

Art of Emotional Distancing: Comparative Notes on Ethical Thoughts of Aristotle, Confucius and Chuang-Tzu

❑ Moderation in All Things: A Cross-cultural/historical guide to a Good Life



❑ Aristotle: A virtuous person seeks a **middle** point between two extremes.

There are also means in the passions and concerned with the passions; since shame is not a virtue, and yet praise is extended to the modest man. For even in these matters one man is said to be intermediate, and another to exceed, as for instance the bashful man who is ashamed of everything; while he who falls short or is not ashamed of anything at all is shameless, and the intermediate person is modest. Righteous indignation (*nemesian*) is a mean between envy and spite, and these states are concerned with the pain and pleasure that are felt at the fortunes of our neighbours; the man who is characterized by righteous indignation is pained at undeserved good fortune, the envious man, going beyond him, is pained at all good fortune, and the spiteful man falls so far short of being pained that he even rejoices. But these states there will be an opportunity of describing elsewhere; with regard to justice, since it has not one simple meaning, we shall, after describing the other states, distinguish its two kinds and say how each of them is a mean; and similarly we shall treat also of the rational virtues. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk2:7)

❑ Confucius: *Ren* (authoritative conduct/person) keeps *Yi* (rightness/duty) at a **distance**.

The Master said, "Exemplary persons (*Junzi*, Confucius gentleman/scholar) in making their way (*Dao*) in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (*Yi*)" (*Analect* 4:10); Master Zeng was ill. And when Meng Jingzi questioned him, Master Zeng said to Meng Jingzi, "Baleful is the cry of a dying bird; felicitous (*Shan*, good/beneficiary) are the words of a dying person. There are three things that exemplary persons consider of utmost importance in making their way: by maintaining a dignified demeanour, they keep violent and rancorous conduct at a distance; by maintaining a proper countenance, they keep trust and confidence near at hand; by taking care in choice of language and mode of expression, they keep vulgarity and impropriety at a distance. As for the details in the arrangement of ritual vessels, there are minor officers to take care of such things." (*Analect* 8:4)

❑ Chuang-Tzu: *Qi* (cosmic energy, undying particular) **remains** perfect; so, why worry?

When Chuang-Tzu's wife died, Huizi came to mourn her. At that moment, Chuang-Tzu was squatting down, beating on a tub, and singing. Huizi said, "You lived with this person, raised children, and grew old together. Not to cry when she died would be bad enough. But to beat on a tub singing! Isn't that too much?" Chuang-Tzu said, "No. When she first died, don't you think I was like everyone else? But then I considered her beginning, before she was alive. Not only before she had life, but before she had form. Not only before she had form, but before she had *qi*. In all the mixed-up bustle and confusion, something changed and there was *qi*. The *qi* changed and there was form. The form changed and she had life. Today there was another change and she died. It's just like the round of the four seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter. She was resting quietly, perfectly at home, and I follow her crying 'Wah-hah!' It seemed like I hadn't comprehended fate. So I stopped." (*Chuang Tzu*, Ch 18: Perfect Happiness)