

(Penultimate Draft)

*Moral Agency in Eastern and Western Thought: Perspectives on Crafting Character*

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Moral Agency, Situationism, and Virtue: Xunzi on Moral Development

**ABSTRACT:**

That human beings are substantially influenced by their environments and situations is now widely acknowledged within both psychology and philosophy. However, human beings are also agents with wills, intentions, and the ability to exert effort. A comprehensive understanding of moral development, therefore, requires an integration of external conditions and the internal perspective of individuals in shaping behavior. This paper explores insights from the classical Confucian philosopher Xunzi to construct a framework for moral development that affirms the interdependence between the environment and the individual, and explains how human striving and perseverance can contribute to the formation of moral character.

***Introduction***

Among the most intriguing features about human beings is our capacity to peer into the future and envision the kind of person we can become. We can set a goal of becoming a certain kind of person and strive to realize that goal through action. These two features—moral ideal and personal effort—both seem integral to our conception of moral development and virtue acquisition. But in recent decades, through the influence of situationism and a deterministic conception of human behavior, the focus of philosophers and psychologists working on moral development has primarily been on the social environment and the influence of external conditions on human action. One positive result is that we are more appreciative of the powerful role that situational factors play in our behavior in ways that operate beneath our conscious awareness. But such recognition of the vital role

that our social environment plays cannot displace the fact that human beings are also *agents*, who must make decisions, choices, and persevere in the face of setbacks and challenges. Unlike a car that will simply run when the right set of external conditions are in place, human beings are not simply mechanical objects that will strive toward virtue given a set of external conditions. Thus, the proverbial statement: you can lead a horse to water but cannot make it drink. Moreover, this point seems especially relevant regarding the acquisition of virtue since acting virtuously and becoming virtuous cannot be detached from the proper emotions, attitudes, and motivations of the agent. It is essential to virtuous action that one acts on one's own accord; no coerced action can be an instance of a virtuous action.<sup>2</sup> This point is even more striking when considering virtue-cultivation, since becoming a good person does not take place through a one-off action, but involves a long and difficult process, one that Confucians believed characteristically ends only upon death.

In this paper, I want to explore the ways that the concepts of agency, commitment, and effort are connected to the influence of the external environment in moral development by examining the ideas of Xunzi, a pivotal thinker in early China.<sup>3</sup> I turn to Xunzi because he is keenly aware of both the powerful role that social and physical environments play in moving us toward virtue, as well as the necessity of obtaining the right kind of mindset, attitude, and commitment for persisting in the process of moral self-cultivation. As I hope to show, Xunzi synthesizes considerations of both the agent and the environment into his overall account of moral development thereby providing a framework for moral development that is balanced and holistic.

### **Situationism, Social Environment, and Virtue**

Like every normative theory, virtue ethics has been subjected to substantial objections. Perhaps the most widely discussed criticism in recent decades is the Situationist Critique developed by Harman (2000) and Doris (2002). Drawing on the psychological literature on situationism that rose to prominence in the 1960s through the work of Mischel (1968), Harman and Doris argued that a range of empirical studies show that robust, stable traits of character are either impossible to obtain or so rare that virtue ethics is undermined as a practically implausible view. Virtue ethicists have replied to this challenge forcefully and with a variety of responses (Kamtekar 2004; Snow 2009; Slingerland 2011; Sreenivasan 2013), which I do not have space to address here.<sup>4</sup> In my view, however, even if virtue ethicists can successfully defend virtue ethics (as I believe they can), the Situationist Critique raises an important question about how virtue ethical accounts can incorporate insights from situationism. What situationism teaches us is that we must carefully consider how our environments shape our character and a virtue ethicist who seeks to develop an adequate account of moral development should not neglect this significant point.

One classical Chinese philosopher recently touted for anticipating situationism is Xunzi (Hutton 2006; Mower 2013). For those familiar with Xunzi's views, this will be unsurprising because Xunzi, perhaps more than any other Chinese thinker, develops an account of moral development that is anchored in cultural and social influence, especially through the practice of ritual (*li* 禮). This emphasis on external conditions is partly rooted in his negative view of human nature, which, he argues, does not contain innate moral inclinations and tends toward moral disorder. Still,

Xunzi believed that human beings do have the resources to become morally good, especially through the participation in rituals and moral norms developed over time through the work of sages.

Xunzi sees culture and environment as powerful tools that can be manipulated through human ingenuity. While our natural physical endowment may not be very impressive compared to many other animals, human beings can manipulate their environment through intelligence and use objects in ways that make us far more powerful than any other creature:

I once spent the whole day pondering, but it was not as good as a moment's worth of learning. I once stood on my toes to look far away, but it was not as good as the broad view from a high place. If you climb to a high place and wave, you have not lengthened your arms, but you can be seen from further away. If you shout from upwind, you have not made your voice stronger, but you can be heard more clearly. One who makes use of boats and oars has not thereby become able to swim, but he can now cross rivers and streams. The gentleman is exceptional not by birth, but rather by being good at making use of things. (Xunzi, Ch. 1: 25-35)<sup>5</sup>

Xunzi is most impressed by our capacity to alter our environments to satisfy our desires and needs. But the direction of influence flows in the other direction as well: our manufactured environments also in turn influence our own thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors.

The root of the *lan huai* plant is sweet-smelling angelica, but if you soak it in foul water then the gentleman will not draw near it, and the common people will not wear it. This happens not because the original material is not fragrant, but rather because of what it is soaked in. Therefore, the gentleman is sure to select carefully the village where he dwells, and he is sure to associate with well-bred men when he travels. This is how he avoids corruption and draws near to what is correct. (Xunzi, Ch. 1:50-55)

Here Xunzi emphasizes the powerful role that our social environment plays in shaping who we become. Being born in an American town with widespread racism in the 1950s, for example, would have negatively impacted one's views about race. Surrounding yourself with friends who are into outdoor activities will likely prompt you to also spend more time outside. Human beings are intensely social creatures that are sensitive to social pressures and cultural norms: "A saying goes, 'If you do not know your son, observe his friends. If you do not know your lord, observe his companions.' Everything depends on what you rub up against! Everything depends on what you rub up against!" (Xunzi, Ch. 3:390).<sup>6</sup>

Apart from surrounding ourselves with good friends and teachers, Xunzi also believed that we should develop cultural practices and norms that are conducive to the development of virtue. The primary mechanism for this is 'ritual,' which consists in a wide-ranging assortment of shared norms and practices that embody, express, and inculcate norms and ideals. Rituals range from large-scale ceremonies, sacrificial offerings, and funerals that mark life-altering events in human life, to everyday activities such as greetings, consumption of meals, and general social conduct. In Xunzi's view, they are a vital source for structuring human lives. At the individual level, rituals can provide a way of habituating oneself to act in ways that are beneficial to oneself, for example, by moderating one's eating or organizing one's sleeping patterns. At the communal level, rituals offer a way of smoothing out social relationships by creating a range of intelligible practices that express and can foster communication, understanding, and collaboration.

While rituals are socially constructed, they are not arbitrarily designed but intelligently produced in a way that aims to suit our nature as human beings. They are, therefore, grounded in certain objective facts about human needs and desires.

For example, it is because of our psychological need for social connection that we need ritualized communal events that help bind people together. It is because of the depth of grief we experience at the death of those we love that we need funeral rituals that allow us to process our loss and express our emotions in healthy ways. As Xunzi comments concerning the mourning rituals: “When a wound is great, it lasts for many days. When a hurt is deep, the recovery is slow. The three-year mourning period takes measure of people’s dispositions and establishes a proper form for them. It is the means by which one sets a limit for the utmost hurt” (Xunzi, Ch. 19: 450-455). The rituals work with human dispositions and desires to give them a proper shape so that they foster a productive and healthy psychology.

Rituals cover a broad spectrum of activities but are also built upon environmental settings that influence social behavior. Turning back to the mourning rituals, Xunzi identifies a number of external features: “Wearing the mourning garments, propping oneself on a crude cane, dwelling in a lean-to, eating gruel, and using a rough mat and earthen pillow are the means by which one ornaments the utmost hurt” (Xunzi, Ch. 19: 460). One’s physical attire, food, and even sleeping apparatus all play a role in ritual practice, influencing us in indirect and subtle ways. Presumably, the rough mat and earthen pillow create a somber environment that helps the mourner to more deeply appreciate the profound loss she has experienced.

In these ways Xunzi highlights how human beings are influenced by a variety of external conditions, ranging from direct social influence, cultural norms and expectations to various environmental cues and devices. In highlighting the appropriate use of external conditions, Xunzi was acknowledging that human beings

are susceptible to outside influences, a point that harmonizes with the core ideas of situationism.

### **Are Cross-situational Character Traits Real?**

Despite his keen awareness of the powerful influence that environment plays in shaping human behavior, however, Xunzi is clearly at odds with philosophical situationists such as Harman and Doris who do not believe that human beings can develop robust virtues. Let me first establish that Xunzi did conceive of virtues as robust character traits that would be consistently manifested across a variety of situations that are trait-relevant (Hutton 2006, Slingerland 2011, and Mower 2013). So, for example, taking courage as a robust character trait would mean that a courageous person would act courageously in standing up to one's boss, calling out bullying, and battling cancer. Harman and Doris argue that nobody (or almost nobody) possesses such robust traits, although one might enjoy a more narrowly-specified trait such as "battling-cancer-courage" or "stand-up-to-bullies-courage." To support the view that Xunzi conceived of virtues as robust, let us consider a few passages:

One who misses a single shot out of a hundred does not deserve to be called good at archery. One who falls short of going a thousand *li* by the distance of even a half step does not deserve to be called good at chariot driving. One who does not fully comprehend the proper kinds and classes of things, or who is not single-minded in pursuit of *ren* and *yi*, does not deserve to be called good at learning. Learning is precisely learning to pursue them single-mindedly. To depart from it in one affair and adhere to it in another is to be such as common people. (Xunzi, Ch. 1: 205-215)

As Hutton (2006) has argued, this passage reveals that Xunzi believed those who were "good at learning" will be "single-minded" and unfailing in their pursuit of virtue across a variety of trait-relevant situations. Xunzi is also clear that those who possess the virtue of *yi* (義 righteousness) will act virtuously in a variety of situations:

When he bends and straightens with the occasion, flexible and yielding like a reed, it is not cowardice or timidity. When he shows unyielding strength and ferocious determination, bending in nothing, it is not arrogance or violent temper. Through *yi*, he changes and adapts to circumstances, because he knows when it is appropriate to bend and straighten. (Xunzi, Ch. 3:60-65)

Here *yi* appears as a central virtue resembling the Aristotelian virtue of practical wisdom since it allows one to act virtuously across a range of circumstances through sensitivity to the features of the situation. And since the virtuous person possesses *yi*, they will not act cowardly or rashly. Moreover, the truly virtuous, in Xunzi's view, will continue to act well even in extremely hard circumstances: "They [*ru* or the cultivated Confucians] are sure to be compliant subordinates. Even if they should be in difficult times, freezing, or starving they are sure not to become corrupt with perverse ways... Even if they should be hidden away in poor neighborhoods and leaky huts, no one will fail to value them, because the Way is truly preserved in them" (Xunzi, Ch. 8: 45-55). These passages support the view that Xunzi conceived of virtues as stable and cross-situationally operative; the virtues shield the agent from the vicissitudes of luck, enabling the agent to continue acting well even in challenging circumstances.

Xunzi clearly thought that the process of becoming virtuous was a long and difficult journey, one that required serious dedication as well as proper external conditions. But even if becoming a gentleman or sage may be challenging for most people, Xunzi believed that moral progress and even sagehood were possible for everyone: "Anyone on the streets can become a Yu [a famous sageking]" (Xunzi, Ch. 23: 253). At least in principle, anyone can become virtuous.

One might now wonder: if the virtues are robust and allow one to act consistently across a variety of situations, then how do we make sense of Xunzi's



view that the social environment and other external conditions exert significant influence on our behavior? As some recent scholars have noted, Xunzi argued that moral development comes in stages and that the need for social cues, teachers, and friends diminishes as one cultivates a stronger moral character. While the fully virtuous person possesses a character that is generally impervious to situational factors, those at earlier stages of moral development will be more susceptible to situational influences. It is therefore a part of the very process of moral development to create conditions that will nudge people to act well, especially in earlier stages, to reinforce good behavior. Over time, however, one's emotions and desire are integrated so that the agent has properly internalized the Way and is increasingly less vulnerable to bad influences that can impede good action.

While the Confucians believed that the virtues shine under a variety of situations, I don't think that they would accept the Stoic view that virtue is sufficient for happiness and that the virtuous person could never be injured by misfortunes. This is especially clear in the case of Confucius and the tragic loss of his favorite disciple, Yan Hui. Although even in such circumstances Confucius did not act badly, it is implausible to claim that Confucius did not suffer greatly from this event. In fact, Confucius seems to suggest that it is important to recognize such an event as a serious loss.<sup>7</sup> So, while the virtues do guarantee good action, they do not guarantee good consequences or even happiness.

### **Xunzi on Moral Agency and Deliberate Effort**

It is clear from the above discussion that Xunzi understood well the powerful influence that our environment plays on shaping human behavior. The power of the environment now has the backing of contemporary empirical studies and meshes well with the widely accepted deterministic view of human beings that takes all

human actions as the necessary outcome of predetermined causal forces. In this view, all of us are fully determined by our genetics, experiences, and external conditions.

While we should not get entangled in a difficult discussion about free will, I do want to show that at least at the level of human psychology, the detached, mechanistic perspective of human action does not fit well with the way we conceive of ourselves as moral agents nor how we think of the process of moral development. For while there is no doubt that we are deeply influenced by external forces in the ways discussed above, we also see ourselves and others as moral agents with an ability to control and direct our actions in various ways. This outlook is confirmed daily by the way that we attribute praise and blame to ourselves and others when we or they act well or badly. In my view, both psychologists and philosophers in recent years have paid insufficient attention to the role of the agential perspective in moral self-cultivation, and that without an adequate account of human agency and our internal point of view, we will be left with an impoverished account of moral development. As will become clear, Xunzi believed that at least a part of the explanation for why some people become good or bad could be traced back to the actions and choices made by the individual and that recognizing the necessity of self-determination and personal effort are an important part of the path toward virtue-acquisition. To explain Xunzi's position I will focus on a central concept in Xunzi's account of moral psychology, namely, *xin* (心 heart-mind).

In early Confucianism *xin*, usually translated as “heart,” “mind,” or “heart-mind,” refers to a faculty that harbors cognitive, conative, and affective powers. Originally, it was conceived as a physical organ occupying the middle of the chest, serving as the seat of thought and feeling. The early Confucians, therefore, did not

neatly separate reason from emotion, although there continues to be scholarly discussions about exactly how they conceived of reason and emotion.<sup>8</sup> *Xin* also serves several important functions for Xunzi. One is that it enables one to know the Way: “How do people know the Way? I say: with the heart” (Xunzi, Ch. 21: 167). But how exactly is *xin* able to comprehend the Way? Xunzi’s answer is a bit cryptic, but he advocates the cultivation of certain qualities such as “emptiness,” “single-mindedness,” and “stillness”:

How does the heart know the way? I say: it is through emptiness, single-mindedness, and stillness. The heart is always holding something. Yet, there is what is called being “empty.” The heart is always two-fold. Yet, there is what is called being “single-minded.” The heart is always moving. Yet, there is what is called being “still.” (Xunzi, Ch. 21: 165-185)

As scholars have noted, Xunzi is likely here influenced by early Daoist texts and unpacking each of these qualities of *xin* is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting though that possessing these qualities of *xin* do not seem to guarantee comprehension of the Way since they only appear to identify important formal properties of *xin* that allow *xin* to function well, but do not guarantee that the material that *xin* takes on is conducive to tracking the Way. Consider this analogy: we might identify qualities that make a computer function well, e.g. good CPU, RAM, and battery, but if we install corrupt software or infect the computer with a virus, the computer can still malfunction. Similarly, it seems that for *xin* to grasp the Way, one needs to be exposed to the right ideas and values, which for Xunzi would have required belonging to a well-ordered community, relationships to good friends and teachers, and the right set of rituals.

Another key feature of *xin* is that it enables self-governance:

The heart [*xin*] is the lord of the body and the master of one’s spirit and intelligence. It issues orders, but it takes orders from nothing: *it* restrains itself,

*it employs itself; it lets itself go, it takes itself in hand; it makes itself proceed, it makes itself stop. Thus, the mouth can be compelled either to be silent or to speak, and the body can be compelled either to contract or to extend itself, but the heart cannot be compelled to change its thoughts. What it considers right, one accepts. What it considers wrong, one rejects. (Xunzi, Ch. 21: 210-215)*

This remarkable passage seems to attribute to the agent, through the power of *xin*, a form of freedom and agency that allows one to rise above the promptings of desire and initiate action according to what appears to one's heart as right or wrong.<sup>10</sup>

The power to initiate or refrain from action through the exercise of one's *xin* is a crucial part of Xunzi's picture of moral development and captures a fundamental way that we conceive of ourselves as moral agents. For while there is no doubt that we are substantially influenced by our genes and environment, from the agential perspective, we do not take what we do as the predetermined results of previous causes. From a practical standpoint we cannot help but attribute praise and blame to ourselves and others, seeing human agents as the source of action. We *commend* John Lewis and his heroic actions and we *condemn* Putin and his decision to invade Ukraine. And when we make such evaluations, we are not merely making judgments about the good or bad consequences that will follow such actions but are holding these individuals accountable for what they have done. Perhaps with the exception of certain philosophers with strong theoretical commitments to hard determinism, it is fundamental to our moral psychology that we take human agents as appropriate objects of praise and blame because we see them as the source of their actions.<sup>11</sup>

One support for this basic picture is that there are conditions under which we withdraw blame or praise, for example, if we find out that the person was drugged or coerced into doing something against their will. The fact that such conditions of excuse exist at all suggests that we do believe that under normal circumstances human beings of a certain age are responsible for their actions.<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, this is a philosophical topic thick with controversy. But apart from the contentious metaphysics involved, at the level of descriptive psychology, Xunzi is on firm ground, capturing our self-conception and how we move through the social world. At the level of human living, we *cannot* but see ourselves as agents who can initiate action and direct ourselves toward various ends. Besides the fact that we hold ourselves and others accountable, another piece of evidence for this agential self-conception is that we do generally affirm that our own individual effort and commitment can make a substantial difference to the outcome. Xunzi also clearly believed that it was important to recognize the importance of dedication and hard work for becoming virtuous:

Now if people on the streets were to submit themselves to study and practice learning, if they were to concentrate their hearts and make single-minded their intentions, if they were to ponder, query, and thoroughly investigate—then if they add to this, days upon days, and connect to this long period of time, if they accumulate goodness without stopping, then they will break through to spirit-like power and understanding, and will form a triad with Heaven and Earth.

Thus, becoming a sage is something that people can achieve through accumulation. Someone says, sageliness is achieved through accumulation, but why is it that not all can accumulate thus? I say, they can do it, but they cannot be made to do it. Thus, the petty man can become a gentleman, but is not willing (*ken* 肯) to become a gentleman.”<sup>13</sup> (Xunzi, Ch. 23: 280)

Xunzi may seem overly optimistic here since he seems to think that anybody who is willing to exert effort can become virtuous. But is commitment and effort sufficient for becoming virtuous? I think that given Xunzi’s earlier points about the importance of ritual, teachers, friends, and a proper social environment more generally, we should take him to be claiming that *if* one were to devote oneself to a life of virtue and practice right action daily, then one would eventually become virtuous. But, there are a host of background conditions that need to be satisfied for one to devote oneself to a life of virtue and practice right action daily. Among them, Xunzi would argue, is connecting with the right teachers, and cultivating good habits through well-ordered

rituals. So, in other words, the antecedent of the conditional statement will not be satisfied unless numerous other conditions are satisfied. One's social environment, for Xunzi, clearly matters to the process of moral development.

Still, Xunzi is clearly hoping that his readers recognize that as human agents possessing the faculty of *xin*, we as individuals must contribute to the process of moral development by committing to the Way and carrying out that commitment through steady exertion. For while good teachers, friends, and a well-ordered community are necessary and can help push us in the right direction, unless one truly sets their heart on a life of virtue, no amount of external pressure can necessitate a virtuous life. Moreover, because the path to virtue is long, Xunzi exhorts people to make daily effort and focus on incremental progress:

That the lame turtle can get there while the six thoroughbreds cannot, is for no other reason than that he works at it, but they do not. And so even if the way is short, if you do not proceed along it, you will not arrive anywhere. Even if a matter is small, if you do not work at it, it will not be completed. If your character is such as to take holidays frequently, then your comings and goings will not take you very far. (Xunzi, Ch. 2: 160-165)

This is wise practical advice for anybody seeking to master a difficult craft or skill, namely, to not dwell on the large-scale goals, but to focus on the process and making daily, incremental progress. And all of this, as Xunzi acknowledges, requires work, dedication, and perseverance.

### **Objection: Willpower Is Not a Trait**

One objection that could be raised against Xunzi or anybody who takes seriously the role of human effort and deliberate exertion in moral development is that contemporary psychological research seems to show that human beings do not possess a trait-like willpower or self-control and that there is little empirical evidence to show that such a trait plays a genuine role in human life (Levy 2017; Imhoff,

Schmidt, and Gerstenberg 2014). Here we might begin by stipulating what we mean by “willpower” or “self-control”: the ability to resist short-term temptations for the sake of long-term goals. Notice that willpower here is not only the ability to *not* do something like eating a second Cinnabon or clicking on another YouTube clip. It’s also about *doing* certain things such as finishing the run or grading essays, when there are countervailing motivational forces. Within the context of moral development, situations that call for willpower may involve not only resisting the urge to act rudely toward someone, but also speaking out at the risk of social disapprobation.

As discussed above, Xunzi believed that the ability to self-govern and override desires was possible through the power of *xin*. But contemporary psychologists have argued that the picture of human beings as self-regulating, autonomous agents, is a mirage. Neil Levy (2017), drawing on recent empirical evidence, argues that when we examine those who can achieve their goals effectively, what we find is not that they possess extraordinary willpower or even more willpower than the average person. In fact, the empirical data suggests that overachievers possess *less* willpower than the average person. How could this be the case? As Levy argues, the effective realization of desired ends often lies not in the exercise of self-control and self-discipline in specific situations, but rather, in effectively deploying various practical strategies to achieve one’s ends more efficiently. For example, overachievers make plans that create conditions that are conducive to their success, for example, by manipulating their environment and putting themselves in favorable situations. As Levy comments,

...more successful delayers engaged in strategies of self-distraction rather than simple effortful resistance. They avoided attending to the rewards, by covering

their eyes or attempting (in one case successfully) to go to sleep, or playing games and singing songs. (205)

Just as Odysseus astutely recognized his inability to resist the temptations of the sirens and so used a pre-meditated strategy to avoid self-harm, those who can satisfy long-term goals find ways of either avoiding situations that impede their goals or employ tactics to propel them forward, knowing that they will be seriously tempted to give up.

As Levy (2017) himself acknowledges, there may be *some* role that willpower or self-control plays, but it seems that the role is less significant than some may believe.<sup>14</sup> Was Xunzi, then, wrong to suggest that much of the difference between the sage and the petty person is due to deliberate effort?

It is worth noting again that manipulating one's environment effectively is an important part of Xunzi's account of moral development, as discussed above. But, Xunzi may ask, how can one persist in continuing to plan and organize one's life in ways that create conditions of success? It could be that willpower's role can now be taken to reside in the effort to secure those external conditions that help one to act well in specific situations, especially in the earlier stages of moral development.

Xunzi clearly recognizes the psychological value of these strategies:

In the caves there lived a man named Ji. He was good at guessing riddles because he was fond of pondering things. However, if the desires of his eyes and ears were aroused, it would ruin his pondering, and if he heard the sounds of mosquitoes or gnats, it would frustrate his concentration. So, he shut out the desires of his eyes and ears and put himself far away from the sounds of mosquitoes and gnats, and by dwelling in seclusion and calmly pondering, he achieved comprehension...Youzi hated dozing off and so burned his palm to keep awake—this can be called being able to steel oneself. (Xunzi, Ch. 21: 290-300)

But while Xunzi recognizes that one can deploy such practical strategies to achieve desirable ends, it is important to note that Xunzi doesn't believe that this is the ideal



state to aim for. In fact, the need to take up such tactics reveals that one does not possess a truly virtuous character:

These are not yet true fondness. To shut out the desires of one's eyes and ears can be called forcing oneself. It is not yet truly pondering. To be such that hearing the sounds of mosquitoes or gnats frustrates one's concentration is called being precarious. It cannot yet be called true sublimeness. One who is truly sublime is a perfected person. For the perfected person, what forcing oneself, what steeling oneself, what precariousness is there?...The sage follows his desires and embraces all his dispositions, and the things dependent on these simply turn out well-ordered. (Xunzi, Ch. 21: 300-310)

A central aim for Xunzi is to become the kind of person who does not have to avoid occasions of temptation, because the temptations do not arise in the first place. It will likely seem to many that Xunzi's bar is too high. And the question of how well we can deeply transform our desires and emotions through long-term training and effort remains an empirically open question.<sup>15</sup> Still, at least when one's character is underdeveloped, Xunzi would insist that one who is committed to the life of virtue must constantly exert serious effort not only in directly exercising willpower, but also carefully considering the influence of one's environment and intelligently using indirect strategies that increases the likelihood of acting well.

What we see then is that the way deliberate effort and willpower enters the process of moral development would be seen by Xunzi as more expansive than on Neil Levy's account. Here it is important to highlight the deep commitment required by the Confucian tradition alongside the intensity of the Confucian regimen for virtue-cultivation. For the Confucians, the path of virtue is not conceived as simply one kind of task or preoccupation among many: it is *the* dominant force that influences every sphere of one's life. A true commitment to the Confucian Way restructures one's life entirely, so that one's desires and values are systematically reorganized. The

following passage shows just how transformative the Confucian path is thought to be by Xunzi:

The gentleman knows that whatever is imperfect and unrefined does not deserve praise. And so he repeatedly recites his learning in order to master it, ponders it in order to comprehend it, makes his person so as to dwell in it, and eliminates things harmful to it in order to nourish it. He makes his eyes not want to see what is not right, makes his ears not want to hear what is not right, makes his mouth not want to speak what is not right, and makes his heart not want to deliberate over what is not right. He comes to the point where he loves it, and then his eyes love it more than the five colors, his ears love it more than the five tones, his mouth loves it more than the five flavors, and his heart considers it more profitable than possessing the whole world. For this reason, power and profit cannot sway him, the masses cannot shift him, and nothing in the world can shake him. He lives by this, and he dies by this. This is called the state in which virtue has been grasped. (Xunzi, Ch. 1: 215-230)

For the Confucians there are a series of daily exercises that one must be devoted to, alongside sustained self-awareness about one's own mental states, and the correct practice of ritual. And all these practices are directed toward the molding of one's character. Therefore, it is unclear to what extent the empirical studies show that the kind of daily deliberate effort and practice that is required by the Confucian program of virtue will prove to be ineffective since it is extremely unlikely that those who were studied were committed to the path of moral development in the way that is prescribed by Confucianism. It is still an empirical possibility that willpower or self-control can have a much more significant influence in one's life when it is grounded in the kind of wholehearted commitment required by a tradition like Confucianism.

It may be that willpower ought not to be primarily conceived as continuous episodic exertion that is exercised by the agent, but as a faculty bound up with the agent's level of commitment and dedication that helps drive the agent toward their goals. When we think about dedicated athletes or musicians that serve as models of

willpower, their motivation lies in their deeper commitment to the goals that they set for themselves. It is this deeper commitment along with strong habits and rituals that supply the momentum to keep moving forward. When we have the right kind of focus and attention on the goals that we have determined to be worthwhile and valuable, it's generally true that our decisions and choices will follow along. Of course, one might go against one's considered judgment about what to do (raising the very complicated issue of weakness of will), but when our deepest commitment and focus are directed toward the proper actions, we will characteristically be driven to carry them through. The sort of willpower that Xunzi presupposes, then, should not be narrowly construed as just raw persistence or the ability to white-knuckle one's way through temptations, but as the overall capacity to move forward toward one's goals by developing a strong commitment and deploying whatever strategies that might be necessary to stick to one's plans.

### **Conclusion**

Where does all this leave us? Consider again Xunzi's picture of moral development as unfolding in different stages. In the earlier stage, a key part of success is to find the right set of proper teachers and friends, and to regulate oneself through the practice of ritual. At this stage, the aspiring agent recognizes the need to discipline and transform one's desires and deploys practical strategies to craft her social environment in ways that are conducive to self-cultivation. And through a wholehearted commitment to the life of virtue, one makes a daily effort to practice good actions, monitor one's emotions, and practice the rituals. So not only does crafting the right kind of social environment play a crucial role for Xunzi, so does persistent effort and deep commitment. Through continuous accumulation of effort, the building of good habits, and reformation of one's desires, over time the agent will

harmonize their will and desires so that, gradually, there will be less reliance on external conditions and the need to override desires through self-control.

This paper has aimed at not only explicating the ideas of Xunzi, but also highlighting the complexities of the process of moral development by exploring both the Situationist Critique and the ideals of moral agency. The Situationist Critique correctly draws our attention to the variety of ways social environments influence human behavior. But as we also observed, no account of moral development can ignore the perspective of the agent *qua* agent, as someone who is seeking to become good. We must integrate discussions of the powerful role that situations and environment have on human behavior with the internal perspective of human beings as moral agents. We cannot see human beings as just another material entity among others that are simply reacting to causal forces, but as agents with desires, intentions, and goals, who can make choices for reasons and strive to achieve the good.

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<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that a coerced act cannot be an "act of virtue" in the sense that it resembles what a virtuous person would have done.

<sup>3</sup> From a contemporary point of view, another important element is genetics, which clearly influences human personality and temperament. Xunzi obviously did not know about modern genetics, but he did acknowledge how human nature shapes our dispositions and desires. Since, however, Xunzi believed that moral development consists in reforming human nature, and since he seemed to think human beings do not tend to differ much in terms of their nature, I will leave this issue to the side.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive picture of psychological situationism and its implications for moral philosophy see Miller 2014.

<sup>5</sup> All translations of the *Xunzi* is from Hutton (2014). I will cite the chapter number followed by the line number.

<sup>6</sup> For a helpful discussion of this passage and its connection to situationism, as well as the connection between Confucianism and situationism more generally, see Hutton (2006).

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Confucius recognized that we all can (and likely will) suffer from misfortunes that we cannot really comprehend. The possibility of such misfortunes can transform how we relate to others who are experiencing immense suffering. I thank PJ Ivanhoe for this point.

<sup>8</sup> See Kim 2014 for discussion on this topic.

<sup>9</sup> See Kjellberg 2016 for a helpful account of how early Daoism influenced Xunzi. Cf. Nivision 1991.

<sup>10</sup> See Van Norden 1992 for a discussion of how *xin's* power to approve (*ke* 可) or disapprove of an action allows one to override one's desires.

<sup>11</sup> Hard determinism is the conjunction of three theses: (a) determinism is true, (b) human beings do not have free will, and (c) human beings are not praiseworthy or blameworthy. It is worth noting that even philosophers such as Galen Strawson who do accept hard determinism admit that they cannot refrain from praising or blaming themselves or others.

<sup>12</sup> P.F. Strawson defends the view that reactive attitudes such as praise, blame, gratitude, and forgiveness are constitutive of the human perspective in his justly famous article "Freedom and Resentment."

<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere Xunzi also sees the difference between a sage and others as not lying in a different nature but in deliberate effort (*Xunzi*, Ch. 2: 120-125).

<sup>14</sup> Levy comments, "...willpower may often be necessary for the exercise of self-control... Willpower is needed to get you going, but unless individuals use it to bootstrap self-distraction, contrual, or other indirect strategies, it will routinely fail to suffice" (Levy 2017: 207).

<sup>15</sup> We should look into those who truly dedicate themselves to character formation and living virtuously. My hunch is that if we looked at those who truly commit themselves to a life of virtue, perhaps by examining the lives of monks or nuns, we will find that their desires have been reshaped by years of prayer and meditation.