

# **A Trial Curriculum of Classics for First Year**

## **University Students:**

### **Journey to Knowledge and Happiness**

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#### **Introduction**

It is of vital importance that students develop a balance between work and play in university life. On the one hand, students should be motivated in their academic work, yet on the other, they should also learn to relax and have fun. The culture in Hong Kong is very much work-oriented, and students nowadays, as a collective, appear to be much more tensed than needed. The rising trend on suicide rates and mental breakdowns in university is worrying, and students should therefore be educated on the acceptance of their own differences and capabilities. To help students develop a broader and more balanced mindset on what achievements and happiness are, the trial curriculum will consist of two important classical texts: *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *Zhuangzi*. These two texts examine a similar aim for knowledge and happiness, but are often contradictory in their deeper philosophical concepts, which will serve as an interesting clash for study and debate on university life.

## Happiness

Aristotle and Zhuangzi agree that the aim in life is to find happiness, although their opinions on what happiness is different. The core to their philosophy, though, is that happiness and success is not just about merit and academic achievements, although these may be more important in Aristotle's text than that of Zhuangzi's. These texts are therefore highly recommended to students who are new to university life, for they will influence the mindset of students, and hopefully have a positive effect on their mental health. Students nowadays, especially in Hong Kong, are often pressured to excel in academics and are shamed for not achieving well; those with lower GPAs usually will develop a sense of inferiority to their academically-abled classmates. By studying the two texts, students will be encouraged to develop a broader approach to what success and happiness actually are, and realize that university life has much more to offer than scholarly activities—it is the experience and attitude that matter most.

Both texts draw on a clear distinction between different levels of happiness. Zhuangzi sees wealth, fame and fortune as fleeting joys, which will lead to greed and uneasiness in the end (Hu). Absolute happiness will only be achieved when we develop a higher understanding of natural things (Dao), that is, when we develop our natural ability fully and freely by flowing along with natural laws. Similarly, Aristotle perceives common people are “quite slavish in their tastes” (1.5.1) and succumb to temporary happiness in sensual pleasures. *Eudaimonia* (Aristotle's idea of ultimate happiness) could only be reached when one performs his function well (SparkNotes Editors).

The two philosophers hold the same opinion that humans have a functional aspect to them, but disagree on what the human function is.

Zhuangzi believes that different things have different natures, but all can be happy by experiencing their natural ability fully. For example, a fish is happy because it has fully exerted its natural ability to swim freely in the water (“Autumn Flood”). Therefore, humans can truly be happy when we accept that the way we live should not go against nature and let everything be. In contrast, Aristotle claims that the human function is to reason properly—rationality is what distinguishes humans from animals and makes us unique (1.7.4). A good person will actively behave in a virtuous manner, for his rational part of the soul will always be in charge of the impulsive and irrational part. By developing reason, we will live well and ultimately reach *eudaimonia*. Zhuangzi however does not see reason as having a supreme and independent role on reality, rather, happiness is simply found in the experience of flowing along with whatever experience that arises. In fact, sometimes our rational minds lead us away from the intuitive Dao.

No matter which train of thought students may find to be more attractive, the crucial message of both texts is clear: happiness goes beyond personal achievements, it is found in attitude and the way you live life. Even though different people may have different capacities, everyone can be happy by utilizing their abilities fully. And the way to live a fulfilling life is to be wise, which is different from being scholastically clever. Wisdom is when one appropriately appreciates life, and conducts oneself in the understanding of his own capabilities and limitations. The texts can thus help students experience a more fulfilling university life that goes beyond lectures, tutorials, and exams.

Lastly, both Aristotle and Zhuangzi find constant practice as crucial to reaching happiness. For Aristotle, virtue is learnt by practicing, through observing right conduct. Zhuangzi’s sages also seem to reach their virtues

of needing no self, no merit and no fame through great effort (“Free and Easy Wandering”); none of them are born with these virtues and have to achieve such a state by being focused on the Dao. The concept of practice will hopefully inspire students to be more motivated in what they do, while keeping in mind that they should lead a balanced and fulfilling life. Such an attitude is needed for students to perform well in university while having fun, and will also aid them to be agreeable people in the university community.

## Knowledge

Both philosophers hold knowledge as an important part of their philosophy. However, while Aristotle bases this on rationality and a structured approach to virtuous action, Zhuangzi’s idea to knowledge seems to be rather spontaneous—a wise person is simply “free and wandering”.

Aristotle gives reason huge role in his philosophy. He discusses rationality as the key to virtue, and also gives a system (Hansen, “Zhuangzi”) to virtue through the doctrine of the Golden Mean (2.6.3): when a person is constantly reacting in a temperate manner between the extremes of deficiency and excess, he will be a virtuous person who can reach *eudaimonia*, since he is living well. He also offers a list of virtues including wit and truthfulness. Yet Zhuangzi’s philosophy seems to undermine the role of reason; Aristotle opens his mind to logic and reason, whereas Zhuangzi opens his to the full range of human experience (Bradley). Zhuangzi uses philosophical fantasy to illustrate his perspectivism, the idea that reality is limited only in terms of perspectives seen by individuals at a particular moment (Hansen, “Chuang Tzu (Zhuangzi)”). This is illustrated in the shift of Kun to Peng (1.1), as well as in the little creatures observing Peng’s journey, for they in contrast find reality limited to the scope of the elm tree (1.1.4). Zhuangzi seems

as fascinated with the shifting perspectives of the same person at different times and moods as he is in the difference of perspective between different individuals. This shows that to Zhuangzi, to have knowledge is to have a broader scope on life and to be more open-minded; it is to have a generous and inclusive mind (Wong). Moreover, his sense of philosophical relativism gives positive meaning to the concept of “use”. A useless tree for carpentry may make a good shade (1.23); a bulky gourd unsuitable as a container may make a good boat (1.20). From this, everything should have a use of its own.

Their clash of ideas serves as food for thought on the understanding of wisdom, and is helpful to students who are trying to discover approaches and new concepts towards acquiring knowledge, enriching the more academic aspect of university life. Both reason and relativism are good ways to approach the challenges in life, and to find meaning in daily endeavors. Zhuangzi’s usefulness seems to be a matter of perspective, in this, students can be encouraged to appreciate what they can do and find meaning in themselves. Aristotle focuses on reason, which will help students be more temperate and level-headed when facing difficulties. The combination of rationality and experience is appropriate in encouraging a positive attitude towards learning and epistemic growth.

## **Limitations**

Aristotle did not give a precise formula for virtues other than it will be a mean state. In fact, he repeatedly emphasized that there are no exact general laws for determining what is virtuous, and we need to approach each situation with calculated practical wisdom (神槍手李太逗). This method is vague and hard to follow.

Zhuangzi's relative philosophy, if taken too seriously, will suggest that acquiring vast knowledge is no better than a limited perspective. Similarly, this can also be understood as Daoism having a similar status to Confucianism, and that Zhuangzi himself is simply no better than his critiques (Coutinho). These ideas go against the core of Zhuangzi's teachings and undermine his position, a consequence which Zhuangzi clearly failed to contemplate.

However, these limitations to the texts are insignificant to the wider learning of what the two philosophers wish to present. The curriculum is designed for the enhancement on critical thinking for the two main elements in university life: work and play. Students will benefit from ideas that are found in the two texts, moreover, Aristotle's and Zhuangzi's philosophy complement each other in that they discuss similar scopes with completely different approaches.

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### **Teacher’s comment:**

Serena Wong’s paper is both an analysis and a plea. As an analysis, she formulates a meaningful inquiry, prioritizes topics, explores and develops them, and offers a well substantiated argument. As a plea, she communicates motivation and purpose by envisioning a more choice worthy way of living the university life as a student. Speaking with a voice of authority, she also demonstrates an openness for further dialogue. Reading her paper, one cannot help but wonder what her proposition would lead to if the university as an institution would encourage students to live her vision a little more, and a little more urgently. (Yeung Yang)