

(Running Title: VIRTUE THROUGH HABITUATION)

## **Virtue Through Habituation: Virtue Cultivation in Xunzi**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates virtue cultivation in the *Xunzi* 《荀子》, paying particular attention to the early formation period. I first give a brief survey of the usage of the character *de* 德 in the *Xunzi* and the corresponding understanding of virtue cultivation. With the identification of some of the most controversial questions regarding Xunzi's ethical thought, including how a person with a bad nature comes to be attracted to virtue, recognize the value of virtue cultivation, and embark on the path of virtue cultivation, I then review the efforts that have been made to address these questions and evaluate what challenges remain. I go on to argue that such challenges can be met and articulate how a petty man can be attracted to and also recognize true virtue. Finally, borrowing some resources from Aristotle's idea of habituation of virtuous actions, I argue that it is possible for a person to embark on virtue cultivation, even though he is without prior moral dispositions and internal motivation for

virtue.

### **Keywords**

*Xunzi – virtue – ritual – habituation – Aristotle – skill*

There have been controversies over whether Confucian ethics in general, or Xunzi's ethics in particular, can be, or even is best seen as a type of virtue ethics.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Xunzi's ethics, Eric Hutton, by taking John McDowell's virtue ethics as a model, suggests that there are adequate grounds for classifying Xunzi as a virtue ethicist, though he allows for the possibility that Xunzi's ethics might be best interpreted in an alternative way.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Mao Zhaohui 毛朝暉 argues that Xunzi's ethics is actually a sort of utilitarianism.<sup>3</sup> This paper does not aim to settle the question of whether Xunzi is best seen as a virtue ethicist, rather than an ethical consequentialist, or a role-ethicist. Instead, starting from a modest observation that virtue and virtuous

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Hutton has helpfully analyzed the pitfalls, limitations but also of potential contributions of interpreting Confucian ethics from the perspective of virtue ethics. See Eric L. Hutton, "On the 'Virtue Turn' and the Problem of Categorizing Chinese Thought," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2015): 331-353.

<sup>2</sup> Eric L. Hutton, "Xunzi and Virtue Ethics," in *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, eds. Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 113-125.

<sup>3</sup> Zhaohui Mao, "Is Xunzi a Utilitarian? Revisiting a Disagreement," *Asian Philosophy* 28, no.4 (2018): 358-367.

persons play a prominent role in Xunzi's ethics,<sup>4</sup> the paper aims to investigate the process of virtuous character formation in Xunzi's ethics, paying attention in particular to the early formation period.

In the following I first give a brief survey of the usage of the character *de* in the *Xunzi* and the corresponding understanding of virtue cultivation. With the identification of some of the most controversial questions regarding Xunzi's ethical thought, including how a person with a bad nature comes to be attracted to virtue, recognize the value of virtue cultivation, and embark on the path of virtue cultivation, I then review the efforts that have been made to address these questions and evaluate what challenges remain. I go on to argue that such challenges can be met and articulate how a petty man can be attracted to and also recognize true virtue. Finally, borrowing some resources from Aristotle's idea of habituation of virtuous actions, I argue that it is possible for a person to embark on virtue cultivation, even though he is without prior moral dispositions and internal motivation for virtue.

## 1 *De* AND Virtue Cultivation

Now the character *de* appears 112 times

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<sup>4</sup> Such an observation is compatible with the claim that Xunzi's ethics is best seen not as a version of virtue ethics, but rather, say, as a version of consequentialism. See also Eric L. Hutton, "Xunzi and Virtue Ethics," 114-5.

<sup>5</sup> D. C. Lau ed., *A Concordance to the Xunzi* (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1996), 221-2.

<sup>6</sup> *Xunzi* 11/53/16. All citations of the *Xunzi* refer to *A Concordance to the Xunzi*. Citations are in the form of chapter/page/line numbers.

<sup>7</sup> *Xunzi* 8/30/12.

<sup>8</sup> For example, *Xunzi* 9/37/3 and 11/55/21-2. For

in the *Xunzi*.<sup>5</sup> Although *de* is usually translated as virtue, it is not identical to the Western notion of "virtue." For one thing, *de* can be used in a general way to describe the character or inclination of a person, a thing or even a nation, and the character in question need not be moral. For example, one instance of *de* in the *Xunzi* describes the dissolute and rebellious tendency of nations.<sup>6</sup> *De* is also used in another instance to describe the inclination of common people to value local customs, material goods and wealth, and life nurturance.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, sometimes the emphasis of *de* is not on the inner moral qualities of the possessor, but on the impact of such moral qualities on other people. When *de* is used in such a way, it might be more appropriate to render it as "moral charisma."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in the following I simply assume that most instances of *de* in the *Xunzi* are similar enough to the notion of "virtue" to warrant discussion of Xunzi's understanding of virtue cultivation.<sup>9</sup>

As Schofer has already pointed out, most instances of the character *de* occur in Xunzi's discussions of political governance.<sup>10</sup> For example, Xunzi talks about how a true king wins over the people by *de* rather than by force or wealth, as the people are attracted by the

further explication of the meanings of *de*, readers might consult David S. Nivison, "'Virtue' in Bone and Bronze," and "The Paradox of 'Virtue,'" both in *The Way of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, eds. Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1996) 17-30 and 31-43.

<sup>9</sup> I thank for an anonymous reviewer's suggestion to provide the clarification.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan W. Schofer, "Virtues in Xunzi's Thought," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 1 (1993): 125.

true king's virtuous acts and longingly wish to live under his governance.<sup>11</sup> Xunzi also frequently talks about how the rank and remuneration of an official should be matched with his *de*.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Xunzi does talk about *de* in the context of ethical cultivation. For example, Xunzi points out that it is wholly up to the person himself (*zaiwo zhe* 在我者) whether his intentions and thoughts are rectified, his virtuous conducts (*dexing* 德行) abundant, and his understanding and deliberations clear; thus the gentleman (*junzi* 君子) works on what is within his powers and improves constantly.<sup>13</sup> In a following passage Xunzi suggests that what a person practices constantly without slacking off are the propriety (*yi* 義) between lord and minister, the affection (*qin* 親) between father and son, and the differentiation (*bie* 別) between husband and wife.<sup>14</sup> Presumably such practices are what Xunzi refers to as within a person's powers and thus up to the person. Xunzi also points out that humanity (*ren* 仁), propriety, and virtuous conducts represent the reliable means to safety, even if danger is not impossible, while vicious acts represent the reliable means to danger, even if safety is not impossible; the gentleman chooses the way of the reliable and yet the petty man (*xiaoren* 小人) chooses the way of the exception.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that for Xunzi virtues are learned and practiced, and help a person

to live a good life. Indeed Xunzi points out that it is through learning that a person reaches the pinnacle of the Way and virtue (*daode zhi ji* 道德之極). The learning process is such that in terms of method a person starts with reciting classics like the *Odes* (*Shi* 詩) and the *Book of Documents* (*Shu* 書) and ends with studying ritual (*li* 禮), yet in terms of purpose a person starts with becoming an educated man (*shi* 士) and ends with becoming a sage (*sheng* 聖).<sup>16</sup> Xunzi also elaborates on what it is like to have a firm grasp of virtue. It is when a person simply does not desire (*yu* 欲) to see, to hear, to talk about or to deliberate on what is not right. Such a person also has utmost liking of what is right, and his eyes love it more than the five colors, his ears love it more than the five sounds, his mouth loves it more than the five tastes, and his heart-mind (*xin* 心) takes it more profitable than having the whole world. Consequently, such a person cannot be swayed or toppled by power or profit, or the masses, or even the whole world. He lives by it and dies by it.<sup>17</sup> For Xunzi a virtuous person has a firm and reliable love of morality and is without internal conflicts most of the time, if not at all, as immorality is simply out of his consideration.<sup>18</sup> To become virtuous a person needs not only to read classics and study morality fully so that he has thorough understanding of it, but also to act it out in person and to remove

<sup>11</sup> *Xunzi* 15/74/9-17.

<sup>12</sup> *Xunzi* 10/43/2, 18/85/11 and 24/118/17-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Xunzi* 17/81/4-8.

<sup>14</sup> *Xunzi* 17/82/3-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Xunzi* 4/15/4-5.

<sup>16</sup> *Xunzi* 1/3/7-12.

<sup>17</sup> *Xunzi* 1/4/17-20.

<sup>18</sup> What Xunzi says seems to imply that the virtuous person still needs to avoid

considerations of immorality and that there is still a weighing of various likes, even if nondeliberate. That is properly why Xunzi does not call such a person a sage but says he is a gentleman. Elsewhere Xunzi says a sage simply acts as he desires and is without forcing, endurance, or precariousness (*Xunzi* 21/105/18-9).

obstacles in the process so as to maintain and nourish his moral progress.<sup>19</sup>

Now all these descriptions of virtue in the *Xunzi* are familiar and unsurprising. What is distinctive, interesting, but also controversial is Xunzi's belief that virtue can be achieved through habituation and accumulation, by a person with a bad nature. In the context of an exhortation to learning, Xunzi highly praises the importance of accumulation. He points out that "Accumulating goodness to accomplish virtue, then spirit-like powers and enlightenment are naturally attained, and the heart-mind of the sage completed."<sup>20</sup> By such a statement Xunzi clearly thinks that there is a difference between goodness (*shan* 善) and virtue, but he also believes that with accumulation one can pass from the state of goodness to the state of virtue. Goldin suggests that Xunzi is familiar with the Guodian manuscripts 郭店楚墓竹簡.<sup>21</sup> Such a judgement seems reasonable and likely. Given this assumption, it is noteworthy that in the texts of *Wuxing* 五行 (*The Five Conducts*) of the Guodian manuscripts, goodness is precisely contrasted with virtue. The *Wuxing* texts point out that if humanity, propriety, ritual, and wisdom (*zhi* 智) take shape within (*xing yu nei* 形於內), then they

are virtues, if they do not take shape from within, then they are merely conducts (*xing* 行).<sup>22</sup> The texts further suggest that the harmony of the five virtues (humanity, propriety, ritual, wisdom and sagacity) is also called *de*, while the harmony of the four conducts (humanity, propriety, ritual and wisdom without taking shape from within) is called goodness; *de* represents the way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道) while goodness represents the way of humans (*rendao* 人道).<sup>23</sup> Other than repeatedly saying that without having delight there is no virtue, the *Wuxing* texts do not elaborate on whether and how one can go from goodness to *de*.<sup>24</sup> This is a question that Xunzi explicitly takes up.

We have already seen above that for Xunzi, an essential feature of getting a firm grasp of virtue is having an utmost liking of what is right. Although the character employed there by Xunzi is "*hao* 好 (like)," its similarity with "*le* 樂 (delight)" is undeniable. It is also obvious from the passage that a virtuous agent acts morally out of his own internal motivation and his conviction of doing right is so firm and steady that he cannot be swayed by other considerations. Such an understanding is also similar to the meaning connoted by the phrase "*xing yu nei* 形於內." In another place Xunzi

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<sup>19</sup> *Xunzi* 1/4/16.

<sup>20</sup> 積善成德，而神明自得，聖心備焉 (*Xunzi* 1/2/9) All translations from classical Chinese are my own, though I have consulted translations of John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988–94) and Eric Hutton trans., *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Paul R. Goldin, *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 57.

<sup>22</sup> *Wuxing* 1-3. The numbers refer to the slip numbers contained in Jingmenshi bowuguan 荆

門市博物館 ed., *Chu Bamboo Slips from the Guodian Tomb* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988). Whether there is a similar contrast between virtue and conduct for sagacity (*sheng* 聖) is a controversial question that I cannot tackle here. See Scoot Cook, Scott. 2012. *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study and Complete Translation*, 2 vols. (Ithaca, N.Y.: East Asian Program, Cornell University, 2012), 486 and Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 279.

<sup>23</sup> *Wuxing* 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> *Wuxing* 8-9, 21.

points out that the best way for the gentleman to nourish his heart-mind is to do it through sincerity (*cheng* 誠); by practicing humanity and propriety single-mindedly he will gain spirit-like powers and enlightenment and then he will also be able to transform (*hua* 化) and adapt (*bian* 變). Finally Xunzi alludes that the ability to transform and adapt can be called Heavenly virtue (*tiande* 天德).<sup>25</sup> All these descriptions of a virtuous agent match well with the understanding of the virtue of the *Wuxing*.

On the other hand, although Xunzi does not mention explicitly that goodness requires no internal motivation, he does suggest that goodness is something that can be practiced by ordinary people. Xunzi points out that the very reason of a sage like Yu 禹 being a sage is no other than his acting out (*wei* 為) humanity, propriety, lawfulness (*fa* 法) and rectitude (*zheng* 正). Given that an ordinary person has the endowment and aptitude that make it possible (*keyi* 可以) for them to know and to practice humanity, propriety, lawfulness and rectitude, and that humanity, propriety, lawfulness and rectitude can be known and can be practiced, it is clear that it is possible for an ordinary person to become a sage. And the method of becoming a sage is to learn

and study, think and deliberate, and most importantly, to accumulate goodness (*jishan* 積善) without ceasing. And Xunzi stresses again that a sage is achieved by a person through accumulation.<sup>26</sup> The passage occurs in the Chapter 23 of the *Xunzi*, where Xunzi repeatedly suggests that “people’s nature is bad, and their goodness comes from artifice” (*ren zhi xing e, qi shan zhe wei ye* 人之性惡，其善者偽也). It is reasonable to infer that the suggestion of becoming a sage through accumulation of goodness is Xunzi’s answer to the question of whether a person with a bad nature can become a virtuous agent. Xunzi also highlights the difference between being possible to (*keyi* 可以) and being able to (*neng* 能), pointing out that the fact that it is possible for an ordinary person to do good does not mean that he indeed is able to do good.<sup>27</sup> This latter ability must be accomplished through accumulation of learning and practice. Supposedly Xunzi intends to clarify that although it is possible for a person with a bad nature to do good, this fact does not conflict with the claim that human nature is bad,<sup>28</sup> for the same endowment and aptitude also make it possible for such a person to do bad,<sup>29</sup> and also that such a person does not yet have the ability to do good.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Xunzi* 3/11/4-6.

<sup>26</sup> *Xunzi* 23/116/6-15.

<sup>27</sup> *Xunzi* 23/116/19-23.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Hutton, “Does Xunzi Have a Consistent Theory of Human Nature,” in *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, eds. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 229. In this paper I use “people’s nature” and “human nature” interchangeably, depending on the context of expression. It should be noted for Xunzi *xing* connotes what naturally comes about for human beings, particularly natural desires and feelings. The term “human nature” is used in this sense, and should not be understood as referring to

human essence.

<sup>29</sup> Xunzi explicitly points out that the gentleman and the petty man have the same natural endowments and their differences are the results of how they accommodate and practice their natural endowments in different ways. See *Xunzi* 4/14/17-15/1. Xunzi also suggests that while it is possible for a person to become a sage, it is also possible for him to become a tyrant. See *Xunzi* 4/15/10.

<sup>30</sup> For further clarification of the difference between *keyi* and *neng*, see Kimchong Chong, “Xunzi’s Systematic Critique of Mencius,” *Philosophy East and West* 53, no.2 (2003): 218-221, and Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early*

Consequently it is reasonable to conclude that when Xunzi suggests an ordinary person with a bad nature can become a sage by accumulation of goodness, there must be a stage where the ordinary person is not yet virtuous but can nonetheless practice goodness, and he does so without yet an internal motivation for or identification with goodness. That is, it is likely that Xunzi understands goodness in a similar way with the *Wuxing*. Actually, Schofer suggests that for Xunzi, acting correctly without correct motivation is a necessary stage in the process of ethical development.<sup>31</sup>

However, such an understanding of ethical development seems to create problems and difficulty for Xunzi's ethical thought. First, why does a person with a bad nature have any motivation to engage in moral acts, however superficially? Now Xunzi suggests that the origin of Confucian ritual lies in the need to avoid strife and disorder so as to satisfy people's desires in an orderly way.<sup>32</sup> Xunzi also says that precisely because people are born with a bad nature, if nothing is done with it, strife and disorder are unavoidable. Thus ritual and morality are needed to bring about peace and order.<sup>33</sup> Now it seems both the establishment of moral norms and actions in accordance with such moral norms can only be due to reasons external to

morality, at least initially.<sup>34</sup> Given that Xunzi sternly believes true virtues can be achieved through habituation of goodness, it seems a mystery how someone who acts correctly without appropriate motivation can come to pick up the right motivation and love virtues for virtues' sake. For example, D. C. Lau doubts that habits can bring about a true love of morality and suspects that when confronted with difficult situations such as those demanding a sacrifice of life, a Xunzian agent will have difficulty adhering to moral standards.<sup>35</sup>

Second, given that a sage has the same bad nature just like others, and also that moral standards and virtues are created by the sage, then how is it possible that a sage becomes a sage and comes to create and embody virtues?<sup>36</sup> That is, how can a person with a bad nature becomes good through learning and accumulation, before moral goodness and virtues are available? Xunzi employs skill analogy and thinks that moral goodness can be created just like a craftsman creates beautiful utensils,<sup>37</sup> and that when doing so the sage is not relying on his nature just like the craftsman need not rely on his nature to create utensils.<sup>38</sup> Yu Jiyuan 余纪元 is not convinced and thinks that virtue is hardly possible without a foundation in

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*Chinese Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 218-9.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan W. Schofer, "Virtues in Xunzi's Thought" 132.

<sup>32</sup> *Xunzi* 19/90/3-5.

<sup>33</sup> *Xunzi* 23/113/10-12.

<sup>34</sup> Lao Siguang 勞思光 points out that for Xunzi Confucian ritual and propriety can only have instrumental value. See Lao Siguang, *The History of Chinese Philosophy New Edition* 《新編中國哲學史》, Vol.1 (Taipei: Sanmin chubanshe, 1984), 340.

<sup>35</sup> D. C. Lau, "Theories of Human Nature in Mencius and Xunzi," in *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, eds. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 211.

<sup>36</sup> T. C. Kline III, "Moral Agency and Motivation in the Xunzi," in *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, eds. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 155.

<sup>37</sup> *Xunzi* 23/114/8-11.

<sup>38</sup> *Xunzi* 23/115/20-22.

human nature.<sup>39</sup> Slingerland also doubts that virtues can be acquired like a skill. In particular, how can a novice recognize the true standards of correctness and thus embark on the path of moral cultivation? For it seems virtue necessarily involves internal standards that are inaccessible from an external point of view.<sup>40</sup> Correspondingly, there is also a question of how and when a sage-to-be can recognize what actions lead to moral goodness and can thus give rise to moral standards through his accumulated efforts.

Now quite a lot of attention has already been paid to these questions. In the next section I shall review and evaluate solutions proposed by scholars regarding these questions and inquire what problems remain.

## 2 Solutions Attempted

Nivison suggests that there is a paradox of *de*, with two aspects to it. On the one hand, in order to attain *de* with others, one needs to do a moral favor to others, usually through self-sacrifice; however, one cannot succeed in doing such a moral favor and thus attaining *de* without sincerity in self-sacrifice for others' benefit. That is, one must not do so instrumentally for one's own benefit but must act sincerely for others' benefit. But this is already having *de* and acting

virtuously. On the other hand, when one intends to learn virtue from teachers, he must already know what virtue is and be moved to pursue virtue, for otherwise he cannot recognize virtuous teachers nor being motivated to learn virtue from them. Yet again this must mean he is already virtuous.<sup>41</sup> Nivison investigates Xunzi's ethical thought with regards to the paradox of virtue, with an emphasis on how a person becomes moral. According to Nivison, Xunzi assumes human beings have an unfilled sense of duty (*yi* 義) and the sages devised particular moral norms to regulate chaotic natural feelings and desires so as to give contents to this sense of duty. And through linguistic legislation Xunzi relegates such a sense of duty to human artifice rather than to their nature (*xing* 性), thus preserving consistency with his claim of "people's nature is bad."<sup>42</sup>

Van Norden believes that for Xunzi there is a distinction between the volitional mechanism of approval (*ke* 可) and natural desires. It is possible for the volitional mechanism to override natural desires, and motivate action in accordance with approval. Thus a person can embark on the path of moral cultivation by coming to understand and approve of morality as the best way of living.<sup>43</sup> David B. Wong disagrees with Van Norden's interpretation. Wong suggests that the distinction between

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<sup>39</sup> Yu Jiyuan, "Human Nature and Virtue in Mencius and Xunzi: An Aristotelian Interpretation," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 5, no.1 (2005): 29.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 252-255.

<sup>41</sup> David S. Nivison, "The Paradox of Virtue," 31-43.

<sup>42</sup> David S. Nivison, "Xunzi on 'Human Nature'," in *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1996), 203-13.

<sup>43</sup> Bryan Van Norden, "Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency," in *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, eds. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 103-134.

approval and natural desires is not as sharp as Van Norden believes. Wong rejects the possibility of approval overriding natural desires in a strong sense, because he does not think that Xunzi provides such bases of approval that are independent of the satisfaction of desires. Instead, Wong suggests that approval overrides natural desires only in a weak sense, with a basis on the satisfaction of the total set of desires over the long term. Borrowing from Nivison the unfilled sense of duty, Wong points out that for Xunzi, human beings come to realize that natural desires and feelings must be transformed for one's self-interest in the long run and that this is the right thing to do. People then devise ritual and propriety to transform themselves and fill in contents for morality. Wong stresses that such a picture is consistent with Xunzi's claim that human nature is bad because morality is constructed for human self-interest. Before such construction there is no morality and the sense of duty is just the capability to understand right and wrong and act accordingly. Wong further suggests that we can come to love morality because morality help to express natural human feelings such as love of parents. Such natural feelings are amoral in themselves but congenial to morality. When expressed through morality, they bring us true delight and enjoyment.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> David B. Wong, "Xunzi on Moral Motivation," in *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, eds. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 135-154.

<sup>45</sup> T. C. Kline III, "Moral Agency and Motivation in the Xunzi," in *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, eds. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 155-175.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Bryan Van Norden, "Mengzi

T. C. Kline III builds on the views of Van Norden, Wong and Nivison. He suggests that the creation of ritual and moral order took over an extended period of time, possibly over generations. The early sages got inspirations from the patterns of the natural order and human behavior, and devised ritual to bring human beings into harmony with one another and with the natural world. Such a process of ritual creation is like the process of craft improvement and production, with each sage improving upon the wisdom and insight of the ritual tradition in a similar way to different craftsmen work upon and improve the craft tradition. Kline also points out that a virtuous agent has moral charisma that is recognizable by and attractive to even the petty man and barbarians, and thus capable of recruiting them into ethical cultivation.<sup>45</sup> Kline's interpretation seems to solve both the problem of how the early sages created ritual and became sages themselves, and also the problem of how the petty man recognizes and is attracted to the Confucian ritual order and begins the path of ethical cultivation. Moreover, there is also consensus that although an uncultivated person is attracted to Confucian ritual and morality for prudential concerns, through further training and exposure he can discover internal rewards of morality and come to delight in virtue for its own sake.<sup>46</sup>

and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency" 123; T. C. Kline III, "Moral Agency and Motivation in the Xunzi" 164-5; Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Human Nature and Moral Understanding in the Xunzi," in *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, eds. T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000) 238-9; and Aaron Stalnaker, "Virtue as Mastery in Early Confucianism," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 38, no. 3 (2010): 415-6.



### 3 FURTHER CHALLENGES

However, critics of Xunzi might remain unconvinced. As I mention above, Slingerland thinks that unlike a technical skill or a crafting process, virtue does not have concrete, external and easy-to-apply physical standards. Given that virtue necessarily involves intangible standards, it seems a beginner must already have certain innate resources by which to distinguish true moral standards from hypocritical standards. Otherwise it seems moral cultivation cannot be differentiated from hypocritical and instrumental practice. Slingerland further suggests that in response to such difficulty Xunzi smuggles certain innate moral dispositions into his conception of human beings and thus Xunzi cannot consistently maintain that human nature is bad. Slingerland actually quotes several passages of the *Xunzi* that Kline relies upon for the claim of moral charisma and argues that these passages provide textual evidence that Xunzi admits of internalist and natural moral responses.<sup>47</sup> Kline does suggest that the petty man or barbarians recognize and respond to virtues because of their inner constitution. However, he insists that such recognition and response have nothing to do with inner moral reactions but are simply natural reactions to external qualities of the virtuous person. On the other hand, moral charisma of the virtuous person is acquired through accumulation of good actions.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 252-9.

<sup>48</sup> T. C. Kline III, "Moral Agency and Motivation in the *Xunzi*" 168-170.

<sup>49</sup> For example, *Xunzi* 3/11/7.

Now Xunzi does suggest that the virtuous person has a kind of moral charisma that can impact on others without speech or actions.<sup>49</sup> How a person becomes virtuous and acquires such moral charisma through habituation and accumulation is precisely a key question of this paper. For our current concern the key issue is what the mechanism is through which an ordinary person or even a petty man can be impacted by the moral charisma of the virtuous person. One key passage that both Kline and Slingerland rely upon is as follows:

The gentleman cleanses his arguments and those of his same kind accord with him; he refines his speech and those of his similar kind respond to him. So when a horse neighs and other horses respond, this is not due to their wisdom but because conditions are such. Thus, those who have just bathed shake out their robes, and those who have just washed their hair dust off their caps. This is the natural disposition of people.<sup>50</sup>

Although Xunzi mentions *qing* 情 (disposition/feeling), which is a part of human nature, in the passage, he is referring to some natural behavior of human beings. Also, the use of characters like *tong* 同 (same) and *lei* 類 (similar) strongly suggests that Xunzi has in mind people at a similar stage of moral

<sup>50</sup> 君子絜其辯而同焉者合矣，善其言而類焉者應矣。故馬鳴而馬應之，非知也，其勢然也。故新浴者振其衣，新沐者彈其冠，人之情也。 *Xunzi* 3/10/19-11/1.

cultivation with the gentleman. The analogy of neighing horses gives the impression that Xunzi is underlining the natural inclination to respond to the gentleman. This can certainly be the case. But Xunzi's overall emphasis is likely on the flocking effect of virtuous people. Even if we grant the possibility that an ordinary person or a petty man can also be attracted by the gentleman's speech and arguments, such response need not be based on some internal moral dispositions. One key character in the relevant sentence is *shi* 勢 (condition). I think Knoblock's rendering of the character as "inner constitution" is misleading, if not wrong.<sup>51</sup> Hutton's translation of the character as "natural inclination" is better,<sup>52</sup> though I still find it unsatisfactory. The instances of *shi* in the *Xunzi* mostly mean authority. One notable exception occurs in chapter 21 "Jie Bi 解蔽 (Undoing Fixation)" of the *Xunzi*. There Xunzi describes how pressing our eyes or covering our ears leads to disordered sensations, and he concludes that it is *shi* that disrupts our senses.<sup>53</sup> It is clear that the character *shi* cannot mean authority here. Knoblock translates it as "force,"<sup>54</sup> while Hutton renders it as "conditions."<sup>55</sup> If the passage of chapter 21 is of any relevance to the interpretation of the passage of chapter 3, then certainly *shi* in the latter case should also refer to conditions or

circumstances.

It seems any responses of human beings require certain corresponding internal dispositions, in the sense that human beings must be internally constituted in a certain way in order to give certain responses. Understood in this sense, then of course an ordinary person or a petty man must also possess certain internal dispositions so that he might be influenced by the gentleman. However, such internal dispositions need not be moral. I agree with Kline's judgement that morally uncultivated people like barbarians are drawn along by the external qualities of the virtuous person. That is, when the gentleman makes an impact on an ordinary person through his moral charisma, he does so not directly through the moral qualities of his virtues, but indirectly through the external qualities of his virtues. Xunzi once draws an analogy between people enjoying fine food and people enjoying the moral way of the sage kings.<sup>56</sup> Slingerland finds it strange that Xunzi speaks of a moral "taste" in such a case.<sup>57</sup> A more careful reading of the text will reveal that Xunzi merely says that people will easily find the way of the sage kings superior to the way of the tyrants, just like they can easily distinguish fine food from coarse food. There is no mentioning how people come to this easy judgement. An internal moral "taste" naturally possessed by

<sup>51</sup> John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 177.

<sup>52</sup> Eric Hutton trans., *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 56.

<sup>53</sup> *Xunzi* 21/106/6.

<sup>54</sup> John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 3 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 109.

<sup>55</sup> Eric Hutton trans., *Xunzi: The Complete Text*,

326.

<sup>56</sup> *Xunzi* 4/15/17-21.

<sup>57</sup> Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action* 259. Paul R. Goldin also suggests that when people are exposed to morality, they are attracted to it naturally, though he admits that people are born ignorant of morality. See Paul R. Goldin, "Review of *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 69, no. 2 (2001): 497-8.

people is one possibility. But another possibility that is more consistent with Xunzi's position is that people judge the superiority of the way of sage kings not by its moral qualities, but by its external qualities, such as peace and order, protection and nourishment. In fact, these qualities are precisely mentioned by Xunzi when he describes the accomplishments of the way of sage kings. In other words, it is likely the case that people are attracted by apparent benefits rather than moral aspects of the way of sage kings, for in the end Xunzi mentions in a previous sentence that people are born petty persons and they are naturally concerned with benefits only.<sup>58</sup>

If people remain forever petty persons, then it is likely that they will abandon the way of sage kings when confronted with difficulties and problems. But people can be morally cultivated and transformed. Of course, the crucial question is how an originally petty person can come to be morally cultivated and transformed. I have cleared one hurdle to such an answer by arguing that a petty man can be attracted to the moral life and virtues by the practical benefits offered by morality. But there is a corresponding hurdle: If a petty man is guided by practical benefits only, how can there be a guarantee that he will find the true moral way and not a counterfeit? It is regarding this challenge that Slingerland's argument of internal standards is particularly relevant. Slingerland is right to point out that for literal standards it is fairly easy to establish the standard of correctness,

such as weight by a balance scale or verticality by a plumb line, whereas when it comes to intangible standards like virtue, correctness is hard to be established in an obvious and external way.<sup>59</sup> There indeed is a distinction between literal standards and intangible standards, but I think it is unwarranted to come to the conclusion that innate moral resources are necessary for the recognition of true virtue. It seems inappropriate to me that a comparison is drawn between simple literal standards like weight or verticality and complex intangible standards like virtue. More comparable contrasts would be simple literal standards against simple intangible standards such as emotion recognition or language grammar, and complex technical standards such as architecture or carpentry against complex intangible standards like virtue. Even though the standard of correctness for emotion recognition or language grammar is still harder to establish when compared with that of weight or verticality, most of the time it can be grasped in a straightforward manner by common people.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, judging complex skills like architecture or carpentry is comparably difficult as judging virtue, even if to a lesser extent. And unlike simple standards, complex skills and virtue involve not a single standard of correctness but a complex set of considerations. This is precisely why practical wisdom is necessary for virtue and practical judgment also necessary of technical skills.

Now it might be thought that the same problem remains for simple

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<sup>58</sup> *Xunzi* 4/15/14.

<sup>59</sup> Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 254.

<sup>60</sup> Certainly there are more ambiguous instances

regarding emotion or language, but there are also comparable problems for weight or verticality, such as faulty balance scales, or visual illusions.

intangible standards. Must not Xunzi admit of inner moral dispositions for the recognition of simple moral standards? Xunzi does suggest that a petty man can recognize honor or disgrace, and understand what involves in being trusted, being loved and being well treated.<sup>61</sup> However, natural capacities for such recognitions might only imply that human beings are naturally equipped for living a social life, which Xunzi also admits.<sup>62</sup> Capacities for social interaction are certainly prerequisite and essential to morality and virtue, but such capacities need not be moral themselves. For one thing, they can certainly be employed for amoral or immoral practices. Simple technical standards like weight and verticality are arguably prerequisite and essential to carpentry, but it seems absurd to suggest that these simple standards are necessarily of carpentry. Thus, Xunzi could suggest that human beings do have natural capacities for social interaction, and recognition of simple social standards like whether someone is being loved, trusted and respected, when combined with other suitable factors, allows us to discover true moral standards.<sup>63</sup> Now such recognition might still be from an external viewpoint, and there is no guarantee of a foolproof procedure or method. But as Harris

suggests, so long as we give up the assumption that moral expertise is a matter of all or nothing, then Xunzi can indeed provide reasons and arguments for the Confucian way that are recognizable even by the uncultivated.<sup>64</sup>

Slingerland further suggests that there is a grave difference between craft or skill acquisition and virtue cultivation. He points out that a craft or skill can be learned and acquired without internal motivation for the corresponding craft or skill. That is, a person can learn and acquire a craft or skill instrumentally for other purposes, for example, making money. But the same does not seem to be true for virtue cultivation. Slingerland thinks that virtue can only be learned and acquired with an internal motivation for morality.<sup>65</sup> Contra Schofer, Slingerland does not believe that virtue can be acquired by initially acting correctly but without the correct motivation. If correct motivation is indeed necessary for even initial virtue cultivation, then this indeed is a fatal problem for Xunzi's ethics. Now a crucial question is whether it is possible to do a virtuous action without thereby acting virtuously. Such a possibility is actually affirmed by Aristotle who is regarded by many as the exemplar virtue ethicist. As a response to the challenge to the possibility of becoming just by doing

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<sup>61</sup> *Xunzi* 4/14/17-9.

<sup>62</sup> *Xunzi* 9/39/15, 10/43/9.

<sup>63</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to specify what these other factors must be. Examples might be normal psychological states of the observer, stable social environment. David B. Wong suggests that for Xunzi human beings have some natural feelings that are congenial to morality even though they are not moral feelings. He also points out that in conditions of insecurity and lack of order such feelings will be dominated by selfish desires and feelings. See David B. Wong "Xunzi on Moral Motivation,"

150. Building on Wong's observation, Kline also affirms that for Xunzi "there are elements of our psychological makeup that can be conscripted into the service of the Dao after being worked upon by the ritual, regulations, music, and learning created by the sages." See T. C. Kline III, "Moral Agency and Motivation in the *Xunzi*," 161.

<sup>64</sup> Eirik Lang Harris, "Which Teacher Should I Choose? A Xunzian Approach to Distinguishing Moral Experts from Fanatics," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 45, no.3 (2017): 476-8.

<sup>65</sup> Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 260-1.

just actions, Aristotle points out that there is a difference between actions done in accord with the virtues and actions done virtuously. The former need only be the kind of actions a virtuous person would do, while the latter must also be performed by a virtuous agent in the right way, in particular by fulfilling three conditions: First, doing it with relevant knowledge; second, doing in intentionally and for its own sake; and third, doing it from a firm and unchangeable character.<sup>66</sup> Whether such a distinction can really rescue Xunzi's model of virtue cultivation is a question that we shall explore in the next section.

#### **4 Aristotle and Xunzi on Habituation**

Aristotle suggests that even for crafts there is a distinction between producing the right products by luck or by blindly following others' instructions, and producing the right products in the right way by the person himself. Aristotle uses grammar as an example, contrasting a person who speaks grammatically correct sentences by chance with a person who speaks grammatically correct sentences out of his grammatical knowledge.<sup>67</sup> An example of the former case might be a language beginner repeating the sentences pronounced by a teacher, while in the latter case it is a competent

language user or even a grammarian. Thus the learning of most crafts involves not merely copying and habituation of mechanical behavior but also, and perhaps more importantly, acquisition of the right internal state through habituation of relevant actions. Of course under certain circumstances, for example when the required products are fairly standard, craftsmen can be used or even treated like machines. But this does not mean that when they work in this way, they thereby act merely mechanically, without any relevant and corresponding internal state. This is surely not the case when a skillful craftsman works on a masterpiece. What I intend to show by the above illustration is that with crafts, habituation of relevant actions can give rise to appropriate internal states that are specific to and essential of the corresponding skills, and there is no requirement of specific internal disposition on the part of apprentices. There seems to be no reason why virtues and the corresponding virtuous dispositions cannot be acquired in the same way through habituation of morally good actions.<sup>68</sup> Thus it is unwarranted for Slingerland to claim that the internal state of the actor is irrelevant to the performance of a technical skill.<sup>69</sup> In particular, Slingerland seems to conflate internal motivation with the internal dispositions of the actor, even though the two are closely connected in the case of

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<sup>66</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a29-35.

<sup>67</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a22-6.

<sup>68</sup> Admittedly "habituation" is rather imprecise in its meaning and reference. In this paper I use the term in a loose way to refer to the programs of moral cultivation of Aristotle and Xunzi that emphasize but also go beyond practice and habits of virtuous actions. I thank for an anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me the

imprecise meaning of the term "habituation."

Colin J. Lewis has attempted to spell out in more details the nature and contents of Xunzi's program of moral cultivation. See Colin J. Lewis, "Ritual Education and Moral Development: A Comparison of Xunzi and Vygotsky," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2018): 81-98.

<sup>69</sup> Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 260.

virtue.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, Slingerland is right to suggest that there is a fundamental difference between crafts and virtue in terms of internal motivation. I have just suggested that the mastery of crafts requires the acquisition of a practical perspective that is internal to and constitutive of a particular craft, such as perceiving, evaluating and working on different woods from the perspective of carpentry. Such a practical perspective necessarily involves certain internal dispositions of the carpenter. And such a practical perspective can be acquired through habituation of actions of carpentry. However, such a practical perspective is compatible with an instrumental motivation towards the craft. For example, when a skillful carpenter employs his craft primarily or even merely for money-making, such an external motivation need not diminish his skillfulness with regards to the craft. Even if there might be certain psychological tension, in principle there is no difficulty in setting apart the practical perspective of carpentry and the motivational stance towards the craft. Such a dissociation does not seem to be possible regarding virtue and morality. The practical perspective of virtue and morality simply excludes the possibility of external motivation. For if I attempt to do a benevolent act by offering goods to others but doing so from an ulterior motive, such as earning fame for myself, I am not acting benevolently and also not doing a benevolent action. But does this mean virtuous actions are impossible

without being acted virtuously?

I think the constitutive relation between the practical perspective of virtue and internal motivation excludes only motivational tendencies that are incompatible with internal motivation for virtue. Motivational tendencies that are different from but compatible or continuous with internal motivation for virtue are not excluded. For example, we might imagine a case where a child is exhorted and encouraged by parents to treat his friend benevolently, maybe by sharing his candies or toys with the friend. Although the child does not yet know and appreciate what it is to do a benevolent act for its own sake, this fact does not prevent him from attempting and learning to act benevolently. The child shares his toys with the friend. They play happily together and the child has a good experience. Such a process and experience help the child to learn a bit about what a benevolent action is, how to act benevolently, and why it is good to do so. With further practice and learning the child can hopefully cultivate the relevant affective, cognitive and practical dispositions for benevolence and also acquire internal motivation for benevolence.

Alternatively, we might elaborate on a case of adult learning hinted at by Xunzi. Xunzi suggests that the gentleman and the petty man have the same nature and capabilities, and they both like honor and benefits, and dislike disgrace and harms. However, they pursue their similar ends with different means.<sup>71</sup> The petty man desires himself to be trusted,

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<sup>70</sup> I made a similar argument in Siufu TANG, "Ritual as a Skill: Ethical Cultivation and the Skill Model in the *Xunzi*," in *Skill and Ancient Ethics: the Legacy of China, Greece, and Rome*,

eds. Tom Angier and Lisa Raphals (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming in 2021).

<sup>71</sup> *Xunzi* 4/14/17-8.

loved and well treated by others. However, he practices cheating and deception, and also other beastly acts, thinking that in this way he can obtain what he desires.<sup>72</sup> When the petty man fails in his practice, he laments that the gentleman must have worthy talents and capacities. Xunzi points out that the petty man is simply wrong, for he has the same talents and capacities as the gentleman. It is the practices that they engage in make a difference.<sup>73</sup> Xunzi suggests that if the petty man has the chances to encounter and experience the moral life, he will find it worthwhile and superior. It is out of ignorance and lack of cultivation that the petty man adheres to the immoral way of life. But if the gentleman comes to teach and demonstrate to him the moral way of life, and also guides and refines him, urges him on and works repeatedly on him, then the petty man can also become a virtuous agent.<sup>74</sup> With such an elaboration, we can see that on the one hand Xunzi does not think that the natural desires for honor and benefits are contradictory to the moral life, and on the other hand Xunzi believes that there is a continuity between pursuing honor and benefits, and acting morally for the sake of morality. I suggest that the latter is the case because all people are already motivated to live a good life. When they come to realize that virtue and morality represent a reliable and constant way to a good life,<sup>75</sup> they are thereby motivated to engage in virtue cultivation. Through practice and habituation of virtuous

actions, they gradually pick up virtuous dispositions and also internal motivation for virtue, and hopefully become a virtuous agent in the end.

In other words, even though a petty man does not yet have internal motivation for virtue, he can nonetheless be externally motivated to engage in virtuous actions, for example out of prudent concerns, or a general desire to live a good life. As long as such external motivation is compatible with internal motivation for virtue, in the sense that such external motivation does not require the agent to take a purely instrumental stance towards virtue, there is no reason why the person cannot sincerely learn to become virtuous. Although I do not have the space to argue for it here, I think even though prudential concerns might conflict with moral concerns locally and over particular issues, there is no fundamental and universal confrontation between them. Prudential and moral concerns represent not two conflicting attitudes towards life and actions, but are two complementary perspectives towards the question of how one should live. Also, as Kristjánsson argues, it is a matter of empirical fact that externally motivated and habituated actions for virtue become, in the end, critical virtue with internal motivation.<sup>76</sup>

Aristotle does suggest that virtuous actions should have the right qualities, even though they are not done virtuously.<sup>77</sup> Slingerland is right to point out that virtuous actions cannot be merely

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<sup>72</sup> Xunzi 4/14/18-20.

<sup>73</sup> Xunzi 4/14/22-4.

<sup>74</sup> Xunzi 4/15/20-16/2.

<sup>75</sup> Xunzi 4/15/4-5.

<sup>76</sup> Kristján Kristjánsson, "Habituated Reason: Aristotle and the 'paradox of moral education'," *Theory and Research in Education* 4, no. 1

(2016): 101-122.

<sup>77</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105a31. Here I follow Irwin's translation to describe virtuous actions as having the "right qualities." See Terence Irwin, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 22.

externally correct. Thus pretentious imitation of a virtuous action is not virtuous. But it is unfounded for Slingerland to further suggest that virtuous actions cannot be performed by someone without prior moral dispositions. Instead I have argued that someone without prior moral dispositions can nonetheless be externally motivated to engage in truly virtuous actions. This is the case because performance of virtuous actions requires neither virtuous dispositions nor internal motivation for virtue. It only requires motivation to learn and acquire virtuous dispositions as well as internal motivation for virtue.<sup>78</sup> I suggest the same is true of Xunzi's model of virtue cultivation through habituation.

In conclusion, building on the previous suggestions of scholars, I have further articulated how and why a person with a bad nature can be attracted to virtue, is able to recognize true virtue, and is able to embark on virtue cultivation even though he does not yet have virtuous dispositions nor internal motivation for virtue. Although I do not discuss in details the contents of the Xunzi's model of virtue cultivation, I hope that I have at least conclusively established the viability of such a model of virtue cultivation.

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<sup>78</sup> Jimenez distinguishes virtuous dispositions and internal motivation on the one hand, but insists on the other hand that proper habituation requires doing virtuous actions with the right motive, even if only occasionally. I agree with

the former idea but not the latter. See Marta Jimenez, "Aristotle on Becoming Virtuous by Doing Virtuous Actions," *Phronesis* 61, no.1 (2016): 3-32.