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Well-Being and Confucianism¹

Confucianism is an ethical tradition with ancient roots, spanning 2,500 years of human civilization. Even today, it remains a *living* tradition, continuing to influence the habits, thoughts, and values of cultures and societies throughout the East. Its origin traces back to the teachings of Confucius or “Master Kong” 孔子 (551-479 B.C.E.) who offered a profound ethical vision of the ideal society characterized by peaceful order and humane relationships.² The achievement of such a society, Confucius insisted, rested on following “the Way” (*dao* 道)—the correct path of moral transformation—through active participation in rituals (or rites) and the fulfillment of social roles within the context of the family and community.

In this essay I explore the accounts of well-being offered by two of the most influential Confucian philosophers, Mencius 孟子 (391-308 B.C.E.) and Xunzi 荀子 (310-219 B.C.E.) who understood themselves as extending and refining the ethical vision transmitted by Confucius.³ Neither of them offered what we would nowadays call *theories* of well-being, and for this reason it is difficult to neatly place their accounts within the contemporary classification

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² Here and throughout this essay I use the term “Confucianism” to refer to an ethical tradition founded on the teachings and writings of Confucius and his followers as represented in the *Analects* and other early Confucian texts such as the *Mengzi*, the *Xunzi*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Great Learning*. Since this essay primarily aims to examine substantive philosophical views, I will not attempt to defend this construal of “Confucianism,” while acknowledging that some sinologists and historians of thought will contest this usage.

³ I leave aside the *Analects* of Confucius since Mencius and Xunzi provide more systematically developed accounts of human flourishing that extend the core ideas found in the *Analects*.

system of well-being that has developed over recent years, although, as we will see, they bear interesting connections to certain contemporary accounts.⁴ Both thinkers affirmed that virtue, or more precisely, virtuous activity, are constitutive of well-being. Because these early Confucians saw virtue as inseparable from human flourishing, substantial space will be devoted to discussing their accounts of virtue and moral development.

In addition to taking virtue as a fundamental component of well-being, both philosophers also emphasized what we might call *the developmental aspect of the good life*, which takes well-being as consisting in the unfolding of a series of stages that manifests a proper trajectory. They affirmed that a life that goes best would involve a certain unifying narrative structure culminating in the achievement of sagehood, and would be marked by enduring positive emotional states that bear a striking resemblance to contemporary accounts of psychological happiness. The proposal that both virtue and the developmental structure of human lives play a significant role in well-being, and that their realization will be accompanied by a deep and lasting form of psychic fulfillment, are among the most interesting and significant contributions made by these early Chinese thinkers. Fleshing out these ideas will be the central objective of this essay.

Both Mencius and Xunzi lived at a time and place remarkably different from contemporary Western society. It is thus not surprising that their aims would diverge significantly from the goals that regulate discussions found within the contemporary philosophical literature on well-being, dominated by the posing of theories, offering of counterexamples, and the modification of theories in light of those counterexamples. Instead, they offered discussions of well-being that were less theoretically directed, but rich in practical implications, regularly

⁴ The most widely discussed classification of well-being theories is given by Parfit (1987: 493-502). For more recent taxonomies see Fletcher (2013) and Woodard (2013).

drawing upon observations of everyday life and the reservoir of common human experience to provide a realizable vision of human flourishing. Their writings reveal a practical orientation, a resolute attitude toward improving the conditions of their society, by providing insights into moral self-cultivation and human fulfillment that could be exemplified within the constraints of human psychology. Because their discussions constantly center on examining fundamental aspects of human experience, they may still offer insights and a fresh perspective that have been either ignored or underappreciated by contemporary philosophers. There is still much to learn from them.

(I) The Concept of Well-Being

If we are to investigate these early Confucians' accounts of well-being, we first need to begin by clarifying what we mean by the term 'well-being.'⁵ This is especially important since 'well-being' has been used by philosophers in a variety of ways, and furthermore, it is not clear that there is any specific Chinese character or concept that corresponds to this term.⁶ A cluster of concepts are sometimes called on to help elucidate the concept of well-being such as the notions of 'happiness,' 'self-interest,' 'good for,' 'good life,' and 'flourishing.' Unfortunately, just how these various concepts, themselves often in need of elucidation, are linked to each other is a difficult issue that requires its own separate treatment. We can perhaps begin by noting that there are broader and narrower senses of 'well-being' that admit of thicker or thinner specifications. The narrower senses of well-being will involve more substantive elements, while the broader

⁵ Most contemporary philosophers use "well-being" and "welfare" interchangeably. I will stick to "well-being" in this essay since it seems more apt in capturing the phenomenon of 'the good life' or 'flourishing' that will be the focus of this discussion. For an analysis of the concept of well-being see Campbell (2013).

⁶ One possible candidate might be *li* 利, commonly translated as "profit" or "benefit," but because for the early Confucians this term is substantively tied to certain goods such as material wealth or power, it cannot be equivalent to 'well-being' which is a more formal concept that leaves open what substantively constitutes a person's interest.

senses of well-being will be characterized more thinly, carrying less substantive content. In what follows, I will use ‘well-being’ in a broad sense that closely corresponds to the concept of ‘the good life,’ ‘flourishing,’ and the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia*. The concept of well-being that I seek to discuss is intimately tied to questions such as “what makes a life go well?” and “what kind of life would you want for those you love?”—questions that greatly concerned ancient Chinese philosophers.

One possible concern with construing the notion of well-being broadly might be that the wider concept does not concern *well-being*, but perhaps the most choiceworthy life or life highest in goodness or value.⁷ But the early Confucians did not distinguish well-being from the good or most choiceworthy life in a way familiar to contemporary philosophers. Instead, they seemed to have implicitly affirmed that the life of virtue is the life that is best *for us*.⁸ This lack of explicit distinction between the good or choiceworthy life and a narrower category of prudential value appears to mirror the beliefs of ancient Greek thinkers who used a single term *eudaimonia* to mark out not only the excellent or choiceworthy life, but also (more contentiously) a life that is good for us.⁹ The fact that the concept of ‘well-being’ in the modern sense—specifying an independent, non-moral prudential category of value—carried much less significance for these classical thinkers is an interesting point that merits careful investigation. One possible explanation is that these ancient philosophers had a much wider conception of moral goodness or virtue than contemporary philosophers, being less preoccupied by what we

⁷ See Haybron (2008): Ch. 8, and Heathwood (2010): 653-654. Baril (2014) also takes the concept of *eudaimonia* as referring not to well-being but to the most choiceworthy life.

⁸ Some may want to argue that they even explicitly believed that the virtuous life is good for us because they argued that “profit” (*li*) would be a corollary of the life of virtue. But as argued above (fn.5) we should not confuse *li* with the notion of “good for.”

⁹ For an argument that Aristotle understood the *eudaimon* life as the prudentially best life see Lebar and Russell (2013): 56-58. But for an opposing view see Lawrence (2008). Baril (2014) argues that the concept of *eudaimonia* is distinct from the concept of well-being.

now see as strictly *moral* duties and more concerned with the everyday affairs of practical living. Seeing virtues as a broader range of qualities that are necessary for facing basic challenges confronting ordinary human lives makes it more plausible to think that virtues and basic prudential goods are closely bound together.

For Confucian thinkers, the virtues played a critical role in cultivating proper feelings and attitudes that are necessary for full participation in the life of the family and community, as well as regulating our interpersonal behavior in ways that would strengthen social bonds. And since on the Confucian view no prudentially good life could lack well-ordered, loving relationships or life within a stable community, there may have been less motivation to conceptually distinguish a life of virtue—especially embodying a Confucian, communal orientation—from a life high in prudential value. This point may be rendered more plausible once we appreciate the way in which both thinkers affirmed a deep connection between virtue and psychological happiness. Developing their accounts of well-being, therefore, will require explicating their accounts of moral development and the virtues, as well as the kind of psychic fulfillment that accompanies their conception of the good life.

(II) Mencius: Moral Sprouts and Nature-Fulfillment

Mencius was, after Confucius, the most historically influential philosopher of the early Confucian tradition. His writings explore a vast range of topics that ultimately aim at clarifying, extending, and refining the ethical teachings handed down from Confucius. To accomplish this, Mencius offers a complex account of human nature, and out of it develops a picture of moral self-cultivation that would lead us toward complete virtue and the achievement of a flourishing life.

Mencius advocates a robust, teleological conception of human nature, and insists that human flourishing can only be achieved by properly developing certain incipient tendencies we find in our nature. In recent discussions, the view that well-being consists in developing and exercising the fundamental capacities inherent in human nature has been labeled “perfectionism” or “nature-fulfillment theory.”¹⁰ Mencius’s account shares many important features of Aristotelian perfectionism—the most prominent form of perfectionism within the Western philosophical tradition—but it also diverges from it in significant and interesting ways. For example, while Aristotle sees rationality as the unique capacity that separates humans from other animals, Mencius takes the moral aspects of our nature as what makes us uniquely human; we are, on Mencius’s view, best characterized as *moral* animals. I will return to some possible repercussions of Mencius’s view of human nature below. Let us first fill in some of the details of Mencius’s account of human nature.

Mencius is best known for his claim that “human nature is good” by which he does not naively mean that most humans lead morally good lives, but that all human beings possess certain dispositional traits or “sprouts” (*duan* 端) that are directed toward moral goodness. Here is how he describes it:

...we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of disdain, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of deference, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of approval and disapproval, one is not human.¹¹

¹⁰ For an articulation and defense of perfectionism about well-being, see Kraut (2007). While Kraut himself eschews this label, and calls his view “developmentalism,” it closely fits the description of perfectionism given above. It should also be noted that I’m taking the terms “perfectionism” and “nature-fulfillment theory” as equivalent, since this is how they are often used within contemporary philosophy, although it seems plausible that a well-being account that is based on the development and exercise of the virtues that does not rely on human nature could also count as a form of perfectionism.

¹¹ *Mengzi* 2A6. All translations of the *Mengzi* (Mencius) are from Bryan W. Van Norden’s *Mengzi: With Selections From Traditional Commentaries*, (Indianapolis: Hackett), 2008.

These four basic feelings or sensibilities constitute the core of our humanity and can be developed into genuine virtues:

The feeling of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The feeling of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom. People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts, yet to claim that one is incapable (of virtue), is to steal from oneself.¹²

Mencius's claim concerning the goodness of human nature does not imply that all human beings possess completely virtuous characters, but that human beings are endowed with an innate capacity for certain moral feelings that can be cultivated into full-blown virtues. In support of this claim Mencius offered a variety of arguments.¹³ The best known is a thought experiment involving a child about to fall into a well:

Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among one's neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries.¹⁴

By reflecting on this situation, Mencius argues, “we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human.” (*Mengzi* 2A6)

Although a detailed analysis of each of the four Mencian moral sensibilities and their corresponding virtues is beyond the scope of this essay, what is important to note for our purposes is that Mencius takes the essence of what it is to be human to consist in those basic

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Philip J. Ivanhoe classifies these arguments as “indications of childhood,” “spontaneous giveaway,” “testimonials,” and “thought experiments.” See Ivanhoe (2002b): 39-40.

¹⁴ *Mengzi* 2A6.

moral feelings that he understands as providing us with the fundamental capacity for becoming fully virtuous.¹⁵

Mencius's claim that human beings by nature possess these four moral sprouts is not meant to be a universally quantifiable statement such that for every x , if x is a human being, then x has the four moral sprouts. Taking up his limb analogy, statements such as "human beings have two arms and two legs" are not ordinarily meant to apply to every human being, since taken in that sense they would be obviously false. Rather, they are claims that should be understood as picking out characteristic features that are constitutive of the life-form belonging to human beings as such, akin to claims like "owls see in the dark" or "wolves hunt in packs."¹⁶

Mencius believes that our moral capacities are rooted in our nature as human beings, and that becoming a virtuous agent is a matter of properly expanding those incipient moral tendencies through a process that he calls 'extension' (*tui* 推).¹⁷ By both broadening and strengthening these dispositional traits, we can fill them out and develop them into the four virtues of 'benevolence' (*ren* 仁), 'righteousness' (*yi* 義), 'propriety' (*li* 禮), and 'wisdom' (*zhi* 智). Although our nature is directed toward the good, the achievement of moral perfection requires constant attention under suitable conditions that are conducive to moral growth. To illustrate this point Mencius draws upon a number of agricultural metaphors:

In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are violent. It is not that the potential that Heaven confers on them varies like

¹⁵ For more in depth analyses of Mencius's conception of human nature and the virtues, see Shun (1997), Ivanhoe (2002b), and Van Norden (2007).

¹⁶ Those familiar with the works of Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson will recognize these statements as what they call "Aristotelian categoricals" or "natural-historical judgments." See Foot (2001): Ch2, and Thompson (2008): Part I.

¹⁷ 'Extension' (*tui* 推) is a technical concept in Mencius's philosophy that has engendered much controversy. See Shun (1989), Ihara (1991), Van Norden (1991), Ivanhoe (2002a), Wong (2002), and McRae (2011).

this. They are like this because of what sinks and drowns their hearts. Consider barley. Sow the seeds and cover them. The soil is the same and the time of planting is also the same. They grow rapidly, and by the time of the summer solstice they have all ripened. Although there are some differences, these are due to the richness of the soil and to unevenness in the rain and in human effort.¹⁸

Even though the seeds contain the full potential of germinating into cultivated barley, the quality of the barley depends upon a range of external factors: richness of the soil, rain, and human effort. Similarly, although human beings carry incipient moral tendencies that can be cultivated into virtues, much depends on the environmental conditions as well as the attention and care put into their development. So although Mencius accepts that human nature already provides us with the necessary equipment to achieve full virtue, he was quite aware of the significance of social conditions, as well as the critical importance of personal commitment and effort. Over 2,000 years later and half a world away, John Stuart Mill echoes a strikingly similar message, also with the use of an agricultural metaphor:

Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favorable to keeping that higher capacity in existence.¹⁹

Despite acknowledging the variety of ways that moral development could be thwarted, Mencius and Mill are confident that under the right social conditions, combined with the necessary time and effort, the development of our moral nature is all within the realm of practical possibility.

Although Mencius emphasizes the importance of the moral sprouts that are inherent in our nature, he also affirms that our non-moral desires for pleasure, including our physical

¹⁸ Mencius 6A7. Phillip Ivanhoe has drawn attention to the significance of agricultural metaphors in Mencius's philosophy in a number of papers. For an especially lucid and insightful overview of Mencius's philosophy and the role of agricultural metaphors, see Ivanhoe (2000): 15-23.

¹⁹ Mill (1998): Chapter Two.

appetites for good food, warmth, and sex, are also fundamental aspects of our nature, and that as long as our desires are rightly ordered, the attainment of such pleasures also contributes to our flourishing.²⁰ So for Mencius, the complete flowering of our nature as human beings not only involves the perfection of our moral capacities, but the satisfaction of our non-moral desires as well. Mencius, in other words, is no Stoic; he accepts that pleasure and the satisfaction of our basic appetites have a clear role to play within the economy of our nature.

Mencius does not, therefore, dismiss the prudential value of the pleasures arising from the satisfaction of our non-moral desires, but he believes that a deeper, more fulfilling sort of enjoyment and psychic happiness arises from living virtuously:

If one delights in them [the virtues] then they grow. If they grow, then how can they be stopped? If they cannot be stopped, then one does not notice one's feet dancing to them, one's hands swaying to them.²¹

A gentleman regards the benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom that are based in his heart as his nature. These are clearly manifest in his life and demeanor. They fill his torso and extend through his four limbs. Though he says nothing, his four limbs express them.²²

The enduring delight that Mencius draws attention to appears to arise from a form of satisfaction generated by the approval of one's own conduct, involving a wide range of possible behaviors including ordinary acts of benevolence or the successful completion of a ritual.

What is emphasized in these passages is that the particular form of satisfaction and joy accompanying virtuous activities (and one's evaluative judgments about them) would also become manifested in the virtuous person's physical form. We can imagine a deep serenity conveyed in the virtuous person's countenance and bodily posture that is apt to be seen as the

²⁰ This position is also supported by Graham (2002): 30-32. But it should be emphasized that Mencius did think of our natural desires as hierarchically ordered in terms of their normative significance, and that the moral desires clearly take precedence over the non-moral desires. See *Mencius* 6A14-15.

²¹ Mencius 4A27.2

²² Mencius 7A21.4

mark of an enduringly happy state, free of anxiety, and resting on a kind of composed surety about the direction of one's life: "the gentleman has a concern to the end of his life, but he does not have a morning's anxiety." (*Mengzi* 4B28.7) Although Mencius does not fully articulate the details of the virtuous person's mental state, these comments suggest that he saw joy and positive psychological states (embodied in one's physical form), as necessary concomitants of a good life.

By taking enjoyment as arising from the practice of virtue, Mencius again shares the Aristotelian idea that pleasure necessarily follows from, and completes, virtuous activities. One significant difference, however, is that while Aristotle holds that we come to enjoy virtuous activities for their own sake because of the inculcation of moral habits embedded within our developed 'second nature' (the nature that arises from the influences of education and culture), Mencius takes our untutored 'first nature' (consisting of innate, unacquired characteristic traits) as already partially constituted by moral desires, implying that the pleasures of a virtuous life would also be partly explained by the content of our basic, first nature.²³ By drawing a tight connection between our first nature and our moral sensibilities, Mencius's form of perfectionism may provide further resources for responding to one of the most common criticisms leveled at objectivist accounts of well-being (i.e. accounts that do not take prudential value as necessarily depending on an individual's mental state), which we may call the *alienation problem*.

The alienation problem arises from what many philosophers see as a necessary requirement that any plausible account of well-being must meet, sometimes called the "internalist requirement." As Connie Rosati describes the requirement, "an individual's good must not be something *alien*—it must be 'made for' or 'suited to' her."²⁴ The core idea, as Rosati

²³ This point is supported by *Mengzi* 6A7 in which Mencius compares our desire for order and righteousness with our desires for good food, beauty, and music: "Hence, order and righteousness delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths."

²⁴ Rosati (1996): 298. See also Railton (1986). For arguments against internalism about well-being see Sarch (2010).

presents it, is that something can be good for a person only if that person is able to care about it. According to the alienation problem, all objectivist accounts, especially those that take virtue or moral goodness as constitutive of well-being, fail to satisfy the internalist requirement since it is always possible that any good or value can become divorced from the particular features of an agent's psychological makeup. But if Mencius is right, because the flourishing life is always connected to the desires of the heart that are partially constituted by moral desires, attaining virtue can never be completely alienated from an agent's psychology.

One likely reply will be that there are clear cases of individuals who are unconcerned about being virtuous and that Mencius's view is therefore simply at odds with our empirical understanding of human psychology. But Mencius could respond by claiming that human beings who lack moral feelings or desires are suffering from a deprivation, much like those who have lost the ability to see or hear. Just as we could still claim that seeing beautiful works of art or listening to sublime music is intrinsically good for human beings even though some lack the ability to engage in such activities, Mencius could also argue that virtuous activity is also intrinsically good for human beings even though some people lack moral desires.²⁵ This isn't to say that such activities are, as things stand, good for those individuals who are incapable of participating in them, but that their incapacities are something that we can justifiably regret from a prudential point of view. Such individuals seem to be *missing out* on certain significant human goods.

Moreover, recent work in both evolutionary biology and empirical psychology seems to support Mencius's view that at least some of our moral sensibilities, empathy for example, is hardwired into us. These studies may further support the view that the lack of those moral

²⁵ This line of argument is taken by LeBar and Russell (2013): 59-66. Mencius would also need to provide a more detailed argument to defend the perfectionist account of well-being, for example, by showing why the exercise of those capacities that are essential or fundamental to human nature is good for human beings.

sensibilities implies a diminished or incapacitated state, similar to being deprived of the capacity for sight or hearing.²⁶

(III) Xunzi: Virtues and Social Environment

Like Mencius, Xunzi thought of himself as extending and refining the ethical tradition passed down from Confucius. He too aimed at strengthening the Confucian tradition by refuting alternative schools of thought that had become powerfully influential in early China. But Xunzi is perhaps best known for his disagreement with Mencius about the correct characterization of human nature, with Mencius claiming that “human nature is good” and Xunzi countering that “human nature is bad.” In asserting this, Xunzi was denying, contra Mencius, that human nature has an inherent tendency toward goodness; our nature does not contain moral impulses that can be organically cultivated into reliable dispositions. According to Xunzi, human nature is a messy unstructured amalgam of generally selfish tendencies that, left on their own, would lead to self-destruction and the kind of society within the state of nature that Hobbes memorably described as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”²⁷

Despite the disagreement about the makeup of human nature, Xunzi’s ethical views converge with those of Mencius in a number of significant ways. They both share, for example, a similar vision of a well-ordered society. They also agree, in substantial ways, about the content and role of the Confucian virtues and the qualities that a sage would exemplify.

²⁶ The moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, for example, has argued for an evolutionary psychological foundation for our basic moral values. See Haidt (2012). The primatologist Frans de Waal has also argued for the evolutionary origins of morality, by appealing to the existence of many proto-moral traits shared by primates. See de Waal (2006). The arguments of both Haidt and de Waal help support the idea that our moral capacities have evolutionary roots and are therefore deeply embedded within our nature, a view that in turn may help lend support to Mencius’s claims about the moral sprouts.

²⁷ Xunzi does, however, countenance certain other-directed desires such as the affection for one’s kin. But even these affections, while not inherently selfish, are not naturally directed toward goodness since without effort and proper guidance they can easily move us to act badly. For more discussion on this aspect of Xunzi’s thought, see Hutton (2000): 229-232.

Where their views diverge is in their characterizations of the process of moral self-cultivation, which in turn are rooted in different conceptions of the status and role of human nature. Xunzi believes that because our initial nature consists of disordered, generally self-absorbed tendencies, we should not develop it by drawing out its natural inclinations, but impose upon it, from the outside, those moral impulses that Mencius thought we can discover as internal to our nature. Rather than *build upon* our nature, Xunzi holds, we must *build into it* those moral dispositions and values that are necessary for moral cultivation. Fittingly, Xunzi draws upon craft metaphors to illustrate the processes of obtaining a virtuous character:

A piece of wood as straight as a plumb line may [with soaking and shaping] be bent into a circle as true as any drawn with a compass, and once the wood has dried it will not straighten out again. The process of bending has made it that way. Thus, if [crooked] wood is placed against a straightening board it can be made straight; if metal is put to the grindstone, it can be sharpened; and if the gentleman studies widely and each day examines himself, his wisdom will become clear and his conduct without fault.²⁸

Our moral character is an artefact much like a wheel or a knife and will only develop with conscious reflection and activity (Watson 169). Just as metal or wood do not carry within them an internal principle of change by which they naturally become knives or wheels, neither does human nature possess an internal moral principle through which it naturally develops moral dispositions.

This conception of human nature led Xunzi to focus his attention on culture and the role of teachers, rituals, and tradition.²⁹ For although by his lights we do not possess the kind of moral nature that Mencius posits, we can undergo a process of reformation to propel us out of the

²⁸ Watson 15. For translations of Xunzi's writings I will use Burton Watson's *Xunzi: Basic Writings* (Columbia: Columbia University, 1963). All references include the page number of Watson's translation.

²⁹ David Nivison speculates that the rituals were slowly developed through trial and error and was applied to society by the sage-kings who sought to eliminate the disorder and violence that gripped the world. See Nivison (2000).

chaos, strife, and disorder that characterizes our original, pre-moralized state. This process of reformation, which requires the practice of rituals (*li* 禮) under the guidance of a teacher, is characterized by different stages of moral development, starting from an uncultivated state driven by selfish tendencies, to becoming a “gentleman,” (*junzi* 君子) culminating in the attainment of sagehood.³⁰ As one might expect, transition from a pre-moral state to sagehood requires a long, arduous process of self-cultivation, a process that depends on a number of distinct virtues.³¹ Xunzi conceives of the virtues that would move us from the early stages of moral cultivation to the stage of being a gentleman as (borrowing Philippa Foot’s terminology) “correctives” that help rectify those desires and tendencies that tend to lead us astray from correct feelings and actions; they presuppose the existence of misdirected passions that need restraint and redirection. Such virtues are especially important for the initial stages of moral development, but also play a significant role even after one becomes a gentleman. For while the gentleman has developed reliable moral dispositions and has come to appreciate and value virtue for its own sake, he still carries certain wayward impulses that need to be tamed so that they do not draw him away from moral excellence.

These errant tendencies, however, do not apply to those who have reached sagehood; such enlightened individuals no longer need the corrective virtues that are required for the earlier stages of development. Instead, the sage will possess the virtue of “subtlety,” (*wei* 微) which

³⁰ I use the term “gentleman” to translate *junzi* (君子) since I think it is most faithful to the original meaning of the Chinese character. Of course, this raises the point that Xunzi, as well as Mencius, both held a narrow vision of who could attain sagehood, and accepted certain patriarchal values deeply embedded within the culture of their time. However, I do believe that we can decouple such attitudes from their general moral theory of self-cultivation, in the way that we can decouple Aristotelian ethics from Aristotle’s views about the biological basis of women as defective men.

³¹ See Schofer (2000) for more detailed discussion of the individual virtues found in Xunzi’s writings.

allows him to act effortlessly, with no interior discord. Because the sage's desires, emotions, and thoughts always track the good (*dao*), corrective virtues are simply unnecessary:

True subtlety is the quality of the perfect man. What has he to do with strength of will, endurance, and fearfulness? A dull brightness shines about his exterior, and a clear brightness within him. The sage follows his desires, satisfies all his emotions...The benevolent man practices the Way through inaction; the sage practices the Way through nonstriving. The thoughts of the benevolent man are reverent; the thoughts of the sage are joyous.³²

The sage's life and actions are in synch with his values, desires, and emotions. His actions are marked by "nonstriving," a mode of unforced, natural behavior— adorned with emotional fulfillment and joy. Xunzi's conception of the interior life of the sage shares a close affinity to Daniel Haybron's emotional state account of psychological happiness, one of the most powerful theories of happiness developed in recent years.³³ Haybron marks out three dimensions of happiness that correspond to three basic modes of emotional response he calls "endorsement," "engagement," and "attunement":

At the most basic level will be responses concerning the individual's safety and security: for example, letting one's defenses down, making oneself fully at home in one's life—being in a state of utter *attunement* with one's life, we might say—as opposed to taking up a defensive stance. Next come responses relating to the individual's commitments to or *engagement* with her situation and activities: is it worth investing much effort in them, or would it be wiser to withdraw or disengage from them? Finally, there will be more or less explicit *endorsements* signifying that one's life is not just free of threat and worth pursuing enthusiastically, but positively good, containing things that are to be built upon sustained, repeated, or sought in the future—as, for example, when one has just achieved a goal or received a great benefit.³⁴

³² Watson 137.

³³ Haybron (2008). Haybron's "emotional state theory" of happiness is too complex to be given a full treatment here. Here I only briefly identify some key features of his account that I believe connects with Xunzi's account of the sage's interior life.

³⁴ Haybron (2008: 111-112).

While acknowledging the need for further discussion, we may for now observe that Xunzi's account of the sage's psychological states appears to capture all three dimensions of Haybron's account of happiness. The sage would surely *endorse* her mode of life since he sees it as following the path prescribed by the Way: "the thoughts of the sage are joyous" (Watson 137). Also apparent is *engagement* in his life and activities—a mode of active immersion in an activity resembling the process of *flow* described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and a clear feature of the sagely life as captured by the mode of "nonstriving" that Xunzi describes.³⁵ Finally, the sage's life is marked by a "clear brightness" and a lack of "fearfulness," indicating an emotional state of confidence and inner peace, implying that he is "fully at home" in her life—qualities that Haybron explicitly marks out as fundamental aspects of *attunement*.³⁶

We may briefly note two reasons underlying Xunzi's view that the morally perfected life is also the most psychologically fulfilling. First, human desires tend to expand and multiply. Without deliberative effort and training, desires become increasingly unruly causing not only ruptures in our social relationships, but also steadily increasing personal frustration. Only by transforming our character through the rituals can our desires become controlled so that we not only live according to the Way, but also optimize the satisfaction of our own desires (Watson 95). Second, Xunzi takes the life of virtue and participation in the rituals as the highest achievable good: "Therefore learning reaches its completion with the rituals, for they may be said to represent the highest point of the Way and its power" (Watson 20). A life centering on the practice of rituals and virtues can provide us with deeper and more profound sources of satisfaction and joy than alternative ways of living.

³⁵ The link between *flow* and *engagement* is noted by Haybron (2008: 115). See Csikszentmihalyi (1990) for an account of "flow."

³⁶ *Ibid*: 115-117.

A key idea running through much of Xunzi's philosophical system is the adaptability of human beings. Despite the unruliness of our inborn tendencies, through pressure and time our desires and values can become reshaped, fitting us for a civilized life in society. Because Xunzi does not accept the existence of innate moral tendencies posited by Mencius, he stresses the importance of proper external conditions, especially surrounding oneself with the right kind of teachers that can provide correct guidance through the rituals. Xunzi is keenly aware of the impact that societal pressures have on us:

[I]f a man associates with men who are not good, then he will hear only deceit and lies and will see only conduct that is marked by wantonness, evil, and greed. Then, although he is not aware of it, he himself will soon be in danger of severe punishment, for the environment he is subjected to will cause him to be in danger. An old text says, "If you do not know a man, look at his friends; if you do not know a ruler, look at his attendants." Environment is the important thing! Environment is the important thing!³⁷

Xunzi's emphasis on the ways in which our peers and our social environment affect our thoughts and behaviors has been reinforced by contemporary research in psychology and sociology, and provides us with reasons for exerting greater effort into investigating what Daniel Haybron calls "human prudential ecology"—the kinds of social environments under which human beings flourish.³⁸ (Haybron 2008: 253-282) This is a topic that has attracted less attention within contemporary philosophy, perhaps because of a pervasive belief in modern liberal societies that Haybron calls *individualism*: "human beings tend to fare best when individuals have the greatest possible freedom to shape their lives according to their own priorities." (Haybron 2008: 255) The opposing view, *contextualism*, claims that we fare better in environments that, to some extent, nudge us toward certain goods and ways of living.

³⁷ Watson 174.

³⁸ The situational sensitivity of human behavior has been especially emphasized by Doris (2002) and Harman (2000)

Confucianism unequivocally endorses *contextualism*. On the Confucian view, humans are social beings, susceptible to a variety of social influences; our individual identities are significantly constituted by an interlocking set of relationships formed within the family and society, and therefore, what is beneficial or harmful to us is importantly constituted also by the interests of those that come to inhabit our social domain.³⁹ Because we are ineradicably social creatures, Confucian thinkers would have been puzzled by an attempt to understand individual well-being that is severed from enquiries into flourishing families and communities. In contrast, contemporary philosophers working on well-being have tended to ignore how the nature of human relationships and our social environments are related to human flourishing, since at best, they are thought only to provide us with knowledge of the necessary empirical conditions for achieving well-being. But if the human self, as the early Confucians believed, is partially constituted by those relationships which we come to establish during the course of our lives, then it may turn out that any satisfying account of well-being must explain the relationships between well-being, family, and the community. Xunzi was especially well attuned to this issue, since many of his writings are directed toward understanding how to organize a society that achieves the common good. Recognizing that the structure and values of one's society play an indispensable role in providing suitable conditions for human flourishing, Xunzi spent considerable time and effort in discussing the social settings that would best promote a flourishing society, putting special emphasis on the need for hierarchical divisions and clearly demarcated roles relative to each station. A well-functioning, harmonious society, Xunzi believes, requires the fulfillment of rituals and moral obligations attached to one's particular station.

³⁹ These points are also explored in Ivanhoe (2013: 61-62).

From the perspective of modern liberalism, Xunzi's view will undoubtedly strike many as excessively rigid, perhaps even inherently unjust. But even granting that Xunzi's particular conception of social hierarchy is, to borrow a concept from Bernard Williams, a merely *notional* possibility (Williams 1985: 178-179) — unrealizable for those occupying modern societies— social distinctions continue to pervade modern life, and may simply be an inveterate feature of human societies.⁴⁰ Moreover, a case could be made that certain hierarchical values such as respect for the elderly (related to the Confucian value of “filial piety” or *xiao* 孝) are still worth maintaining. Such reflections should at least move us to question whether all hierarchical divisions are inherently problematic, and if they are not, which of them may still be worth preserving.

(IV) The Teleological Structure of Well-Being

I now turn to a key idea running through the discussions of both Mencius and Xunzi that connects back to certain features of the good life discussed earlier: the significance of the developmental structure of human life. While a number of philosophers have claimed that the trajectory or the shape of one's life matters for well-being, their discussions have mostly focused on why a life that improves over time is higher in well-being than a life that declines over time.⁴¹ David Velleman and Douglas Portmore have claimed that a life that goes uphill is better than one that goes downhill (all things being equal) just in case, and because, an uphill life involves the redemption of earlier (bad) events in one's life, thereby adding overall meaning to one's life

⁴⁰ Haidt (2012) argues that our capacity to value hierarchical divisions has been implanted in us through evolutionary forces, and may, therefore, be an ineradicable feature of human societies.

⁴¹ See Glasgow (2013), Portmore (2007), Velleman (2000), Slote (1983) for accounts of what Glasgow calls the *shape-of-a-life phenomenon*, that a life that goes better over time is better than one that declines, even if the total amount of enjoyment in both lives are equal. However, Feldman (2004) and Kahneman (2000) deny the existence of the phenomenon altogether.

story. I believe that both Mencius and Xunzi would agree with Velleman and Portmore about the significance of redemptive meaning, but I also think that they would emphasize what I will call the *teleological structure of well-being*. This aspect of well-being takes seriously the idea that in order for our lives to realize the kind of narrative meaning endorsed by Velleman and Portmore, they must be correctly oriented toward ends that have objective value. It is this trajectory toward proper end (or ends) that provides the unifying thread necessary for narrative significance.

As pointed out earlier, both Mencius and Xunzi hold that the best human life culminates in sagehood; becoming a fully virtuous person is the proper end of all our strivings. But despite the fact that they disagree about the process of moral development through which we may attain this end, what they clearly accept is that there is a certain developmental trajectory that must be followed if we are to achieve flourishing lives. On their views, this trajectory takes its particular shape from the psychological, bodily, and environmental conditions that determine the natural rhythms and cycles of human life. Such conditions impose certain constraints on the structure of the process of self-cultivation. One point emphasized by both Mencius and Xunzi is that life unfolds through a series of stages, and that what unifies these stages is the continual progression toward virtue and sagehood; it is the movement toward virtue that provides flourishing lives with their narrative unity. The notion of life-stages is important, and is effectively captured by the different metaphors invoked by our two Confucian thinkers. Recall Mencius' agricultural metaphor for self-cultivation. A good farmer must work with those natural tendencies inherent within the seeds in order to provide them with the necessary care and attention for development. This requires that she understands the surrounding environment, for example, the salinity of the soil and the climate patterns of the region. For Mencius, our moral development also requires a long, slow, and steady process, which takes those natural moral tendencies found in our nature

and guides them toward virtue by providing the proper conditions for growth. Just like the maturation and growth of barley seeds, the development of our moral sprouts spans a number of distinct stages, ideally culminating in the achievement of a fully virtuous character. These stages of development are structured by the tendencies of our nature and so it is important to pay attention to the characteristic features of a particular stage of moral development since what is necessary for one stage may not be necessary for another. This point is illustrated by the following parable told by Mencius:

Do not be like the man from Song. Among the people of the state of Song there was a farmer who, concerned lest his sprouts not grow, pulled on them. Obviously, he returned home and said to his family, ‘Today I am worn out. I helped the sprouts to grow.’ His son rushed out and looked at them. The sprouts were withered.⁴²

This brief but insightful parable draws attention to the importance of understanding the natural stages of development and why failing to understand the particular needs relative to each step can have disastrous consequences. Just as the farmer must understand the natural sequence by which his sprouts tend to grow, we must also understand the natural sequence by which we must cultivate our moral sprouts.

Now recall Xunzi’s employment of craft metaphors: the molding of clay into vessels, the carving of wood into utensils, and the sharpening of metal into blades. As noted earlier, these metaphors focus on the way that our moral sensibilities are produced not out of the internal resources of our nature, but by implantation through artifice and design. Nevertheless, even though Xunzi does not believe that there are natural stages of moral growth fixed by the moral sprouts of our nature, he still holds that there are certain steps to moral development that must obtain for the achievement of sagehood. Reflect on the process of forging a blade. A blacksmith

⁴² *Mengzi* 2A2.

forging a blade out of metal begins by heating the blade at a high temperature, and then goes on to shape the metal on an anvil with a hammer. This is followed by the process of steady grinding to provide the blade its sharpness, which is then followed by a further heating phase and brought to completion through a final stage of grinding. Xunzi believed that, in a similar way, moral development must occur in a step-by-step process, which begins with the recitation of the *Classics* and introduction into rituals (Watson 19). Through study and the repeated performances of rituals one's character begins to take on a determinate shape, and as it gradually becomes ordered toward righteous behavior, the agent continues to move forward to subsequent stages of moral development, ending with the achievement of sagehood.

So while Xunzi did not accept, as Mencius did, that our nature carved out the proper developmental path through which we can become fully virtuous, he did believe that our initial endowment and the process of cultivation through the practice of correct rituals (a process discovered by the ancient sages) determined the sequence of development that must be traversed to reach the final end of the sagely life.

For both early Confucian philosophers, the correct understanding of well-being could not be separated from the teleological end (i.e. sagehood) that our lives ought to be directed toward; any evaluation of a person's well-being needed to be made in light of how well her life was moving toward her final end. Their focus was not on what some philosophers call *synchronic well-being* which concerns how well a life is going at any particular moment in time, but rather, *diachronic well-being*, concerning one's life as a whole (or longer stretches of one's life). Moreover, they both accepted the existence of norms that would regulate this developmental process, whether they were grounded in facts about our nature (Mencius) or culture (Xunzi). The weight that was attached to the success of one's life as a whole may explain why the Confucian

thinkers did not put much effort into explicating what constitutes a person's good at a time, an issue central to most contemporary philosophical discussions of well-being. On their behalf, we could offer a tentative account of synchronic well-being that takes what constitutes a person's well-being at a time as the realization of those goods that help contribute to (or are constitutive of) the sagely life. But given their focus on the developmental stages of the flourishing life, they may have believed that offering a unified account of what ultimately constitutes a person's well-being at a time may not be possible, since on their view, what is good for a person at a time is wholly dependent on the particular life-stage that one occupies. What is good for a developing child, they may have insisted, is significantly different from what is good for a mature, healthy adult, which is also importantly different from what is good for an elderly adult facing the final stages of her life.⁴³

Attaching so much weight to a particular substantive end (sagehood), may seem to require an unduly restrictive conception of well-being. Some of this worry may be alleviated by reminding ourselves of the glowing, *attuned* psychological life of those who reach sagehood. Some may want to question this connection between virtue and psychological fulfillment on empirical grounds. But some recent empirical studies suggest that those who engage in charitable activities, and (importantly) *do it for the sake of benefiting others*, enjoy higher levels of psychological happiness.⁴⁴ Obviously, such research is far from demonstrating that Mencius and Xunzi were right about the connection between sagehood and psychological fulfillment. But even if one rejects the particular substantive end proposed by both Mencius and Xunzi, their views capture the sense that any attractive account of well-being needs to accommodate the

⁴³ This point is developed in Kauppinen (2009).

⁴⁴ For a lucid and philosophically informed examination of these studies, see Tiberius (2015: 178-182).

intuitive idea that for a life to go well it must instantiate a meaningful narrative structure which needs to appeal to a notion of a worthwhile end or set of ends that properly organizes one's life.⁴⁵

(V) Conclusion

A number of philosophers, most notably Charles Taylor, have argued that a chronic feature of modern life is a sense of malaise, characterized by “loss of meaning, the fading of horizons” arising from a breakdown of traditional, hierarchical order that “gave meaning to the world and to the activities of social life.” (Taylor 1991: 3) What the older system provided us, according to Taylor, is “a horizon of significance”—a background of intelligibility necessary for imbuing our lives and activities with meaning. The Confucian conception of human flourishing, with its strong emphasis on a robust, teleological moral order that can only be achieved within the larger context of one's family and community, perhaps provides a way of avoiding the kind of modern malaise described by Taylor; it offers a way of giving one's life a purpose or direction, a background of horizon that is crucial for attaching a sense of meaning to one's life:

[R]ites are the highest achievement of the Way of man. Therefore, those who do not follow and find satisfaction in rites may be called people without direction, but those who do follow and find satisfaction in them are called men of direction.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ In an insightful paper, Antti Kauppinen offers a rich account of well-being that takes seriously the importance of narrative meaning within a teleological structure. In my view both Mencius's and Xunzi's accounts of well-being meet most of Kauppinen's conditions for a life that goes well. See Kauppinen (2012). Alasdair MacIntyre has also stressed the importance of maintaining a narrative unity for one's life in his most famous work, *After Virtue*. See MacIntyre (1981: Ch. 15).

⁴⁶ Watson 99.

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