Journal of Dharma 49, 4 (October–December 2024), 555–560

BOOK REVIEW

ARISTOTLE AND XUNZI ON SHAME, MORAL EDUCATION, AND THE GOOD LIFE

YUHONG HAO, YU FENG & XUE WU♦

Jingyi Jenny Zhao. *Aristotle and Xunzi on Shame, Moral Education, and the Good Life*. Oxford University Press, 2024. xiii+178 pp. ISBN: 978–0197773161

Abstract: Jingyi Jenny Zhao's book Aristotle and Xunzi on *Shame, Moral Education, and the Good Life* comprises five chapters and an epilogue. It offers a significant contribution to the comparative study of Aristotle and Xunzi, two influential philosophers from distinct cultural and philosophical traditions—Greek and Chinese, respectively. By examining their perspectives on shame, moral education, and the good life, Zhao opens a vital cross-cultural dialogue that deepens our understanding of how emotions function in ethical formation. This book not only illuminates how each thinker constructs the role of shame within their moral frameworks but also invites interdisciplinary engagement with the complex nature of emotions in cultivating moral character and achieving a flourishing life.

Keywords: *Aristotle, Bian, Good Life*, *Shame, Moral Education, Phronimos*, *Xiu*, *Xin*, *Xunzi*.

♦ Yuhong Hao (corresponding author) is from College of Humanities and Management, Xi'an Traffic Engineering Institute. Xi'an, 710300, China. Email: haoyuhong1983@163.com

Yu Feng is from Department of Basic Courses Teaching, Xi'an Traffic Engineering Institute. Xi'an, 710300, China. Email: fengyu19851960@163.com

Xue Wu is from Department of Basic Courses Teaching, Xi'an Traffic Engineering Institute. Xi'an, 710300, China. Email: xuexue5211118@126.com

How are morality and emotions connected? Is morality primarily a personal virtue, or does it also serve the greater good of the community? Humans have an innate ability to discern between good and bad, and this discernment hinges on individual choices. Yet, one may ask: how do we distinguish between good and bad emotions? Can emotions themselves be morally categorized? And is it possible to develop a credible methodology for identifying and understanding different emotions? Emotions are deeply embedded in every culture, serving as vital channels for expressing meaning and experience. They are powerful tools for communication and reflection. When individuals learn to channel their emotions toward actions that promote both personal integrity and the common good, they embody the ideals of moral virtue—and perhaps even wisdom.

This raises further philosophical questions: Can there be such a thing as a universal emotion? Take, for instance, the emotion of shame—should it be critically understood as a moral self-assessment for the sake of communal harmony? Or is it more closely tied to feelings of regret or experiences of disrespect? To truly comprehend shame, we must move beyond its outward signs and examine its role in human relationships and behavioural tendencies. It is within these social and moral contexts that the deeper significance of emotion—and its connection to morality—emerges.

In the introduction, Zhao addresses the methodological issues related to cross-cultural comparisons and explores the role of 'shame' in examining the values of philosophers and their societies (4). She argues that the previous studies have perceived the emotion of shame as universal while understanding Aristotle's and Xunzi's concepts of shame and disgrace require a holistic understanding of their philosophical ethical frameworks. In other words, this work examines how reading Aristotle and Xunzi in parallel can complement and inform the study of each on topics such as emotions, moral education and the good life. Despite the two philosophies developed in different contexts, their discourses are similar enough for comparison (17-18).

In the first chapter, Zhao offers a comparative overview of

Aristotle's and Xunzi's intellectual backgrounds, laying a solid foundation for her cross-cultural textual analysis. By examining the sociohistorical contexts, literary traditions, and contemporaries of both philosophers, she identifies key similarities and differences between them. Notably, Aristotle and Xunzi were not the first thinkers in their traditions to address the concept of shame. Both drew significantly from their philosophical predecessors—Aristotle from Plato and Xunzi from Confucius—and built upon their legacies, often extending or challenging their insights. Despite their shared engagement with inherited traditions, Zhao highlights the profound differences shaped by their distinct contexts. These include variations in audience, geography, textual form and philosophical questions. Their respective political roles and social positions also informed their unique philosophical responses to moral and emotional life, resulting in distinct conceptual constructions of shame and its role in ethical cultivation (41).

Chapter two adopts a philological approach, comparing the vocabulary of shame in ancient Greek and Chinese traditions across generational and contextual lines. Zhao's comparative study extends beyond a surface-level lexical analysis, offering nuanced insight into how shame is linguistically and culturally constructed (42). By closely examining shame-related terminology in Aristotle and Xunzi, Zhao reveals that both traditions employ clusters of expressions that reflect self-conscious evaluations of one's behavior—particularly in relation to societal expectations and the judgment of others.

In Aristotle's works, Zhao explores the use and connotations of *aidōs* and *aischunē*, paying particular attention to whether these terms are interchangeable or carry distinct nuances. Similarly, in Xunzi's discourse, she analyzes terms such as *xiu*, *chi* and *ru*, situating them within broader ethical and social frameworks (52–54). Despite the linguistic and cultural differences, Zhao concludes that both philosophers use shame-related vocabulary to uphold moral values and reinforce interpersonal relationships (60). Shame, in both traditions, is understood not as a mere emotional reaction but as a deeply rooted human disposition

essential for cultivating virtue and demonstrating exemplary behavior within one's community.

Chapter three addresses the functionality of shame as a unique human capacity essential for fulfilling one's moral duty and fostering community consciousness. Zhao presents shame not merely as an individual emotional experience, but as a profoundly social emotion integral to community life. Her analysis is particularly compelling in its comparative approach, examining the concept of *logos* in Aristotle alongside *bian* (辨/辯), meaning differentiation or argumentation, in Xunzi. Zhao emphasizes that, for both Aristotle and Xunzi, the social dimension of human life is central to the development of moral consciousness. Unlike animals, who lack logos and *bian*, humans possess the unique capacity to make and transmit value judgments. Consequently, notions such as "shame" and "morality" are inapplicable to non-human animals, as these concepts presuppose the ability to engage in reflective social interactions. (63).

Chapter Four delves deeper into the developmental dimensions of shame and morality in the thought of Aristotle and Xunzi, examining how the emotion of shame contributes to the cultivation of a morally refined individual. Both philosophers present models of behaviour that emphasize the transformation of shame from a reactive emotion into a constructive force for moral progress. Unlike much of the existing literature—which tends to frame shame either negatively, as psychologically destructive (akin to guilt), or punitively, as a response to wrongdoing—Zhao highlights how Aristotle and Xunzi reinterpret shame as a dynamic instrument for self-improvement and ethical formation.

For Aristotle, the *phronimos* (the practically wise person) exemplifies moral maturity by harmonizing rational deliberation with appropriate desires. Similarly, Xunzi's ideal person is marked by a cultivated heart-mind (*xin*) that can critically reflect on thoughts and actions, ultimately selecting morally appropriate desires. Both thinkers assert that moral excellence involves transcending base inclinations in favor of acting according to

objective moral goods. In this sense, exemplary individuals are not driven by social validation or public opinion but by an inner orientation toward the good (115). For them, the goal is not the pursuit of individual happiness, but the realization of common well-being as a way of life. Zhao's interpretation moves away from understanding shame as an emotion tied to guilt or punishment. Instead, she presents it as a transformative moral force rooted in innate knowledge and internal ethical refinement, rather than external rewards like status or honor. The cultivation of shame becomes an aesthetic and moral experience—one that fosters selflessness and dedication to community service. This view, in fact, repositions shame not as a developmental liability, but as a foundational virtue in moral education with enduring relevance for the modern world.

The final chapter presents the conclusive findings and broader implications of Zhao's research, particularly concerning the intersection of moral cultivation, ethics and political life. Building on the previous chapters' exploration of the relationship between shame and morality in both Aristotelian and Xunzian frameworks, Zhao shifts her focus to gendered dimensions of shame and the role of morally cultivated individuals in public life. She contrasts how each tradition conceptualizes shame in relation to women. In the Greek context, Zhao examines traditional sources such as Herodotus' story of Gyges to highlight how shame is often tied to acts of seduction and dishonor, particularly concerning women. In contrast, Chinese philosophical texts rarely portray such narratives in the context of imperial figures. Zhao argues that while male moral failure is prominently depicted in both traditions, concerns for women's moral agency are often sidelined. Although Xunzi treats shame in a generally gender-neutral manner, without explicit differentiation between the experiences of men and women (127–128), Zhao highlights how political and moral transformation remains largely the domain of men, with women's roles constrained to limited and situational contexts (131). The author finally moves toward a comparative reflection on the political dimensions of moral cultivation. Aristotle asserts that a well-functioning constitution depends on

legislators who instill virtue in citizens and shape moral norms—particularly for the youth—thereby linking individual moral education directly with political stability. Xunzi, by contrast, emphasizes personal transformation through the cultivation of li (ritual propriety) over personal ambition, suggesting that societal harmony can only be achieved when individuals prioritize moral discipline and self-regulation over self-interest (138). The epilogue serves as a comprehensive summary, describing the integrated approaches of both Aristotle and Xunzi within a cross-cultural framework.

By engaging with two distinct texts rooted in different cultural and historical contexts, Zhao's study offers a broad and insightful framework for understanding moral development. Through its cross-cultural methodology, the book introduces fresh perspectives on cultivating moral character, both in rulers and in individuals more broadly. However, the work falls short in its practical application. The absence of case studies limits the pragmatic value of the philosophical insights presented. Moreover, the study gives only cursory attention to Christian thought, particularly regarding the notions of shame and guilt, which could have enriched the comparative scope. A deeper engagement with biblical perspectives would have strengthened the dialogue between Western and Eastern traditions. Despite these limitations, the book stands as a significant contribution to cross-cultural and comparative scholarship. It is a valuable resource for students, educators, practitioners and all those interested in Greek and Chinese philosophies, especially in the context of moral and ethical education.