

Virtues as Universal Moral Realities

Bridging Aristotelian and Confucian Ethical Frameworks

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18 June 2025

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PREPRINT VERSION – DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15690699

This is a working preprint version of the article:

Aristotelian Logic and Quantum Structure: A Syllogistic Framework for Contextual Inference and Ontological Mediation

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Date: 18 June 2025

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Abstract

This article challenges Alasdair MacIntyre's assertion of the incommensurability of Aristotelian and Confucian virtues by proposing that virtues are universal moral realities. Drawing upon Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy and Confucian ethics, it argues that cultural traditions serve as distinct coordinate systems mapping these universal virtues. The article employs the metaphor of Euclidean and spherical geometries to illustrate how different cultures emphasize various aspects of the same moral landscape. It concludes by advocating for a virtue-based approach to cross-cultural ethical dialogue, facilitating constructive engagement without absolutely necessitating direct cultural translation.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics, Comparative Philosophy, Aristotelian Ethics, Confucian Ethics, Moral Realism, Cross-Cultural Dialogue

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1. Introduction: The Challenge of Incommensurability

Alasdair MacIntyre famously argued that ethical systems rooted in distinct cultural and historical traditions generate virtues that are fundamentally incommensurable, resisting meaningful comparison or integration (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1981, pp. 186-187; *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 1988, pp. 349-350). According to MacIntyre,

Aristotelian virtue ethics and Confucian virtue ethics exemplify two such deeply embedded traditions, each with its own internal rationality and cultural coherence (MacIntyre, 1988, pp. 349-350). This thesis implies that ethical dialogue between these traditions is severely limited, if not impossible, due to the absence of a shared evaluative framework (MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 1990, pp. 170-171).

Yet, MacIntyre's compelling perspective leaves unresolved critical philosophical questions: Are virtues merely cultural constructs, or do they correspond to deeper moral realities that transcend cultural boundaries? Can we meaningfully discuss virtues across diverse traditions without falling into relativism or forced equivalences? This article addresses these questions by proposing a philosophical inversion of MacIntyre's construct. Instead of virtues being culturally determined products, it argues that virtues are stable, universal moral realities. Cultural traditions—such as Aristotelian or Confucian—serve as diverse interpretative frameworks or "coordinate systems," each emphasizing particular aspects of these universal virtues (Nussbaum, "Non-relative Virtues," 1993, pp. 245-246).

This theoretical shift not only reframes the philosophical debate but also opens new possibilities for cross-cultural ethical dialogue. By considering virtues as foundational moral realities independent of cultural narratives, comparative philosophy can move beyond perceived incommensurability. This article will further argue that universal virtues can act as a philosophical bridge, facilitating constructive ethical engagement between traditions, illustrated through the comparative analysis of Aristotelian-Thomistic and Confucian ethical frameworks.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Alasdair MacIntyre: Tradition-Dependent Virtue Ethics and Incommensurability

Alasdair MacIntyre, renowned for his revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, highlights modern moral fragmentation and seeks to recover coherent moral traditions (*After Virtue*, 1981, pp. 1-5). Deeply indebted to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, MacIntyre has engaged critically with Confucian ethics, arguing for their fundamental incommensurability (MacIntyre, 1988, pp. 349-350; MacIntyre, 1990, pp. 170-171).

MacIntyre asserts that moral reasoning and virtues are deeply embedded within specific traditions that provide necessary narrative and rational contexts (MacIntyre, 1988, pp. 349-350). Rationality itself is tradition-dependent, precluding meaningful abstraction of virtues from their contexts (*Three Rival Versions*, 1990, pp. 170-171). Within Aristotelian ethics, virtues facilitate achieving eudaimonia through rational flourishing (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I). Confucian virtues emphasize relational selfhood and social harmony through li (ritual propriety) and ren (benevolence) (Confucius, *Analects*, Book IV; Mencius, *Mencius*, Book II; Zhu Xi, *Learning to Be a Sage*, pp. 15-19).

MacIntyre underscores fundamental differences in the conceptions of self and community: Aristotelian ethics prioritize individual flourishing within the polis (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I), whereas Confucianism views selfhood relationally and contextually (Confucius, *Analects*, Book XII). Metaphysically, Aristotelian ethics relies on teleology, whereas Confucianism emphasizes cosmic harmony and relational order (Zhu Xi, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, Chapter 1). MacIntyre concludes these frameworks possess unique internal rational standards, making direct translation impossible (MacIntyre, 1988, pp. 349-350). Nevertheless, he acknowledges cross-traditional dialogue as possible during epistemological crises (MacIntyre, 1990, pp. 170-171).

2.2 Martha Nussbaum: Universal Virtues and Human Capabilities

Martha Nussbaum provides a robust alternative to MacIntyre's perspective through her capabilities approach (*Creating Capabilities*, 2011, pp. 17-19; "Non-relative Virtues," 1993, pp. 242-269). Arguing from a broadly Aristotelian standpoint, Nussbaum maintains that certain virtues such as justice, compassion, and practical reason are universally essential for human flourishing (*Creating Capabilities*, 2011, pp. 23-24; "Non-relative Virtues," 1993, pp. 245-246).

Nussbaum's approach is grounded in universally applicable human functions that transcend cultural and historical contexts, challenging MacIntyre's tradition-dependent rationality. Her arguments leverage cross-cultural empirical evidence and philosophical analysis to support the universality of human vulnerabilities and capabilities, underscoring the potential for virtues as stable, universally meaningful moral realities (*Creating Capabilities*, 2011, pp. 32-35).

2.3 Aquinas: Natural Law and Virtues as Universal Moral Realities

Thomas Aquinas's virtue ethics, firmly rooted in natural law theory, further reinforces the notion of virtues as universal moral realities. Aquinas describes virtues as intrinsic

dispositions (*habitus*) that align human beings with their rational nature and ultimate telos—*eudaimonia* (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 55, a. 4).

Natural law, central to Aquinas's ethical framework, posits universally discernible moral principles inherent in human nature (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2). Aquinas explicitly defines virtue as "a good quality of the mind by which we live rightly" (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 55, a. 4), grounding virtues in reason and human nature itself. Aquinas's robust philosophical justification supports considering virtues as universally constant, transcending particular cultural narratives, and facilitating comparative ethical inquiry (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2; Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 84-85).

2.4 Stephen C. Angle: Progressive Confucianism and Interpretive Pluralism

Stephen C. Angle's work, particularly *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism* (2012), contributes significantly to the understanding of Confucian ethics in a modern, global context. Angle promotes what he terms "Progressive Confucianism," which acknowledges the rootedness of Confucian moral concepts in traditional culture while advocating their reinterpretation to address contemporary moral and political challenges. Central to Angle's project is the idea that Confucian virtues such as *ren* (benevolence), *li* (ritual propriety), and *yi* (righteousness) can evolve in meaning while remaining anchored in historical practice (Angle, 2012, pp. 5–8, 57–62).

Angle affirms that Confucian ethics has internal mechanisms for self-renewal and moral critique, which makes it compatible with pluralist frameworks. He also explicitly engages with MacIntyre, arguing that while Confucianism and Aristotelianism arise from different traditions, they can participate in a shared philosophical conversation if the virtues they articulate are approached as responses to overlapping moral questions (Angle, 2012, pp. 101–105). This supports the notion that virtue realism—understood as acknowledging stable moral realities across cultures—can undergird comparative philosophy.

2.5 Bryan W. Van Norden: Comparative Ethics and Interpretive Challenges

Bryan W. Van Norden, in his *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (2007), provides a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western moral philosophies, focusing on thinkers like Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. He challenges simplistic attempts to align Confucian thought directly with Western virtue ethics, warning against over-assimilation. Nevertheless, Van Norden acknowledges that virtue

remains a central ethical concern in both Confucian and Aristotelian traditions, even if the grounding metaphysics and moral psychology diverge (Van Norden, 2007, pp. 12–18, 54–57).

Van Norden’s analysis is particularly useful in its emphasis on the textual and philosophical integrity of early Chinese ethical systems. He maintains that while conceptual translation is fraught with difficulty, comparative philosophy must proceed with intellectual humility and rigor. This position reinforces the argument that traditions map different aspects of the same virtue reality, albeit with unique emphases and vocabularies (Van Norden, 2007, pp. 61–65).

2.6 Tu Weiming: Confucian Humanism and Moral Universality

Tu Weiming, a leading figure in contemporary Confucian philosophy, has long advocated for a global Confucianism rooted in humanistic values. In works such as *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (1985), Tu argues that Confucian ethics, while culturally situated, expresses universal human concerns—especially regarding moral self-cultivation, familial relations, and the search for harmony. His emphasis on selfhood as relational and dynamic aligns with the Confucian commitment to ritual and virtue cultivation (Tu, 1985, pp. 17–28).

Tu explicitly positions Confucianism as capable of engaging global moral discourse without abandoning its particularistic roots. He critiques relativist interpretations of Confucianism and maintains that virtues such as *ren* and *li* express universally intelligible values (Tu, 1985, pp. 43–47). Tu’s framework resonates with virtue realism by suggesting that different cultures articulate stable moral truths in response to common existential and ethical conditions.

2.7 Additional Contributors to the Virtue Ethics Dialogue

For completeness, several other scholars have contributed to the broader dialogue surrounding virtue ethics and cross-cultural philosophy. Kwong-loi Shun, in *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (1997), provides a nuanced analysis of Confucian moral psychology, emphasizing the internal coherence of early Confucian ethical frameworks and contributing to discussions on virtue ethics’ interpretive boundaries (Shun, 1997, pp. 88–91).

David B. Wong, particularly in *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (2006), argues for a pluralistic yet non-relativistic understanding of moral traditions, acknowledging both cultural specificity and shared human concerns (Wong, 2006, pp.

40–55). His work complements virtue realist approaches by offering a pluralist account of ethical systems that avoids collapsing into relativism.

Philip J. Ivanhoe, in *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* (2000), examines Confucian moral development and its resonance with virtue ethics. Ivanhoe's work emphasizes self-cultivation as central to Confucian moral life and explores its parallels and divergences with Aristotelian and Thomistic models (Ivanhoe, 2000, pp. 13–19).

These scholars, while diverse in their methodologies and conclusions, contribute to a rich, ongoing discourse that frames this article's engagement with virtue realism and cross-cultural ethical inquiry.

3. Metaphorical Framework: Geometries of Ethics

To advance the argument for virtue realism and cross-cultural ethical engagement, this section introduces a metaphorical framework derived from geometry: the distinction between Euclidean and spherical coordinate systems. These geometries offer different but equally valid ways of mapping space, each better suited to certain types of objects and problems. Euclidean geometry excels at describing flat, linear spaces, while spherical geometry more naturally describes curved surfaces, such as planetary bodies. Neither system is inherently superior, but each provides tools appropriate for specific contexts.

This metaphor serves as an illustrative model for understanding how diverse cultural traditions, such as Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics and Confucian ritual ethics, map the shared moral landscape of virtues. Just as geometries represent different frameworks for articulating spatial realities, ethical traditions offer distinct coordinate systems for articulating the stable, universal realities of virtues. Some virtues, like justice or benevolence, may be more prominently articulated within one tradition than another, much as certain geometrical problems are more naturally solved in one coordinate system. However, the underlying moral reality remains consistent across these mappings.

The use of this metaphor aligns with broader debates in comparative philosophy, where scholars such as Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. have emphasized the necessity of appreciating differing conceptual frameworks without collapsing them into a single evaluative standard (Ames & Rosemont, *The Confucian Mind*, 1998, pp. 101–106). Their emphasis on "role ethics" as an interpretative key to Confucian moral reasoning illustrates how distinct frameworks can coexist while engaging with shared human

concerns. Likewise, virtue realism posits that ethical traditions are valid mappings of universal moral realities, without requiring their conceptual homogenization.

This metaphorical approach also resonates with discussions in the *Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, where authors like Sor-hoon Tan and Leigh Jenco have advocated for methodological pluralism in cross-cultural philosophy (Tan, "Confucianism and Democracy," 2016, pp. 23–28; Jenco, *Changing Referents: Learning Across Space and Time in China and the West*, 2017, pp. 41–45). Additionally, Rein Raud has contributed to this discourse by framing comparative philosophy as a dialogical process of mutual learning rather than one of conceptual assimilation (Raud, *Practices of Selfhood*, 2016, pp. 115–118). Hall and Ames, in *Thinking Through Confucius* (1987, pp. 89–95), similarly emphasize that conceptual schemes must be respected in their own right to foster productive comparative work. These scholars collectively underscore the importance of engaging with differing frameworks while seeking common philosophical ground. Their work underlines the importance of respecting the integrity of each tradition's conceptual schema while enabling philosophical dialogue.

By adopting the geometrical metaphor, this article seeks to provide a conceptual tool that allows for cross-cultural ethical comparison without falling into relativism or ethnocentrism. This approach maintains the philosophical integrity of each tradition while affirming the existence of shared moral realities—virtues—common to all human societies.

4. Virtues as Universal Moral Realities: A Realist Proposal

Building upon the metaphorical framework of geometries, this section advances the central thesis of this article: virtues are universal moral realities that transcend cultural and historical contingencies. This claim departs from the tradition-constituted ethics posited by MacIntyre and aligns more closely with a virtue realist position, which holds that virtues are stable elements of human moral experience, discernible across diverse cultural mappings.

4.1 Philosophical Foundations for Virtue Realism

The realist stance on virtues has notable antecedents in both classical Western and Eastern philosophy. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* provides the foundational argument that virtues correspond to the function (ergon) and nature of human beings as rational animals. He defines the good for humans as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1097b22–1098a20), framing virtues not as

arbitrary cultural norms but as intrinsic to human flourishing (eudaimonia). Further, Aristotle's discussion of the "doctrine of the mean" (Book II, 1106b36–1107a8) situates virtues as natural equilibria in human behavior, reinforcing their universality within the human condition.

Thomas Aquinas extends and refines this framework within his theological synthesis. Grounded in natural law, Aquinas argues that moral precepts are "self-evident" because they are inscribed in human nature, accessible through right reason. In *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 2, he explains that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided," a precept applicable universally because it reflects human nature's rational orientation. Aquinas maintains that virtues, as habitual dispositions (*habitus*), actualize the potentialities of human nature toward its proper ends (*telos*), aligning individual flourishing with the common good (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 58, a. 5).

Confucian thinkers such as Mencius and Zhu Xi offer analogous foundations in Eastern philosophy. Mencius articulates a view of human nature as inherently good, positing the "four sprouts" of virtue—benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*)—as innate potentials requiring cultivation (Mencius, Book II, 2A:6). Zhu Xi, in his synthesis of Confucian thought, identifies the *li* (principle) as universal moral order inherent in the cosmos and human nature, accessible through self-cultivation (Zhu Xi, *Learning to Be a Sage*, pp. 12–18).

These philosophical traditions—Aristotelian, Thomistic, and Confucian—converge on the notion that virtues are not mere social constructs but rather responses to the objective conditions of human nature and the cosmos. This convergence reinforces the plausibility of virtue realism as a cross-cultural ethical framework.

Martha Nussbaum's contemporary articulation of virtue realism, particularly through the capabilities approach, underscores that certain core virtues—such as justice, compassion, and practical reason—are indispensable for human flourishing across all societies (Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 2011, pp. 32–35). Nussbaum supports this claim with both philosophical argumentation and empirical research on human well-being, further grounding the universality of virtues.

4.2 Empirical Support for Virtue Universality

Beyond philosophical foundations, empirical research in psychology and anthropology substantiates the universality of core virtues. Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, pp. 161–179) identifies five to six common

moral intuitions observed across cultures: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and liberty/oppression. These intuitions align with classical virtues such as compassion (care), justice (fairness), and respect (authority), suggesting a stable moral architecture shared by diverse human societies.

Further empirical support comes from Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson's seminal work, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (2004). This cross-cultural research involved examining moral traditions from major world religions, philosophies, and cultures, resulting in the identification of six universal virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 13–25). Each virtue comprises specific character strengths, such as creativity under wisdom or forgiveness under temperance, providing a nuanced taxonomy that demonstrates both universality and cultural specificity.

Additional anthropological research, such as Alan Page Fiske's relational models theory, supports the view that moral norms and virtues are embedded in universal forms of social relationship, including communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing (Fiske, *Structures of Social Life*, 1991, pp. 21–25). These relational structures echo Confucian and Aristotelian emphases on social roles and justice, underscoring their cross-cultural resonance.

This convergence of psychological, anthropological, and philosophical data lends credence to the realist claim that virtues are not merely culturally contingent constructs but represent stable moral constants that undergird human social life and flourishing. Similarly, Peterson and Seligman's *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004) proposes a universal taxonomy of virtues based on cross-cultural research, identifying six core virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 13–25).

This body of research supports the proposition that while cultures may emphasize certain virtues differently—analogous to geometrical mappings—the underlying moral realities of virtues are consistent. These findings provide empirical grounding for the philosophical claim that virtues are stable moral constants.

4.3 Virtues and Human Flourishing

Human flourishing—central to both Aristotelian and Confucian ethical systems—provides a key framework for understanding virtues as universal. Aristotle's eudaimonia, often translated as flourishing or well-being, hinges upon the cultivation of virtues as the

means by which human beings actualize their rational nature (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, 1177a1–1178a8). Central virtues such as justice, prudence, and friendship form indispensable components of this flourishing.

In Confucian ethics, flourishing is expressed through harmonious social relationships and the cultivation of *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (ritual propriety). Confucius asserts that a person who embodies *ren* brings harmony to their relationships and wider society (Confucius, *Analects*, Book XII, 12.1–12.2). Mencius further develops this by positing that moral self-cultivation is essential to the well-being of both the individual and the community (Mencius, Book VI, 6A:7).

Philosophical anthropology supports this convergence. Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self* (1989), argues that human flourishing is always embedded within cultural narratives but also guided by universal moral sources, such as justice and benevolence, that transcend these narratives (Taylor, 1989, pp. 211–215). His concept of the "moral horizon" offers a framework for understanding how virtues remain stable reference points across cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the work of contemporary virtue ethicists like Rosalind Hursthouse (*On Virtue Ethics*, 1999) reinforces the necessity of virtues for human flourishing by defining them as traits that enable individuals to navigate life's challenges in ways conducive to well-being (Hursthouse, 1999, pp. 167–172).

Tu Weiming's reflections on Confucian humanism likewise emphasize that virtues articulate responses to shared existential conditions—birth, death, family relations, social order—thus highlighting their cross-cultural intelligibility (Tu, *Confucian Thought*, 1985, pp. 45–47). This convergence between philosophical traditions and empirical reflections on human life substantiates the argument that virtues form the bedrock of human flourishing across cultures.

Taken together, philosophical arguments, empirical research, and cross-cultural ethical reflection converge to support the realist thesis that virtues are universal moral realities. This provides a foundation for constructive cross-cultural ethical dialogue, grounded in shared moral constants rather than cultural relativism.

5. Cultural Traditions as Coordinate Systems: Mapping Universal Virtues

Building on the philosophical and empirical foundation for virtue realism, this section explores how cultural traditions serve as distinct coordinate systems that map universal

virtues. Drawing on the earlier metaphor of Euclidean and spherical geometries, these systems provide context-specific articulations of shared moral realities. While the underlying virtues remain stable, their expression, emphasis, and prioritization vary across cultural landscapes.

5.1 Aristotelian-Thomistic Mapping

In the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, virtues are articulated within a framework that emphasizes individual rational flourishing in the polis and participation in the order of creation. Aristotle identifies the cardinal virtues—prudence (*phronesis*), justice (*dikaiosyne*), fortitude (*andreia*), and temperance (*sophrosyne*)—as foundational to ethical life (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III-V). Prudence, or practical wisdom, is central as it governs right action through reason (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.5, 1140b4-6).

Aquinas integrates this framework with Christian theology, identifying the same cardinal virtues but adding theological virtues—faith (*fides*), hope (*spes*), and charity (*caritas*)—which orient human beings toward supernatural ends (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 62, a. 1). In Aquinas's model, prudence governs natural moral acts, but charity perfects the will's orientation toward God, embedding Aristotelian ethics within a broader teleological system that unites nature and grace (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23, a. 1).

This mapping emphasizes human flourishing as alignment with rational nature and divine order, focusing on the cultivation of stable dispositions (*habitus*) that enable right action, both individually and communally.

5.2 Confucian Mapping

Confucian ethics, particularly as developed by Confucius, Mencius, and Zhu Xi, articulates virtues within a framework prioritizing relational harmony and moral self-cultivation. Core virtues—*ren* (benevolence), *li* (ritual propriety), *yi* (righteousness), and *zhi* (wisdom)—form the moral architecture of Confucian life (Confucius, *Analects*, IV.15; Mencius, II.A.6).

Unlike Aristotelian ethics, which centers on the individual's rational capacity, Confucian ethics emphasizes the relational self, defined through familial and social roles. Moral development is achieved through the cultivation of *li*—rituals that align the individual with cosmic order (*tian*), as Zhu Xi elaborates in *Learning to Be a Sage* (pp. 12–18). Here, harmony (*he*) replaces teleology as the metaphysical foundation, situating virtue

cultivation in the dynamic interplay between human beings and the cosmic order (Zhu Xi, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, Chapter 1).

The Confucian mapping thus prioritizes ethical relationships and ritual context over abstract rational principles, emphasizing the role of moral emotions and relational attunement in achieving flourishing. Unlike Aristotelian teleology, Confucian cosmology emphasizes harmony (*he*) rather than purpose-driven development.

5.3 Comparative Analysis: Complementarity of Mappings

While Aristotelian-Thomistic and Confucian systems diverge in their conceptual architectures—teleological individualism versus relational harmony—they nonetheless map onto the same moral landscape. Justice in Aristotelian ethics, concerned with equitable distribution and social order (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.1), parallels *ren* in Confucian ethics, which emphasizes benevolence and mutual obligations within relationships (Confucius, *Analects*, XII.22).

Mapping Confucian virtues within the Aristotelian system is challenging but feasible. For example, *li* (ritual propriety) can be analogized to Aristotelian phronesis (prudence), insofar as both govern context-sensitive actions that sustain moral community. Yet, *li* integrates aesthetic, emotional, and social dimensions absent in the narrower rational focus of phronesis (Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*, 2012, pp. 101–105). Conversely, Aristotelian justice, grounded in natural law and distributive fairness, may not fully capture the Confucian stress on filial piety (*xiao*) or the ritual expression of moral hierarchy (Zhu Xi, *Learning to Be a Sage*, pp. 15–19).

Nevertheless, the capacity to translate these virtues across systems, even with difficulty, demonstrates their universality. Each tradition offers a distinct coordinate system more suited to emphasizing particular moral dimensions: Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics better articulates rational structures of moral judgment, while Confucianism excels in expressing relational and ritual dimensions of virtue. This complementarity supports the dual thesis that (1) virtues are universal moral realities, and (2) cultural systems differ in their capacity to articulate these virtues fully.

Further, an essential parallel can be drawn between the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of *habitus* and the Confucian emphasis on *li* (ritual propriety) in the cultivation of virtues. In Aristotelian ethics, virtues are developed through repeated actions that form stable dispositions (*habitus*) directed toward achieving the human *telos*—rational flourishing (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 55, a. 4). This process is inherently teleological: the cultivation of virtue is a means to the end of human flourishing.

In contrast, Confucian virtue cultivation through *li* is often considered an end in itself. Ritual actions are not merely instrumental but constitute moral life directly, embodying harmony and relational attunement without necessitating an external telos beyond the enactment of the ritual (Zhu Xi, *Learning to Be a Sage*, pp. 15–19). This distinction illustrates the deeper metaphysical divergence between the systems: *habitus* presupposes teleology, while *li* reflects a relational ontology grounded in cosmic harmony.

Nevertheless, both mechanisms—repetition in Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics and ritual performance in Confucianism—demonstrate the universality of virtue cultivation through habituation, even if framed within different metaphysical assumptions. This further reinforces the argument that virtues, as stable moral realities, can be articulated across diverse cultural frameworks, albeit emphasizing different dimensions of moral life.

This insight aligns with contemporary comparative philosophy, where scholars like Roger Ames, Sor-hoon Tan, and Bryan Van Norden advocate for intercultural dialogue that respects both the universality of ethical concerns and the particularities of cultural articulations (Ames & Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 1987, pp. 89–95; Tan, "Confucianism and Democracy," 2016, pp. 23–28; Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*, 2007, pp. 61–65).

6. Bridging Ethical Frameworks through Virtues: Toward Constructive Dialogue

The preceding sections have established that while Aristotelian-Thomistic and Confucian ethical systems articulate virtues differently, they nonetheless map onto the same underlying moral realities. This convergence enables a distinctive mode of cross-cultural ethical engagement: rather than attempting direct translation between traditions, dialogue can be mediated through the shared ground of virtues themselves. This section proposes a virtue-centered approach to comparative ethics, whereby virtues function as stable conceptual anchors, facilitating constructive dialogue without requiring full conceptual assimilation.

6.1: Virtues as Conceptual Bridges

By treating virtues as universal moral realities, comparative philosophy gains a stable axis for dialogue between ethical traditions. Virtues function as conceptual anchors that allow engagement between systems without forcing full conceptual assimilation. This

method provides an alternative to two common pitfalls in comparative ethics: (1) cultural relativism, which denies any possibility of shared moral standards, and (2) ethnocentrism, which imposes one tradition's categories upon another.

This approach resonates with Martha Nussbaum's defense of non-relative virtues grounded in human capabilities, where she argues that certain capabilities—such as life, bodily integrity, and practical reason—are essential for human flourishing across cultural boundaries (*Creating Capabilities*, 2011, pp. 32–35; "Non-relative Virtues," 1993, pp. 242–269). The virtues sustaining these capabilities—justice, compassion, courage—thus act as universally intelligible points of reference.

Moreover, Leigh Jenco's methodology of "changing referents" encourages scholars to engage traditions on their own terms while identifying shared ethical concerns (Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 2015, pp. 41–45). Jenco suggests that common human experiences—such as suffering, relational obligations, and the pursuit of justice—can serve as starting points for dialogue. For instance, justice in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition emphasizes distributive and commutative fairness (*Nicomachean Ethics*, V.1), while Confucian *yi* (righteousness) highlights fulfilling one's role in the social hierarchy (Mencius, II.A.6). Despite these differences, the shared concern for social harmony and fairness enables constructive discussion.

Additionally, Rein Raud conceptualizes comparative philosophy as a dialogical, non-assimilative engagement, where traditions learn from each other without collapsing their frameworks (*Practices of Selfhood*, 2016, pp. 115–118). Using virtues as conceptual bridges fosters this dialogical process, allowing diverse traditions to converse over shared moral terrain while maintaining their distinctive voices.

6.2: Avoiding Direct Cultural Translation through Virtue-Based Mediation

One of the most delicate challenges in comparative philosophy lies in avoiding superficial translations of concepts across traditions. The danger of conceptual flattening is well noted by Bryan W. Van Norden, who warns against "domesticating" foreign concepts into familiar categories, thereby misrepresenting them (*Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, 2007, pp. 17–21). In response to this danger, a virtue-based approach avoids translating whole traditions into each other's terms and instead focuses on shared ethical concerns embodied in specific virtues.

Instead of asking, "What is the Confucian equivalent of Aristotelian justice?" a more productive question is, "How does each tradition address the moral imperative of social harmony and rightful conduct?" This shift enables a richer dialogue. For instance, while

li (ritual propriety) in Confucian ethics might be loosely associated with prudence (*phronesis*) in Aristotelian ethics, such a mapping risks obscuring the unique ritual and cosmological dimensions of *li*. The two traditions both aim at cultivating morally discerning agents, but their ontological assumptions differ: *li* embodies a cosmic relationality, whereas *phronesis* reflects practical rationality aimed at achieving individual and civic flourishing (Zhu Xi, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, ch. 1; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.5).

David B. Wong's pluralistic relativism provides a helpful framework here. In *Natural Moralities* (2006), Wong argues that distinct moral traditions may express different configurations of moral truth based on shared human concerns (pp. 40–55). Rather than demanding strict correspondence between terms, Wong encourages interpretive generosity and structural comparison—a position that reinforces the value of virtue realism without falling into dogmatism.

Furthermore, Kwong-loi Shun, in *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (1997), underscores the internal coherence of Confucian virtue cultivation and cautions against reducing *ren* to Western notions of empathy or benevolence (pp. 88–91). By focusing on how *ren* functions within a network of virtues like *li* and *yi*, Shun highlights the complexity of Confucian moral psychology, which is easily lost in direct translation.

Thus, a virtue-based comparative method allows for mediated dialogue: it enables discussion through shared concerns—like justice, reverence, or loyalty—while respecting conceptual integrity. It shifts the comparative task from terminological equivalence to philosophical resonance, where traditions can illuminate one another without being collapsed into each other.

6.3 Convergence Through Shared Virtues: Asymmetry and Complementarity in Dialogue

While the virtue-centered approach provides a shared axis for ethical dialogue, it does not imply that all traditions are equally equipped to articulate every dimension of virtue. Some frameworks are better suited for particular virtues, and this asymmetry should be acknowledged as part of the comparative process. Recognizing asymmetry allows traditions to learn from one another without undermining their internal coherence.

For instance, Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics, grounded in natural law and metaphysical teleology, offers a particularly rich account of rational structure and individual moral agency. Virtues like prudence, justice, and fortitude are analyzed in relation to human nature's rational end, which integrates both individual flourishing and the common

good (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 58, a. 5). This framework excels at dissecting the logical and rational components of virtue, offering conceptual clarity on issues like distributive justice or moral deliberation.

Conversely, Confucian ethics, particularly through *li* and *ren*, provides deeper resources for articulating relational and ritual dimensions of virtue. The Confucian system is particularly adept at embedding moral agency within the fabric of social roles and cosmic harmony (Zhu Xi, *Learning to Be a Sage*, pp. 12–18). This system captures aspects of moral life that are less emphasized in Aristotelian ethics, such as emotional attunement, ritual aesthetics, and relational obligations.

Acknowledging this complementarity enables what Sor-hoon Tan refers to as "critical engagement": each tradition can draw on the other's strengths while maintaining its internal structure (Tan, "Confucian Democracy," 2003, pp. 51–54). Such engagement need not be symmetrical. For example, a Thomistic philosopher might seek Confucian insights into relational ethics, while a Confucian scholar could engage Thomistic accounts of natural law to refine theories of justice beyond familial and ritual contexts.

This approach aligns with Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr.'s call for "role ethics" as an interpretive model for Confucianism (*The Confucian Mind*, 1998, pp. 101–106), which foregrounds relational roles rather than abstract moral rules. Engaging Thomistic natural law with Confucian role ethics can enrich both traditions: Thomism could incorporate relational dynamics more deeply, while Confucianism could sharpen its account of individual moral agency and justice.

Therefore, the virtue-centered approach fosters asymmetric complementarity: traditions engage each other through shared virtues, acknowledging both convergence and divergence in their mappings. This allows comparative ethics to transcend both homogenization and relativism, promoting genuine philosophical dialogue grounded in the universality of virtues.

7. Application: Asymmetric Dialogues and Philosophical Engagement

Building on the model of asymmetric complementarity outlined in the previous section, this part illustrates how the virtue-centered approach can be practically applied in philosophical engagement between traditions. It proposes a framework for cross-cultural ethical inquiry that respects both universality—the shared ground of virtues—and particularity—the conceptual vocabularies and metaphysical assumptions unique to each tradition.

7.1 The Case of Justice and Yi: Relationality and Distribution

Among the shared virtues that invite comparative reflection, justice in Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics and yi (righteousness) in Confucian ethics offer a compelling case study. At first glance, these concepts might seem incommensurable, reflecting MacIntyre's thesis of tradition-dependent rationality (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 1988, pp. 349–350). Yet, a closer analysis reveals overlapping moral concerns: both virtues regulate social life, ensuring fairness, order, and proper conduct, albeit through distinct cultural grammars.

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (V.1, 1129a), delineates justice into distributive and corrective forms, grounded in rational deliberation aimed at the common good. Justice ensures proportional equality within the polis, reflecting an individualist moral psychology that treats citizens as rational agents whose flourishing depends on fair participation in civic life.

By contrast, yi in Confucianism is relational and contextual. It governs one's appropriate conduct within a network of hierarchical relationships—whether between ruler and subject, parent and child, or friend and friend (Mencius, II.A.6). Mencius situates yi within the moral emotions and social roles cultivated by li (ritual propriety), highlighting that moral rightness is inseparable from context and role (Mencius, VI.A.10).

While Bryan Van Norden cautions against flattening these terms into equivalence (*Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*, 2007, pp. 17–21), a virtue-centered approach allows us to explore their convergence without erasing difference. Justice in Aristotle's model leans toward institutional fairness, while Confucian yi focuses on interpersonal appropriateness. Yet both aim at social harmony—a universal moral goal.

This asymmetry fosters mutual enrichment. Aristotelian-Thomistic justice can sharpen Confucian ethics' focus on non-familial institutions and legal mechanisms that sustain social order beyond personal relationships. Conversely, Confucian yi can remind Aristotelian frameworks that justice is not solely a matter of distributive structures but also of emotional resonance, ritualized conduct, and the moral texture of human relationships (Zhu Xi, *Learning to Be a Sage*, pp. 15–19).

In this dynamic, justice and yi become conceptual bridges: not reducible to one another but capable of dialogue. This dialogue aligns with Rein Raud's vision of comparative philosophy as an encounter that respects difference while seeking philosophical resonance (*Practices of Selfhood*, 2016, pp. 115–118).

7.2 Theological Engagement: Thomism and Confucianism in Asymmetric Dialogue

While this article maintains a philosophical orientation, the reality of comparative ethics is that some traditions—particularly Thomism—integrate both philosophical and theological elements. Engaging Confucianism with Thomism thus presents an exemplary case of asymmetric dialogue, where one tradition includes explicit theological commitments and the other does not. This asymmetry, far from being an obstacle, exemplifies the potential richness of cross-cultural engagement through virtues as mediators.

In Thomistic ethics, virtues operate on two distinct but interconnected planes: the cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance), rooted in natural law and accessible to all rational beings; and the theological virtues (faith, hope, charity), which orient human beings toward supernatural ends (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 62, a. 1). The theological virtues, especially charity (*caritas*), direct the will toward union with God and shape moral action in light of eschatological fulfillment.

In contrast, Confucian ethics, particularly as articulated by Zhu Xi and Tu Weiming, grounds moral life in the cosmic order of *tian* (Heaven) and emphasizes harmony within human and cosmic relationships (Zhu Xi, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, ch. 1; Tu, *Confucian Thought*, 1985, pp. 45–47). Virtues like *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (ritual propriety) are cultivated through social roles and rituals that align human beings with the dynamic flow of the cosmos. While Confucianism invokes transcendent principles (e.g., *tian*), it does not posit an eschatological horizon akin to Thomism’s vision of beatitude.

Despite these metaphysical differences, virtues provide a common conceptual ground. For instance, *caritas* in Thomism and *ren* in Confucianism share overlapping concerns for benevolent love and moral responsibility within communities. Yet their ontological grounding differs: *caritas* is infused by grace and oriented toward divine union, while *ren* arises from human relationality and cosmic attunement.

This asymmetry allows each tradition to illuminate the strengths and limits of the other. Thomism’s teleological framework sharpens the question of ultimate ends, prompting Confucianism to reflect on the scope and limits of its this-worldly harmonization. Conversely, Confucian ethics can challenge Thomism to reconsider the ritual, aesthetic, and relational dimensions of virtue cultivation often underdeveloped in Western discourse (Ames & Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 1987, pp. 89–95).

This philosophical-theological asymmetry echoes Sor-hoon Tan's emphasis on pluralistic engagement: different traditions may approach shared ethical concerns from distinct metaphysical angles, enriching the dialogue without necessitating full convergence (Tan, "Confucian Democracy," 2003, pp. 51–54). In this way, theological frameworks like Thomism can coexist within comparative ethics, contributing unique perspectives without dominating the discourse.

7.3 Toward a Framework for Comparative Ethical Inquiry: A Three-Stage Methodology

The preceding analyses of justice and *yi*, as well as the asymmetric engagement between Thomism and Confucianism, demonstrate that a virtue-centered approach offers more than a conceptual bridge—it proposes a methodological framework for comparative ethical inquiry. This framework respects the universality of virtues while honoring the particularity of cultural articulations. It proceeds in three stages, each designed to maintain philosophical rigor and cultural sensitivity.

Stage 1: Identification of Shared Virtues

The first step is to identify shared virtues across traditions. This stage requires distinguishing virtues that serve as common moral concerns, such as justice, benevolence, wisdom, or courage. The work of Martha Nussbaum in *Creating Capabilities* (2011, pp. 32–35) and *Non-relative Virtues* (1993, pp. 245–246) provides a valuable starting point. Nussbaum articulates a list of central human capabilities, each sustained by specific virtues, grounded in empirical and philosophical research across cultures.

Peterson and Seligman's *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004, pp. 13–25) complements this work, offering a taxonomy of six core virtues identified in major world traditions: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. This empirical grounding ensures that comparative ethics begins with shared moral terrain.

Stage 2: Mapping Cultural Articulations

Once shared virtues are identified, the second stage involves mapping how each tradition conceptualizes, cultivates, and prioritizes these virtues. This mapping respects the internal coherence of each tradition's ethical vocabulary, metaphysics, and moral psychology.

For example, prudence (*phronesis*) in Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics emphasizes rational deliberation guiding moral action (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.5). In Confucian

ethics, *li* (ritual propriety) serves a similar role in regulating conduct, but it also integrates aesthetic, emotional, and cosmic dimensions absent from Western prudence (Zhu Xi, *Learning to Be a Sage*, pp. 12–18). Mapping these articulations allows for philosophical resonance without reducing one concept to the other.

This stage aligns with Bryan Van Norden’s insistence on preserving conceptual integrity in comparative work (*Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*, 2007, pp. 17–21) and Kwong-loi Shun’s reminder that virtues like *ren* resist easy assimilation into Western categories (*Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 1997, pp. 88–91).

Stage 3: Constructive Engagement and Mutual Enrichment

The final stage fosters constructive engagement, where traditions learn from each other by illuminating and enriching their articulations of shared virtues. This process does not require conceptual assimilation but instead encourages philosophical growth through dialogue.

For instance, justice in Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics may expand its horizons by integrating Confucian insights on ritualized conduct and emotional attunement. Likewise, Confucian *yi* can engage Thomistic notions of natural law and institutional justice, offering fresh perspectives on the balance between personal relationships and systemic structures (Ames & Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 1987, pp. 89–95).

This model aligns with Rein Raud’s concept of dialogical comparison (*Practices of Selfhood*, 2016, pp. 115–118) and Sor-hoon Tan’s advocacy for pluralistic engagement (Tan, "Confucian Democracy," 2003, pp. 51–54). It allows comparative ethics to transcend relativism and homogenization, sustaining philosophical integrity while fostering mutual learning.

8. Conclusion: Virtues as Universal Anchors for Comparative Ethics—Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This article has advanced a virtue-centered model of comparative ethics rooted in virtue realism—the position that virtues are universal moral realities transcending specific cultural, historical, and metaphysical contexts. Against MacIntyre’s thesis of incommensurability, this model suggests that traditions as distinct as Aristotelian-Thomistic and Confucian ethics can engage constructively through shared moral concerns, even when their conceptual frameworks and metaphysical assumptions differ. By framing virtues as stable anchors, the approach avoids the pitfalls of cultural

relativism and ethnocentric assimilation, offering a nuanced pathway for philosophical engagement across traditions.

The geometrical metaphor of coordinate systems—Euclidean and spherical geometries—proved useful in illustrating how diverse traditions map the same moral landscape differently. Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics excels in articulating rational, teleological structures of virtue, while Confucian ethics highlights relational, ritual, and emotional dimensions. Each system brings distinct conceptual resources to the shared project of human flourishing.

The philosophical foundations and empirical validation provided by thinkers such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Confucius, Mencius, and contemporary scholars like Nussbaum, Haidt, Peterson, and Seligman reinforce the universality of virtues like justice, benevolence, and wisdom. These findings offer a robust justification for virtue realism, enabling a structured framework for comparative inquiry based on three stages: (1) identifying shared virtues, (2) mapping cultural articulations, and (3) fostering constructive engagement.

Limitations of the Study

However, this model has limitations that must be acknowledged:

- **Scope of Traditions:** This article focused primarily on Aristotelian-Thomistic and Confucian ethics. While these systems offer rich and contrasting frameworks, the conclusions drawn here may not generalize seamlessly to other traditions—such as Islamic, Buddhist, or African ethical systems—which may feature different ontological or epistemological assumptions.
- **Conceptual Overlap and Ambiguity:** The identification of shared virtues assumes that there are sufficient commonalities across traditions. Yet, cultural-specific nuances may resist full alignment. For instance, Confucian *li* cannot be wholly captured by prudence or justice in Western terms without losing its ritual and aesthetic dimensions. This tension highlights the interpretive challenges of even the virtue-centered approach.
- **Empirical Validation:** While this study draws on psychological and anthropological data (Haidt, Peterson, Seligman), empirical research remains predominantly Western-centered. There is a risk that universal claims about virtues reflect limited cultural samples, requiring broader empirical grounding across non-Western contexts.

Overcoming Limitations

To address these challenges, future research should:

- **Expand the Scope:** Incorporate Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and African ethical systems to test the flexibility and robustness of the virtue-centered model. Comparative studies engaging Islamic *adl* (justice) or Buddhist *karuṇā* (compassion) with Aristotelian or Confucian counterparts would enrich the discourse.
- **Deepen Meta-ethical Inquiry:** Explore how virtue realism can reconcile ontological pluralism with the claim of moral universality. Engaging with meta-ethical debates around moral realism, constructivism, and pluralism (e.g., Wong, Raud) could strengthen the philosophical grounding.
- **Diversify Empirical Research:** Encourage cross-cultural psychological studies that include non-Western samples. This would provide stronger empirical foundations for universal claims about virtues.

Future Directions

Building on these foundations, this model invites several avenues for future development:

- **Philosophical Deepening:** Address meta-ethical questions such as: How do virtues maintain ontological stability across conceptual schemes? Can virtue realism accommodate pluralism without collapsing into universalism?
- **Interdisciplinary Dialogue:** Integrate anthropology, psychology, and religious studies to refine the empirical and cultural grounding of the model, moving beyond philosophical abstraction.
- **Applied Ethics:** Explore how virtue-centered comparative ethics can inform contemporary issues such as climate ethics, human rights, or bioethics, where multiple cultural perspectives must be negotiated.

By positioning virtues as universal anchors for comparative ethics, this article reaffirms the possibility and necessity of philosophical dialogue across traditions. Virtues serve as conceptual bridges, sustaining the human search for flourishing across diverse landscapes, while respecting the integrity and depth of each tradition.

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