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# Systems and Teaching in Stoic and Confucian Philosophies

Baptiste Mèlès

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## Introduction\*

Systems have a lot of virtues. Among their abilities, the theoretical ones are often underlined. First, the system, defined as a rational organization of philosophical discourse, gives *consistency*: it assures that there is no contradiction between the propositions constituting the theory. It also offers *unity*: every part of the theory is bound to a single principle. It eventually allows for *completeness*: the author as well as the reader are sure that no proposition is missing, since each one stays exactly at its place, leaving no lacuna. Systematicity thus guarantees *scientificity*, which is the highest theoretical virtue for which one can hope, even when systematicity is not claimed and remains implicit.

But one is led to examine whether systems may also have some *teaching* virtues, especially in moral philosophy — thus not only theoretical virtues, but also *practical* ones. Are systems appropriate ways of teaching the path to wisdom? To consider this question, two philosophical schools will be compared: stoicism in the Western tradition and confucianism in the ancient Chinese tradition.

## 1 Systematicity as the royal way to wisdom

It has often been said that the Stoics invented systematicity. Without, of course, being the first philosophers to try and develop a consistent theory, they are said to have paid particular attention to dividing philosophy in a few domains — ethics, physics and logic — and showing the links between those fields. Long and Sedley thus write that “Of all ancient philosophies, Stoicism makes the greatest claim to being utterly systematic. Arguably, the Stoics invented the notion of philosophy as “system<sup>1</sup> [...]” I do not intend

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<sup>1</sup>A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 160.

to examine whether this precedence is historically valid, but I will try and show *which* systematicity is engaged in Stoic philosophy.

Indeed the risk is to interpret retrospectively the ancient notion of system, keeping in mind the later fortune of this concept, and especially Kant's or Hegel's views about, and use of, systems. That Stoics have promoted systems for their theoretical virtues, above all for consistency and completeness, is beyond doubt, and — rightly — often emphasized. Victor Goldschmidt has shown how the Stoic theory of time not only belongs to physics, but is also correlated to ethics and even logic. For instance, physics shows that only the present exists, and that past and future do not exist in a strong sense; ethics thus claim that I have to keep my mind on the present, preventing myself from any remorse or hope<sup>2</sup>. Ethics plays in this insightful analysis the role of an *object* for the system — time indeed has an ethical meaning —, but the system as educational *method* does not explicitly seem to possess any ethical virtue: only theoretical ones.

Less often mentioned are the educational virtues systems had for the Stoics, however important it may have been for them. The goal of Stoic philosophy is not exclusively theoretical. Wisdom is aimed beyond science, as Seneca writes: “I will state the difference between wisdom and philosophy. Wisdom is the human mind's good brought to perfection. Philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom; it strives for the goal which wisdom has achieved<sup>3</sup>.” And the fact that philosophy intends to lead to wisdom is corroborated by the ternary division of virtue (ἀρετή, *arétè*), i.e. excellence, reported by Aetius: “The Stoics said that wisdom is scientific knowledge of the divine and the human, and that philosophy is the practice of expertise (τέχνη, *techne*) in utility. Virtue singly and at its highest are triple — the physical one, the ethical one, and the logical one. For this reason philosophy also has three parts — physics, ethics and logic<sup>4</sup>.” Philosophy leads to wisdom because they share the same structure. There is more: wisdom preserves, at the highest level, the content of philosophy.

Even the order of the parts of philosophy may have an educational meaning. While it is an order of importance, it also refers to an order of teaching, showing what the last goals of philosophical learning are. Several different orders have been proposed: some Stoics “assign the first place to logic, the second to physics and the third to ethics; these include Zeno in his book *On Discourse*, Chrysippus, Archedemus and Eudromus. Diogenes of Ptolemais starts with ethics, Apollodores puts ethics second, while Panaetius and Posidonius start with physics<sup>5</sup>.” This order may also appear as an order of exhibition, if we presume that the most important parts of philosophy are

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<sup>2</sup>Victor Goldschmidt, *Le Système stoïcien et l'idée de temps*, Collège philosophique, Paris: Vrin, 1953, ch. 3, III, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup>Seneca, *Letters*, 89, 4–5. See Long and Sedley, op. cit., 26 G, p. 160.

<sup>4</sup>Aetius I, Preface 2, SVF II, 35. See *ibid.*, 26 A, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup>Diogenes Laërtius VII, 39–41. See *ibid.*, 26 B, p. 158.

treated at the end of the curriculum, insofar as they require the knowledge of the other parts.

Emphasizing the theoretical virtues of systems in Stoic philosophy — consistency, unity and completeness — as it has often, and rightly, been done, should therefore not hide some of its practical virtues recognized and promoted by the Stoics. Systematicity in itself does not directly lead to wisdom, but is the best way to express philosophy, which in turn leads to wisdom, once excellence is reached. It is not enough to say that systematicity does not obstruct the quest for wisdom: it is, in fact, the royal way that leads to it.

## 2 Systematicity as obstructing the Way to wisdom

A glimpse at ancient Chinese philosophical texts suffices to establish that few are systematic. Why is that?

For theoretical reasons, one might think, concerning ancient Chinese cosmology, as it was developed since the *Yijing* (易經), which describes the world in an ever-changing state<sup>6</sup>. For theoretical reasons too, if all phenomena are relative, as in Zhuāngzi (莊子, Tchouang-Tseu), or if language is not trustworthy, as in Lǎozǐ (老子, Lao-Tseu)<sup>7</sup>. With regard to these ancient Chinese philosophies, the lack of systematicity is not surprising.

More unexpected is the fact that even some relatively systematic philosophies can refuse the systematic way of teaching. It is mainly the case of Confucius' thought<sup>8</sup>. The comparison may be all the more instructive as Confucian philosophy has often been compared with Stoicism<sup>9</sup>.

Of course, the word “system” is nowhere to be found in Confucius' work, which is not expressed in a systematic way, consisting in a set of words or acts of the Master related by his disciples, similarly to Epictetus' *Discourses*; but this did not prevent Confucius from expressing himself about notions which constitute the concept of system in the Western tradition.

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<sup>6</sup>Although we could have expected a systematic treatment from this book, which is structured by regular combinations of plain lines “—” (陰, *yīn*) and broken ones “- -” (陽, *yáng*).

<sup>7</sup>The *Book of Way and Virtue* begins with the words:

“The way that can be spoken of  
Is not the constant way;  
The name that can be named  
Is not the constant name.”

See Laozi, *Tao Te Ching* (道得經, Dàodéjīng), Penguin Classics, translated by D. C. Lau, London: Penguin Books, 2006, 1: 《道可道非常道，名可名非常名》.

<sup>8</sup>*Kǒngfūzǐ* (孔夫子).

<sup>9</sup>Both link cosmology and ethics, cosmological and social order. The notion of duty (κατήκοντα or *officia* in Stoic philosophy) is not universal, but depends from the social position. This last point is exactly what distinguishes Mencius' (孟子, Mèngzi) orthodox confucianism from Mòzi's (墨子) thought.

*Consistency* is the minimal condition for a theory to be a system; it can without doubt be expected from Confucius. But there is more: even *unity* — the fact that several theories are correlated to a single principle — is claimed. Confucius strongly asserts this last criterion of “systematicity:” “There is a single thread binding (貫, *guàn*) my way (道, *dào*) together<sup>10</sup>.” Further he also claims, in almost the same words: “I have a single thread binding it all together<sup>11</sup>.” Thus Confucius does not deny, nor minimize, the consistency and unity of his thought: he emphasizes it.

Concerning *completeness*, some passages in the *Analects*, especially the sixteenth chapter, consist in a set of lists: three kinds of beneficial friendship, of harmful friendship, of beneficial pleasures, of harmful pleasures, etc. But these lists have no regularity, no rule of construction; they are very rare in Confucius’ work; and above all, their authenticity is very doubtful. Confucius thus emphasizes unity but avoids completeness.

Confucius’ relation to the form of his moral philosophy is itself regulated by educational interest. The way in which thoughts are exhibited is not neutral with respect to the content of the lessons. Confucian philosophy may be a system, but is not exposed as such. Keeping silent about what makes from the system a totality allows for the revelation of disciples’ qualities<sup>12</sup>. The good student is the one who can develop by himself what follows from the thoughts of his master: “Ah, dear Zígòng (子貢)! I eventually can talk to you about the Book of Odes (詩經, *Shījīng*)! Tell such a man something and he can see its relevance to what he has not been told<sup>13</sup>.” This criterion, which characterizes good students, also enables the master to identify bad ones: “When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time<sup>14</sup>.” Thus the real wise is not the one who has reached excellence in all the fields of philosophy, as in the Stoic notion of wisdom; he is the one who can see much further than what the master says. As Confucius compares two of his disciples, Yán Huí (顏回)<sup>15</sup> and Zígòng, the latter tells him: “How dare I compare myself with Hui? When he is told one thing he understands

<sup>10</sup>Confucius, *The Analects* (論語, *Lúnyǔ*), Penguin Classics, translated by D. C. Lau, London: Penguin Books, 1979, IV, 15: 《吾道一以貫之》.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, XV, 3: 《子一以貫之》.

<sup>12</sup>A deep analysis of ancient Chinese teaching strategy, especially in Confucian philosophy, can be found in François Jullien, *Le Détour et l'accès. Stratégies du sens en Chine, en Grèce*, Paris: Grasset, 1995, ch. IX. In the same book, François Jullien highlights the theoretical reasons of this educational strategy and compares it, among other things, to military strategy.

<sup>13</sup>Confucius, *op. cit.*, I, 15. See also III, 8 for an example of a good disciple, understanding and pursuing the master’s thought, and therefore able to talk with him from the *Shījīng*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, VII, 8.

<sup>15</sup>Yán Huí, who died precociously, was Confucius’ favorite disciple; see *ibid.*, V, 25; VI, 2, 5 and 9; VII, 10; IX, 10, 19 and 20; XI, 2, 6–10, 22; XII, 1; and probably, following the tradition, VIII, 5.

ten. When I am told one thing I understand only two<sup>16</sup>!” Refusing any systematic discourse, any claim to sufficiency, is therefore a way to let the disciples become intellectually autonomous. The most important quality is not to know, be it at the highest level of excellence, but to study (學, *xué*)<sup>17</sup>. Completeness is educationally dangerous: it prevents the students, but also the master, from studying.

### 3 Conclusion

Thus a difference emerges between two educational strategies. The Stoics choose systems in order to promote an idea of excellence, which implies an excellence of knowledge. Confucius, who avoids systems, reveals and shapes the understanding abilities of his disciples.

This conflict of strategies finds an *analogon* in mathematics, the theoretical science *par excellence*. While Euclides develops his mathematics in a systematic way, and tends to generality, the *Nine Chapters*, a classical book of Chinese mathematics, only exhibits particular cases. Not by inability, as Karine Chemla has shown<sup>18</sup>, but by choice: the reader has to find truths by himself. This confrontation reveals that systematicity does not only raise theoretical problems, but also educational ones.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., V, 9.

<sup>17</sup>To see the importance of “study” (學, *xué*), first character of the *Analects* (I, 1), see for example VII, 2; IX, 7 and 29; XIX, 5, and passim.

<sup>18</sup>See Karine Chemla and Guo Shuchun, eds., *Les Neuf Chapitres. Le classique mathématique de la Chine ancienne et ses commentaires*, Paris: Dunod, 2004 and Karine Chemla, “Penser sur la science avec les mathématiques de la Chine ancienne”, in: *La Pensée en Chine aujourd’hui*, ed. by Anne Cheng, Folio Essais, Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

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