, but he does offer a critique of the times in which he and Socrates lived.

While the literary tradition of the Greeks represents developing attitudes regarding both the role of the gods and one’s place in society, the pre-Socratics offer a more systematic and practical approach at rationalizing the natural world and provided the groundwork for Socrates and the Sophists. These early thinkers first appeared in Ionia and were later introduced to Athens and beyond. The idea of an evolutionary character of the universe and the human species was not new to the Greeks, but the removal of the gods from these events was a transition that was not immediately well received. The investigation of the pre-Socratic thinkers delved first into the nature and origins of the universe before they considered the reliability of sense perceptions and how knowledge could be gained.

Discrepancies in the methods and solutions of the pre-Socratics led to individual claims of being right. This worked to their discredit but also had a role in the Sophistic movement. The Greeks pursued knowledge for more reasons than the sake of the pursuit
itself; technology led to power, which was becoming increasingly important to the Greeks after their victory over the Persians. In the democratic polis of Athens in particular, power was held in high esteem, as Athenians became the center of a naval empire. Individual gain could be rationalized by the individualistic and utilitarian approach taken by the pre-Socratics. Sophists teaching the art of rhetoric had ample students with the growth of democracy in Athens, and morality was subordinated by the right of the powerful (Guthrie 20). For the Sophists consciously prided themselves in their ability to make the unjust argument overcome the just one. They considered it to be a mark of a skillful rhetorician to prevail in accord with his own interests regardless of the justness. Therefore, during the life of Socrates there was not only a growth of atheism but also a trend of individuals claiming knowledge without any justification because the pathos of an argument held as much value as its logic, if not more. Also, there was a shift away from aristocratic, inherited excellence designating one’s worthiness to rule toward acquired qualities, in which power and rhetorical education became the foundation. No thorough system of inquiry yet existed that could be applied to all forms of knowledge, including ethical questions.

There are some very striking similarities between the external features of Greek and Chinese religion. The Chinese believed in an Earth Mother as well as other agricultural deities and a supreme (male) ruler, Shang Di, who lived in heaven and decided such things as the amount of rainfall in a year and the outcomes of battles (Chai 19-21). Gods existed everywhere and were deeply involved in human affairs. Also, the Chinese practiced animism, imbuing natural phenomena, like mountains and rivers, with spirits. As I discussed earlier, religion played an important function in the state politics
(previous to the Eastern Zhou period), albeit through a form of ancestor worship not practiced by the Greeks. The belief in a ghostlike afterlife, however, was not missing in the Homeric tradition. While the Greeks placed the dead in a separate physical realm, the relationship between the spiritual and material worlds was less disconnected for the Chinese. The Greeks had a specific Underworld with physical boundaries (although the nature of this changes significantly from it representation in Homer to that in the tragedians), but the Chinese could interact much more directly to the dead.

Contingent to the Zhou rulers’ rationalization of power was a development in humanism. Shang Di, the anthropomorphic supreme ruler, became increasingly associated with tian, (the cosmic order or, most simply, heaven) until the two became interchangeable (Chai 23-4). He came to represent a divine ethical force, and human behavior and virtue became more important than ritual. This skepticism about the old rites and interest in the human sphere was by no means a development toward atheism, but rather it placed religion on a much more practical level and provided a great degree of social morality; heaven rewarded the virtuous and punished the wicked. Also, the emphasis of rituals began to focus more on the pragmatic reason of instilling proper relationships within a community and unifying society.

China also experienced considerable changes in the several centuries preceding the fifth, and the more frequent use of writing is by no means one of the least significant. The earliest evidence of writing goes back to the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-c. 1050 B.C.) when it was used primarily for oracle readings. During the Zhou period actual texts began to appear, including the Book of Documents, which contains contemporary historical accounts. These provide descriptions and rationale for the Zhou conquest. The
Book of Documents recognized the legitimacy of the pious Zhou kings over the decadent Shang and their sadistic ruler, while preserving the centrality of the former political boundaries and thereby setting a precedent of continuity (Ebrey 31).

The ideas governing the divine sanction of kings laid out earlier were developed in the Western Zhou period, many of which were recorded on bronze tablets. The renovated state ideology was accompanied by changing attitudes toward human sacrifice and the afterlife, as well as a new principle of cosmic moral authority. The systemization of these ideas through writing can be seen through another document of that time, the Book of Changes. This text gives a specific procedure of divination through patterns of broken and unbroken lines, and tells the significance of the corresponding results.

Another early Zhou work, the Book of Odes, represents the poetic genre of that period. It contains a wide variety of topics that demonstrate a consideration for all levels of society, ranging from past heroes and kings to love poetry and descriptions of ordinary life. The previous three texts comprise a portion of the corpus that Confucius compiled and edited, and they demonstrate the value of writing not only for the transmission of ideas across centuries but also for facilitating the systemization of thought.

It may be useful to provide a final synopsis of the events and circumstances directly before and during the lives of Confucius and Socrates. Confucius lived during the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 B.C.) of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (named after a text later written about the time), which was characterized by the gradual decentralization of government. As the king lost power and influence, the rites he performed came to mean less. Although the humanist ideas of ethics still existed, particularly in the forms of chivalric warfare, violence rent the social harmony, which
had been governed by the hierarchical view of relationships (Ebrey 39). During this time, without fear of retribution from the king, rulers of states sought economic gain and political expansion at the cost of their neighbors. This tendency for rulers to acquire power for personal gain both engendered and received assistance from corrupted advisors who sought their own advantage. Confucius’ own life was directly impacted by these developments when he was forced out of his administrative office through political intrigue. He spent the following fourteen years wandering China seeking employment, but in the end, Confucius returned to his own state to devote the remainder of his life to scholarship and education. His early life was spent educating himself and working in lower class jobs, which would play a very important role in his later views on education. Another critical experience for Confucius was the time he spent in the royal capital of Lo to “observe the relics of lost imperial greatness” (Chai 29-30). This opportunity allowed Confucius to see first hand the power and glory of Zhou’s past, inspiring him to look there for paradigms of moral excellence.

The circumstances in which Socrates lived were slightly more complicated. Spurred by the victory over Persia and catastrophe of the plague, Athens was experiencing rapid changes in its political sphere as well as advancements in science and philosophy and a creative outburst among poets and playwrights. The power and influence Athens gained as the head of the Delian League following Persia’s defeat encouraged both a more radical democracy within the *polis* and imperialism toward the other members. The tribute Athens collected from its neighbors went toward the payment of jurors as well as the construction of the Parthenon on the Acropolis, a sign of Athens’ increasing arrogance and oppression. The utter annihilation of the neutral island
of Melos marked the extent to which they would go in pursuit of hegemony over the Greeks. The Sicilian Expedition ended in complete failure and was followed by a shift in the war favoring the Spartans. Athens’ complete loss of power at the end of the Peloponnesian War and the cruelties of the Thirty Tyrants put in place to rule Athens produced a chaotic time of mistrust and factions (Loomis 4).

Strong cultural forces drove Athens in the 5th century B.C. Its view of itself as the center of intellectual thought followed the innovations of pre-Socratic philosophy. Sophistic reasoning justified the personal gains acquired during Athens’ rise to economic and political power following the Persian Wars. Pericles, in his funeral oration, explicitly congratulates the achievements of the Athenians and their ancestors. According to Thucydides he said, “And if our more remote ancestors deserve praise, much more do our own fathers, who added to their inheritance the empire which we now possess…” (Thucydides 267). With Athens’ ambitions to possess hegemony over the Greeks came antagonisms with Sparta and its allies, which resulted in the Peloponnesian Wars.

Initially, the Athenian spirit remained high and they kept their sights on foreign matters in Egypt and Sicily, even while fighting a war in their own territory. Despite several catastrophic losses, Athens still held onto a fair amount of power, including its navy. However, this mood of excitement and optimism changed considerably with the coming of the Plague in 429. Thucydides describes the carelessness of gods and laws that followed the excessive casualty rate and uncertainty of life. “Fear of gods or law of man there was none to restrain them” (Thucydides 277). In addition to this calamity, the Spartans were laying waste to the countryside of Attica. The following twenty-five years were marked by successive defeats for the Athenians, and a heavy draining of their
resources. In 416 B.C., a wave of revolutions sprung up in cities across Greece, which led to untold atrocities and a general moral breakdown. Thucydides illustrates the ensuing chaos and attributes it to greed and ambition. In regards to the parties that formed, he says, “[I]n their acts of vengeance they went to even greater lengths, not stopping at what justice or the good of the state demanded, but making the party caprice of the moment their only standard” (Thucydides 297). In 405, Sparta besieged Athens and a year later the Athenians surrendered. The Spartans installed a group of aristocrats, known of as the Thirty Tyrants, to rule Athens, and the reign was so brutal that it was overthrown in the following year. Threatened with civil wars and paranoid of aristocratic usurpation, the people of Athens became very hostile toward any perceived threat to democracy, and Socrates became one of many victims of that purging.

Before beginning a direct analysis of the texts containing the teachings of Confucius and Socrates, it is necessary to include some comments on their authorship and authenticity. Because neither philosopher wrote down his teachings, we are dependent upon the later writings of their disciples and must take into consideration not only the infusion (intended or not) of the authors’ own ideas into the text, but also the distortion of memory over lapses of time. The latter scenario is probably more prominent in the case of Confucius. Scholarship has determined that the students of Confucius’ disciples compiled the Analects, which contain the sayings of Confucius and will be examined in this paper (Legge 16). They would have used whatever written materials there might have been containing details of accounts, as well as the oral transmission of their teachers. This potential inexactitude is further complicated by the destruction of all classical works during the Qin Dynasty of the 3rd century B.C. Significant as the Qin was
in the history of China, it was short lived. The Han Dynasty, which followed, sought to restore the classical tradition and scoured the countryside for extant works. They discovered only three copies of the *Analects*, which contained some discrepancies. Chief among them was the number of chapters, referred to as books; two of the copies held twenty whereas the other included two extra. Early scholars conducted a great deal of study on the subject, and the version of the *Analects* that is used today is comprised of twenty books. Each contains the writing of a different student who was recording the memories his teacher had of Confucius’ sayings and dialogues.

The matter of authorship is slightly more complicated in the case of Socrates. Most of what is known of his teachings comes through Plato’s dialogues, although Xenophon’s *Apology* and Aristophanes’ *Clouds* offer different perspectives on the life of Socrates. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss how accurately these works reflect the beliefs of their subject. Instead, I will be using the works of Plato with the generally held assumption that they contain a large amount of the author’s own input, particularly in later works such as the *Republic*. It is traditionally accepted that in the chronology of Plato’s works, the *Apology* came near the beginning and the *Republic* near the end, with the former being more congruous with Socrates’ beliefs and the latter based on Plato’s interpretation of Socrates’ intent. The distinction here is less clear than in the case Confucian *Analects* where there were numerous writers who are not known for establishing any radically new ideas. Those later disciples who did become well-known, like Mencius and Xunzi, wrote entirely separate works and the departures from purely Confucian thought are much better defined. For the purposes of this paper I will include Socrates and Plato together making observations about any obvious distinctions, but
otherwise treating them both as essential components in the foundation of Greek philosophy.
ANALYSIS

The preceding pages were meant to set a backdrop for the discussions that follow, and I will refer back to them when determining the significance of the influences on Socrates and Confucius in relation to the similarities and differences of their teachings. This next section will draw primarily from a textual analysis of the *Analects* and selected works of Plato. My method of comparison will be to separate several topics that are commonly addressed by Confucius and Socrates (and Plato). As teachers (although Socrates claimed that he did not receive monetary compensation), the issue of education took on special relevance to these thinkers, which included ideas on methods, source material, and applications, as well as who should even be educated. To varying degrees these three philosophers (including Plato) discussed the practical use of their ideas, and this was particularly the case in regard to the political sphere. An ideology of social structure also exists within these texts, either implicitly or quite blatantly, and this issue is quite fundamental to understanding the rationale of their basic doctrine. Finally, a comparison of the developments of ethical study and inquiry will provide a partial explanation for the successes of Confucian and Socratic/Platonic thought. Obviously all of these themes are interrelated to some extent, but for practical purposes of organization they will first be looked at individually.

*On Education*

Education was a primary consideration for Confucius, Socrates, and Plato, although all three had widely differing ideas on the subject. All teachers themselves, their views can be seen in part by their styles and methods. The dialectic of Socrates, a
series of questions directed toward a logical end, formed the basis for his education of others. He would hold conversations with pupils, with whom he frequently became close friends. Whereas Socrates focused on more pragmatic matters, his student Plato additionally delved into matters of metaphysics. Plato actually established a school, the Academy, which explored a wide array of subjects. Only through strict study could the mind be trained to understand deeper concepts, including the abstract ideas of justice and goodness, which were so important to Plato (Loomis 8-9). Confucius, outside his brief time in politics, devoted his life to education and received thousands of pupils, seventy of whom became important thinkers in their own right. He emphasized supplementing the study of classical works with experiential knowledge and the exercise of proper ritual in order to become a more cultivated person.

When Socrates’ pupil and friend Crito visits him in prison, the student tries to convince his master to escape. One of the arguments that Crito employs is the consideration of the education of Socrates’ children. Socrates responds in the form of his usual line of inquiry and leads Crito to change his mind. Within that argument Socrates makes several references to education. The duty to educate ones children he equates with Crito’s other reasons (money and loss of character), labeling them as “only the doctrines of the multitude,” who, he claims, do not have any reasoning behind them (Loomis 72, Crito). Later he concludes that justice must be considered before anything else (Loomis 78, Crito). In this Socrates is indirectly attacking both the propensity of the masses to accept things without questioning them and the Sophists who manipulate motives of personal gain into their teachings. Socrates on the other hand, through his system of questioning, determined the rationale behind beliefs, thereby developing a unified
critique of knowledge. In this manner, he deduces the primacy of justice and good actions. Indeed, it was in matters of virtue that Socrates was most interested. As Guthrie explains, Socrates sought “philosophical justification by demanding a universal definition,” as he asked what *arête* meant in the *Meno* (Guthrie 253). Therefore, Socrates’ pedagogical method can be seen as a conversation between master and pupil, in which the two work through a logical deduction of a given topic in order to gain a truer insight.

Plato develops the basic educational ideas of Socrates, and elaborates on them in the *Republic*. In *Book VII* Plato narrates his analogy of the primitive humans dwelling in the cave. By means of discovering the real substance behind the shadows, the few who walk out into the light discover a higher truth. In this analogy, Plato uses the realization of the true nature of things, which leads to greater understanding, as an explanation of how instruction in natural phenomena can be used as a means for preparing minds for moral learning. R.M. Hare points out the differences in the emphases of traditional education and the new education espoused by the Sophists. The former advocated a development of character and the latter focused purely on the material outcome generated by craftiness of wit and the ability to persuade. Plato joins and adapts these two seemingly opposing elements to form his own system, which is meant to lead to the good, whereas he claims the other methods merely led to bad in their original form (Hare 55-6). *Book II* of the *Republic* describes in great length the manner in which Plato’s ideal society would be educated. Subjects such as music and gymnastics would be required for the training of youth, but Plato condemns the old poetic tradition. His educational
program is to be carefully molded so as to produce a mind fit for philosophical undertakings and ruling the state.

Confucius devoted a considerable number of his many sayings to education. Like Socrates and Plato, he emphasized the development of character, and education was a means to that end. The ideal result was to become a junzi, a person of superior character. Confucius’ junzi differs from Plato’s idea of a philosopher king in its form and social context (as will be discussed below in the section concerning society). Confucius advocated the study of the classical texts, which he himself compiled, in order to learn proper relationships and rituals. He explains it succinctly in one passage; “Education begins with poetry, is strengthened through proper conduct and consummated through music” (Lin 200). In this way Confucius is quite different than Socrates and Plato. Rather than critique these subjects through inquiry, he admonishes his students not only to learn them well, but also to practice them. This is not arbitrary or without reason, however. Confucius sees these works as the exemplars of their time, a time that he perceived as a golden age. In a conversation between Chen Kang and Poyou, Confucius’ son, the former asks the latter if he can recall anything special that his father taught him. Poyou then recounts an instance when Confucius asked him, “Have you learned poetry?” To the negative response he replies, “If you don’t study poetry, your language will not be polished.” Another day Confucius asks his son, “Have you studied the ceremonies?” Again he receives a negative reply and says, “If you don’t study the ceremonies, you have no guide for your conduct.” Chen Kang smiled after this story because Confucius had taught his son the same lessons as his disciples (Lin 202-3). It was Confucius’ belief that moral education began with the family, which contrasts with Plato’s notions of
destroying family structure and replacing it with the state’s function of systemizing morality from the very beginning of ones upbringing.

Obviously Confucius’ approach differs from his Western counterparts’, but he does attempt to justify study as a means to an end. In this way he is not far from Plato’s vision of an ideal society. Learning small things facilitates the comprehension of greater ones. Also, education was a continuing process and useless if one fails to draw from it when required to do so. “A man may be able to chant all three hundred Songs from memory, and still falter when appointed to office or waver when sent on embassies to the four corners of the earth. What good are all those songs if he can’t put them to use?” (Confucius 141). Therefore, contingent to learning was the proper observance of li, social norms, which guided behavior. This also called for a following of the rituals learned in the classical texts. Confucius admits that he cannot say of himself, “I’ve become a sage and mastered Humanity,” but instead, “I work at it and teach it, never tiring” (Confucius 75). In this humble statement Confucius reveals his acceptance of practical limitations and seems to be echoed in Socrates’ quest for someone who is truly wise.

The intended recipients of these educational programs are a point of contrast between Confucius and Plato. Confucius did not give any special regard to one’s status as far as education was concerned. He did, however, believe that people were born with different abilities, and classified them both according to natural aptitude and improvement through hard work. He said, “Those who are born wise are the highest type of people; those who become wise through learning come next; those who learn by sheer diligence and industry, but with difficulty, come after that. Those who are slow to learn,
but still won’t learn, are the lowest type of people” (Lin 204). Here Confucius imposes a purely pragmatic class system that focuses on a specific quality. The Greek ideal, which Socrates and Plato adhere to, encompasses a much wider range of qualities. Virtue, *arête*, Socrates seems to believe, cannot be taught, entailing an idea of inherited status (through these given attributes), which betray very aristocratic leanings. As Rose states, in the *Republic* Plato defends his position against the attacks of the Sophists by employing a system of eugenics to ensure that only the truly *kaloi k’ agathoi* comprise the aristocratic class (Rose 353-4). The complex educational system that Plato contrived is meant to train this elite class, who are intended to rule.

In the *Apology*, Socrates rejects any involvement in politics because of the command of his personal deity, his inner voice. He says, “[I]t always forbids but never commands me to do anything which I am going to do. This is what deters me from being a politician” (Loomis 50, *Apol.*). He goes on to conjecture an early death if he had, since he upholds justice, whereas the state is corrupt and unjust. He cites examples for both democratic and oligarchic rule. In the illegal trial against the generals of the battle of Arginusae, Socrates spoke out against the common opinion, deciding, he asserts, “I would run the risk, having law and justice with me, rather than take part in your injustice because I feared imprisonment and death” (Loomis 50, *Apol.*). In the second example he defies the Thirty even at the risk of losing his life. Socrates thereby implies, by removing himself from public contexts, that his search for knowledge is for a different purpose; he seeks it for its function to care for the soul rather than for political purposes.

In his quest for an ideal society, Plato is forced to modify his teacher’s thoughts. Through proper education he intends to create a ruling class that is free from corruption

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and follows principles of justice. He therefore, concludes that education in morality is necessary for a good government and a good society. Confucius had much the same end in mind. When people are educated in the proper rituals and relationships, a time of peace and prosperity will reign. Those educated in statecraft have an obligation to serve as advisors to rulers and to guide them in ways compatible to the principles they learned. There are many instances in the Analects where Confucius either criticizes a capable individual for his reclusion from politics or condemns administrators who fail to advise their rulers against immoral actions, particularly making frivolous wars on their neighbors. The highest aim of education in Confucianism, however, is the cultivation of ren, human-heartedness, which seems compatible, at least on a rudimentary level, to the arête of Socrates and Plato.

On Politics

The question of each philosopher’s exact views on politics stems from their attitudes toward the application of education. All three thinkers make it quite clear that those who rule or administer should be those most qualified for it. Socrates makes a rather harsh critique of democracy in the Protagoras when he alludes to the use of experts in technical fields or professions, while people who have no understanding of or training in politics make decisions in the state all the time (Guthrie 410). This certainly undercuts the idea that all citizens are inherently qualified to participate in government. But rather, like any other skill, one must possess proper training and knowledge. Confucius asserts similar views in expressing opinions only on those things, in which one has studied or experienced. For instance, when the Duke of Wei asked Confucius about
military strategy, he replied, “I’ve learned something about the conduct of worship and sacrifice. But as for the conduct of war- that is something I’ve never studied” (Confucius 171). Granted Confucius is making a rather political remark here, namely that war, being unnecessary and unethical in most cases, is something that he knows nothing about. On another occasion, a situation occurs opposite to Socrates’ example but with the same message. Fan Chi asks Confucius about farming and growing vegetables. Confucius responds by telling him to leave those questions to farmers and gardeners, later giving the admonition for rulers to attend to rituals and duty (Confucius 140-1). There is, then, an agreement in the views of Socrates and Confucius in the relegation of people to their proper places in society, leaving statecraft for those who are trained in it. As Confucius says, “When one is not holding a position in the government, one is not entitled to participate in governmental administration” (Wu 7).

Who then should take part in politics? In Socrates’ view Guthrie suggests that political involvement requires “natural gifts, but above all things study and application” (Guthrie 410). It therefore is not an affair that should be handed to the masses, which possess knowledge only of their particular craft. There is also an implicit message of being born into a position to rule, since, besides the already mentioned belief in inherent qualities, those born into the aristocracy are the only ones who really have the access to or leisure for the study of politics. Socrates spells out his views fairly clearly in the Crito, “we must not regard what the many say of us; but what he, the one man who has understanding of just and unjust, will say, and what the truth shall say” (Loomis 71, Crito). Although Confucius believed in the allowing all classes to receive education and be eligible for administrative positions, he also supported a complex hierarchy and the
proper relationships that comprised it. When asked about governing, Confucius said, “Let the lord be the lord, the minister be a minister, the father be a father, and the son be a son” (Wu 7). However those who hold positions of power must show benevolence to their subjects and act as a model of morality; in this way the state could be assured peace.

The methods by which a state should function also deserve consideration. Confucius presents a rather idealistic view where rulers govern by ren. Displays of power would only undermine the morale of the people, so severe punishment should be avoided at all costs. Legislation and law enforcement should only be a last resort when rule by morality fails. The restoration of order within society, called zhengming, or the “rectification of names,” is itself a peaceful process that directs people to their proper places in society (Wu 7). In regards to correct governing Confucius says, “If you use government to show them the Way and punishment to keep them true, the people will grow evasive and lose all remorse. But if you use Integrity to show them the Way and Ritual to keep them true, they’ll cultivate remorse and always see deeply into things” (Confucius 11).

Socrates, while being devoted to the laws of the polis, did not necessarily agree with their interpretation and execution. Nonetheless, he believed them to be important, and as he explains to Crito, since the state provided him with his childhood education and did not force him to remain in Athens, he should respect and obey its laws as a citizen (Loomis 74-5, Crito). However, in response to his sentence of death, Socrates said, “If you think that by killing men you can prevent someone from censuring your evil lives, you are mistaken; that is not a way of escape which is either possible or honorable; the easiest and the noblest way is not to be disabling others, but to be improving yourselves”
(Loomis 58, *Apol.*). In that statement, Socrates is making a critique of government severity strikingly similar to Confucius’ with an ideal of moral self-improvement at its core.

Plato, who dabbled in politics in Sicily for a short time, called for an authoritarian state, but one run by rulers trained in morality. Only through the strict impartment of ethics could a government hope to remain free of corruption. However, as Plato suggests in the *Politicus*, the rulers who created these laws should not be subject to them, and they should be able to change them at will (Hare 66). Despite his firm beliefs in the superiority of Zhou culture, Confucius also believed that the rules governing people’s lives, *li*, should be fluid and able to change to fit the present situation.

*On Society*

As mentioned earlier, social structure played a major part in the ideas of these philosophers. A sense of a more or less rigid ruling class prevailed in the minds of all three. Socrates made very obvious distinctions between the masses and the few. In the *Crito* he uses an analogy of an individual training in gymnastics; it is the advice of the instructor that he should listen to rather than others (Loomis 70, *Crito*). Once again Socrates is specifying who has what knowledge, and it is those few who know a certain subject that should practice and teach it. Confucius has remarkably similar ideas on a well-ordered society. He outlines a very hierarchical system of relationships, in which the obedience of subject to ruler is at the top. The other relationships include those between father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, and friends. While the four highest relationships require the loyalty of the subordinate member to the
dominant, they also insist that the latter be benevolent to the former. The filial piety a child shows to his parents instills in him the reverence to be loyal to his superiors. “In youth, respect your parents when home and your elders when away” (Confucius 4). Only through proper relationships can society be in harmony. Within this basic structure each member is to perform the tasks that are suited for him or her. In the Republic, Plato stratifies society in a much more definite sense than either Socrates or Confucius did. He divides citizens into two classes with the upper being divided again. The lowest class is the largest and comprises the workers, while the upper class is separated into soldiers and guardians, or rulers. He also differs vastly from Confucius in his attitudes toward the family. Plato believed in a very Spartan way that the family should be abolished and the children raised by the state. In this way, members of the same generation are deemed as brothers and sisters, while the older generation acts as parents.

The question of social mobility is equally important. In Confucius’ view of proper placement in society, he is not saying that it is necessarily something someone is born into. The concept of junzi underwent a change with Confucius; the earlier literal meaning “son of a lord” changed from its inherited status to one that was earned through moral development (De Bary 42). Rather, by study and the practice of li, not only is one able to attain higher positions, but one is obligated to do so. This contains an implicit moral doctrine that achievement and learning is not good enough in and of itself; these skills must be put to use for the betterment of society. In this way, the individual cannot separate himself from his social contexts. One’s life can only have meaning through his relationships with others. When a person cultivates ren in himself, it becomes manifest in his dealings with others. Socrates may not have gone quite to that extreme, but he
does attack the entirely selfish and power seeking propensities of the Sophists. Not that self-interest was necessarily a bad thing, and power could certainly be a good thing, but one must always put foremost what is just. In his critiques of the unsubstantiated claims of knowledge that his adversaries held, Socrates might be sounding more unsupportive of social mobility than he actually was. The thrust of his argument was for people to logically back their claims, which could be tested through his system of inquiry. In this process, one not only determined the truth of the particular matter, but also gained a better understanding of reality in general. It was therefore possible for one to improve oneself, and thereby undertake greater positions in life. Plato’s ideal society is far more aristocratic, and the only social mobility that takes place comes in the form of eugenics. In order to keep the ruling class pure, defective members are dropped down to the lower class. There is given no method by which a member of that lower class can climb to a higher level (Rose 355). He makes no mention of applying his pedagogical system to the lower class; it is meant explicitly for the training of those who will use the principles learned to rule wisely and justly. Therefore, he retains a practical (if unrealistic) outlook that combines the values of inherited excellence and the intellectual training provided through education.

The moral society Confucius envisioned could come about through true knowledge and the practice of li, which included right conduct. Concerning the first part, he said, “… we should make it our aim that there may be no lawsuits at all, so that people who have actually done wrong will be too ashamed of themselves to indulge in words of self-defense. Thus the people are inspired with a great respect or fear (of the magistrate). This is called “to know the root (or bottom) of things.” This is called “achieving true
knowledge (or wisdom)”” (Lin 143). As a point of comparison, Plato also wanted to eliminate lawsuits. He would correct this perceived problem by abolishing personal property.

In accordance with his views on wisdom, Confucius believed the proper observance of ritual to be crucial. He was very interested in learning the old Zhou rituals that were falling out of practice. “When he was in the Grand Temple, the Master asked questions about everything he saw” (Confucius 25). He saw the early Zhou period as a golden age, rich with traditions and conscientious of ritual. With the parallel declines of both the Zhou state and the rituals it used to practice, Confucius could make a logical connection, attributing the former to the latter. The growth of humanism marked a shift in emphasis away from gods and ancestors to a more social function of ritual. To this Confucius says, “We are saying all the time, ‘Li! Li!’ Does li mean merely a collection of jades and silks (in ceremonial use)? We are saying all the time ‘Music!’ ‘Music!’ Does music merely mean playing about with drums and bells?” (Lin 201). Although Confucius believed that li was changeable, he also saw a beneficial continuity with the past. In his advice of “simplicity rather than extravagance,” Confucius is stressing ritual’s functional role, and that it should be done in sincerity instead of show (Confucius 22).

Ritual also had its place in Greek society in the form of religious duties and festivals. The state cult played an integral part in the lives of the citizens of a polis, both in worship and in ideology. The pre-Socratic development toward a rational skepticism of the anthropomorphic gods had certainly taken root within Athens by the time of Socrates, and the plays of Euripides respond to that atmosphere. Charges of atheism
were commonly made against public enemies and were included in the trial against
Socrates. He refutes them outright as being contradictory; “the demigods or spirits are
gods, and you say first that I do not believe in gods, and then again that I do believe in
gods” (Loomis 45, *Apol.*). True, some of Socrates’ beliefs in the gods may have been
unconventional; he claimed to have a personal deity that spoke to him. During his
defense in the *Apology*, he acknowledges, “This sign, which is a kind of voice, first began
to come to me when I was a child” (Loomis 50, *Apol.*). Yet, in Plato’s accounts, at no
point did he deny the existence of other gods or denounce the state court. He even argued
that he made regular offerings, and, most noteworthy, was his divinely inspired mission
from the Delphic Oracle. Nevertheless, in the *Clouds* Aristophanes does depict Socrates
as an atheist who practices the new beliefs of natural philosophy.

Plato is far less ambiguous in his stance. He not only supports the state cult and
the gods it worshipped, but believed in investing it with a moral doctrine. In this way, as
Guthrie points out, Plato accused earlier poets of lying in their accounts of the gods, thus
imposing an ethical standard on their behavior (Guthrie 230). The cult of gods benefited
the state and contributed to the coherence of society, which helps explain why Plato
supported it. Like Confucius, Plato also valued proper form; in the *Republic* he
explicates the importance of adhering to the original forms in performing music and
gymnastics and observing religious duties. This loosely relates to Confucius’ belief in
incorporating ritual into every aspect of one’s life, although Plato emphasizes the state’s
role in setting the standard. In Book IV of the *Republic*, Adeimantus says, “were it not
that little by little this spirit of license, finding a home, imperceptibly penetrates into
manners and customs; whence issuing with greater force, it invades contracts between
man and man, and from contracts goes on to laws and constitutions, in utter recklessness, ending at last, Socrates, by an overthrow of all rights, private as well as public” (Loomis 312, Rep.). Socrates goes on, however, to warn against total legislation of people’s lives, exhorting instead to instill good behavior through education and form, which will result in an orderly society.

On Ethics

Socrates, Plato, and Confucius shared a conviction towards morality, but had different expressions for it and means of working toward it. Confucius believed in a universal principle of yi, translated as righteousness, which governed conduct and relationships. It was not something he sought to define, but an encompassing idea meant to guide. He refers to yi several times in the Analects; for instance: “The superior man, in the world, does not set his mind either for anything, or against anything; what is right he will follow” (Legge 168). This is a prohibition against following extremes, for the sake of a cause, but instead turning one’s attention to yi. This is essential for maintaining both a sense of conscientiousness and stability in society. Wu provides a translation, which interprets the line in a much stronger social context, “…attitude toward the society is neither one of a conformist nor one of a rebel…” (Wu 5). Clearly yi is not simply a subject of study but a practical behavioral model.

Socrates rather ambiguously refers to his method of determining right from wrong as “the divine faculty of which the internal oracle is the source” (Loomis 58, Apol.). It is this voice, which guides his actions, that he says keeps him from politics. Being divinely inspired, Socrates places his oracle on a level transcending human bias; it is a universal
representative of its time, in which the idea of anthropomorphic deities was being strongly challenged. Also, in its indisputability and divine origin, Socrates’ inner voice is relatively comparable to Confucius’ *yi*, which stems from the laws of heaven. However, Socrates’ assertion that this moral guide resided within the individual, or at least in Socrates himself, was a direct challenge to the state, which also claimed that its laws were imbued with divine sanction.

Moreover, the standard of determining right from wrong that Socrates employed was vastly different than that promoted by many politicians and Sophists in Athens. He replaced the motivation of power and self-interest with virtue and justice as one’s initial priority. He exhorted each of his disciples to “look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests, and look to the state before he looks to the interests of the state; and that this should be the order which he observes in all his actions” (Loomis 55, *Apol.*). The emphasis on looking to oneself supports Guthrie’s assertions about Socrates and the *psyche*, roughly translated as soul, but without many modern connotations. Guthrie summarizes Socrates understanding of *psyche* as being “the true self;” it was for the benefit of this that one must work, and in order to do so, one must gain self-knowledge (Guthrie 469-70). Socrates introduced logical inquiry as the means by which one can properly make such acquisitions. Through this process, one could glean the good from what was not good, and after determining it in oneself could begin to judge for the state. It was then, a political skill, and that not everyone possessed the skill and should not claim to do so was very controversial in a democratic state.

This political skill of possessing the sound judgment required of a good leader was encapsulated in the idea of *arête*. The concept of *arête* included a sense of virtue but
contained several implications. First, as Meno asks, “Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue can be taught? Or is it a matter of practice, or natural aptitude or what?” (Guthrie 250). The former question responds to the Sophist conviction that morality can be taught for monetary recompense. Those affluent members of society who were benefiting from Athens’ opportunistic climate shared in the new ideology of teaching virtue. The latter question represents the old aristocratic view of *physis*, or inherited excellence. According to this theory, the potential for *arête*, like physical attributes, was passed down from generation to generation, frequently with divine antecedents somewhere in the distant past. Virtue was then instilled through associations with friends and family, particularly the father, who themselves possessed *arête*. Virtue then, which was requisite to good rule, was a product of both genetic inheritance and proper experiences.

To Confucius aristocratic birth was in no way necessary for moral superiority. It was proper for one to show respect and loyalty to those in higher echelons of society, with the dynastic line of kings at the top, but their birth did not guarantee moral qualities; the strong tendency for corruption had to be overcome so that the ruler could be a paragon for his subjects to emulate. It was not position that determined virtue, but the other way around; “Thus it is that he who possesses great moral qualities will certainly attain to corresponding high position…” (Lin 112). In order to be worthy of such a position, one must cultivate *ren* by following *li*. Concerning *ren*, Confucius told Fan Chi, “Love people” (Confucius 134). Unlike Socrates’ *arête*, *ren* was available to anyone who sought it. In Book VII Confucius said, “Is *jen* [*ren*] so far away? I want to have *jen*, and lo! *jen* is at hand” (Chai 37). It was therefore possible for someone of lowly birth to obtain *ren*, and accordingly achieve positions of power.
The way to virtue was through practicing $li$, which is regulated by social institutions and decorum. Without $li$, virtue is irrelevant; “Reverence becomes tedium without Ritual [$Li$], and caution becomes timidity. Without Ritual, courage becomes recklessness, and truth becomes intolerance” (Confucius 81). Confucius envisioned living a life in which all things were imbued with ritual. When Yen Hui asked, “Could you explain how giving yourself to Ritual works,” the Master said, “Never look without Ritual. Never listen without Ritual. Never speak without Ritual. Never move without Ritual” (Confucius 127). Appropriating knowledge is also necessary for becoming a person of $ren$, and its acquisition is closely tied to $li$. To put $li$ into practice and gain knowledge, one must begin with self, closely following Socrates’ priorities. Confucius said, “A person’s faults are all of a piece. Recognizing your faults is a way of understanding Humanity [$Ren$]” (Confucius 34). Also, “If a man can for one day subdue oneself and return to $li$, the world will accord him $jen$ [$ren$]. For $jen$ is to begin with oneself; does it begin in others?” (Chai 41). In this way, through introspection, one can find and remove one’s faults; having done so, one can be trusted to take on responsibilities of state.

**Conclusion**

Drawing from the previous analysis, a number of points of comparison and contrast can be made between Socrates, Plato, and Confucius. Regarding education, both Socrates and Confucius established forms of philosophical inquiry and focused on matters of pragmatic concern, whereas their pupils went further into metaphysical studies. All three of the aforementioned philosophers emphasized the practical purposes
of education, especially in the realm of governing. One point of stark contrast, however, was Plato’s insistence on arête being inherited, and Confucius establishing just the opposite with junzi, which he deemed to be an acquired state. In politics, all three believed that only the most qualified members of society should rule, and they should rule justly, guiding by their own good examples rather than through the force of severe punishment. Like education, there is a discrepancy in who is qualified to rule, although Confucius did stress proper relationships, which people were often born into. In regards to society, Confucius and Plato both imagined an ideal of order and stability. This could come about through following rituals and maintaining a proper observance of a class system, although Confucius allowed for social mobility through talent, study, and hard work. Finally, on the topic of ethics, Confucius and Socrates, as well as Plato, had similar models of a superior person, and justice was of primary attention. A heavenly/divine principle governed justice, but exactly who had access to that knowledge and in what way it could be learned varied, with Socrates and Plato leaning far more heavily toward the aristocracy.

The ethical reforms of Confucius and Socrates had far-reaching implications. They struck at the very core of their societies and political systems. Each philosopher had political aspirations that ultimately failed. Instead the forum of education (informal for Socrates) became their means to social change. Their ideas combined traditional systems (Greek aristocracy, Chinese hierarchy) with new ways of thinking, namely philosophical inquiry. This challenge to those in power or seeking positions of power made them many enemies, but they also acquired a very devoted body of disciples, often idealists seeking an ideal moral society. These students were then able to immortalize
their master’s ideas both through word of mouth and, more importantly, through the written record, which enabled the creation of a systemized dogma unintended by their founders. They redefined many of the most salient words and ideas in society, especially concerning virtue and its status as innate or taught. The successes of their philosophies lie largely in the wide range of applications they included and their ability to be adapted by later thinkers who had either more idealistic or pragmatic leanings. Thus these two separate responses to crises, although failing to create the ideal society envisioned, did form the groundwork in their distinct cultures for the more than two thousand years of philosophical development that followed.
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