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2013

# Is Conscientiousness a Virtue? Confucian Responses

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# Is Conscientiousness a Virtue? Confucian Answers<sup>i</sup>

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## Introduction

Among contemporary philosophers sympathetic to the theoretical centrality of virtue, there is little agreement on the status of conscientiousness. Indeed, there is little agreement even on what the word “conscientiousness” means; for the time being, let us take it to mean consciously ensuring that one does one’s duty. Adams and Wallace both take conscientiousness to be a virtue, whereas Roberts calls it a “quasi-virtue” and Slote argues that it is both different from and inferior to virtue.<sup>ii</sup> The landscape becomes still more complicated when we add in the vexed concept of “continence,” which we can initially gloss as forcing oneself to act rightly, against contrary inclination. McDowell sees continence as fundamentally distinct from virtue, while others like Stohr and Eylon argue that in important ways, virtue itself is a kind of continence.<sup>iii</sup> The dense views on these matters of historical figures like Aristotle and Kant further muddy the picture.<sup>iv</sup>

My goal here is to offer some clarity by drawing on what for some will seem a surprising source: early Confucianism. In one way, this should not be so surprising, because Confucianism is increasingly being recognized as home to one or more type of virtue ethic. No shock, then, that it speaks to issues like conscientiousness and continence. On the other hand, the strategy of seeking clarity by looking to the views of multiple Confucian philosophers, themselves sometimes differing from one another and whose texts are subject to certain interpretive disputes, may seem quixotic. In fact, stepping outside the Western tradition provides a valuable way for Western philosophers to check our bearings. We will see a way of thinking about psychological

phenomena and ethical concerns that is clearly related to many of the insights driving the Western debates to which I have alluded, but which parses matters somewhat differently. Briefly, the Confucians hold that conscientiousness is certainly not virtue. It lacks the reliability, flexibility, and (in many cases) style that come with virtue. Conscientiousness has important value, especially for ethical learners, but it is also dangerous.

### **The *Analects***

Let us begin with the *Analects*, which is much more worried about hypocrisy than interested in encouraging conscientious but not heartfelt behavior.<sup>v</sup> For example, in one early passage Confucius is said to consider all of the following shameful: “clever words, an ingratiating countenance, and perfunctory gestures of respect, ...(as well as) concealing one’s resentment and feigning friendship” (5:25; Confucius 2003, 50). In a somewhat later passage, we hear Confucius wonder: “If someone seems sincere and serious in his conversation, does this mean he is a gentleman? Or has he merely adopted the appearance of a gentleman?” (11:21; 2003, 119). Confucius does not trust popular opinions of people; even if everyone in a village likes someone, it is better if we know what the *good* people in the village think, or else to judge for oneself (13:24; 15:28). Most famously, in a late passage the *Analects* tells us that Confucius condemned the “village worthy (*xiangyuan*)” as “the thief of virtue” (17:13; 2003, 205). An adjacent passage makes a similar point when it draws an analogy between “assuming a severe expression while being weak inside” and breaking into a home and committing burglary (17:12; 2003, 205). In both cases, a seemingly good exterior is stolen or at any rate unearned.

The hypocrite and the conscientious person resemble one another very closely in both external behavior and much of their inner psychology. After all, does not the hypocrite consciously ensure that he or she does his or her duty? The difference seems to lie in the consistency with which a conscientious person both tries, and succeeds, in getting him or herself to follow duty. Indeed, the *Analects* does at times commend what looks like conscientiousness. Confucius is asked about “accumulating and exalting virtue (*chong de*),” and he replies: “Emphasize devotion and trustworthiness, and always move in the direction of what is right” (12.10).<sup>vi</sup> It is a bit unclear exactly how one is supposed to “emphasize devotion and trustworthiness,” which are character traits that one might be expected to take on over time, but as a first approximation, we should presumably strive to follow our superiors’ orders and match our deeds to our words. Insofar as one has a grasp on what counts as “right (*yi*),” “moving in the direction of what is right” is more directly accessible. Confucians understood their world to be governed by a code of propriety, and in many places we can see the close relationship between “ritually proper (*li*)” and “right.”<sup>vii</sup> Although the exact relationship between the externalized rules (the right, the proper) and internal virtues (righteousness, propriety) was debated by various Confucians, it seems plausible to think that here in the *Analects*, students are being told that a way to “accumulate and exalt virtue” is to follow the rules. Such a reading is supported by another discussion of “accumulating and exalting virtue” from the same chapter. Here, Confucius says more simply that one should “put service first and reward last” (12.21; 2003, 135). In both passages, we see the suggestion that one should do one’s duty as a route toward developing one’s virtue. One is not yet virtuous enough to do these things more spontaneously; the conscientiousness that is here advocated is clearly the activity of a learner. Still, ethical learning is critical to the project of the *Analects*, so insofar as conscientious behavior can contribute to

such learning, it is valued. A problem with such learners is that they may know their duty and yet fail to follow it; in an earlier passage, Confucius explicitly worries that he may “hear what is right yet be unable to move in its direction” (7.3). As I will elaborate below, this is one of the dimensions of conscientiousness’s unreliability and thus one of the reasons why Confucians push for more robust virtue.

A nice way to sum up the ambiguous place of conscientiousness in the *Analects* is offered in a recent article by Amy Olberding (Olberding 2009). Her topic is the relation between style and moral improvement, and part of her account is based on an extended study of Zigong, one of Confucius’s students.<sup>viii</sup> She writes that Zigong is “a keen student of Confucius’s manner, explaining Confucius’s behavior to others and loyally defending Confucius to those skeptical of the Master’s authority.”<sup>ix</sup> Nonetheless, “while Zigong cultivates a learned and refined mien, there is some worry that he is too facile with surface appearance and inattentive to the substantive qualities of character that ought to underlie them.”<sup>x</sup> Olberding diagnoses Zigong as weak in “sympathy (*shu*)” but strong in “studied attention to ritual”; she calls him a “technician” and “rule bound” (Ibid, 511.). Olberding argues that Zigong’s excessive formalism will result in his failure to “offer others tailored responses that acknowledge their particular identities and circumstances,” and this has negative effects both on others and on himself:

His failure registers in the effects of his style on others, (in) their sense of passing unrecognized or being submerged in a uniform otherness that elides the delicate variations of their more particular claims upon Zigong’s energies. More subtle is the effect of Zigong’s failure on himself. If we assume that Zigong aims, albeit clumsily, to foster fruitful relations with others, his efforts are inept in a particularly pernicious way. In his exercise of technical skill, he grants little access to himself. That is, in Zigong, others may well feel they have encountered a *form*, not a *man*. He not only elides others, he conceals himself. In consequence, he erects a barrier that impedes the ability of others to achieve sympathy with him.... Put simply, technical perfection can generate distrust.

(Ibid., 511-12)

The sentiments in this passage mesh well with the *Analects*' worries about conscientiousness that we discussed above, with the addition of Olberding's recognition that in an important sense, it does not matter whether a rule-bound "technician" is in fact aiming at moral improvement and fruitful relationships, or is cynically attempting to manipulate people in pursuit of status and material gain. In either case, there is a tendency for the conscientious style to generate distrust. His mild corrections of Zigong notwithstanding, Confucius does not take Zigong to be a "thief of virtue," but the similarity between the two types is still troubling. Again, we cannot discount the value of conscientiousness for learners, but even here we see problems. Olberding thus concludes that the more natural and idiosyncratic model of Zilu, whom she terms a "clown," offers a better route forward than Zigong's "technician" (Ibid., 515).

### **The *Mencius***

Like the *Analects*, the *Mencius* also expresses worries about conscientiousness. One of Mencius's students asks him to explain who are the "village worthies" excoriated by Confucius. Mencius replies that such people have no aspiration to improve themselves; they say, "Born in this era, we should be for this era. To be good is enough." Mencius remarks that:

If you try to condemn them, there is nothing you can point to.... They are in agreement with current customs; they are in harmony with the sordid era in which they live. They seem to dwell in devotion and faithfulness; their actions seem to be blameless and pure. The multitude delight in them; they regard themselves as right. But you cannot enter into the Way of Yao and Shun with them.

(7B:37; 2008, 195)

Mencius's use of the word "seem" suggests that his concern may be that village worthies exhibit mere "semblances" of virtue.<sup>xi</sup> This reading of the passage also fits well with the context in

which the village worthy was discussed in the *Analects*: recall from above that Confucius condemns those who “assume a severe expression while being weak inside”: a seemingly good exterior is unearned because it masks inner weakness. And yet Mencius’s worry here seems subtly different from that in the *Analects*. It is not so much that village worthies (as he understands them) hide their inner weakness, as that they are celebrated for doing their quite minimal duties and no more. Mencius regarded the moral standards of his age as woefully inadequate; resting content with such customs condemned one to a life of moral mediocrity. The problem with village worthies, therefore, was that they thrived in and actively encouraged<sup>xii</sup> a culture of doing no more than one’s duty—and they did this at a time when the collectively understood duties were too minimal to lead to genuine moral progress for individuals or for the society. In short, rather than calling Mencius’s “village worthies” hypocritical, we should simply see them as conscientious, and Mencius found such conscientiousness deeply troubling.<sup>xiii</sup>

The closest Mencius comes to making explicit the distinction between conscientious and virtuous activity comes in the following passage:

Mencius said, “That by which humans differ from animals is slight. The masses abandon it. The gentleman preserves it. Shun had insight into things. He had scrutinized human roles. He acted out of benevolence and righteousness; he did not act out benevolence and righteousness.”

(4B19; cf. 2008, 107)

Mencius believes that humans (unlike animals) have innate promptings toward virtue which need to be preserved and extended; if they are abandoned, one is no different from an animal. Based on his successful extension of these rudimentary feelings (via scrutinizing human roles, among other things), the ancient sage Shun was able to act out of virtuous dispositions, rather than merely doing his best to act in a virtuous way. The English phrase “act out benevolence” is somewhat ambiguous; in light of our discussion in the previous paragraph, it is important to

clarify that by “act out benevolence,” Mencius does not mean *pretending* to be benevolent—that is, merely “acting.” He means to put into practice actions that are benevolent, but not to do so in a way that springs naturally from a benevolent character. Distinctions like this are common in Western virtue-ethical literature, both ancient and contemporary. We can also look to a famous twelfth-century commentary on the text for clarification: “Benevolence and righteousness were already based in Shun’s heartmind, and all that he did came from them. It is not that he regarded benevolence and righteousness as fine things and only then forced himself to act” (Zhu 1987, 112; Mengzi 2008, 107). Clearly, Mencius is arguing that sagely virtue is distinct from conscientiousness.<sup>xiv</sup>

So far we have seen that Mencius, like the Confucius of the *Analects*, has a clear conception of conscientiousness and has serious concerns about it, though Mencius’s stress is less on hypocrisy than on one’s resting content with mediocrity. Still, again like the *Analects*, we do find in the *Mencius* some recognition that conscientious behavior is important for learners. At one point, Mencius says, “If you wear the clothes of (ancient sage) Yao, recite the teachings of Yao, and perform the actions of Yao—this is to be Yao” (6B:2; 2008, 159). In order to understand Mencius’s point here, it is critical to keep in mind that the Confucian masters often tailor their teachings to the current needs of a specific student. Rather than making a blanket claim that is apt for all, therefore, Mencius is here giving one individual (named Cao Jiao) instructions that will help him to move forward.<sup>xv</sup> Similarly, even though Shun was lauded for not forcing himself to “act out” benevolence, in a subsequent passage Mencius says, “Nothing will get one closer to benevolence than to force oneself to act out sympathetic understanding” (7A:4; 2008, 172).<sup>xvi</sup> The two kinds of forcing are different from one another: in Cao Jiao’s case, one consciously mimics Yao with the hope that good behavior and a deeper transformation will

follow; in the latter case, one focuses oneself (consciously, thus “forcing”) on one kind of motive rather than another. The latter seems more advanced, though still potentially subject to the problems which conscientiousness engender, as Mencius has made clear.

### **The *Xunzi***

Conscientiousness plays a larger role in *Xunzi*—the third of our classical Confucian sources—than it does in either of our previous texts. Notwithstanding certain differences from *Mencius*, we will see that the account in *Xunzi* is basically compatible with what has come before: conscientiousness is apt as a learner’s state but troubling if one becomes stuck at this stage. *Xunzi* is in fact considerably more explicit about the stages of ethical development.<sup>xvii</sup> One passage distinguishes three “grades of person (*renlun*)”:

1. The “common mass of humanity (*zhongren*).” The fundamental orientation of their heartminds (or “commitment (*zhi*)”<sup>xviii</sup>) allows for “crooked and selfish motives (*qusi*),” though they hope “others will consider them to be public-spirited” (K II, 83; Li 157).
2. “Lesser Confucians (*xiao ru*).” *Xunzi* writes that they are committed to “repressing the merely private and thus are able to be public-spirited. In their conduct, they repress their emotional dispositions and inborn nature and are thus able to become cultivated” (Ibid.).
3. “Great Confucians (*da ru*).” The commitment of these individuals is “at ease with what is public-spirited, (and) their conduct is at ease with cultivation” (Ibid).

In the hope of the masses to appear public-spirited, we can detect some resemblance to the “village worthy,” especially the *Analects*’ version which sees such people as hypocrites.<sup>xix</sup> Of primary interest here, though, is the middle category. *Xunzi* also says that these people are

“knowing, yet fond of inquiring of others, so they are able to develop their talents.” This is strong praise from Xunzi who, as we will see, puts considerable emphasis on learning from teachers and other “models.” Xunzi often characterizes the “merely private (*si*)” in terms of one’s physical desires, and believes that the disposition to feel such desires is rooted in our nature. “Lesser Confucians” are able to force themselves to act well despite the fact that such private desires push them in other directions. Clearly this is a case of conscientiousness and indeed of continence, since these people must repress contrary inclinations. Just as clearly, the highest group (the Great Confucians) exemplify full virtue in the way they are “at ease” with public-spirited activity.

In other passages Xunzi expands on these ideas. His characterizations of the lowest and highest categories are largely compatible with what we have already seen. The middle group, though, gets considerably more fine-grained analysis. For example: “He who acts from a fondness for the model is a scholar. He who embodies it with firm commitment is a gentleman.... (If a man) possess the model but has no commitment to its true meaning, then he will act too rigidly.”<sup>xx</sup> Both the “scholar” and the “gentleman” fall in between the masses and the sage. Without firm commitment, the mere scholar is likely to be overly rigid in his effort to follow the model. Still, Xunzi has here made explicit the motivation of the “scholar”: he is fond of “models (*fa*).” Models include the examples posed by exemplary teachers and ancient sages, as well as explicit ritual directives. Models are key to Xunzi’s understanding of ethical progress because (as we will discuss below) he does not believe that we have guidance from innate moral feelings.

In another passage, Xunzi further elaborates on the middle ground between masses and sage:

When a person's conduct is based on the model with maximal firmness so that merely private desires do not confuse what he has been taught, he may properly be called a "resolute scholar."

When a person's conduct is based on the model with maximal firmness and he is fond of cultivating and rectifying himself in terms of what he has been taught so that his dispositions and inborn nature are reformed and improved; ...[when,] although his conduct is generally appropriate, [but] he is not yet fully at ease; [and] when, although his thought and awareness are for the most part suitable, he is not yet completely thorough,...then [he] may properly be called a "staunch and substantial gentleman."

(Li 140; altered from K II, 75-6)

Once again we see a distinction between "scholar" and "gentleman." The scholar is able to stick firmly to the model, but with such conscientious resolution may come, as noted above, some rigidity. The gentleman's motivation is more internal, more "embodied" because his commitment is now at least partly reflected in transformed dispositions and in the ways that he perceives the world, but he still falls short. Insofar as he is not fully "at ease," he must still monitor himself and ensure that he acts properly. Perhaps he has moved beyond continence, since there are no suggestions here of significant contrary inclinations, but some conscious intervention—some conscientiousness—is still necessary to see that he acts as needed.

In a fascinating passage from the "Undoing Fixation" chapter, Xunzi is even more specific about the different mechanisms that can enable conscientious people to motivate themselves to act properly. Xunzi relates three stories. A man named Ji lived in a cave in order to ponder by himself, but was easily distracted by mosquitoes and gnats. His answer was to

carefully keep himself as far away from the distractions as possible; Xunzi calls this “anxiously keeping oneself on guard (*wei*).” The second incident concerns Mencius, who is said to have expelled his wife because he hated the impropriety she showed in breaking convention.<sup>xxi</sup> Xunzi calls this “rigidly forcing oneself (*zi qiang*).” Finally, a man named Youzi “hated dozing off so he burned his palm to stay awake.” Xunzi classifies this as “endurance (*zi ren*).”<sup>xxii</sup> All three of these men at least partly achieve their ends, but Xunzi emphasizes the distance between them and a sage. One way of characterizing the difference is that they are focused only on external results; Xunzi says, “Those who are murky understand only external manifestations, while those who are clear understand internal manifestations.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Sages “follow their desires and embrace their emotional dispositions,” and things simply turn out well-ordered, without any need for keeping on guard, rigid forcing, or endurance. Xunzi is not interested here in whether the results achieved by the three men are actually correct, nor does he explicitly draw attention to ways in which their external goals may be undermined by the means taken to achieve them. His point is rather that we should not rest content with a murky interior psychology, but work to achieve the state of the sage wherein results come “without striving (*wu wei*).”

So far, we have seen a picture that accords quite well with the previous Confucians. It is possible to conscientiously get oneself to act properly, through a combination of external models (so that one knows what is “proper”) and motivational techniques (keeping on guard, rigidity, and so on), but such results are at best a stage on the way toward more full-blown virtue. Each of the passages from *Xunzi* we have examined emphasizes the need for an inner transformation of dispositions—a coming to be “at ease” with the proper feelings and response. In a famous passage that has drawn much scholarly attention, though, Xunzi might seem to be asserting that a different kind of conscientiousness is possible. We read:

Life is what people most desire, and death is what people most despise. However, when people let go of life and accomplish their own death, this is not because they do not desire life and instead desire death. Rather, it is because they do not approve (*ke*) of living in these circumstances, but do approve of dying in these circumstances. Thus, when the desire is excessive but the action does not match it, this is because the heartmind prevents it.... Thus, order and disorder reside in what the heartmind approves of; they are not present in the desires from one's dispositions (*qing*).<sup>xxiv</sup>

At issue is how to understand “approval.” It is distinct from and indeed seems to override desiring. Desires are automatic responses of one's dispositions to things, as when one encounters and desires a delicious food. Approval, on the other hand, stems from understanding (*zhi*): Xunzi tells us that it is only the understanding that enables us to take a given object or goal as approval-worthy, and let it guide us (Li 529). In an important article on Xunzi's view of human agency, Bryan Van Norden adds two other remarks about “approval.” First, he says that it does not seem to be associated with joy or delight in one's action. Second, Van Norden suggests that the phenomenology of “approving” of something seems to be like “feeling morally compelled to perform...some action” (2000, 124). If we take all these characteristics of approval together, it might be tempting to imagine that Xunzi is talking about something like Kant's pure practical judgment, with the heartmind playing the role of one's morally good “will.” Furthermore, since approval seems clearly to be a kind of conscientiousness, we might also think that Xunzi has discovered an important new species: not the compromised motivation of the learner, but a pure sort of motive that, perhaps, should be our ultimate goal.

In fact, no scholars today argue that Xunzi is here anticipating Kant, though there is considerable disagreement about how we ought to understand Xunzi's view here.<sup>xxv</sup> I believe that with a few additional observations, we can come to see how “approval” is the same kind of conscientious state—or rather, covers the same range of conscientious states—as we saw above. The key is seeing how one comes to approve of something. In a passage just before the lengthy

discussion of “approval,” Xunzi writes: “Our desires are independent of our approval of them, but we actually seek only what we approve of. It is our nature that our desires are independent from our approval. It is the result of our heartmind that we seek only what we approve of. When a single natural desire is controlled by our heartmind’s many aspects, it becomes difficult to classify it as the original, natural desire.”<sup>xxvi</sup> T. C. Kline explains that the original desire has been transformed into a more complex motive, in something like the transformation that Aristotle says takes place during practical reasoning. Approval, then, may not be a desire, but “another kind of motive, perhaps something that we could call a practical judgment, that combines both cognitive and conative elements” (Kline 2000, 161). Approval is not a simple mental state, wholly distinct from desire, which can serve as a *sui generis* source of motivation. It is rather the result of a process, a filtering and transforming of our desires by our heartmind. In the simplest case of the completely uncultivated person who approves whatever he or she desires, this “process” is empty and automatic.<sup>xxvii</sup> Xunzi says that anyone can approve of things, as distinct from simply desiring them, and so there is no guarantee that approval will always be correct. “If what the heartmind approves of misses the proper patterns, then even if the desires are few, how would it stop short of chaos” (Li 527). However, in many cases, this will be a result of a lengthy process of conscious cultivation. Especially when we take this into account, we begin to see that approving is closely related to the process of “commitment (*zhi*)” that was at the core of some of Xunzi’s earlier discussions of conscientiousness. Recall that the three “grades of person” each had a different commitment.<sup>xxviii</sup> The middle category is committed to “repressing the merely private and thus are able to be public-spirited.” We could also say that these people approve of public-spiritedness, and are thereby able to repress the merely private. We also have seen that Xunzi talks about the degree of “firmness” with which one’s conduct is based on a proper model. One’s

understanding and fondness for the model both figure into this firmness; approval, we can infer, is another way of talking about the role of understanding in enabling one to stand firm. Xunzi's stories about Ji, Mengzi, and Youzi, finally, can be seen as further illustrating what different kinds of approval may look like. In particular, it is consistent with everything Xunzi has said to suspect that approval will often be rigid, just like many of his other discussions of conscientiousness claim. Conscientiousness is an important capacity that we have, but it is no substitute for becoming more virtuous.<sup>xxix</sup>

One final issue we should consider is Xunzi's insistence that morality in general, and righteousness (*yi*) in particular, are "external" rather than being—as Mencius thought—"internal" to one's nature. Much ink has been spilled over this topic; very roughly, the dispute is over whether virtuous dispositions emerge through the properly-nurtured growth of specific proto-moral capacities that we have innately. Xunzi does not think so. He does hold that our natures are amenable to being shaped, but the means and goal of the shaping are human discoveries. For our purposes, the question is whether this disagreement between Xunzi and Mencius has consequences for their respective views of conscientiousness. It will help us to formulate an answer if we take on board something like Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues. For Hume, natural virtues are those "that are rooted directly in the weak sentiment of benevolence"; to fully develop such virtues, one has only to "recognize as a norm what is already latent within our human nature."<sup>xxx</sup> On the other hand, Hume also wants to be able to account for virtues like honesty or justice which not only do not seem to emerge directly from benevolence, but can even conflict with it. His answer is that the mediation of a convention or compact (with or without conscious agreement) can enable us to redirect feelings of benevolence. Our approbation for the practices associated with convention-governed social life

(like promising, laws, and property) can redirect our sentiments, which then come to take on a life of their own within our hearts and minds. These new dispositions are artificial virtues (Wiggins 1996, 137).

Hume's categories do not map perfectly onto either Mencius or Xunzi, but what they do help us to see is this: both natural and artificial virtues are *virtues*. Whatever their origins, they are robust dispositions that spontaneously can guide the style and substance of our reactions to our environment. The virtue of truthfulness, no matter whether understood as natural or artificial, is importantly different from rule-bound truth-telling. Admittedly, being shaped by an external model plays a much bigger role for Xunzi than for Mencius, and so we might expect that Xunzi will have more to say about those who are consciously striving to confirm to such models. This is indeed what we have seen: Xunzi offers a more subtle—and perhaps somewhat more favorable—treatment of conscientiousness than does either Mencius or Confucius. Nonetheless, the general shape of conscientiousness is quite consistent across all three texts. In all three texts, the goal is the reliability, flexibility, and style that come with virtue.

## **Conclusion**

The main project of this essay has been to show, often via detailed interpretation of passages, that early Confucian philosophers exhibit a concerted and consistent interest in conscientiousness. As I have emphasized, they understand conscientiousness to be both distinct from (and inferior to) virtue, and to have both positive and negative sides. These results have two kinds of immediate payoff. First, by thematizing the idea of conscientiousness (for which there is no single term in these texts) we can better understand the role that rules and models play in early

Confucian ethics. Claims made in each of these texts concerning the importance of ritual and other sorts of rules must be read against the context of their views of conscientious rule-following, as opposed to full-fledged virtuous responsiveness. Second, the arguments of this essay should help us to better grasp the kind(s) of virtue ethics that these three texts are putting forward. Especially in the *Xunzi* we see a spectrum of positions that one can occupy as one's degree of ethical cultivation progresses, with increasingly less reliance on conscientiousness. Because actually achieving sagehood is nigh on impossible, these semi-conscientious middle-ground positions are extremely important to our ethical lives, but this does not change the fact that the development of, and reliance upon, a virtuous character remains Xunzi's ultimate goal. In other words, by properly understanding the place of conscientiousness within early Confucian ethics, we are helped to see that the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi* present forms of virtue ethics, rather than a deontological ethics or a unique synthesis of rule- and virtue-based ethics.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In addition to these two immediate rewards, I must grant that I have only scratched the surface of the rich range of comparative questions that one could pursue on the basis of the material here discussed. For example, can we bring together and then generalize upon the various ways in which the texts urge readers to avoid the problematic aspects of conscientiousness, and then on this basis offer advice to ethical learners today (that is, to all of us)? What should we make of the fact that “reason” and “reasons” play a much larger role in most Western discussions of conscientiousness and continence than these notions played in the texts we have examined here? Speaking of continence, what more might we tease out of early Confucianism concerning this idea—especially in light of the Confucian view that a sage will respond to all relevant values (Angle 2009, ch. 6)? This seems not to allow for McDowell's notion that “moral” considerations will “silence” others, and yet sagely activity is surely not to be understood as taking place against

a background of “contrary inclinations,” as the idea of continence suggests.<sup>xxxii</sup> I hope that others and perhaps I myself will be able to pursue these kinds of comparative opportunities in the future. As this essay and, indeed, all the essays in this volume show, the juxtaposition of virtue ethics and Confucianism opens up many exciting prospects for future research and, we can hope, for concrete ethical learning.

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<sup>i</sup> My thanks to Bryan Van Norden and Eric Hutton for helpful comments on an early draft, as well as to participants in the Virtue Ethics and Confucianism Conference for their feedback and encouragement.

<sup>ii</sup> Adams writes that “conscientiousness may be taken to be the virtue of excellent responsiveness to obligations one really has to other persons” [Adams 2006, 34]; see also [Wallace 1978]. Roberts says that the “sense of duty or obligation” is a quasi-virtue: “If we can’t get people to be concerned about one another, maybe we can get them to feel that they have some mutual obligations” [Roberts 1991, 333]. Slote begins an extensive discussion of conscientiousness by saying, “to the extent we make use of moral rules or claims to guide our actions toward others

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or have an intrinsic conscientious concern with the moral character of our actions, our connection with other people is less immediate, less personal, than if we simply concern ourselves with their welfare” [Slote 2001, 49].

<sup>iii</sup> [McDowell 1979], and contrast [Stohr 2003] and [Eylon 2009].

<sup>iv</sup> We should distinguish the above uses from uses of “conscientiousness” according to which it is a kind of special attentiveness or moral seriousness, the opposite of which is to be overly light-hearted or blasé [Kupperman 1991, 72], which seems more like what Roberts calls “virtues of will power” [Roberts 1991, 332n12].

<sup>v</sup> This is true throughout the text, from consensus early passages like 5:25 to consensus late passages like 17:13.

<sup>vi</sup> It is striking that in a recent conference presentation, Hagop Sarkissian translated *zhong* 忠, which I have here rendered as “devotion,” as “conscientiousness.” I take it that this is a similar sense of “conscientiousness” to Kupperman’s idea of attentiveness or moral seriousness; see note 3, above.

<sup>vii</sup> For one helpful perspective on this complex issue, see [Van Norden 2007, 270-2].

<sup>viii</sup> She builds on her own earlier work [Olberding 2007] and on that of scholars like Joel Kupperman [1999] and Gier [2001].

<sup>ix</sup> [Olberding 2009, 510]. She cites *Analects* 1:10, 9:6, and 19:24 as evidence.

<sup>x</sup> [Ibid.]. Olberding offers *Analects* 5:15 and 14:29, among other passages, as evidence that Zigong needs to get beyond surface evaluations of others [and of himself]. There is a degree to which Olberding’s portrait of Zigong is based on imaginative reading-between-the-lines, but even if we were to insist that one or another aspect of her characterization fits the “real” Zigong poorly, her character sketch still serves to illustrate what may be worrisome about conscientiousness.

<sup>xi</sup> On “semblances” of virtue in the context of Confucianism, see [Van Norden, 2008, 196] and [Yearley 1990].

<sup>xii</sup> From Mencius’s statement that they “regard themselves as right [自以為是],” we can tell that they are aware of what they are doing. They are conformists, but not mindless conformists. I thank participants in the Warp, Weft, and Way blog for helping me to clarify this; see < <http://warpweftandway.wordpress.com>>.

<sup>xiii</sup> I discuss reasons why Confucians resist the idea that we should distinguish going beyond the moral minimum as “supererogation” in [Angle 2009, 29].

<sup>xiv</sup> We will see below that Xunzi does not believe benevolence and righteousness to be “internal,” but still can make the distinction that Mencius draws here between virtue and conscientiousness.

<sup>xv</sup> Zhu Xi’s commentary makes this point explicit: “If we examine Cao Jiao’s questions, we see they are shallow and simplistic. He must be at the point where he is only beginning to see things.... Thus, Mencius answers him in this manner” [Mengzi 2008, 160]

<sup>xvi</sup> Van Norden’s translation has “act out *of* sympathetic understanding.” The language is very similar to 4B:19, but unfortunately 7A:4 is too concise to make clear whether “act out of” or “act out” is more apt. If we follow Van Norden, the idea has to be that one can force oneself to act from one kind of motive rather than another, and that this is an important step toward developing a robust disposition to act virtuously.

<sup>xvii</sup> I have found the chapter on Xunzi in [Slingerland 2000] to be very helpful in thinking through the issues of this section. References to Xunzi are as follows: “K” refers to Knoblock’s translation [Xunzi 1988-1994]; volumes are distinguished by Roman numerals. “Li” refers to Li Tisheng 李滌生’s Chinese edition [Xunzi 1979]. I have also benefitted greatly from Eric Hutton’s as-yet unpublished translation.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Zhi* is an important technical term for Xunzi that also plays a significant role in earlier Confucianism. Stalnaker’s discussion is incisive; he glosses it as “settled intention” or “our ultimate aspiration or standard” [Stalnaker 2006, 255]. Because it is also something that we can consciously take on and something that can deepen over time, I suggest the translation of “commitment.” For further discussion, see [Angle 2009, 114-15].

<sup>xix</sup> See also [K II, 75; Li 140], wherein Xunzi says that the virtue of the common people [民德] “consists in considering goodness to be following common usages”; this resonates more directly with Mencius’s concerns about the village worthy.

<sup>xx</sup> [Li 33]; translation substantially altered from [K I, 156].

<sup>xxi</sup> For a different version of this story, see [Mencius 1970, 217].

<sup>xxii</sup> [Li 493]; my translations draw partly on [K III, 108].

<sup>xxiii</sup> [Ibid].

<sup>xxiv</sup> [Li 527]; this translation is drawn, with only minor changes, from Hutton’s unpublished translation.

<sup>xxv</sup> David Wong explicitly denies the Kantian parallel [2000, 141].

<sup>xxvi</sup> [Li 527]; my translation. Compare [Hsün Tzu 1963, 150-1].

<sup>xxvii</sup> Xunzi insists that all people can “approve” at [Li 195]; see [Knoblock II, 120]. Eric Hutton helpfully insisted that I take this fact more fully into account.

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<sup>xxviii</sup> The commitment of the “common mass of humanity,” recall, is such that they are crooked and selfish, presumably as a result of simply following their desires. In this case, we have what is referred to in my main text as an “empty” process of approval [and commitment]. I thank Eric Hutton for pointing out that Xunzi makes a distinction between synchronic and diachronic senses of “deliberate activity [*wei* 偽]”; see [Li 506], [K III, 127], and [Hsün Tzu 1963, 139-40]. Hutton suggests that one can also see synchronic and diachronic dimensions to approval and commitment. This makes sense, and viewing null cases of “empty” approval and commitment as I have suggested helps us to see the continuity between synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

<sup>xxix</sup> In an excellent recent book comparing Xunzi with Augustine, Aaron Stalnaker points out that for Augustine, continence is in fact a critical kind of virtue, since virtue itself for Augustine is simply the “continuous striving for something higher, nor repose in dependable excellences of character” [Stalnaker 2006, 259]. Concerning Xunzi’s understanding of continence, Stalnaker writes [replacing “assent” with the “approval” we have been using]: “He seems to have a similar concept, but the idea appears to be relatively uninteresting to him theoretically because he thinks the power of [approval] is common to all humans, and so he is much more concerned with how we might learn to what we should [approve]” [Ibid]. Stalnaker adds elsewhere that according to Xunzi, “even the uncultivated have full possession of the innate power to [approve or disapprove of] particular desires” [Ibid, 256], and so Stalnaker emphasizes Xunzi’s “deep distinction between, on the one hand, our initially innate system of spontaneous responsiveness to our environment that includes our dispositions and desires and, the other hand, the reflective and deliberative desires that consist in our judgment of [approval]” [Ibid, 259]. In all of this, Stalnaker seems to be pointing us in a slightly wrong direction, on the one hand drawing too sharp a distinction between “approval” and our transformed dispositions, and on the other hand downplaying the other discussions of continence [or conscientiousness] because they do not fit well enough with “approval.” But if approval is what I have just argued, then it fits much better into a single picture. [Indeed, my understanding of the role that “commitment” plays for Xunzi — which is an important link between continence and approval — owes much to Stalnaker’s discussion [Ibid, 255].

<sup>xxx</sup> [Wiggins 1996, 132]. The following example from Hume cannot but remind one of *Mencius* 2A:6, in which Mencius claims we will all feel alarm and empathy upon seeing a child about to fall into a well: “A parent flies to the relief of his child; transported by the natural sympathy which actuates him and which affords no leisure to reflect on the sentiments or conduct of the rest of mankind in like circumstances” [quoted in Ibid]. For further discussion of similarities between Hume and Mencius, see [Liu 2003] and [Slote 2009].

<sup>xxxi</sup> For contrasting views, see Lee Ming-huei’s essay in this volume, and [Liu 2004].

<sup>xxxii</sup> See [McDowell 1979], [Stohr 2003], and [Eylon 2009].