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THE ROLE OF BEAUTY AS AN ANALOGY IN ANCIENT GREEK AND CHINESE  
PHILOSOPHIES

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**Abstract**

Ancient Chinese and Greek philosophies are striking in their differences, but they are more striking in their similarities. One similarity in particular stands out: the use of aesthetic language to describe truth, value and the good life. Why is it that beauty appears to be the analogy of choice when no other analogy goes far enough? This paper seeks to answer that question via a thorough investigation and comparison of early philosophies of both cultures. By using early cultures and limited philosophers, excess influences are minimized to focus on these specific philosophers and the topic at hand. Lao Tzu, Confucius, Socrates, and Plato were chosen as the leaders of their fields, pseudo-contemporaries and emblematic of the cultures they represent. This allows for an examination of the interplay between philosophers and how the aesthetic analogy is developed.

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## Introduction

Ancient Greece and China were two of the most important and influential societies in the world, and both had strong philosophical presences. While each philosophy is clearly separate and distinct from the other, there are striking similarities between some major themes and ideas of the works of early philosophers in these societies. The overwhelming success of these early societies coupled with their strong philosophies leads one to question the connections between them. If there a universal key to success via philosophy, it may be possible to find some parts of it by examining what made these philosophies special and long lasting.

While it may be expected that both of these philosophies would focus on ethics, behavior, and the nature of society, given that they were critical in creating that society, they both consider concepts far more abstract and less immediate. Specifically, the relationship between beauty, goodness, and truth is discussed by several philosophers in works that have been influential for millennia. In these philosophies, there is frequently a “beauty analogy” that compares beauty, both concrete and abstract, to goodness or truth in any level of abstraction. I will attempt to understand why this analogy was so universal and how different philosophers' views compare. I will go on to pursue what that says about those societies, and whether the universal quality of the analogy gives us any greater insight into today's society.

In attempting to answer this question, I will examine both primary and secondary sources by and about some of the most important philosophers in these early societies. I will show that a variety of messages arise concerning the nature of beauty and its relationship to society, and that these messages bestow importance upon art. I will also

analyze aesthetic language and its use as an analogy. The underlying assumptions involved in the analogy may support a universal view of metaphysics, which may also have interesting importance for these philosophies.

Beauty's use as a philosophical tool is still seen today. It is so ingrained in our language that it becomes hard to avoid, and references to beauty or elegance as an ultimate goal are frequent. The status of beauty juxtaposed against some of the most important philosophical goals ever pursued shows that beauty is an important part of our human and philosophical lives. How did beauty reach this status and why?

My interest in a comparative study of philosophies began when I took tai chi as a class, and learned about taoism. There are many parts of taoism that are completely foreign and antithetical to Western philosophy and the way we tend to see the world. As I began to learn more about philosophy, I found that I had a specific interest in early thought, specifically in ancient Greece and China. I found significant correlations between their different philosophies, mostly in terms of ethics.

Commonalities among ethics did not surprise me too much, because every society must be built upon some mutual agreements and understandings in order that the people of the society may exist in harmony. I expected to find an emphasis on loyalty, moderation, self-control, and other rules of interaction critical for the success of a society. I found that my pragmatic bias was a poor assumption because while I did find those, I also found that there was another, less obvious similarity: that of aesthetic references and analogies.

Humans have always had the urge to create art. What I have found, though, indicates that beauty is a universal human concept. Only then could the aesthetic analogy

work to communicate its meaning to others. This power of artistic language to communicate messages beyond the tangible has fascinated me since I saw its range of use. Since then, I have found that beauty appears to be an ideal, something abstract and esoteric that is still more accessible than most abstract philosophical concepts. It is frequently used as a bridge to help people understand something difficult by comparison. It also seems to be used across a wide range of space and time. There are few analogies as universal as this is, and I am intrigued to investigate what makes aesthetics work and how different comparable philosophers use it.

If this analogy is as universal as it appears to be, it could have fascinating implications for understanding how we think about art and philosophy, as well as the ancient cultures that have shaped our world today. This analogy could introduce a way of understanding how it is that we push ourselves to understand concepts and ideas outside the realm of reality. It could bring the abstract and concrete closer together and provide a means of discourse between many more people who think in many different ways.

In order to understand this analogy, I will first examine the main philosophical voices in each society and their biological histories (where there is one). This should help create a basis upon which to understand the complicated relationships between ideas that are later explained by the analogy. Then, I will examine how the analogy is used in specific examples by specific philosophers, and compare these uses, their function, and their overall success. Finally, I will conclude by offering an understanding of the analogy across societies and show future applications or understandings of the analogy and others like it. I will also examine the use of such a universal analogy in our lives today.

## Ancient Greek Philosophers

Within ancient Athenian culture, the role of philosophers was tenuous. Many citizens disliked a class of people known as the sophists. The sophists would promise to teach people what they knew for a price. Much of the education was overrated and expensive, but it was a privilege of the wealthy to learn. The sophists would teach people how to win arguments, rather than how to think critically, ensuring that those with education would remain in power. The ancient Athenian upper echelon was made up with people of many professions, but sophists had power and the courts, though similar in some ways, were unlike ours today.

The role of Socrates in ancient Greek philosophy is undeniably central and essential to the philosophers who came after him. He was a father figure to Plato, he was a political figure in Athens, and he was a martyr for his philosophical beliefs. We know he was unattractive and that he spent much of his time asking sophists about what they claimed to know. When he did this, he would point out inconsistencies he saw in an attempt to better understand the subject, but this would trip up the powerful sophists. People enjoyed watching Socrates use the sophists' own words against them, but this earned Socrates many very rich and powerful enemies. Socrates was put to death in 399 BCE for the charges of corruption of children and blasphemy. These charges are likely false, but Socrates defended himself in court (very poorly) and refused to be exiled, which forced the punishment of death.

This is part of the little we know for sure about Socrates, because he never personally documented any part of his life or thoughts. Without any autobiographical information, everything we know about this very controversial figure is known purely

through second-hand sources, many of which used the figure of Socrates to advance a personal agenda. Socrates is such a central character in Athens at the time that he appears to have been caricatured while he was still alive. He was easily recognizable and popular, so he would quickly become a character in plays, dialogues and memoirs. However, each time he is taken to be a character, we lose objectivity about the life of such an influential and important man.

Though Socrates is a critical player in the theater of Greek life, he never wrote anything himself. What we know of Socrates comes from the people around him and the roles he plays in their discourse. Socrates figures most prominently in Plato's work, frequently used as a protagonist in the dialogues, and represents both himself and the ideal philosopher. In many cases, it appears that Plato speaks directly through Socrates, making it extremely difficult to discern precisely who is speaking. Since Plato could be the most influential philosopher in history, Socrates has a permanent place in philosophical discourse, even if they are not his ideas that are being disbursed.

Xenophon, another lesser-known Greek philosopher, also documented memoirs of Socrates. Xenophon's portrayal of Socrates has many inconsistencies with Plato's depiction, causing questions of who, if anyone, is giving an accurate portrayal of such an important man. Xenophon's Socrates is far less philosophically certain than Plato's. While Plato's and Xenophon's views differ in philosophical regard, they agree on the kind of man Socrates was in society.<sup>1</sup> Wherever there is disagreement is a possibility of dilution of the true Socrates and an opportunity to present one's own agenda, which is especially true of other philosophers.

Socrates also appears as a main character in Aristophanes's *The Clouds*.

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<sup>1</sup> Waterfield, "Introduction," 15.

Socrates's role is considered by some to be a farce of the sophists, the very people Socrates attempted to learn from while simultaneously turning their ideas upside-down, much to the amusement of the Athenians. This earned Socrates enemies among some of the most respected and best-educated men in Greece at that time. Others take the role more seriously as a biographical narration, although this goes against many accounts of Socrates and his personality. Either way, some parts of the written record of Socrates must be farcical, false, or fictionalized.

This collection of contrasting life stories adds a level of mystery to an already mysterious man. Every view we have of Socrates is seen through the lens of someone else, frequently someone who is creating a philosophy or editorializing on reality. This skews and undermines any statement we make about him and leads us only to opinions about who he really was.

While Socrates is an enigma of ancient Greece, we know far more about other people of importance at that time. Plato, for instance, was a student of Socrates and witnessed his teacher's execution-by-suicide when he was just twenty-five. We have reason to believe that Plato was a wealthy and prominent member of Athenian society. He began to write about Socrates later in life, and scholars show that Plato's works go from a consistent record of Socratic beliefs to a more opinionated recollection of events that more represented Plato's own ideas than his teacher's.<sup>2</sup> Plato's own life and death were significantly less dramatic than Socrates's. Plato eventually opened schools to educate young Athenians, and wrote much on the subject of education in the *Republic*.<sup>3</sup>

A curious part of Greek philosophy as a whole is its attempt to question, reaffirm,

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2 Kraut, Richard. "Plato."

3 Plato, *Republic*.

and consider a variety of options before it chooses a philosophy, allowing the reader to understand the thought process that allowed the thinkers to arrive at the final position. This is seen especially well throughout Plato's dialogues, as he introduces different characters to present different, progressively more advanced ideas on a topic until a climax is reached. This method is a part of Plato's early works, but is essential to his later dialogues such as *Symposium* and the *Republic*.

In *Symposium*, the topic of love is addressed by a group of highly-educated Athenian men. Their discussion starts in a very concrete, simple way, and increases in complexity and abstraction until Socrates's monologue of love. Each character develops the earlier topics and advances the conversation. The reader is shown the strengths and weaknesses of each progressive argument, and given the nature of dialogue, is free to make up his or her own mind as to the best response or Plato's personal opinion, if it is present at all. The lack of a determined conclusion for each work means that only after reading a significant number of Platonic works can a reader begin to decipher what is Plato's own opinion and philosophy. This is further complicated by Plato's use of Socrates in his dialogues, many of which occurred after Socrates's death. Since Plato never appears in his own dialogues, where he stands on any given issue is murky.

Many times, Socrates argues things that are likely contradictory to what he actually believes, such as when he condones extreme censorship in the *Republic*.<sup>4</sup> In this case, he uses censorship as a tool in the building of an ideal society, and certainly not in the current one. What's more, he is only using the building of an ideal society as a metaphor for the soul in his search for justice. Here, censorship plays an important role in helping to create a different impression of death than the one currently popular, so that

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4 Plato, *Republic*, 379A

his ideal guardians will not be afraid of death. Socrates's argument for censorship is just that – an argument. It is not meant to be taken as his or Plato's true opinion, but as a tool in a thought experiment. This example shows how it can be extremely difficult to say for certain what either Plato or Socrates believed, and even if they believed what they argued.

Greek philosophy faced several daunting problems just to survive, and these questions are still a part of philosophical discourse today. Philosophers had a somewhat outsider view of society, a distance needed to analyze and understand the powers at work. They had to be separate enough to be relatively objective and consider many alternative explanations for things around them, while still being a part of society enough to survive, make money, and have a perspective within society as well. The theme of where the philosopher sits relative to society is subtly addressed in Plato's *Republic* from the very beginning, where we hear of Socrates going down to the edge of the city to observe a festival.<sup>5</sup> Even this imagery has the sense of an outsider, of someone outside of the city, and of someone who observes rather than partakes in. Later in the *Republic*, Socrates argues that the philosopher should be the ruler of the city, even as he admits that his opinion will sound absurd and strange.<sup>6</sup> The juxtaposition between the philosopher as an outsider and the philosopher as the ultimate insider is striking, and there is much conversation about who should be a philosopher and where the philosopher should be within the city.

This leads to the question of the utility of the philosopher. Plato implies through Socrates's argument in the *Republic* that the philosopher is useful precisely because he or

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5 Plato, *Republic*, 327A

6 Plato, *Republic*, 473C

she does the things that are not always considered useful. Daydreaming, observing the night sky, and keeping track of the changing of the seasons may not seem very useful, but the information gathered may help a ship navigate, for instance.<sup>7</sup> It has been a question ever since of how useful a philosopher can be to society, and how we should treat that philosopher. What are philosophers experts of, exactly? While Plato attempts to argue that the fact that it is hard to answer the question shows their utility, it is hard to deny that there is a need for concrete skills that philosophers do not possess.

The metaphysical conversation about the relationship between particulars and universals is also a source of disagreement between society and philosophy. Plato famously discusses universals as true things, and uses the beauty analogy, among other things, to support his claims. However, society is not directly affected by the difference between particulars and universals. The importance of one of the most novel ideas in history is not very important, relatively speaking, to society as a whole. The idea of universals could be argued as the lynch-pin concept of Plato's idea of the good, but it is often dismissed. Plato argues that in order to find love, it is essential to look for the highest beauty, and to love beauty, until one reaches the pure idea of beauty, truth, and the good, at which point, one has found the greatest thing to love, given birth to true virtue, and is loved by the gods.<sup>8</sup> Only with a concept of universals would it be possible to have a pure beauty, truth, or good.

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7 Plato, *Republic*, 488A – 489A

8 Plato, *Symposium*, 212A

## Ancient Chinese Philosophers

There were several very distinct thinkers in ancient Chinese society, but we will focus on Confucius and Lao Tzu for their differences, early adoption, and long lasting impact. In many ways, they are opposites. Confucius focuses on daily practice and the layman. He attempts to form a philosophy that can be accessible to each person and that will form a society. Lao Tzu, however, spends very little time in the concrete realm, preferring instead to try to confer the meaning of the *tao* (or the way) to his followers. In some ways, they are two sides of the same coin, but in others, they are fiercely separate in what they hope to achieve and who their audiences are.

Confucius spent much of his life in exile. He was born in Lu province around 551 BCE, but little more of his biography is definitively known. His society did not appreciate what he could provide them and he spent his life wandering from one Chinese province to another, looking for work and a place where he could help influence politics and teach his ideas. It was not until after Confucius died that he became famous and his philosophy spread around China. Confucius did document his ideas in writing, but we do not have a direct line that can be definitely attributed to him.<sup>9</sup> His ideas have been written from memory by his students, and are frequently a short dialogue or response to something happening in the real world.<sup>10</sup>

Confucius's philosophy is built around the ideal citizen, and what it means to live within a society. He puts emphasis on culture and Chinese tradition, referencing the ancients and the Odes. In essence, he believed that through proper behavior and ritual, people can develop moral, virtuous beliefs and become good citizens. By respecting the

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<sup>9</sup> Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 51 – 52.

<sup>10</sup> Slingerland, Edward, Trans. *Confucius Analects*

ancient ways and reading traditional texts, people could build a great society, lead by *wu wei*, or effortless, spontaneous inaction. Leading by *wu wei* would return the country to the state of harmony it was in in the beginning, according to Confucius. Since Confucius's ideal society would be ruled by a virtuous man, obeisance of leadership in the society would lead to the good of all. Authority and social order are critical, while metaphysical or universal truths are considered irrelevant to the layman.<sup>11</sup>

Lao Tzu had a much different focus. Different sources place Lao Tzu in time either before Confucius as his master, far later, or even simply a legend, and thus far there has been no accepted determination of who he really was. However, Lao Tzu's concentration on the metaphysical tao means that he responds very little to society. Lao Tzu attempts to communicate just how beyond our grasp the tao is, and implies that through *wu wei* and a connection to the tao, one can attain the good life. Lao Tzu also establishes the concept of no resistance, that to beat an enemy, it is important to use his own strength against him. This relates to the concept of opposites flowing into one another, represented by the taijitu symbol, also known in Western culture as the “yin-yang” sign.<sup>12</sup>

Legend has it that Confucius and Lao Tzu fought, and it is a fight that will sound familiar today. Confucius accuses Lao Tzu of being distant and out of touch from reality and society, while Lao Tzu argues that Confucius is missing the whole point. This is an argument about just how abstract philosophy should be and who philosophy is for. When philosophy is about society and the layman, a more concrete philosophy makes sense, while an abstract philosophy takes far more time and energy to study and master, but may

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<sup>11</sup> Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 62.

<sup>12</sup> I owe much of my knowledge of Lao Tzu and Taoism to tai chi teacher Amalia Shaltiel.

perhaps yield more truth.

However abstract his teachings, Lao Tzu did use tools to help his followers, including the beauty analogy. He writes, “Music and dainty dishes can only make a passing guest pause. But the words of the Tao possess lasting effects, Though they are mild and flavorless, Though they appeal neither to the eye nor to the ear.”<sup>13</sup> Here, Lao Tzu proposes a thought experiment of sorts. If we consider music and fine dishes and other household decorations, it is clear that we invest in them. We spend money to make our guest feel welcome and to make our homes beautiful, but the most that can happen is that a guest pauses for a moment to enjoy it, and then moves on. The enjoyment the guest experiences by seeing and hearing what may be considered beautiful is nothing compared to the tao. The tao will help a person feel as if she was in the presence of an even greater beauty all the time. It may never be a spectacular event, but it is constant, even if the music stops and the dishes break. Lao Tzu is appealing to the common person here. This is a person who strives for beauty and power in their lives. Lao Tzu shows a beautiful scene and compares the timeless tao to it. This is an analogy that will appeal to anyone who has a home or has been a guest at someone else's.

Just as Lao Tzu uses tools to help the common man understand his philosophy, Confucius also reached towards the metaphysical. “The Master said, 'Set your heart upon the Way, rely upon Virtue, lean upon Goodness, and explore widely in your cultivation of the arts.’”<sup>14</sup> Here, Confucius is telling his disciple that there are some very important metaphysical concepts, including the Way, virtue, and goodness, and that along with his teachings of tradition and authority, it is possible to follow the Way by cultivating the

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<sup>13</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*, pg 79, Ch 35.

<sup>14</sup> Slingerland, *Confucius Analects*, p. 65, Book 7.6

arts. The cultivation of the arts is the only part of this recommendation that is concrete, and we see a usually pragmatic Confucius explain a little further what it is that underlies some of his teaching.

In this regard, Confucius and Lao Tzu are strikingly similar. They each study the tao, but focus on very different aspects of it and recommend different actions based on their focus. Both try to reach all groups of people, and help them reach the best life possible.

### **A Comparison of the Beauty Analogy in Each Society**

The beauty analogy appears to be common in both societies, and is used in similar ways in each. In each case, worldly examples of beauty are compared with the ultimate beauty, to show the relationship between something concrete and its abstraction. This relationship is often seen with truth or goodness. What is it about truth and goodness that lend themselves to this kind of analogy, and why is this particular analogy so frequently used?

In the beauty analogy, the abstraction is what is best described. A philosopher seeking truth may use the beauty analogy to clarify the difference between everyday truth (like it is a Wednesday) and a universal Truth, something beyond the normal definition of truth and something unchanging over time. The beauty analogy is helpful here because people can imagine how it would feel, viscerally, to see something more beautiful than anything that they had ever seen before, but have more trouble imagining something more true than normal truth.

The key here is the aesthetic feeling. The feeling of knowing something is beautiful is a universal human experience. The idea of aesthetics is extremely complicated, but there seems to be a concrete instinct that something is beautiful. Having had this reaction, one can imagine a stronger reaction to something even more beautiful, even if it is hard to describe or verbalize. The difficulty of verbalizing an experience or goal, like truth, is what brings us to the beauty analogy.

Understanding the feeling of recognizing beauty may indicate better what the philosopher is trying to describe with the beauty analogy. This reaction to beauty as a human experience is more concrete than the abstract concepts of truth or goodness,

especially when we cannot define such commonly used and important terms. This would indicate that the relationship between truth, goodness, and beauty may be our human reaction to each in their universal form. Their particulars may not be similar in the least, but their universal forms may have strong similarities, even identities, that philosophers are attempting to find. The existence of a metaphysical connection is also implied by these analogies and may help us comprehend their whole meanings.

Though the beauty analogy exists in both ancient Chinese and Greek societies, it is used differently in different places and towards different ends. Through examples of its use in several influential works, I hope to understand better what its purpose is and whether it is simply an analogy or whether there is a stronger connection between beauty, truth, goodness, love, and justice.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima teaches Socrates that the way to find real, true love is to love beauty in its forms, from concrete to progressively more abstract. She instructs Socrates to begin by loving beautiful bodies, then beautiful souls, then wisdom,<sup>15</sup> and then says:

The man... is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for his earlier labors: First it always *is* and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others.<sup>16</sup>

As Diotima explains this, she describes how it is that beauty becomes more and more abstract, from what we see to feel to know until one has a glimpse of a pure, true beauty.

The analogy here is between beauty and love, and it argues that to find the true and

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210A – 210E

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210E – 211A

abstract nature of love, one can turn to beauty as a vehicle. By studying and loving beauty, one will increase one's own love. When true beauty is reached, so is the state of true love, because of this exercise.

She goes on to say, “only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty).”<sup>17</sup> Here, Diotima shows that the benefits of investigating beauty are not just for love's sake or for beauty's own sake, but also for the sake of virtue itself. This strong connection between beauty and virtue may be surprising, considering that the topic at hand was love. Plato assumes a fundamental, universal connection between love, beauty, and virtue. This assumption is puzzling and it is unclear where it comes from. It follows from the argument that the relationship between beauty and virtue is similar to that between love and beauty; that is, they support and strengthen each other. What is striking about adding virtue to love and beauty is the lack of feeling associated with virtue relative to love and beauty. In order for all of these to work together and for Plato's analogy to make sense, Plato is likely assuming a moral feeling or reaction to virtue. It is possible that Plato is arguing that when one's understanding and reaction to beauty is strong enough, that feeling will expand beyond beauty, into love and into other parts of life, including virtue and truth (the love of wisdom may come into play here). What Diotima is also saying here is that one can only be as virtuous as one is understanding of beauty. Only when one sees true Beauty can one stop using images and employ true virtue, rather than an approximation of it.

All of this is extremely cohesive with Plato's metaphysics. In short, Plato had a universals view of metaphysics, one in which any particular item instantiates to some

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<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212A.

degree a universal concept.<sup>18</sup> In this case, the particular beauties that Diotima refers to include people and wisdom, which she says can only produce a particular instantiation of virtue, *not virtue itself*, because the beauties are not Beauty itself. However, upon reaching the true beauty or the universal beauty, one can produce true virtue, instead of simple images or shadows of it.

Confucius uses the beauty analogy in a far more concrete way, but still makes a strong link between culture and virtue, saying, “Someone who is broadly learned with regard to culture, and whose conduct is restrained by the rites, can be counted upon not to go astray.”<sup>19</sup> Confucius puts a large emphasis on ritual and tradition, which he refers to as culture and the rites. Culture here is used to mean “writing... training in ritual, the classics, music... and later training in the 'six arts' of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics.”<sup>20</sup> Someone broadly learned with regard to this kind of culture would certainly know beauty, specifically through music and calligraphy. Confucius goes on to say that this person would not go astray, which implies a moral uprightness.

So again, we see a juxtaposition of beauty and virtue or morality, but from a very different tradition with very different effects. Confucius's use of the beauty analogy has a far less metaphysical implication, but it does indicate an assumption of a strong relationship between beauty and goodness. It also indicates that learning about beauty will lead to more virtuous behavior, which is the same effect that Plato described through Diotima in *Symposium*. Not only will that person act well, but that person will also act consistently, as indicated by the idea of counting on him, or trusting him.

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18 Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, 17.

19 Slingerland, Edward, Trans. *Confucius Analects*, ch. 6.27.

20 Slingerland, Edward, Trans. *Confucius Analects*. p. 237.

Confucius is also using the word “astray” which reflects his use of the way metaphor for a path to the good. This implies that there is only one way to get there, and it by necessity includes culture. Without culture and beauty, the man cannot be elevated to the level of trust and consistency that Confucius describes here.

Lao Tzu is perhaps the most abstract in his use of beauty, but he says, “A good word will find its own market. A good deed may be used as a gift to another... Let others offer their discs of jade, following it up with teams of horses; It is better for you to offer the Tao without moving your feet!”<sup>21</sup> Here, Lao Tzu describes princely gifts to be given to an emperor at his enthronement. Discs of jade and teams of horses would be both useful and beautiful, but Lao Tzu maintains that there is a better gift. He is saying that no matter how beautiful something might be, the Tao is even better. A good deed is a better gift than something beautiful, and this again compares virtue and beauty. Lao Tzu is talking about serving others through good words and deeds, and that is the tao. The tao is the ultimate good, the universal way. Lao Tzu is not interested in outer beauty, and says often that “[The Sage] prefers what is within to what is without.”<sup>22</sup> When he refers to worldly beauty, it is often with a tone of dismissal. Here, he uses it as a tool to compare the greatest, most beautiful or expensive gifts possible to the tao to show that even the greatest worldly beauty imaginable cannot be a better gift than that of the tao through good deeds. This shows that people, if not Lao Tzu, find something fundamentally good about beautiful things. We value them as gifts and spend time and money on them.

Lao Tzu finds outer beauty dangerous because it can distract from virtue and inner beauty. He writes, “The greatest perfection seems imperfect... The greatest

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21 Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*, Ch. 62.

22 Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*, Ch. 72.

straightness looks like crookedness. The greatest skill appears clumsy. The greatest eloquence sounds like stammering.”<sup>23</sup> Here he is discussing the tao and how external assumptions may make what is good look less elegant than it truly is. By worldly standards of prestige and power, the tao does look very bland, and what is good is not always exciting.

Plato makes a similar argument in his *Republic* when he writes as Socrates, “[The] lovers of listening and of sights devote themselves to beautiful sounds and colors and shapes and everything crafted out of such things, but their thinking is incapable of seeing and devoting itself to the nature of the beautiful itself.”<sup>24</sup> This is the problem Lao Tzu sees with the beautiful. When what is beautiful becomes equated with worldly beauty and wealth, the nature of the beautiful itself becomes neglected, and it can no longer be used to elevate one's thinking. At that point, beauty is no longer able to be connected with virtue, morality or truth because it does not have the same universal property.

However, none of these philosophers are referring to strictly worldly beauty. They may, as Plato does, start there, but each shows that the true beauty is within. Plato and Confucius use beauty both for a means to an end and as a goal in itself, but they both view it as necessary to reach goals of virtue and love. Lao Tzu is cautious of external beauty, and uses it as a metaphor for external frivolity rather than a true good. In so doing, however, he also points to virtue and love as the truly beautiful and valuable goals.

These philosophers are explicit in their use of beauty as a metaphor, but aesthetics are not only used as an analogy in these works, but as a model for the works themselves.

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<sup>23</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*, Ch. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 476B.

The distinct writing styles points to this, as different styles are employed to communicate different concepts. The *Tao Teh Ching* attempts to communicate extremely ephemeral ideas about an unknown but constantly present energy and tao. Thus, its style of poetry and riddle-like chapters to describe different aspects of the tao and of life within it is well suited for its task. Using visual language and not giving explicit clarity describes something about the cloudy nature of the tao itself.

The *Confucius Analects*, however, employ a method of extremely brief and applicable stories. This style contributes to its use as a concrete, society-focused philosophy. It does not mince words and is typically pragmatic. It gives simple and important advice that is easy to follow and is not self-contradictory. It focuses on how to live, and each segment does that in its form as well as content. This also makes sense given its history as an edited series of sayings that Confucius's disciples remembered after he died. Their brevity means that they, too, are not always in depth and clear, and the riddles alongside the practical advice show the range of ideas Confucius considered.

These styles lie in stark contrast to Plato's dialogues. In these works, Plato's voice is mysteriously absent, even as he speaks for all characters. Through a thorough comparison and analysis of each character's arguments and perspectives, guesses may be made, especially since Socrates was such an important figure in both his life and works. However, Plato still supplies voice to everyone, and has reasons to believe every opinion he shares. This style forces the reader to question what the answer really is, who is right, and who to believe. Plato, in the tradition of Socrates, attempts and succeeds to make the reader think critically about the topic at hand and make her own decision. There is no final answer and no single voice. Given Plato's likely goals to mimic his teacher in

encouraging thought and discussion, there are few better styles than a dialogue with which to make his arguments.

Since these texts are beautiful in themselves, they inherently imply a truth or goodness of content. They provide an argument for their own truth. They are both harmonic within themselves and also harmonic with respect to their contents. They are orderly, peaceful, at ease.

Harmony or unity may be the linking factor between the good, beautiful and true. The nature of this relationship is of some metaphysical interest. It seems as though on some level, there is a degree of identity between the good, the beautiful and the true. They do not just have a close relationship, they share a common universal property. It is my belief that Plato's explanation of universals, instantiation, and Platonic heaven offer a sufficient and convincing account of metaphysics.<sup>25</sup> In this account of metaphysics, there would be a universal property, perhaps of beauty, truth, unity, or harmony, but very likely the good, that would be separately instantiated in each of the cases mentioned above. Any time something is beautiful, perhaps it instantiates the same property as something that is true, good, or harmonious. The process and degree of instantiation would be different in each case, but this is one way that I can understand it to be true that something beautiful *is truly* good.

This postulation would explain very clearly Socrates's insistence in Plato's *Symposium* that to find the good is to love the beautiful, as well as any other connection between several of these concepts, although they are usually considered distinct. The unified universal hypothesis also extends to Lao Tzu and Confucius, even though they are

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<sup>25</sup> For more on my view of metaphysics, see Peck, "An Argument for Platonic Heaven," 2012. This is included in the Appendix.

less metaphysically explicit than Plato. Lao Tzu identifies something of a force or energy that he refers to as the tao, which seems to be metaphysically similar to the Platonic view, but more integrated into the world. The tao seems to be a more integrated energy of all universal concepts, rather than a series of distinct properties. In this way, Lao Tzu's emphasis on nature, as well as the connection between taoism and tai chi, qi gong, and feng shui, serves to show how taoism is considered to be far more closely integrated into everyday life than Platonic universals, which are in a completely separate realm unreachable by humans. Confucius, arguably the most concrete of the three, did not focus much on metaphysics, preferring to work on specific actions and behaviors. His philosophy is almost exclusively social and political, but he says nothing that would directly contradict any of the above concepts. He also refers to Heaven, wu-wei as a kind of action, and virtue as a force or power, all of which subtly, but not overwhelmingly, reinforce the ideas of a universal metaphysics.

Each of these philosophers is clear that not all art or music is beautiful. In the *Analects*, Confucius is recorded as saying, “As for music, listen only to the Shao and Wu. Prohibit the tunes of Zheng, and keep glib people at a distance—for the tunes of Zheng are licentious, and glib people are dangerous.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Plato writes in the *Republic*, “And it's appropriate for founders to know the general outlines along which the poets need to tell stories; if they compose things outside these, they're not to be accepted, but it doesn't belong to the founders themselves to make up stories.”<sup>27</sup> Here, Socrates argues that it is not enough to tell the people what kinds of stories to avoid, but it is necessary to censor all texts for the good of the perfect city. Lao Tzu tries to stay away from

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26 Slingerland, Edward, Trans. *Confucius Analects*. Bk 15.11, pg 178.

27 Plato. *Republic*. 379A, pg 71.

references to cultural beauty completely, apparently to avoid the trap of people associating a work that is considered valuable by society with beauty or goodness in itself.

The similarities in the treatment of beauty in each of these societies is hard to explain without a notion of similar metaphysics and assumptions. While Confucius was only fifty years separated from Plato, these societies were very different and extremely distant from one another.<sup>28</sup> Assuming that word somehow made its way from one society to another and became a part of the way of thinking in only fifty years, it would still have been carefully analyzed and considered before being published. If these notions were not independently created, they at least would have to be independently vetted and approved by some of the brightest minds in history. The relationship between the good and beauty must have a strong human conceptual link, at least, to explain its widespread appearance.

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28 Cai, Zong-i. "In Quest of Harmony: Plato and Confucius on Poetry." 317.

## Conclusion

There are strong differences and similarities between the ancient Greek and Chinese philosophies, as well as their respective use of the beauty analogy. In each case, the philosopher employs aesthetics as a tool to communicate a new idea, indicating a universal and very important quality of beauty to communicate extremely difficult to verbalize concepts. Beyond that, beauty and good are treated as fundamentally similar, or even identical, by each of these extremely different and influential societal philosophies. However, they are in very different societies, have distinct underlying assumptions, and espouse quite different values.

The similarities between these philosophies with regard to the relationship between beauty and goodness are striking, especially considering the relative isolation of the two societies and fundamental differences between them. In comparison, this relationship seems far more important than it may first appear, because not only did it hold a significant place in these ancient societies, but it has held this place ever since. Why it is so may be a matter of metaphysics, conceptual understanding, or human brain patterns. Whatever the case may be, this relationship has held across time, space, science, and society.

Today, beauty seems to be a secondary goal in American society. Our focus on economy and utility is all-encompassing. This is not to say that we avoid or deny beauty; rather, we just spend a considerably abbreviated time pursuing it. It is true that our society is extremely busy and that we seem to have less and less time for leisurely pursuits. However, the time we spend on leisure is rarely used for a better understanding of beauty, art, culture, or music, or, for that matter, of goodness or truth. Instead, it is

spent on obsessions, one hundred forty character “tweets,” and video clips. Even as people use the language of beauty to describe the things and ideas important to them, they are less and less aware of what beauty is.

Perhaps, though, this is too harsh. Plato preaches this notion throughout his dialogues, and we find that the people receiving it are confused. It was no more immediately clear to them then than it is to us now. People have always been busy, and beauty can never eclipse the importance of survival. Lao Tzu, Confucius, and Socrates were outcasts and exiles, not societal figures capable of changing fashions of public opinion instantaneously. Resistance to the philosopher is nothing new. The devaluation of beauty has always been a societal failure, not a personal one.

At the same time as we build utilitarian, ugly buildings, we find ourselves more obsessed than ever with the perfect human form. Models and actresses cultivate the most beautiful bodies possible. Unfortunately, it is difficult to move beyond that and into the inner beauty and wisdom that Plato claims is the way to ultimate beauty, love, and knowledge. Lao Tzu would find that this gets us nowhere at all.

As a society, we all want better lives, but it rarely seems to occur to people to search for what is good. We look for the quick answer, and scoff when our Socrates says that we need to learn it on our own.<sup>29</sup> It may just be our own impatience, and perhaps our fear, keeping us from attempting to find what it is we want most.

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<sup>29</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 518C, pg 214.

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## Appendix

Sarah Peck

Prof Droege

PHIL 426W: Metaphysics

7 February 2012

### An Argument for Platonic Heaven

Upon consideration of the six theories of universals described by Armstrong, the argument for a blob theory with universals is the most compelling, consistent, and explanatory theory for a basic system of metaphysics. This type of theory posits that there exist universals that are identical to themselves, that there is a relationship of instantiation between universals and particulars, and that particulars are nodes within a space-time continuum called a state of affairs. This theory can explain the perfection of mathematical concepts, even if they cannot be fully instantiated physically, as well as manage to account for both the physical science view of particles and the relationships of similarities between tokens. This theory has the smallest ontological costs for its explanatory power.

To develop this theory, we begin with the notion of “strict” identity. This kind of relationship only holds that one thing is exactly identical to itself if it has all the same properties (Armstrong 3). If we take relational properties to be considered in this identity, we encounter a problem that nothing is ever identical to itself in a different space-time moment. Even electrons which have almost uniform properties would not be strictly identical even to themselves from one point in time to another. Electrons move. Their movement means that their relational properties change constantly. Only if time stood

still would an electron be identical to itself. This understanding of “strict” identity has absolutely no continuity or explanatory power.

At this point, we must conclude that in this world, there is no perfect identity. However, we find that there are similarities in the world between objects, and there are relationships that describe objects very well on a close approximation. These resemblances, coupled with the impossible (in this world) necessity of math, lead us to a consideration of a second world, or a Platonic heaven (Armstrong 75, 81). If such a world were to exist, it would go far to explain the similarities between tokens within a type. It would contain strictly identical, unchanging universals, or forms, and would have relationships to this world. The world of perfect relationships and ideals would be able to describe and group tokens in this world. Since these relationships and forms are in a different world and do not change over time, they would have the only true identity to themselves known to exist.

The introduction of a second world or a Platonic heaven leads to criticism. Some critics claim that a second world or a Platonic heaven have large ontological costs, are unintuitive, and are unnecessary (Armstrong 77). However, even in trope theories, there are properties of objects thought to exist as tokens of a greater property type. Where would this greater property type be if not in a Platonic heaven? Any other explanation would come with its own ontological costs, and shows a certain degree of necessity for a Platonic heaven. It raises other questions, as well. Can only imperfect instantiations of a property exist? If so, it would be futile to ever hope for perfection of any kind. This creates a particular problem when we consider math, given that the relationships within the mathematical constraints are consistent and arguably perfect.

The heavy ontological cost of a Platonic heaven is arguable as well. Regardless of its cost, it is clear to all that this Platonic heaven's existence cannot be proven or disproven (Armstrong 78). This objection then becomes something of a “because I say so” argument where neither side can conclusively get anywhere. No ontological cost can be fully calculated or understood. I find that its explanatory power is great enough to offset whatever ontological cost a Platonic heaven might have. This leads me to adopt an acceptance of a Platonic heaven and move on with my theory.

I would also like to point out that there is a certain ontological cost in a full denial of the possibility of another world. Taking an agnostic stand, which appears to have the least cost, seems to allow for a Platonic heaven without much concern for whether it actually exists or not. Stating conclusively that there is a Platonic heaven may actually have a lesser cost than a conclusion that states there absolutely is not one. However, since there is no way to know either way, the ontological costs are hard to calculate precisely, and should therefore be used as only a partial contribution to one's overall metaphysical decision making.

Another criticism of a Platonic heaven comes from natural theorists who believe in nothing beyond this state of affairs (Armstrong 76). I find that Naturalism leads to no consistent explanatory power at all, so if one wants to understand relationships between things (especially math), Naturalism is unable to give a strong answer. I also feel that my method thus far leads to an inability to deny a Platonic heaven. However, Naturalism is strong in that it has few costs, but it does not solve our goals in defining our metaphysics. If one's goals are different, it is conceivable to fall into a relatively consistent Naturalist metaphysic.

Having posited and accepted a Platonic heaven, we must now explain the relationship between the Platonic heaven and our everyday world. This would be a relationship of instantiation, wherein tokens are tokens of a type because they instantiate that type to some degree. This means that particulars would have properties and relations (Armstrong 75). The properties and relations they have would be instantiations of the universal property or relation. For example, different partially spherical objects may instantiate sphericity to greater or less degrees, but the sphericity they mimic is identical to itself. In this way, instantiation is how objects become tokens of a specific type (a type of the property they represent), and also how we can extrapolate from more and more perfect instances of sphericity to promote the idea of perfect sphericity. It seems to be a natural truth that things are organized in different ways, and those natural organizations can be explained by each instantiating the same property.

The difference in the particular sphericity of two objects leads to a question of how their sphericity can be considered identical. The critics who make these claims often take the trope-resemblance view that the particular sphericities are themselves tokens of the type sphericity, and only this higher-level sphericity has identity. I counter that the particulars only instantiate the universal in degrees, while the universal has identity. When compared side-by-side, these views are remarkably similar, except that the resemblance theorists have added another step in adding a higher order token-type relationship for all properties. I feel that a realist view does a better job at simply addressing the problem with fewer steps and relationships than the resemblance view, even if it is immediately less intuitive.

Along with instantiation, we must posit a third concept; that of a state-of-affairs.

In a sense, this is a view saying that relationships hold because they are that way in the world. It is a matter of fact or a state of affairs. A state-of-affairs view creates a four dimensional space-time coordinate system while particulars themselves are nodes in this space-time continuum. These nodes instantiate certain properties because it is the state of affairs. The Platonic heaven exists outside and independently of this state of affairs.

A concept of state-of-affairs is included within most metaphysical views seeking to explain and analyze more than simple blobs or classes. It is relatively widely accepted and not very controversial in itself.

This theory of metaphysics gives continuity over time by comparing one space-time node to a similar node in the next possible space-time moment, and determines continuity with the node where the least properties change, rather than by comparing a beginning and end product and conclusively deciding that they have nothing in common. We would prefer to posit that a common history constitutes continuity.

Another common objection to a realist metaphysic relates to what universals are within the Platonic heaven. If it has both a perfect circle form and a perfect spherical form, it appears that these two forms have something more in common than mathematical relationships within algebra. This leads to a concept of higher-level forms, and a question of whether something instantiating a sphere also instantiates a circle. I feel that this is a valid concern, but that this is not enough to put a serious dent in the Platonic heaven theory. First of all, each theory of metaphysics which seeks to categorize and classify will run into a parallel problem of higher-order similarities, resemblances, properties, or classes. Secondly, this appears to be a world of higher and lower orders. Macroscopic things are composed of microscopic things, which are composed of elementary particles,

and so on. If we simply broke everything down to the greatest common denominator, we would be left with very little explanatory power and likely the same explanatory problem of zero identity that we began with.

All of that being said, Platonic heaven would likely constitute a perfect example of the scientifically identified building blocks of matter, along with confirmed mathematical relationships. Things like concepts or emotions may or may not belong in Platonic heaven. However, contrary to Armstrong's beliefs, I do not have a problem with uninstantiated universals (76). Taking this into consideration, Platonic heaven could very well be much fuller than we now perceive.

Armstrong's objection to uninstantiated universals is that there is no reason for them to exist, and that it is unnatural for anything to exist beyond this world of particulars (76). When he discusses the possible-by-nature uninstantiated universals, he dismisses the idea because he does not believe that universals should be treated to exist if it is only possible they exist (Armstrong 81). I disagree. While we can agree that a drawing does not exist if it is not drawn and only possible to be drawn, universals do not work in the same way as tokens. Here, Armstrong is using his *universalia in rebus* viewpoint to determine that the creation of universals and objects are codependent, in which case, a universal would not exist until there was an actual object that instantiated it (77). However, I prefer a *universalia ante res* or universals before particulars view, where it would make sense that all universals would have to exist before they were instantiated so whether they were instantiated or not, if it was possible to be instantiated, they must exist. This is consistent with my interpretation that the Platonic heaven would exist outside of the state of affairs world.

In conclusion, I have found that the realist view within blob theory has made the best arguments with the least ontological costs, and that it is a coherent system that does not fall easily to criticism and objections. While the other theories bring up interesting ideas and different arguments, they simply do not fit as well with reality the way I see it.

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