

Early Confucianism and Contemporary Moral Psychology

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to introduce scholars to recent discussions of early Confucian ethics that intersect with contemporary moral psychology. Given the early Confucian tradition's intense focus on the cultivation of virtue, there are a number of ways in which early Confucian thinkers – as represented in the texts of the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi* – fruitfully engaged in a range of topics that are closely connected to live issues in moral psychology. Not only did they anticipate some contemporary debates (e.g. moral modularity, situationism) but explored them from a distinctively Confucian normative worldview, attending especially to the role of the family and ritual practice. This essay seeks to demonstrate that early Confucianism, by integrating a normative vision with empirically grounded observations of human behavior, offers resources for constructively exploring a number of ongoing questions in moral psychology.

1. Toward a Cross-cultural Approach to Moral Psychology

Contemporary moral psychology is a rapidly developing, burgeoning field. One significant feature of this development is the acceptance of a more inclusive, interdisciplinary approach linking together a range of disciplines that previously worked in relative isolation. It is now much more common to see moral philosophers collaborating with cognitive scientists, biologists, and psychologists and also appealing to a wide body of empirical research to either justify their own meta-ethical and normative theories or criticize the positions of others.¹ Underlying this movement is growing recognition of the need to build normative theories that are realizable by creatures like ourselves, with our sort of physiological and psychological constitution. Human morality, on this view, must be capable of being embodied in concrete human lives and experiences (Flanagan 1991). Such ideas chime with the current trend to ‘naturalize’ ethics, by anchoring moral properties in features of the natural world.²

But if a more empirically informed understanding of human morality is what we are after, it seems necessary to also take a cross-cultural, comparative approach to moral psychology. In the absence of good reason, our investigations should not be restricted to the moralities of Western cultures or societies. While there are signs of change, this point has yet to be fully appreciated by philosophers and moral psychologists. Alasdair MacIntyre remarks:

[T]he study of moral philosophy has become divorced from the study of morality or rather of moralities and by so doing has distanced itself from practice. We do not expect serious work in the philosophy of physics from students who have ever studied physics or on the philosophy of law from students who have never studied law. But there is not even a hint of suggestion that courses in social and cultural anthropology and in certain areas of sociology and psychology should be a prerequisite for graduate work in moral philosophy. [...] Yet without such courses no adequate sense of the varieties of moral possibility can be acquired. One remains imprisoned by one's upbringing. (MacIntyre 31)

Without adequately understanding a range of moral perspectives and values, moral philosophers can become hostage to their own unexamined assumptions and biases. Moral philosophy may devolve into merely an activity of self-affirmation.

These points offer a significant reason for inquiring into the moral psychology found in the early Confucian tradition.³ By turning to early Confucianism we can understand one well developed system of moral thought and action that powerfully influenced the shape and development of East Asian societies and cultures. Of course, to what extent early Confucian moral psychology challenges the normative assumptions and values in contemporary Western philosophy will not be settled in this paper. Such a task would require normative theorizing that evaluates the moral views of the early Confucian tradition, which would require its own careful discussion, a task that can be fruitfully pursued only after achieving an adequate understanding of the philosophical psychology embedded in Confucian morality. The aim of this essay, rather, is to introduce readers unfamiliar with early Confucian thought to some of the interesting ways that recent discussions of early Confucianism intersect with contemporary moral psychology.

For early Confucian thinkers, moral philosophy and moral psychology were deeply intertwined, a point supported by a number of recent works on early Confucianism that employs empirical, interdisciplinary methodologies and fits well with the naturalized approach to ethics noted earlier (Flanagan 2008; Munro; Sarkissian 2010a; Sarkissian 2010b; Seok 2015; Wong 2014). The primary goal of early Confucianism was not to build theories but to move people to become reliably good and to establish benevolent governance by turning rulers toward virtue. This essay focuses on the moral psychology – understood here as the psychological underpinnings of our moral feelings, judgments, and actions – represented in the core texts of early Confucianism: the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*, by exploring their connections to several issues that remain widely discussed in contemporary philosophy. While I stand behind the choice of these texts as representing a moral tradition, I want to emphasize that I do not claim that the ideas and positions articulated in these texts amount to the same thing or that they are consistent with each other. In this essay I only aim to introduce to contemporary Western moral philosophers the general contours of the moral psychology of early Confucianism. The discussion will be mostly confined to examining emotion and virtue, two concepts that have garnered much attention in recent years in both the field of Chinese philosophy and contemporary moral psychology. Given that the primary aim of the early Confucian moral tradition was fostering characteristic traits that are constitutive of the ‘gentleman’ (*junzi*) or the ‘exemplary person’, the focus on emotion and virtue will allow us to probe some of the fundamental elements of early Confucian ethics.

In the next section, I discuss the role of emotion in moral judgment and action, focusing on the early Confucian philosopher Mencius’s conception of human nature. Here I explore Mencius’s account of the virtues by reflecting on the concept of moral modularity. Then, I turn to the situationist critique of virtue ethics and discuss some responses that have been inspired by the early Confucian tradition, focusing especially on the Confucian account of ritual. Examining these two topics will help the reader gain a basic grasp of some important features of early Confucian morality, especially its conception of moral development, and get up to speed on some of the fascinating work taking place at the intersection of early Confucian ethics and contemporary moral psychology.⁴

Before moving forward, it is worth noting that the focus on emotion, virtue, and moral cultivation might suggest that the early Confucians espoused a form of what is now known as ‘virtue ethics’. But while a number of prominent scholars in the field of Chinese philosophy have advocated this interpretation, there are competing interpretations that take the early Confucians as moral sentimentalists, role-based theorists, and consequentialists.⁵ In this essay, I will not seek to defend a particular position on this issue. Regardless of which interpretation

is correct, most would agree that the notions of emotion and virtue play significant roles within the early Confucian tradition, which I hope is sufficient to warrant the choice of topics in this essay.

2. Emotions, Moral Sprouts, and Human Nature

In the Western philosophical tradition there is a well-represented line of thought emerging from the Stoics, running up to Kant, that construes emotions and feelings as blind, capricious, unreliable, and in general, detrimental to the moral life (Blum). In recent years, partly in response to the growing recognition of the cognitive aspects of emotion (Solomon; Nussbaum; D'Arms and Jacobson) and its powerful effect on the formation of moral judgments (de Sousa; Haidt; Nichols 2004; Prinz 2007), moral philosophers are now more attentive to the influence of emotion in judgment and action. One point noted by scholars of Chinese philosophy is the notable absence of a sharp separation between reason and emotion in the early Confucian moral framework (Van Norden 2007: 217; Wong 1991). A single Chinese term, *xin*, usually translated as 'heart' or 'mind', is used to mark out the seat of both affection and cognition. On the early Confucian picture, our emotional experiences are not directionless, random feelings detached from reason, but bear a close connection to our values and commitments. Emotions draw our attention to salient normative features of the world and are the appropriate objects of normative appraisal. Accordingly, our moral development hinges on strengthening and refining our emotional capacity.

On the view endorsed by Mencius, human nature is partially constituted by a set of innate inclinations and feelings – what Mencius calls 'sprouts' (*duan*) – that provide us with the basic moral equipment for developing into mature moral agents (*Mengzi* 2A6). The four moral sprouts (or 'beginnings') and their corresponding virtues are displayed below:

Sprout	Virtue
(1) Compassion	Benevolence
(2) Shame (or disdain)	Righteousness
(3) Deference	Ritual propriety
(4) Approval and disapproval	Wisdom

Mencius sees the development of the sprouts into virtues as a process that requires time, human effort, and a proper social environment (*Mengzi* 6A7). Although the achievement of the virtues is a contingent matter, Mencius takes the four sprouts as innate dispositions inherent in our nature as human beings.⁶ Unless countervailing forces are present, human beings will tend to spontaneously experience these feelings under a range of conditions. Upon seeing a child about to fall into a well, just about all of us will feel the 'compassion' that Mencius identifies (*Mengzi* 2A6). Feeling slighted by someone, we tend to experience disdain toward the person (*Mengzi* 6A10). The moral sprouts, even in their uncultivated state, are not merely dormant psychological entities; they play an active role in our psychological economy (Ivanhoe 2002).

Turning to recent developments in cognitive science, the widely discussed 'dual process theory' of cognitive reasoning – an account of cognitive architecture that divides mental operations into two modes or 'systems' – suggests that the Mencian sprouts are more closely connected to the fast, intuitive, and 'hot' automatic system ('System 1') rather than the slow, deliberative, and 'cool' reasoning system ('System 2') that together regulate both the cognitive and affective qualities of our mental lives (Kahneman). As noted in the examples cited above, in

certain morally charged situations, the Mencian sprouts trigger certain emotions such as compassion, shame, or disapproval. Mencius offers a vivid illustration of this phenomenon:

Now, in the past ages, there were those who did not bury their parents. When their parents died, they took them and abandoned them in a gully. The next day they passed them, and foxes were eating them, bugs were sucking on them. Sweat broke out on the survivors' foreheads. They turned away and did not look. It was not for the sake of others that they sweated. What was inside their hearts broke through to their countenances. So they went home and, returning with baskets and shovels, covered them. (*Mengzi* 3A5)

The emotionally charged reaction upon seeing the corpses of the parents was swift and spontaneous – certainly not the result of rational deliberation (System 2).

This is not to say that the two systems work in isolation; although each has its own distinctive function, they interact in important ways. For example, System 1 can relay feelings and intuitions to System 2, and System 2 can take those feelings and intuitions, processes them, and endorse or rejects them, resulting (sometimes) in action. Because on the Confucian ethical worldview, much of the moral substance of our lives depends on how well (or badly) we react in everyday social encounters, Mencius was sensitive to the process of nurturing these sprouts and fine-tuning our emotional tendencies. Below, we will explore what role that System 2, in the form of *zhi* – the Mencian virtue of practical wisdom – plays in the development of the sprouts.

Philosophers have recently started to explore the extent to which Mencius's moral psychology can be characterized in terms of moral modularity (Flanagan and Williams; Flanagan 2008; Seok 2008). Moral modules, to give a brief description, are cognitive–affective–conative dispositions that are activated automatically, cognitively impenetrable (i.e. difficult to manipulate through rational control), and triggered by a narrow range of inputs (domain specific).⁷ While there are reasons for not attributing a strong conception of moral modularity to Mencius, what Flanagan calls a 'modules-all-the-way-up and all-the-way-down' view because of the way that practical wisdom (*zhi*) can influence the shape and development of the sprouts, Mencius's conception of the sprouts as offering independent affective bases for specific virtues suggests that he believed in certain domain-specific moral competencies that are innate to humans and foundational for morality (Seok 2008). For this reason, even if Mencius cannot be interpreted as endorsing a view of moral modularity without qualification, contemporary discussion of moral modularity can serve as a useful foil for understanding Mencius's views and Mencius, in turn, can offer fruitful ways of exploring modular based ethical views.

Characterizing Mencius as offering the first expression of a modular based moral view, Flanagan (2008) has drawn stimulating comparisons between what he calls Mencian Moral Modularity (MMM) and a contemporary version of moral modularity proposed by Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues, known as Moral Foundations Theory (MFT).⁸ Both pictures present an account of morality that arises out of a set of innate emotional dispositions that furnish us with the basic moral architecture that constitutes our 'first nature'. Above, we identified the four moral inclinations (compassion, shame deference, approval/disapproval) Mencius takes as basic. On Haidt's MFT there are five distinct moral domains: (i) harm/care; (ii) fairness/reciprocity; (iii) ingroup/loyalty; (iv) authority/respect; and (v) purity/sanctity. (Haidt now endorses a sixth foundation, 'liberty/oppression', but believes there is less evidence for it than the five foundations listed above.)⁹ On Haidt's view these domains offer us five moral (or proto-moral) inclinations or tendencies that have become embedded in our nature through evolution, allowing us to develop distinct moral competencies and skills. What Mencius's sprout view and Haidt's MFT view hold in common is the idea that human beings have, as part of their basic equipment, certain moral inclinations, and that morality largely consists in developing,

modifying, and reconfiguring these basic moral dispositions. While culture, as both views would emphasize, plays a crucial role in shaping these sprouts or modules, our moral lives must ultimately be built on top of this foundation.

The basic moral modules are, Haidt contends, like the five taste receptors that allow us to distinguish and make judgments about different tastes. Just as the taste receptors allow us to mark out different tastes – ‘sour!’ ‘sweet!’ – moral receptors allow us to identify and react to a wide range of moral phenomena – ‘shame on him!’ ‘how heroic!’ This analogy between morality and taste, as Haidt acknowledges, was also suggested by Mencius (as well as Hume): ‘Hence, order and righteousness delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths’ (*Mengzi* 6A7). Extending this point, we can conceive Mencius’s moral sprouts as distinct moral receptors that allow us to grasp and evaluate different moral situations. Each moral sprout allows us to feel and judge in ways that are appropriate to different domains of moral experience; the sprouts charge our experiences with a normative pull. Confronted with rude behavior we react with contempt; upon seeing a child fall we’re moved with pity. Of course, our moral experience can be much more complex than these descriptions suggest since we can experience a number of different feelings at once: I feel both angry and sad that you would do that to me; I’m both grateful and ashamed for the kind gesture. Different sprouts can fire at the same time, and pull us in different directions.

But how do we know if the moral sprouts are growing properly? What’s the ideal configuration for the sprouts? It is important to remember that the sprouts are not virtues. As the agricultural metaphor of ‘sprouts’ suggests, the sprouts are in need of care and attention. What we are after, so to speak, is a moral harvest: a mature and cultivated self. Again, the metaphor of farming, rather than vegetation, is apt. Farming – itself an outstanding product of human culture – requires patience, wisdom, and effort (Ivanhoe 2013). This suggests the need for a more centralized reasoning process – System 2 – that can offer normative guidance through rational deliberation. Indeed, as scholars have pointed out, Mencius’s fourth sprout of ‘approval and disapproval’ – which is directed toward the virtue of ‘wisdom’ (*zhi*) – seems to carry a more cognitive orientation (Kim). One can construe Mencian wisdom as a ‘meta-virtue’ that allows us to reflectively guide the development of the other sprouts (Flanagan: 81–89). By opening space for normative reflection, Mencius’s moral theory is in a better position of capturing our intuitively held normative judgments than the kind of modular based view advocated by Haidt that takes rationality as merely allowing for *post hoc* rationalizations. In this way, Mencius may offer resources for integrating certain attractive features of Haidt’s moral psychology (while avoiding its excesses) with the conceptual resources necessary for preserving normative theorizing.

Allowing room for reflection and wisdom makes Mencius’s moral theory more plausible. But, it also shows that Mencius’s sprouts cannot be conceived in a strongly modular way since it seems that the development of the sprout of approval and disapproval both influences, and is also influenced by, the other sprouts – calling into question their cognitive impenetrability. (Briefly, cognitive impenetrability requires that the modules are fairly well insulated from the influences of reasoning and deliberation.) On the other hand, some cognitive scientists like Sperber (1997, 2005) have defended less strict ways of understanding modularity.

Mencius himself believed that there was just one ideal way for the sprouts to grow – set by his Confucian ideal of the perfected sage – that few would now accept. Still, even if we reject aspects of Mencius’s substantive beliefs about the nature and role of each sprout, the basic structure of his moral psychology as grounded in basic emotions connected to distinct moral domains may still be on the right track, or at least help us articulate certain constructive ways of conceptualizing human nature and moral development.

3. *The Situationist Critique and Early Confucian Virtue Ethics*

Among the various challenges to virtue-based approach to ethics, none has garnered more attention in recent years than the ‘situationist critique’ developed by John Doris and Gilbert Harman. Drawing on the situationist position developed by psychologists (Darley and Batson; Isen and Levin; Milgram), Doris and Harman argue that examination of the empirical data shows that human behavior is significantly affected by minor situational factors that often operate beneath our awareness. Their conclusion: almost nobody possesses the virtues, understood as ‘global’ characteristic traits that are consistently exemplified across situations and are reliably manifested over time under relevantly similar circumstances.¹⁰ And so, virtue ethics as a normative theory suffers from psychological implausibility.

Defenders of virtue ethics have come back swinging, employing a wide range of strategies that cannot be adequately addressed here.¹¹ My focus below will center on some of the recent responses to the situationist critique inspired by the early Confucian tradition.¹²

But just what is the situationist challenge? At first blush, it is somewhat puzzling how the situationist research poses a threat to virtue ethical theories that hold a global conception of virtue. For what the studies show is only that most people are affected by situational influences, indicating the lack of a virtuous character in those people. But, it is tempting for the virtue theorist to curtly reply: so what? No historical thinker who took virtues seriously, dating back to Aristotle or Plato, or even further, to Confucius, believed that most people are virtuous. As Michael DePaul writes, ‘The *Republic* so obviously presents the view that virtue is hard to acquire and rare that one almost feels embarrassed making a case for the claim’ (DePaul 150). And the empirical studies, as Doris rightly acknowledges, simply do not – indeed, cannot – show that it is impossible to obtain a virtuous character. So what is the problem?

Christian Miller has recently articulated what I think is the deeper challenge raised by situationist psychology, which he dubs the *realism challenge* (Miller). At its heart, the challenge is for those who take a globalist conception of virtue to provide an empirically implementable outline of how, given all the subtle and complex ways that situational features subconsciously affect us, an ordinary person can develop a virtuous character. This challenge takes seriously a significant insight that can be drawn from the psychological studies, which is that human beings are highly susceptible, in ways that operate under conscious awareness, to a dazzling range of minor environmental influences.

Miller’s *realism challenge* is especially fitting for our discussion since the recent responses to the situationist critique drawing on early Confucianism have primarily focused on crucial features of the early Confucian conception of moral development. These responses focus on the following aspects of Confucian moral self-cultivation:

3.1. NO PAIN, NO GAIN

The road to virtue is difficult and long, requiring wholehearted commitment, sacrifice, and intense effort (Slingerland). One cannot cut corners. Xunzi stresses this point:

If you truly accumulate effort for a long time, then you will advance. Learning proceeds until death and only then does it stop. And so, the order of learning has a stopping point, but its purpose cannot be given up for even a moment. (Hutton, Ch. 1: 130–135)¹³

This point raises a common, and in my view, eminently plausible response to the situationist critique: Ordinary agents who have not undergone the arduous process of moral training will stand close to no chance of being able to resist the pervasive influence of biases and temptations.

Evaluating the plausibility of virtue ethics by examining the behavior of ordinary agents is like evaluating the effectiveness of a regimen for learning the piano by examining the ability of people who haven't actually gone through the training.¹⁴

3.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EVERYDAY

Connected to the point above, one of the hallmarks of early Confucian morality is its focus on the activities of everyday social life. While contemporary moral philosophers tend to emphasize dramatic moral choices (e.g. whether to sacrifice one's life or torture an innocent person to save more lives) much of the early Confucian texts focus on the attitudes, feelings, manners, and expressions that constitute much of our ordinary social discourse (Sarkissian 2010a: 7). From the early Confucian point of view, our character is largely built up from the steady accumulation of such seemingly minor events. Making moral progress, especially in the earlier stages of moral development, requires careful monitoring of our basic attitudes and behaviors: 'The gentleman learns broadly and examines himself thrice daily, and then his knowledge is clear and his conduct is without fault' (Hutton Ch. 1: 5–10). Fostering this sort of conscientiousness toward more mundane and seemingly trivial feelings and behaviors of everyday life may reduce the level of influence exerted by morally irrelevant situational factors.

3.3. THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATIONAL FACTORS

While the early Confucians certainly accepted the cultivation of certain robust character traits as a normative ideal, they were quite sensitive to the subtle and powerful influence that our environment can have on human behavior (Sarkissian 2010a; Slingerland; Mower; Hutton; Seok 2015):

Thus, the mourning garments and the sounds of weeping make people's hearts sad. To strap on armor, don a helmet, and sing in the ranks make people's hearts emboldened. Dissolute customs and the tunes of Zheng and Wey make people's hearts licentious. Putting on the ritual belt, robes, and cap, and dancing the *Shao* and singing the *Wu* make people's hearts invigorated. (Hutton, Ch. 20: 105–110)

We can draw Xunzi's point by appealing to modern American artifacts and practices that influence us in similar ways: the sound of trumpets played during the funeral of fallen soldiers, the graduation garment, and the singing of the national anthem. Harnessing the powerful effects of such cultural accouterments, together with crafting the right sorts of situations, can instill values and attitudes that bolster our likelihood of acting well.

Along with cultural artifacts, Xunzi also homes in on the powerful influence of our social environment:

If you obtain a worthy teacher to serve, then what you hear will be the ways of Yao, Shun, Yu, and Tang. If you obtain a worthy friend to befriend then what you see will be conduct that is loyal, trustworthy, respectful, and deferential. Then you will make daily progress toward *ren* and *yi* and you will not even realize it. That is due to what you rub up against. Now if you live alongside people who are not good, then what you hear will be trickery, deception, dishonesty, and fraud. What you see will be conduct that is dirty, arrogant, perverse, deviant, and greedy. Moreover, you will suffer punishment and execution, and you will not even realize it is upon you. That is due to what you rub up against. 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! (Hutton, Ch. 23: 380–390)

By drawing attention to the powerful influences of our environment, these passages demonstrate ways in which early Confucians like Xunzi anticipated the findings of situationist psychology. Here one might wonder: if ‘everything depends on what you rub up against’ and even mundane objects like music and clothing can exert such powerful influence, then how can the early Confucians still believe in the attainability of virtues, conceived as stable and consistent traits of character? One possible answer is that their recognition of the role that our environment has on our behavior is focused more on the process of moral development, rather than the character of virtuous agents. As the process of moral development gradually molds the character of the aspiring Confucian, fewer situational supports will be necessary to ensure correct action. On the other hand, the early Confucians’ account of virtue suggests rethinking the relationship between virtues and situations. Deborah Mower advances a response to the situationist critique along these lines:

Xunzi’s program of moral education, spanning years and yielding several stages of development by inculcating a multiplicity of enforcements, seeks to develop deliberative situational embeddedness. And while Doris and Harman treat situational influence as a “one size fits all” specter, Xunzi’s account of moral development and program of moral education suggests that there are different levels and kinds of situational influence that are appropriate; indeed, the degree of influence for situational factors, one’s cognitive awareness of them, and the role they play in yielding one’s behavior varies greatly among each of the stages. (Mower 134)

One of the insights of Xunzi’s account of virtue, according to Mower, is the deeper appreciation of the way that moral development, virtues, and situations are all closely intertwined. On Xunzi’s account of virtues it simply makes no sense to ask whether the virtues can operate independently of situational factors. This is a fascinating line of thought that merits more careful exploration.

3.4. RITUAL AND MORAL EDUCATION

As evident in the passages cited above, the situational factors that the early Confucians understood as significant for moral development all center on Confucian rituals. Ritual (or rite) lies at the heart of the early Confucian moral tradition. Following Benjamin Schwartz, we can characterize rituals as

all those “objective” prescriptions of behavior, whether involving rite, ceremony, manners, or general deportment, that bind human beings and spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family, within human society, and with the numinous realm beyond. (Schwartz 1985: 67)

To some contemporary Western readers, however, the very idea of ritual is marked by negative connotations – a set of rigid, dull, and monotonous activities, bearing little connection to morality or the flourishing life. The early Confucian attitude toward rituals couldn’t be more different. Confucius tells his disciple,

Restraining yourself and returning to the rites constitutes Goodness. If for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to the rites, in this way you could lead the entire world back to Goodness. (*Analects* 12.1)

Xunzi takes ritual as crucial for peaceful order and survival, as well as the proper channeling of desires and emotions for greater fulfillment: ‘And so when ritual is at its most perfect, the requirements of inner dispositions and proper form are both completely fulfilled.’ (*Xunzi* Ch. 19: 120).

On the Confucian view, rituals are the fundamental building blocks of culture and society, providing us the ‘cultural grammar’ for making our way through socio-moral space (Li). They help regulate our everyday social transactions by delimiting the boundaries of what is appropriate or fitting in particular contexts. Take the act of a handshake. As Herbert Fingarette notes, what appears to be a trivial and effortless ‘ritual’ activity requires not only cultural understanding, but expresses in a subtle way mutual recognition of shared humanity. The moral, as Fingarette points out, is profound:

These complex but familiar gestures are characteristic of human relationships at their most human: we are least like anything else in the world when we do not treat each other as physical objects, as animals or even as subhuman creatures to be driven, threatened, forced, maneuvered. (Fingarette: 11)

By drawing attention to socially shared understandings of what constitutes respectful behavior, rituals not only assist in smoothing out social interactions by allowing us to avoid potential areas of social conflict but also amplify those values vital for healthy communities.

How exactly the rituals hone and strengthen one’s emotional capacity is left open in the Confucian texts, but drawing upon the empirical work of Antonio Damasio’s ‘somatic-marker hypothesis’, Sarkissian (2010b) offers an intriguing answer. The Confucian social rituals (along with other cultural exercises) help create in their practitioners ‘somatic markers’ that allow one to spontaneously respond to various situations with the appropriate emotional attitude. By mastering a wide range of ritual practices – bearing in mind the broad range of activities that are covered by Confucian ritual – one’s emotional repertoire is expanded and strengthened, allowing one to feel and behave according to the norms of Confucian conduct in a wide range of circumstances. Of course no set of rituals can possibly prepare a person for all the novel moral situations that one may confront. Confucius himself was well aware of the complexities that arise within the span of a normal human life, and advocated broad cultural learning that would have included a variety of Confucian arts: music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics (*Analects* 1.6, 6.27). Diligent practice in these disciplines, the recitation of the classics, and active participation in the rituals would lead the avid learner to internalize the Confucian values and achieve the kind of emotional and cognitive balance necessary for successfully meeting the diverse array of complex moral and social challenges that must be confronted in the course of human life.

Still, even with close attention to the social environment and strict dedication to developing one’s character, how likely is it that ordinary people can become reliably good? Here, the defense of virtue ethics does not require, I think, showing that most people can develop full-blown virtues, but that moral education can – again with serious effort and wise guidance – effectively make people better and to some reasonable degree approximate the virtues. Much more empirical research is needed to demonstrate the degree to which, through conscious effort, people can strengthen their moral dispositions. Some empirical research has shown that it is possible to decrease the habit of making prejudiced judgments over time through practice of self-regulatory control (Snow 34–37). As Nancy Snow argues, our behavior can be significantly altered by actively pursuing particular goals and commitments (Snow 39–62). Such points at least suggest the psychological plausibility of developing stable moral dispositions.

Much work remains, especially with regard to determining what sort of virtue-enhancing strategies (if any) are most effective. And while this is especially important for those moral views that take the achievement of robust, global character traits as a normative ideal, this is a topic that should be of interest for all of us who seek to create a world that is more hospitable and humane. The situationist critique suggests that our psychological nature will not make the realization of this goal effortless or easy. But that only underscores why the issue is all the more pressing.

4. Conclusion

Like much of the ancient Greek moral tradition, the early Confucian moral tradition was focused on the cultivation of a set of character traits that would reliably motivate people to act well. What is distinctive about the early Confucians is the central role they give to ritual practice, which they see as the key to acquiring the virtues. The very nature of rituals, as a set of culturally embedded practices requiring a highly contextualized for successful execution, makes it a significant topic that merits careful study especially from the perspective of moral psychology. The tremendous importance placed on rituals offers some support for thinking that the early Confucians were well aware of the impact of situational factors and the need to find ways of manipulating our social environment in ways that would help nudge us toward good habits of feelings and thoughts.

One might, however, remain skeptical that even with the help of rituals, the early Confucians' aspirations for cultivating robust virtues were psychologically unrealistic and do not provide much arsenal for countering the vast amount of literature supporting situationist psychology.

As a partial response to this skeptical worry, there is a point that I think is worth drawing attention to, which is that both the rituals and the virtues that the early Confucians aimed to achieve were both socially embodied and deeply entrenched within the cultural context of early China. Given the smaller, more tightly knit and homogenous communities that existed during that time, at least when compared to contemporary America, the effects of social priming through rituals and other forms of social manipulations could have exerted a much greater force than it would in contemporary Western societies. For example, the early Confucians were deeply concerned with the way that the use of speech establishes the correct norms of behavior, giving rise to the Confucian practice of 'rectification of names' (*zhengming*). Through this practice, as Slingerland notes, 'words such as "father" or "ruler" bring with them certain positive social norms, and their very invocation should inspire a certain type of model emulation' (Slingerland 413). By ensuring that even the usage of words in everyday social contexts is laden with normative significance, the early Confucians were looking to find ways of manipulating the cultural environment in ways that would nudge agents toward proper patterns of thoughts and behaviors.

Moreover, while we have good reasons for thinking that the early Confucians did believe in cultivating certain global traits of character that in certain ways overlap with what contemporary moral philosophers would think of as virtues, the early Confucian understanding of virtues diverged in significant ways from the Western conception of virtues (with its roots in Hellenistic, Judeo-Christian moralities), and so may have been more congenial to development within the Confucian cultural setting. These points highlight the critical need for deeper reflections on our conceptions of both emotion and virtue from a cross-cultural and comparative perspective, a task that I hope will become more widely pursued in coming years.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ This is not to say that all the philosophical concerns about the use of the empirical sciences in normative inquiry have been resolved. One can still detect some uncertainty among philosophers about the extent to which the empirical work is relevant to normative theorizing (Clipsham). The payoff that an empirically informed approach to moral philosophy will yield remains to be settled (Rini).

² There are different conceptions of ‘naturalism’ that merit careful exploration. For a helpful contemporary discussion, see Flanagan, Sarkissian, and Wong (2008). ‘Naturalizing Ethics’ in *Moral Psychology: Vol. 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness* (Ed.), Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. Cambridge, MA. MIT Press.

³ This paper focuses on the moral psychology of early Confucian thinkers, in particular, Confucius (Kongzi), Mencius (Mengzi), and Xunzi. Anytime I refer to ‘Confucian’ thought, I mean only to refer to the texts attributed to these three thinkers. It is worth noting that ‘Confucianism’ is a contested term among sinologists. I leave this issue aside. I also leave aside questions regarding the extent to which these texts represent the ideas and values of the historical figures to which they are attached.

⁴ Due to space constraints, I leave aside other topics that will be of interest to those interested in contemporary moral psychology including the connection between the early Confucian moral tradition and evolutionary psychology (Munro; Nichols) and the recent work that takes Confucianism as offering a form of embodied moral psychology (Seok).

⁵ See Angle (2009); Ivanhoe (2002); Sim (2007); VanNorden (2007); Yearley (1990); and Yu (2007) for discussions that advocate a virtue-ethics interpretation of early Confucianism. For a role-based ethics interpretation, see Ames and Rosemont (2010). For a consequentialist interpretation, see Im (2010). For a sentimentalist reading, see Liu (2003).

⁶ For Mencius’s arguments supporting the existence of these sprouts, see Ivanhoe (39–40).

⁷ Exactly what moral modules are is a complex issue. Haidt rejects the stricter criteria for modularity proposed by Fodor (1983) and endorses a looser understanding endorsed by Sperber (1997, 2005). See Haidt (2012: 401–402). For a treatment of modularity in general, see Fodor (1983) and Sperber (2005). See Seok (2008), Flanagan (2010), and Flanagan (2008) for discussions of moral modularity.

⁸ For specific discussions of the modular nature of Haidt’s theory, see Haidt and Bjorklund (2008: 204–206) and Haidt (2012: 144–148).

⁹ See Iyer et al. (2012) and Haidt (2012) for discussions of the liberty/oppression foundation.

¹⁰ I leave aside another feature of global traits, ‘evaluative integration’ (Doris 22), which plays a less prominent role in the situationist critique.

¹¹ For references and a comprehensive overview of this literature, see Miller (214–233).

¹² See Hutton (40–43) for reasons for thinking that early Confucianism falls within the range of the situationist critique’s targets.

¹³ Xunzi also says, ‘If you start carving and give up, you will not be able to break even rotten wood, but if you start carving and do not give up, then you can engrave even metal and stone.’ (Hutton Ch. 1: 95–100).

¹⁴ Here, it is worth pausing to seriously reflect on those individuals who have devoted their lives to self-purification such as Gandhi, St. Francis of Assisi, the Dalai Lama, and note just how much effort is exerted on a daily basis toward achieving moral goodness.

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