Abstract
Since the 80’s of the last century a trend has emerged in the English language literature on Chinese thought that suggests reading early Confucian texts as a form of virtue ethics. However, Alasdair MacIntyre has presented early Confucian and Aristotle’s thoughts as incommensurable thought systems and doubted that notions and statements of one incommensurable thought system can be adequately expressed and addressed within the framework of another. This article discusses MacIntyre’s position and two strategies—employed by the proponents of virtue ethics interpretation of early Confucian texts—of meeting MacIntyre’s challenge. The article attempts to show that none of the responses were successful, thus leaving the quest for the most adequate philosophical framework to interpret early Confucian ethical thought open.

Keywords: early Confucianism, virtue ethics, incommensurability, comparative philosophy

Introduction
Since the 80’s of the last century a trend has emerged in the English language literature on Chinese thought that suggests reading early Confucian texts as a form of virtue ethics with its roots in Aristotle’s thought and its contemporary explication primarily associated with the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre. This interpretation contrasts early Confucian ethics with modern moral theories of deontology and consequentialism and sees Confucians as emphasizing a long-term cultivation of benevolent character traits in human beings, instead of formulating simple and universal principles of right conduct. This has led some scholars to conceptualization of early Confucian ethical thought in virtue ethics terms and translation of key ethical terms in aretaic vocabulary. A number of the most distinguished English-writing scholars of Chinese thought has supported the virtue ethics interpretation of early Confucians. This interpretation has been successful in the sense that it has contributed to the renewed and still increasing interest of contemporary Western moral philosophers in early Confucian ethical writings.

However, in a volume dedicated to comparative studies Alasdair MacIntyre...
has published an article where he has presented early Confucian and Aristotle’s thoughts as incommensurable thought systems and have explicitly expressed doubt that notions and statements of one incommensurable thought system can be adequately expressed and addressed within the framework of another. The position MacIntyre argued for in this article has been taken by proponents of Confucian virtue ethics as challenge for their approach. The challenge is even more pressing, as it was formulated by the thinker, whose ideas have largely shaped the virtue ethics approach in general.

In what follows, I will firstly present main ideas on incommensurability in MacIntyre’s article. Against that background, I will summarize several responses formulated specifically by the proponents of virtue ethics interpretation of Confucian thought. At the centre of this investigation are the scholars who attempt to meet MacIntyre’s challenge and stay in a neo-Aristotelian framework while comparing different traditions. We will put these responses into two groups – the “negative” (Yu Jiyuan, May Sim), where the goal of response is to refute MacIntyre’s critique by showing that it is contradictory, wrong, and/or harmful; and the “positive” (Bryan Van Norden), where the goal of response is to meet MacIntyre’s challenge by working out a comparative framework that would be immune to the critique voiced by MacIntyre. My claim throughout this article is that none of the responses from Confucian virtue ethics perspective were successful, as the negative ones tend to misread MacIntyre’s initial claims and the positive one falls short of providing truly neutral ground for comparison of early Confucian and Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian ethical ideas, impossibility of which was claimed by MacIntyre.

**MacIntyre and incommensurability of the rival theories**

According to Richard J. Bernstein “incommensurability” was thrust into the centre of Anglo-American philosophical debates because of Thomas Kuhn’s provocative book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Bernstein 1991, 87). Although Kuhn in his book was exclusively interested in the incommensurability of scientific paradigms, the idea was soon “generalized and extended to problems and contexts far beyond Kuhn’s original concern to analyze scientific inquiry” (ibid, 89). Bernstein discusses Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* as prominent examples of the extended use of the term.

MacIntyre further extends the use of the term in his 1991 article “Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians About the Virtues”, where the idea of incommensurability was explicitly applied to intercultural studies. Some conceptual problems can be noted here, as the term “incommensurability” was used by Kuhn mainly in reference to scientific theories that have predictive value and make truth claims. It is
an open question if we can take, at least, “Confucians” as working within a framework of a theory with its unique set of predictions and truth claims. If we understand Confucians as primarily engaged in practical activity, rather than theorisation of it, can we still apply the term “incommensurability” referring to Confucian practice? Since this conceptual issue was not questioned in responses to MacIntyre’s use of incommensurability by scholars I am examining, I will not address this theme in my paper.

In his article in 1991 MacIntyre discusses comparative philosophy that takes upon a task to explain, evaluate and compare Aristotelian and Confucian approaches to ethical issues by putting these two thought systems into one – neo-Aristotelian – conceptual framework. In this article MacIntyre treats early Confucian and Aristotelian though systems as incommensurable. According to MacIntyre, the incommensurability is “a relationship between two or more systems of thought and practice, each embodying its own peculiar conceptual scheme, over a certain period of time” (MacIntyre 1991, 109). The peculiarity of any given thought system, according to MacIntyre, is so pervasive that it manifests itself not only in the different concepts used by adherents of that system of thought and practice, but also in different and specific for that system rules and ways of argumentation, different standards and measures of interpretation, explanation, and justification, different norms of achievement, and so on. Because it is an obvious fact that cultures and systems of thought and practice are dynamic entities that change over time, MacIntyre acknowledges that the systems that were incommensurable at one point of the history may become commensurable at the other. However, during the time of incommensurability, according to MacIntyre,

It will be the case that those who inhabit each of the two or more rival schemes of thought and practice embody them in their beliefs, actions, judgments, and arguments in such a way that it is both the case that the members of the two or more rival parties can agree, each from their own point of view, that they are referring to, characterizing, and conducting their inquiries about what is indeed one and the same subject matter, and yet also in their characterizations of and questions about that subject matter employ, to some large and significant degree, concepts whose applicability entails the nonapplicability, the vacuousness, of the conceptual scheme or schemes employed by their rivals (MacIntyre 1991, 109-10).

MacIntyre suggests that incommensurable systems will share certain structure that will enable them to agree that the subject matter of their interest is the same, but, nevertheless,

It is at a second level of characterization that predicates are applied in accordance with standards internal to and peculiar to each of the rival standpoints and such that each set of standard excludes the possibility of application for key predicates of its rivals. And this use of predicates will give expression to distinctive modes
of observation, of seeing as and of imagining, as well as of reasoning (MacIntyre 1991, 110).

There are several important points for comparative philosophers that MacIntyre draws from observations of incommensurability of thought systems. The first point that goes throughout the whole article as one of the main themes is that there can be no neutral and at the same time meaningful standpoint, from which we could compare two rival systems of thought and practice. As MacIntyre puts it, we could supply an account neutral with respect to any two rival systems, but such an account would be “at so bare a level of characterization that it will be equally compatible with far too many rival bodies of theory” (MacIntyre 1991, 105). Thus, either the standpoint of comparison is universal because it is so neutral that it does not say much substantially, or it is, rather, a specific standpoint with its own peculiar standards, implications, and corollaries. However, there are scholars who seem to disagree with MacIntyre on this point. In the last section of this article I will present Bryan Van Norden’s distinction between “thin” and “thick” accounts of theory, which I take as an attempt to provide such theoretically neutral grounds for comparison.

The second and related point is that the lack of universal and neutral standpoint for comparison makes it obvious that even the statement of the nature of contrast between the two rival systems of thought and practice is problematic, because it is very likely to assume a certain specific view of what counts as problematic issue and to engage into equally specific way of how to formulate and solve that issue. If, according to MacIntyre, we are dealing with two incommensurable systems it will mean that even before starting to compare we have already chosen a specific framework that makes one of the incommensurable systems more at home than the other. For example, without any particular reference to Aristotelian ethics, Antonio Cua tries to present early Confucian ethics as an “ethics of virtue”. For Cua, the main goal of his “conceptual experiment” is an attempt to reconstruct what he have called “relatively loose system of action-guides” of early Confucianism as “ethics of virtue with a coherent conceptual scheme” (Cua 1998, 1; 271). We can see that the normative standards that support Cua’s qualification of tradition and interpretation in terms of “loose” and “coherent” and to favour one over the other were taken not from early Confucians. And even “incommensurability” arises as a problem, as it was noted before, only when theory is given primacy over practical engagement. As Hall and Ames point out, “despite the fact that MacIntyre is well aware that the Confucian moral vision depends little on what we would take to be theoretical or conceptual claims, he is still insistent that the comparison be pursued, if at all, at this level because the ultimate goal of such comparison is to determine the truth or falsity of claims made” (Hall and Ames 1998, xii-xiii). However, MacIntyre is well aware of this point, as he says of his own comparison, “up to this point, without acknowledging it, I have been characterizing the differences between Aristotelianism and
Confucianism from what is more generally a Western and more specifically an Aristotelian point of view” (MacIntyre 1991, 107-8).

The third point deals with the relation between incommensurability, translatability and the issue that will be very important for MacIntyre’s critics – possibility for mutual understanding between the two different cultures. MacIntyre points out in his example with Galileo’s move away from impetus theory of Aristotelian physics, that although the last adepts of Aristotelian physics and Galileo all did speak the same natural languages, the theories they promoted were incommensurable. According to MacIntyre, even if the shift in perspective and theoretical standpoint required from Galileo the enrichment of the terminology and idiom of the natural language he used, this change still happened within the same natural language. In other words, Galileo was not dealing with problems of translation. This shows, according to MacIntyre, that translatability does not entail commensurability, but it “surely must be, one initial step toward making possible a type of conversation between originally incommensurable standpoints which could over time transform their relationship” (MacIntyre 1991, 111). However, as MacIntyre explicitly suggests, when the incommensurability arises from untranslatability of the natural or technical languages, in which the rival systems of thought and practice are expressed, it does not follow that all the mutual understanding is precluded. “But such understanding is possible only for those adherents of each standpoint who are able to learn the language of the rival standpoint, so that they acquire, so far as possible, that other language as a second first language” (MacIntyre 1991, 111). According to MacIntyre, understanding comes not through the comparison that proceeds from asking the adherents of the rival system questions that are important in one’s own system of thought and practice and, then, requests or expects the answers that would comply with the relevant standards of one’s own tradition. Understanding comes from the immersion into the rival system and from learning their specific ways of reasoning and expressing the results of that reasoning. Incommensurability thesis, as MacIntyre presents it, does not suggest the impenetrability and inaccessibility of the incommensurable systems to each other’s adherents, and does not maintain that nothing meaningful can be argued from one system against the other. However, it does suggest that it is impossible to adequately and fully reiterate the problematique of one system of thought with the conceptual framework of the other incommensurable system without losing the significant degree of meaning and uniqueness of that system. In other words, our critique from the positions of one incommensurable system will very likely touch only the surface of the other incommensurable system and miss most crucial assumptions, areas of interest, and goals of the system in question. MacIntyre’s position is that we eventually may achieve understanding of the other thought system and even present a substantial critique unless we both start and finish our investigation of the incommensurable thought system.
by applying it to our own standards and conceptual frameworks.

The fourth point MacIntyre directs more to Aristotelians, which shows that he admits that Confucian framework could probably render this aspect in comparative philosophy differently or find it irrelevant. MacIntyre suggests that the conceptual grasp of incommensurability helps to advance the conversation between two rival systems, because once Aristotelians understand that their rejection of the rival standpoint was “inevitable” as stemming from imposition of their standards of argumentation and justification upon the system that operates in rather different and incommensurable ways, “they would have to conclude that no rational encounter, no dialectical appeal to mutually acknowledged principles of any kind, whether principles embodied in shared established opinions or principles necessary for the achievements of scientific explanation and understanding, had taken place or could so far have taken place” (MacIntyre 1991, 112). This point helps to raise awareness that at this stage of the conversation between the rival systems of thought and practice no claims for truth by the parties of conversation can be made. Especially, if these claims were to resolve the problematic issues between theories and achieve a verdict of which system presents true statements on the nature of the subject matter. In other words, the concept of incommensurability makes one aware that there are other consistent and workable ways of describing and explaining the world reality. As MacIntyre puts it, “without rational encounter the rival theory becomes a subject matter concerning which we have not achieved that truth which is *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*” (MacIntyre 1991, 112). Recognition of incommensurability of two rival theories may foster more charitable treatment of the rival theory, allowing it to state its position in its own framework, and it prevents the temptation of reductionist treatment of world cultures.

This point should be seen as MacIntyre’s suggestion to allow the rival system of thought and practice to be different from one’s own, that is, allowing it to operate in its natural modus, according to its natural standards. At the same time, because MacIntyre does not see cultures and systems of thoughts and practice inherent in these cultures as static and monolithic, but rather as changing through the course of their history, the incommensurability of two theoretical standpoints is not taken by MacIntyre as an unavoidable matter of fact that makes the rational encounter impossible. This leads us to the last point of MacIntyre’s incommensurability thesis, the suggestion that the rational debate and encounter between Aristotelian and Confucian systems can take place only by enriching the linguistic and conceptual resources of one’s own tradition to the point that it would enable the parties to provide the more adequate representation of each other. According to MacIntyre,

That accurate representation will be of the other as a historically developing body of theory and practice, succeeding or failing at each stage, in the light of its own standards, in respect of the difficulties or problems internal to it. That
is, what the Aristotelian will have had to provide for his or her own use will be a history of Confucianism written and understood from a Confucian point of view... (MacIntyre 1991, 117).

According to MacIntyre, having constructed such history of the rival standpoint according to the internal standards of that rival account, having learned the conceptual apparatus that voices the position of that rival standpoint, an Aristotelian would not only be able to understand Confucianism, but also to engage into rational and critical discussion that could lead adherents of one system to recognize “rational inferiority” to the other rival and incompatible tradition. Rational dialogue would be possible here, because both parties would engage into dialogue consciously using the same framework of conversation, after “incorporating within their own structures of understanding an accurate representation of that standpoint and its history” (MacIntyre 1991, 117).

MacIntyre finishes his paper with suggestions that should facilitate such conversation between two or more rival bodies of theory and practice that would not, in MacIntyre’s words, be “sterile”. First, he suggests that as comparative philosophers we should “understand our own standpoint in a way that renders it from our own point of view as problematic as possible and therefore as maximally vulnerable as possible to defeat by that rival” (MacIntyre 1991, 121). Then, MacIntyre claims, we have to make sure that “we do not allow ourselves to forget that in comparing two fundamental standpoints at odds with each other... we have no neutral, independent standpoint from which to do so” (MacIntyre 1991, 121). According to MacIntyre this means that we can compare Confucianism and Aristotelianism from the Confucian point of view, or from the Aristotelian point of view, or from some third, equally specific standpoint with its own internal structure, standards, and vocabulary, for example, Buddhist or Kantian. “But we cannot find any legitimate standing ground outside the context of the points of view” (MacIntyre 1991, 121). Thus already a way how we voice our disagreements, according to MacIntyre, should be the object of our disagreement, exactly because it is never culturally neutral.

MacIntyre’s position was understood by many as arguing for radical impossibility of mutual understanding in the intercultural discussions and as openly threatening the very undertaking of comparative philosophers. In so far as MacIntyre denied the adequacy and appropriateness of straightforward comparison by reiterating the content of one system of thought and practice by the means and in the ways of its rival, MacIntyre did indeed question the validity of certain type of comparative studies. In Confucian studies many adherents of virtue ethics interpretation of early Confucians have taken MacIntyre’s position as a challenge for their own undertakings. It is especially acute problem in virtue ethics approach to Confucian texts, as the main thesis of this group of scholars – that early Confucian thought is best understood as a form of virtue ethics6 – can be seen as an attempt to express the sensibilities
of one tradition with the vocabulary of other incommensurable tradition. Yu Jiyuan, for example, notes that MacIntyre’s version of incommensurability “threatens our project of comparing the ethics of Aristotle and Confucius”, but Yu, nevertheless, does not find MacIntyre’s “rejection of the possibility of the comparison between Aristotelianism and Confucianism to be acceptable” (Yu 2007, 6-7). In what follows, I will present two ways in which adherents of virtue ethics interpretation of early Confucians have tried to meet MacIntyre’s challenge.

“Negative” responses to MacIntyre’s incommensurability challenge

One of the recent studies committed to comparison of Confucius and Aristotle is a study by Yu Jiyuan, The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue (2007). Before proceeding to the comparison itself, Yu Jiyuan attempts to clear methodological issues in comparative philosophy against MacIntyre’s challenge of incommensurability. According to Yu Jiyuan, MacIntyre’s position “is not clear” and MacIntyre “seems to be caught in confusion” (Yu 2007, 7; 8). Where does Yu see this alleged confusion in MacIntyre’s position? Yu explains that MacIntyre’s understanding of the incommensurability of two rival systems is leading “to the impossibility of adjudicating their rival claims” (Yu 2007, 7), but MacIntyre supposedly allows rational encounter and, something that Yu finds ironic, MacIntyre draws his conclusion about the incommensurability of Confucianism and Aristotelianism “through comparative study of these two theories” (Yu 2007, 7). Thus Yu concludes that “MacIntyre seems to be caught in confusion between the result of comparative philosophy and its mere possibility” (Yu 2007, 8). Citing MacIntyre’s suggestion that mutual understanding becomes possible for adherents of rival systems after they learn each other’s language, Yu gives us a hint where to look for resolving MacIntyre’s confusion: “In saying this, however, the problem is no longer about the possibility of comparison, but about how comparison should be done and what qualities a comparativist needs to possess in order to get the job done appropriately. These are very different issues” (Yu 2007, 7). While I agree with this particular claim of Yu, I cannot agree with the implications of his “no longer”, which suggests that questioning the very possibility of comparison was the initial intention of MacIntyre’s article and only Yu’s interpretation clears up MacIntyre’s position saving him from confusion. I see Yu Jiyuan here not as resolving MacIntyre’s “confusion”, but as clearing up his own misreading of MacIntyre’s position.

Yu does not cite where MacIntyre claims that comparison is not possible or that such possibility is at the centre of MacIntyre’s enquiry. Yu claims that “what is at stake is the possibility of comparison” (Yu 2007, 7), but the article of MacIntyre holds no such claim. On the contrary, as MacIntyre says
straightforwardly at the end of the article, his whole undertaking was to discuss and to “bring out … more generally something of how conversation between rival bodies of theory and practice, rooted in very different cultures, has to proceed, if its interchanges are not to be sterile” (MacIntyre 1991, 120-1). Instead of arguing for (or against) the impossibility of comparison, MacIntyre was suggesting how we should compare and what an adequate and fruitful comparison is. As cited before, MacIntyre stressed the necessity that “we do not allow ourselves to forget that in comparing two fundamental standpoints at odds with each other … we have no neutral, independent standpoint from which to do so”, which simply means that “we may compare Confucianism and Aristotelianism from a Confucian standpoint, or from an Aristotelian” (MacIntyre 1991, 121; emphasis added). Thus, it seems to me, MacIntyre’s position, in this particular article at least, was all along not about possibility of comparison, but, in Yu Jiyuan’s words, about how comparison should be done.

If the main target of criticism of MacIntyre’s incommensurability thesis for Yu Jiyuan was the alleged negation of the possibility of comparison, so for May Sim, who devotes the whole chapter in her book as a direct response to MacIntyre, it is the alleged negation of the mutual understanding and possibility of a dialogue. May Sim undertakes an attempt to show that Confucius employs ten categories of Aristotle, even without explicitly mentioning them, because “to show how these thinkers share a fundamental set of categories is also to show that there are grounds for a kind of commensurability and hence for the possibility of dialogue” (Sim 2007, 50). May Sim further charges MacIntyre as maintaining that Confucianism and Aristotelianism “necessarily fail even to recognize the other’s problems and moral shortcomings” (Sim 2007, 70). She concludes that “even supposing these two ethical systems do not share all standards and measures, it does not follow that they are so radically disparate that they employ no kindred concepts or must necessarily find utterly unintelligible what the other advocates or repudiates” (Sim 2007, 70).

In my earlier exposition I have showed in some length how MacIntyre made clear that mutual understanding between the rival parties is not precluded (MacIntyre 1991, 111). It is hard to see where May Sim finds MacIntyre’s claims about “utterly unintelligible” positions of rival systems, when he is, in actuality, advocating for the possibility of the adherents of different cultures to learn each other’s language “as a second first language” (MacIntyre 1991, 111). And not only does MacIntyre, contrary to May Sim’s claim, not suggest that the rival systems necessarily fail to see each other’s problems, he is instead arguing for the possibility that those outside of a certain standpoint may recognize failures of it “even when it has gone unacknowledged by the adherents of the tradition of inquiry which has failed” (MacIntyre 1991, 118).

The main source of these misunderstandings, in my opinion, is the tendency to take MacIntyre’s claims as absolute when in reality they are not without
important qualifications. For example, where MacIntyre says that he sees no “neutral and independent method of characterizing those materials in a way sufficient to provide the type of adjudication between competing theories of the virtues which I had once hoped to provide” (MacIntyre 1991, 105; emphasis added), for his critics it is simply a claim about “impossibility of adjudicating [the] rival claims” (Yu 2007, 7). Where MacIntyre stresses that the incommensurability is a relationship “over a certain period of time” and that “two different and rival conceptual schemes may be incommensurable at one stage of their development and yet become commensurable at another” (MacIntyre 1991, 109), for Yu it stands out as problem, “if two incommensurable systems can reach mutual understanding, why are they still incommensurable?” (Yu 2007, 9). It is important to point out that here the language, in which MacIntyre formulates his critique, may make his position seem ambiguous. The “incommensurability” is a strong term that precludes variations in degree, thus making it difficult to conceptualize what a “lesser” incommensurability between two systems would look like. If there are no intermediate states of “lesser” incommensurability that would eventually lead to dissolution of incommensurable states, can we – and this is Yu’s point – make sense out of the notion of “temporarily incommensurable” systems? This view of incommensurability is correct, as Kuhn was also talking about “transition between incommensurables” that “must occur all at once (though not necessarily in an instant) or not at all” (Kuhn 1970, 150). However, the impossibility of change in degree of some state does not preclude possibility of change of the state itself. No-one can be “more” married today than one was yesterday, but one can certainly be married or not-married at different points of time.

Further, Yu Jiyuan claims that “one cannot deny the possibility of comparative philosophy on the basis that different traditions have different psychologies, sociologies, and conceptual schemes” (Yu 2007, 8). This reference most probably is a reaction to MacIntyre’s claim that “every major theory of the virtues has internal to it, to some significant degree, its own philosophical psychology and its own philosophical politics and sociology” (MacIntyre 1991, 105). However in this paragraph MacIntyre, contrary to Yu’s claims, is not denying the possibility of comparative philosophy. He points out that various different areas of inquiry into human affairs are so interwoven that any account rich enough to be relevant for evaluation, for example, of theoretical claims about virtues, will already presuppose “one such theoretical stance regarding the virtues, rather than its rivals” (MacIntyre 1991, 105). As contemporary Chinese philosopher Wan Junren notes in his article on Confucian and Aristotelian ethics, “different definitions of the conception of the virtuous person (the bearer of virtue) create a difference in explanatory context” (Wan 2004, 124). Therefore, MacIntyre concludes, “there is just no neutral and independent method of characterizing those materials” (MacIntyre 1991, 105).
At the same time, it is important to see where MacIntyre’s critics do indeed enhance MacIntyre’s position. Yu Jiyuan notes, “it appears that, for MacIntyre, incommensurability becomes such a crucial issue only because it is difficult to adjudicate between rival claims and determine which side is the winner for truth” (Yu 2007, 8). MacIntyre shows in his paper that an adequate rational encounter between the two rival systems of thought and practice might result in one system coming “in the light of its own standards of rationality, theoretical and practical, to be recognized by its own adherents as rationally inferior to some other rival and incompatible tradition” (MacIntyre 1991, 117). MacIntyre elaborates on two conditions that have to be satisfied in order to judge of the inferiority of one system. He also points out to the possibility that the adherents of the “inferior” system may not acknowledge it at the beginning, but “those external to that standpoint, who have incorporated within their own structures of understanding an accurate representation of that standpoint and its history, may on occasion be able to recognize such a condition of failure” (MacIntyre 1991, 117-8).

Even if it is unintentional, the language of failure in MacIntyre’s article supports Yu’s charge that MacIntyre is looking for the winner in the cultural exchange and comparison. The fact that the examples of incommensurable systems that MacIntyre chooses come from the exact sciences, may also contribute to the belief that the cultural incommensurabilities are resolved in cultural “paradigm shifts” analogical to those in the sciences described by Thomas Kuhn (see Kuhn 1970). It is highly questionable, if it is possible to reject the entire cultural system as a failure and it is not clear if such a wholesale rejection could result in a successful transition to some other system. The history of China’s wholesale rejection of Confucian heritage during the early 20th century and Cultural Revolution of 60’s and 70’s may strengthen such doubts.

The concept cluster that surrounds the “incommensurability” term in its original context in Kuhn’s book further fosters absolutist readings of MacIntyre’s use of the term and the notion of “paradigm shift” plays important part here. If this notion is applied in intercultural studies, a possible reading of incommensurability is one that maintains the necessity for an adept of one cultural tradition to convert to another tradition (to shift between paradigms) by totally abandoning one’s own. If one shifts paradigms and starts to accept Copernican heliocentric system, one can not consistently keep subscribing – even partially – to Ptolemy’s system with Earth as the stationary centre of the universe. But changes normally are less clear-cut in cultural exchanges where practical engagement does not require a complete theoretical agreement. As Hall and Ames point out, the sense of community between Anglo-Europeans depend much on invocation of terms such as “freedom” or “justice”, despite the fact that there are numerous disagreements on theoretical content of these notions (see Hall and Ames 1998, xv). Thus, MacIntyre is not suggesting that...
Aristotelian has to abandon Aristotelianism and to wholeheartedly become a Confucian, when he stresses that “what the Aristotelian will have had to provide for his or her own use will be a history of Confucianism written and understood from a Confucian point of view” (MacIntyre 1991, 117). Probably a more suitable metaphor to describe intercultural exchanges is not a “paradigm shift”, but a “tradition graft”. When one plant is engrafted into another, the recipient plant may bear fruits of the graft, while at the same time keeping its original roots. Thus the responsible grafting helps to introduce new cultures to the old habitats without endangering the local cultures.

As much as MacIntyre presents cultural exchanges as eventually ascertaining superior theoretical accounts of world reality, Yu is correct suggesting that it would be “an extremely narrow conception of comparative philosophy that the goal of it is to determine, between the parties being compared, which side is the winner” (Yu 2007, 8). However, in a more recent article on comparative issues MacIntyre seems to have moved away from the discussion of how one of the rival systems is to acknowledge its inferiority. MacIntyre is still arguing how the ideas of rival theories might challenge each other, but that would require, in a constructive manner, a response rather than surrender:

My suggestion is then that the differences between a Confucian account of the virtues and that advanced by Thomistic Aristotelians raises questions for both. The Confucian emphasis upon the place of *li* [禮] among the virtues requires a response from Thomistic Aristotelians. And the Thomistic Aristotelian thesis about the kind of justification that an ethics of the virtues needs to supply requires a response from Confucians (MacIntyre 2004, 162).

**“Positive” response to MacIntyre’s incommensurability challenge**

MacIntyre has consistently denied the possibility of a neutral ground for comparing the two rival systems. Bryan Van Norden in his book devoted to the early Confucian – he uses the more native name “Ruism” as a reference to *rujia* 儒家 – and Mohist thought employs the distinction between thick and thin accounts of theories and objects (See Van Norden 2007). For Van Norden, the thin description is simply “fixing” the topic that does not involve “distinctive concepts and commitments” of the participants of the discussion (Van Norden 2007, 17). It seems that in setting the framework of comparison in terms of “thick” and “thin” accounts Van Norden tries to avoid that, in MacIntyre’s words, second level of characterization where “predicates are applied in accordance with standards internal to and peculiar to each of the rival standpoints and such that each set of standards excludes the possibility of application for key predicates of its rival” (MacIntyre 1991, 110). Thus, developing “thick” – “thin” distinction as a method for comparative
philosophy I take to be Van Norden’s attempt to overcome MacIntyre’s scepticism and to show just how possible it is to find a sufficiently neutral ground for intercultural comparisons.

Already in the beginning of his book Van Norden admits that the “major feature of my approach – the use of the categories of Western virtue ethics – is open to the charge that it inaccurately assimilates Aristotelianism and Ruism when these worldviews are, in fact, radically different” (Van Norden 2007, 15). Because Aristotelians and Confucians “disagree significantly over many major issues”, Van Norden attempts to avoid a possible distortion of any of the theories under investigation by employing the distinction between “thick” and “thin” accounts of the theory. Van Norden indicates that he develops this methodological approach from the insights of Gilbert Ryle, Clifford Geertz, Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum (Van Norden 2007, 16-17). Van Norden describes the distinction as follows:

We can give a “thin” description, which has little theoretical content and which can be shared by a broad range of discussants who might disagree significantly over many other matters. One might think of the thin description as simply “fixing” the topic of disagreement between participants in a discussion. In contrast, a “thick” description is the detailed account given by a particular participant in the discussion and framed in terms of the distinctive concepts and commitments of that participant (Van Norden 2007, 17).

According to Van Norden’s explanation, “thin” description should have little theoretical content and be merely a fixation of disagreement. By keeping the theoretical content away from the description we should be able to set the neutral ground for comparison where each system of thought can speak in its own voice. Thus, Van Norden suggests that it is possible to use such “thin” account of virtue ethics to interpret and explain early Confucian ideas (and probably ideas of other schools or traditions) without distortions.

The “thin” account of virtue ethics that Van Norden employs in his work includes four items. These four items are intended by Van Norden to be “thin” enough not to impose alien ideas and concepts on the system of thought in question, but also to be “thick” enough not to be empty, that is, void of any explanatory value. Thus, according to a “thin” description of virtue ethics, it is

(1) an account of what a “flourishing” human life is like, (2) an account of what virtues contribute to leading such a life, (3) an account of how one acquires those virtues, and (4) a philosophical anthropology that explains what humans are like, such that they can acquire those virtues so as to flourish in that kind of life. (Van Norden 2007, 21)

Thus the question is, if Van Norden’s thin description of virtue ethics is a thin description or does it already have a significantly large theoretical content, which not necessarily fits best the classical Confucian ethics?
The first item in Van Norden’s thin characterization of virtue ethics states that it is an account of what a “flourishing” human life is like. Van Norden admits that “flourishing” is a technical term in virtue ethics. Van Norden explains that “to flourish is to live a certain kind of life: a life characterized by the ordered exercise of one’s capacities as a human” (Van Norden 2007, 37). In a similar manner, Rosalind Hursthouse, while introducing neo-Aristotelianism, that is, “the particular version of virtue ethics” (Hursthouse 1999, 8), singles out three main categories that make up the basic structure of this thought. “Flourishing”, or one of the possible translations for *eudaimonia*, is one of these technical terms. This suggests that there is some theoretical content in the notion of flourishing and one could doubt, if the term does not turn Van Norden’s description of virtue ethics into a “thick” description. As a way out, Van Norden avoids using the specific Greek word, which would necessarily add more theoretical content than Van Norden probably is willing to allow. For example, Hursthouse describes one difference between the Greek *eudaimonia* and the English “flourishing” by noting that “animals and even plants can flourish, but *eudaimonia* is only possible for rational beings” (Hursthouse 1999, 9). There is a clear conceptual link between the notions of *eudaimonia* and rationality. This link is further strengthened by Aristotle’s stress on intellectual virtue as the highest virtue (as opposed to moral virtue) and the importance of the contemplative life to *eudaimonia*: “for man, therefore, the life according to reason is the best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else *is* man. This life therefore is also the happiest” (Aristotle X.7, 1178a6-9; cursive in translation). Van Norden uses theoretically less laden term, which is free from these important Aristotelian implications and points out that most of us at least understand the topic, when we hear the reference to the flourishing life, because “whatever philosophical position we pay lip service to, we sometimes act as if we think some ways of life are worth living, whereas others are not” (Van Norden 2007, 37). These considerations allow us to accept that with the first item Van Norden manages to stick with a fairly thin characterization of ethical pursuits.

The second item in thin description of virtue ethics states that it is “an account of what virtues contribute to leading such a life” (Van Norden 2007, 21). Here it seems that Van Norden has moved from fixing the topic to providing a culturally specific account of that topic, thus shifting, in fact, to the “thick” account. Van Norden’s formulation suggests that the central part of leading a flourishing life is virtue, that is, one’s personal quality. It may be argued that Van Norden does not directly advocate for neither the primacy nor the centrality of virtue for flourishing life in his account, but, as Richard A.H. King points out, the primacy and centrality of virtue category has to be assumed, if virtue ethics is to be a distinctive ethical outlook. In R.A.H. King’s words,
Virtue ethics, to be an interesting ethical position, has to posit the primacy of virtue – for naturally both utilitarians and duty ethicists think that virtues are important, insofar as dispositions of persons conflict with or contribute to fulfilling duties or maximising utility. But they are derivative in these systems; … It has to be argued that virtue is the crucial concept (King 2011, 12).

This should strengthen our suspicion that Van Norden’s “thin” account of virtue ethics is, actually, a “thick” account of ethics. There might be a consistent ethical vision that is concerned with a worthy – or flourishing – human life, but that takes, for example, rationally grasped sense of duty or human relationships as the primary contributor to leading such life. For example, the centrality of human relationships is pointed out in a review of empirical studies on happiness, which by many would be seen as a necessary part of flourishing life. These empirical studies show that “the objective predictors of happiness contain many weak effects and only one strong one, the latter being social connectedness” (Tice and Baumeister 2001, 73).

Van Norden’s third item further reiterates this idea of centrality of virtue to the flourishing life by claiming that any form of virtue ethics would be “an account of how one acquires those virtues” (Van Norden 2007, 21). In such a view acquiring a certain virtue or set of virtues is understood as a goal of human activity, because it brings up the flourishing. The fourth item states that virtue ethics has to have “a philosophical anthropology that explains what humans are like, such that they can acquire those virtues so as to flourish in that kind of life” (Van Norden 2007, 21). Once again it stresses the assumption of the centrality of virtue by suggesting that the understanding of human being has to accord to this specific view that takes virtue as the central part to the flourishing life. The important question has to be asked, if such centrality and primacy of virtue can be accepted as unproblematic starting position in interpreting early Confucian thought.

Some support to the idea that the category of virtue might be only derivative and secondary in the early Confucian accounts on flourishing human life can also be found among scholars who favour and encourage virtue ethics interpretation of Confucianism. Consider this account of Kongzi’s view on ethics, provided by P. J. Ivanhoe:

At the heart of Kongzi’s conception of the proper life for human beings – the “Way” (dao 道) – is a model of a harmonious and happy family, one whose different members each contribute to the welfare and flourishing of the whole, according to their role-specific obligations. These obligations – serving as a mother, a father, an elder brother, etc. – and the practices and norms associated with them were the primary guides to the moral life. In this sense, the family served as the basic paradigm for the well-lived life. However, the moral life did not end with the family. One had roles to fulfill in society as well (Ivanhoe 2002, 1).
This passage does not give any hint of the centrality of a theory of character traits, that is, virtues to the extent that it could fit Van Norden’s thin description of virtue ethics.

The above analysis should help us appreciate fully the fact that Van Norden is providing not simply a thin description of ethics, but a thin description of virtue ethics. This means that we are dealing, after all, with a thick account, which is not free of theoretical content, as MacIntyre’s understanding of a neutral ground for comparisons would require and what Van Norden’s distinction between “thick” and “thin” attempts to achieve. Van Norden’s “thin” account of virtue ethics, to put it once more in MacIntyre’s words, deals with the “second level of characterization that predicates are applied in accordance with standards internal to and peculiar to each of the rival standpoints and such that each set of standard excludes the possibility of application for key predicates of its rivals” (MacIntyre 1991, 110). This does not necessarily disqualify this particular framework from use in the comparative philosophy, but it requires us not to forget the thickness, that is, the specific theoretical content of the framework in use. If, on the other hand, Van Norden would try to avoid the “thickness” we have prescribed to his account and would attempt to take the term “virtue” and its role in the ethical thinking in a more moderate version, then the thin description of virtue ethics gets so thin that it looses its explanatory power. In other words, such account would not meet MacIntyre’s requirement that the neutral ground should not be “at so bare a level of characterization that it will be equally compatible with far too many rival bodies of theory” (MacIntyre 1991, 105).

Obviously, this risk is also acknowledged by Van Norden, who agrees that, according to the moderate version of virtue ethics, Kantian ethics would also encompass all four traits of the thin description of virtue ethics. At the same time, Van Norden’s analysis provides a good explanation why Kantian ethics is still better described as deontology than a form of virtue ethics.

However, in the more moderate versions of virtue ethics, the four components above are logically dependent on consequentialist or deontological aspects of the ethical view. Kant, for example, has a conception of the four items above, but they appear primarily in his seldom-read The Doctrine of Virtue, and he thinks of virtues as helping one to follow the deontological strictures of the categorical imperative (Van Norden 2007, 34; emphasis added).

Insofar as Van Norden’s “thin” account of virtue ethics claims explanatory power that would not be applicable for too many rival theories, the centrality and primacy of virtue has to be assumed. This does not allow “thin” description of virtue ethics to be seen as a comparative framework, which has “little theoretical content”, and which can be shared by a “broad range of discussants who might disagree significantly over many other matters” (Van Norden 2007, 17). It follows then, that the use of virtue ethics framework to interpret early
Confucian texts remains open to the charge against the pitfalls of attempting to explain one incommensurable thought system in terms of other incommensurable system.

**Conclusion**

MacIntyre’s article on incommensurability presents a valid and important challenge for comparative philosophers who are employing conceptual framework of one tradition to explain the ideas of the other. MacIntyre’s position has generated several responses among the proponents of virtue ethics interpretation of early Confucian ethics, and these responses employ different strategies to meet incommensurability challenge. The article has showed how “negative” attempts to refute MacIntyre’s challenge by maintaining that it is supported by contradictory and confused claims are not successful, as they tend to misread MacIntyre’s original position. On the other hand, the “positive” attempt to meet MacIntyre’s challenge by providing “thin” description of virtue ethics as a neutral and not sterile ground for comparisons between Aristotelian and Confucian traditions is not successful, as it either does not meet requirement of neutrality, or (in its more moderate version) becomes applicable for too many rival theories, thus hurting the explanatory powers of the suggested framework. This leaves the necessity to justify the use of non-Chinese conceptual frameworks in explaining early Confucian ethical thought.

**References**


Notes

1. I thank Henry Rosemont Jr., Roger T. Ames, and anonymous reviewer at *IJAS* for valuable comments on early draft of this paper. All mistakes and inadequacies that are left are my own.


4. I thank Henry Rosemont, Jr. for repeatedly drawing my attention to this point. For similar line of critique see Hall and Ames 1995, Ch.2 or Hall and Ames 1998, xi-xix.

5. In similar vein, H. Rosemont and R. Ames, proponents of role ethics interpretation of early Confucian thought, maintain that Confucianism looses its unique perspective once presented as a form of virtue ethics and reiterated in the vocabulary of virtue ethics. They argue that early Confucians believe in fundamentally and thoroughly relational constitution of human being and primary concern of early Confucian ethical thought with relations as opposed to individual character traits is more adequately captured in the vocabulary of role ethics. For role ethics interpretation of early Confucians see Ames and Rosemont 2011, Ames 2011, and also their translations of *Lunyu* and *Xiaojing* (Ames and Rosemont 1998 and Rosemont and Ames 2009).

6. See, for example, Ivanhoe 2002, 167 n. 6.

7. It is worth to note that for Kuhn, just as for MacIntyre, although in other contexts, incommensurability did not preclude comparability. According to Richard Bernstein, “Kuhn never intended to deny that paradigm theories can be compared – indeed *rationally* compared and evaluated. In insisting on incommensurability, his main point was to indicate the ways in which paradigm theories *can* and *cannot* be compared” (Bernstein 1991, 87; italics in original).

8. Similar project is developed by Edward Slingerland who suggests that “despite the quite different content of the respective visions of human flourishing found in the two traditions, there is a structural similarity with regard to the means by which these specific visions are thought to be realized” (Slingerland 2001, 99; emphasis in original). Slingerland proceeds by “organizing a discussion of the *Analects* around a list of structural characteristics culled primarily from MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*” (Slingerland 2001, 99). According to Slingerland this should prove that there is a structural commensurability between Aristotelian and Confucian traditions, which could be taken as a starting point of comparative work.

9. I thank Roger Ames for drawing my attention to this point.

10. Hall and Ames point out specifically that “MacIntyre’s examples of cultural incommensurability continue to be largely drawn from scientific models” (Hall and Ames 1998, xii).

11. Bernstein points out the difficulties that Kuhn’s readers had with his use of “paradigm shift”: “Such expressions as ‘different worlds,’ ‘conversion,’ and ‘gestalt switches’ led (or rather, misled) many sympathetic and unsympathetic readers to think that his conception of a paradigm is like a total self-enclosed windowless monad – and that a paradigm shift necessitates an ‘irrational conversion’” (Bernstein 1991, 88).
About Author

Vytis SILIUS
He is a PhD candidate and lecturer at Vilnius University, Centre of Oriental Studies. Main research interests include traditional Chinese philosophy, contemporary moral philosophy, and methodological problems of intercultural studies of philosophy. He is preparing a PhD dissertation *The nature of Classical Confucian ethics in the controversies of modern philosophy*. His recent representative article is *Congruity (li) as ethical notion in Zhu Xi’s theory of renxing*, in *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*. 2010, t. 11, nr. 2., p. 91-115.

vytis.silius@oc.vu.lt