University of the People

PHIL 1402 Introduction to Philosophy

Unit 4 Written Assignment 4

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**Navigating Tradition and Autonomy: A Personal Philosophy Through Confucian, Platonic, and Thomistic Lenses**

**Introduction**  
As a 37-year-old Asian man navigating the intersection of cultural expectations and individual aspirations, my worldview is shaped by the tension between collectivist traditions and modern individualism. Raised in a society steeped in Confucian values—filial piety, academic achievement, and communal harmony—I have witnessed how Plato’s meritocratic idealism, Aristotle’s communitarianism, and Aquinas’ natural law both mirror and clash with my lived experiences. This essay argues that while these philosophers offer frameworks to understand societal structures, a contemporary philosophy must reconcile their ideas with the realities of cultural evolution, personal autonomy, and child-free agency in a rapidly changing world.

**Plato’s Meritocracy and the Asian Educational Crucible**  
Plato’s *Republic* emphasizes a rigid hierarchy where philosopher-kings govern based on intellectual superiority—a concept mirrored in the East Asian emphasis on academic achievement as a gateway to social mobility. Growing up, my identity was inextricably tied to academic performance; standardized exams and elite university admissions were treated as modern-day agōnes, reflecting Plato’s belief in “golden souls” destined for leadership. Yet, this system often neglects emotional well-being and creativity, reducing individuals to their utility. While I acknowledge meritocracy’s role in fostering diligence, my experience reveals its limitations: burnout, stifled individuality, and the marginalization of non-academic talents. My philosophy rejects Plato’s static hierarchy, advocating instead for a fluid meritocracy that values diverse forms of excellence, from artistic expression to emotional intelligence.

**Aristotle’s Polis and the Weight of Familial Duty**  
Aristotle’s assertion that “man is by nature a political animal” resonates deeply in Confucian societies, where family and community obligations are paramount. As a child-free individual, I occupy a liminal space in a culture that equates adulthood with parenthood. Extended family gatherings often involve probing questions about marriage and children, reflecting Aristotle’s view of the family as the foundational unit of the polis. However, his exclusion of those outside traditional roles parallels the societal invisibility of child-free individuals. My philosophy aligns with Aristotle’s emphasis on community but challenges his narrow definitions. Volunteering in mentorship programs for underprivileged youth, for instance, allows me to contribute to societal flourishing without conforming to biological parenthood—a reimagining of Aristotle’s “social offspring” that values legacy through impact rather than lineage.

**Aquinas’ Natural Law and the Secular-Confucian Dilemma**  
Aquinas’ synthesis of divine reason and ethics finds echoes in the Confucian concept of *li* (ritual propriety), where moral order is rooted in tradition. Yet, as Asia secularizes, conflicts arise between ancestral duties and individual desires. For instance, my decision to prioritize a career in environmental advocacy over a “stable” corporate path—a choice at odds with filial expectations—highlights the tension between Aquinas’ immutable natural law and modern pluralism. While Aquinas might frame this as a rejection of “right reason,” my philosophy embraces ethical autonomy, viewing self-actualization as a moral imperative. This mirrors Hannah Arendt’s concept of “natality,” where individuals create new beginnings through action, challenging static traditions.

**Synthesis: A Philosophy of Balanced Agency**  
My worldview bridges these philosophical legacies while addressing their gaps. From Plato, I retain the value of striving for excellence but redefine it to include emotional and creative growth. From Aristotle, I adopt communal responsibility but expand it beyond biological and traditional confines. From Aquinas, I draw on the need for ethical grounding but secularize it, anchoring morality in human dignity rather than divine mandate.

Growing up in a multigenerational household, I learned that harmony requires compromise but not self-erasure. My child-free status, often perceived as a rejection of Confucian values, instead reflects a commitment to redefine contribution—whether through environmental stewardship or mentoring. Politically, I advocate for policies that support diverse family structures, such as subsidized childcare for working parents and community grants for non-traditional households, blending Aquinas’ emphasis on common good with Rawlsian equity.

**Conclusion**  
Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas provide frameworks to dissect the interplay of family, society, and governance, yet their visions are incomplete without contextual adaptation. As a middle-class Asian man navigating modernity, my philosophy embraces dynamic balance: honoring tradition while asserting autonomy, valuing community without erasing individuality, and seeking ethical purpose beyond dogma. In a world where cultural scripts are being rewritten, the true “good life” lies not in rigid adherence to ancient ideals but in the courageous synthesis of inherited wisdom and self-authored values.

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