

Is Ritual Alienating?¹

In the English-speaking world, virtue ethics is strongly associated with the ideas of Aristotle, and, to a lesser extent, Hume and Nietzsche; in articulating and defending virtue ethics as a theory, many contemporary philosophers draw on the ideas and theories of these thinkers. However, a number of recent scholars have emphasized reading the early Confucian thinkers, too, as virtue ethicists. P.J. Ivanhoe, Bryan Van Norden, and Eric Hutton, for example, have all suggested that the early Confucian philosophers can and should be read as articulating a virtue-based approach to ethics.² The idea is that if we think of Kongzi (Confucius), Mengzi (Mencius), and Xunzi as virtue ethicists, we can tap into some immensely rich sources of material for developing virtue ethics in new directions, and we will have more resources to defend virtue ethics against objections.

It is worth remembering that virtue ethics as a normative ethical theory is in one sense quite new. Before the 1970's, debates about normative ethics in the English-speaking world

¹ This essay grew out of a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar for College and University Teachers, "Traditions into Dialogue: Confucianism and Contemporary Virtue Ethics." I am grateful to all the participants in that seminar for a terrific experience and for many conversations which carried my thinking on this topic further. I am particularly grateful to Michael Slote and Stephen Angle, the co-directors. I also want to thank Howard Curzer, who organized a panel at the Pacific Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association in April 2009, called "Confucian Rituals: Pro and Con," which was sponsored by the International Society for Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy. I am very grateful to Howard for inviting me to contribute, and for his careful insights on the topic. I learned a great deal from my fellow panelist Deborah Mower, from the many thoughtful questions from the audience, and especially from my commentator, Mark Berkson. The paper was greatly improved by the lively and probing discussion at that meeting. Unfortunately, however, I can blame no one but myself for the paper's remaining shortcomings.

² Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd Ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000); Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Eric Hutton, "Character, Situationism, and Early Confucian Thought," *Philosophical Studies* 127 (January 2006): 37-58. Other examples in this vein include Edward Slingerland, "Virtue Ethics, The *Analects*, and the Problem of Commensurability," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29 (2001): 97-125; Jiyuan Yu, "Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle," *Philosophy East and West* 48 (1998): 323-47.

centered on deontology (primarily Kant's version, or Ross') and consequentialism. But a handful of moral philosophers – Elizabeth Anscombe, Bernard Williams, and Michael Stocker deserve special mention – argued against these “modern moral theories” and their related focus on duty and obligation. They rejected the focus on the rightness of actions as the primary locus of moral attention. Instead, they sought to restore the concept of virtuous character to what they saw as its rightful place as the central concept of morality. For this, they looked back to Aristotle. Anscombe, Williams, and Stocker made a number of quite trenchant criticisms of deontology and consequentialism, but a common theme of their criticisms was that these rule-based modern theories, focusing as they do on abstract principles and impersonal accounts of what one ought and ought not to do, alienated agents from morality.

By contrast, these critics suggested that virtue-based ethics were free of this kind of alienation, beginning moral theorizing, as they do, by asking about the agent's inner character. John Doris articulates this point nicely: “[virtue-based theories] appear to escape worries about what we might call the 'creepiness' of theory-driven moral reflection; the decreased spontaneity and authenticity, and increased alienation, that are supposed to afflict 'theoretical' approaches to morality”³. In part because these criticisms of consequentialism and deontology seemed to have bite, the landscape of normative ethics began to change. Where there were only two ethical theories, there are now three. In the English-speaking world, it is now a commonplace that consequentialist, deontological, and virtue-based ethical theories together constitute the three main approaches to doing normative ethics. While of course there are also serious and important differences within these categories (e.g., Rossians *vs.* Kantians, preference consequentialists *vs.* hedonistic utilitarians), there is now general agreement that the really important divide is between these three approaches. It is also generally agreed that virtue

ethics doesn't suffer from the problem of alienation, in the way that the other normative theories are thought to do. (Other allegations are made against virtue ethics.⁴)

The question that Van Norden, Hutton, and others have been asking is: what can Confucianism bring to this discussion? How can it enrich our discussion of the merits and demerits of virtue ethics and its rivals? Just as Michael Slote looked back to James Martineau⁵, and Christine Swanton turned to Frederick Nietzsche⁶, many scholars of Confucian thought turn to Kongzi, Mengzi, and Xunzi to enrich our understanding of virtue ethics, and to help develop it as a theory. While the Confucian tradition may in fact turn out to be quite fruitful in both of these regards, it may also bring with it some problems for virtue ethics.⁷ My concern in this paper is that Confucian virtue ethics, or at least Xunzi's version of Confucian virtue ethics, might be susceptible to the same kind of alienation that deontology and consequentialism have been thought to suffer from. This would be a serious blow, because if virtue-based ethical theories failed to avoid the problem of alienation, they would lose their purported advantage over their consequentialist and deontological rivals.

Before I begin the argument, let me make an important qualification. Even if I'm right, this might not be so terrible for Confucian virtue ethics. The claim that a moral theory interferes, at least occasionally, with spontaneity and authenticity just might not worry people too much. A number of deontologists and consequentialists have responded to Williams (and Anscombe, Stocker, and others) by simply saying: so what? Being good is not easy; it is also sometimes alienating; it can require difficult deliberation; and it may involve abstraction from

³ John Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," *Noûs* 32 (2008): 520.

⁴ Rosalind Hursthouse has a very nice discussion of these objections in her "Virtue Theory and Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 223-46.

⁵ Michael Slote, "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1995): 83-101.

⁶ Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷ Eric Hutton makes much the same point, with regard to a very different objection to virtue ethics, in his "Han Feizi's Criticism of Confucianism and its Implications for Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Moral Philosophy*

the immediate emotional content of one's lives.⁸ The Confucian virtue ethicist might choose to say exactly the same thing. The only thing she cannot say is that her virtue ethics has all of the immediate advantages over its rivals that thinkers like Williams, Anscombe, and Stocker thought that virtue-based ethical theories should and would have.

I begin the paper by asking what the problem of alienation is. Then I examine Xunzi's remarks about *li* (ritual). Here we distinguish between a narrow and a wide version of the argument. The narrow argument shows that Xunzi's account of *li* can be plausibly seen as alienating. The wide argument, which is merely suggested here and not argued for, would make the same claim about classical Confucian theory as whole. The argument is, at any rate, conditional: *if* deontology and consequentialism are alienating, then so is (Xunzi's version of) Confucian virtue ethics. At the close, I consider some objections to the argument, and offer some thoughts about the problem.

1. The problem of alienation

It is not easy to describe the "problem of alienation" for ethical theories. The thinkers most often associated with the problem of alienation are Bernard Williams and Michael Stocker; however, Williams' and Stocker's concerns are not exactly the same. However, there is some overlap between their worries, and it is not too difficult to discern a common theme in their criticisms of consequentialist and deontological moral theory that runs through the writings of Bernard Williams, Michael Stocker, and to a lesser extent, Elizabeth Anscombe. Williams

5 (2008): 423-453.

⁸ Peter Railton and Marcia Baron each make this sort of point in their defenses of consequentialism and Kantianism respectively. Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134-171; Marcia Baron, "The Alleged Moral Repugnance of Acting from Duty," *Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984): 197-220.

speaks of “integrity”; Stocker of “schizophrenia”; Anscombe of “the law conception of ethics.”⁹ Peter Railton has used the phrase “the problem of alienation” to capture this common theme running through these varied but overlapping criticisms. He offers the following description of alienation, focusing on the moral agents who act in accord with a consequentialist moral theory:

[T]here would seem to be an estrangement between their affections and their rational, deliberate selves: an abstract and universalizing point of view mediates their responses to others and to their own sentiments ...¹⁰

In his account, Railton emphasizes the way in which alienation affects both one’s relationship to one’s own deep feelings and sense of self, and also one’s relationship to others, particularly one’s friendships and intimate family relationships. To be alienated from these things is to feel disconnected from them – to have them fail to figure in one’s thought and action as one feels that they should. This alienation is caused by the fact that the moral theory takes a point of view on the self which is abstract and impersonal, and which clashes with a more authentic, personal point of view. For morality to play this alienating role, it is argued, is to raise the question of what reason we have to be moral.

One way in which moral theories may produce alienation is by driving a wedge between the feelings and motives that are essentially one’s own, and what we think, morally, we ought to do. This is not to suggest that just *any* conflict between one’s feelings and one’s moral reasons will be alienating. Conflict between feeling and reason is part of life. But some feelings are different; some – Williams calls them our “categorical desires”¹¹ – are fundamental to one’s self-conception, and indeed to our reasons for being alive at all.

⁹ Bernard Williams and J.J.C. Smart, *Utilitarianism, For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Michael Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453-66; Elizabeth Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1-19.

¹⁰ Railton (*op. cit.*), 137.

¹¹ Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-19.

Some desires are admittedly contingent on the prospect of one's being alive, but not all desires can be in that sense conditional, since it is possible to imagine a person rationally contemplating suicide, in the face of some predicted evil, and if he desires to go on in life, then he is propelled forward into it by some desire (however general or inchoate) which cannot operate conditionally on his being alive, since it settles the question of whether he is going to be alive.¹²

Categorical desires give us our most basic reasons for acting, or even living. When morality separates us from *these* desires, we become alienated.

Michael Stocker puts the point somewhat differently. For Stocker, our authentic feelings should be reflected in our moral reasons: "One mark of a good life is a harmony between one's motives and one's reasons, values, and justifications."¹³ Modern moral theories, such as consequentialism and deontology, Stocker maintains, bisect us, "making us and our lives essentially fragmented and incoherent."¹⁴ They do this by telling us that deep-seated feelings which we take to be authentically our own must be suppressed or cast aside in order that we should carry out the actions that morality demands. Deontology and consequentialism alienate agents because they force agents to look at our own character and authentic desires from an impersonal point of view. By contrast, Stocker claims that Aristotlean virtue ethical approaches avoid this problem, because they emphasize harmony between one's feelings or emotions and one's moral duties.¹⁵ Virtue ethical theories, Stocker says, put personal integrity at the center of moral thought.

Another area in which alienation arises is personal relationships. Both Stocker and Williams emphasize the way in which modern moral theories alienate us from other people. Stocker's well-known Smith example illustrates this point. Imagine that you are very ill, and

¹² Williams (1981), 11.

¹³ Stocker, *op. cit.*, 453.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 456.

¹⁵ Michael Stocker, "How Emotions Reveal Value and Help Cure the Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," in Roger Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University

must stay a very long time in the hospital. To your surprise, you are visited there by Smith, who “befriends” you and returns to spend time with you daily.¹⁶ Much later, you learn that Smith has no interest in you as an individual person, and merely showed you kindness out of an abstract sense of duty – he might have chosen anyone else on the ward. Stocker thinks that you would be appalled, and you would not think of Smith’s actions as the actions of a friend. The reason is that Smith does not act out of the reasons that a friend has, which are highly personal and concrete, but out of abstract, impersonal considerations. Stocker suggests that a consequentialist or deontologist cannot be a genuine friend, because choices made in friendship are not filtered through the lens of duty. (If they were, they would not be the acts of a friend.) Like the egoist who pursues love in order to increase his own happiness, there is a basic disconnect between the motive that is appropriate to the action and the motive that one’s moral code requires one to have.

Bernard Williams goes further, suggesting that abstract moral theories like consequentialism and deontology allow *no* room for genuine personal connections, as conflict will inevitably arise between the way morality tells us to see the world, and the way that love demands.

... [T]he point is that somewhere ... one reaches the necessity that such things as deep attachments to other persons will express themselves in the world in ways which cannot at the same time embody the impartial view, and that they also run the risk of offending against it.¹⁷

Thus, the problem of alienation is (at a minimum) twofold: consequentialist and deontological moral theories alienate us from our own self-conception, and also from our attachments to others. One reason to prefer virtue-based accounts over such theories is that

Press, 1996), pp. 173-190.

¹⁶ From his (1976), p. 462.

they do not traffic in such abstractions; they focus our attention on self-cultivation and well-being, rather than on abstract conceptions of duty and rightness.

2. Xunzi and the Confucian emphasis on *li*

Xunzi is, somewhat belatedly, getting recognition in the West as a major Confucian thinker on a par with Mengzi. Xunzi's writings are particularly valuable for Western philosophers in that his extended treatises allow the contemporary reader to understand his views more fully, and in greater depth, than Mengzi's anecdotal and occasionally aphoristic narratives and dialogues do. One does not want to minimize problems of interpretation and exegesis, but Xunzi's text is remarkably clear and inviting when compared to other Warring States texts. More important, Xunzi's ideas are subtle, well-argued, and powerful. His is clearly a Confucian theory, but he develops earlier Confucian ideas in new ways.

Xunzi wrote at length on the subject of *li*, which I here translate as "ritual," as do two of his best-known English translators, Eric Hutton and John Knoblock.¹⁸ However, the translation of *li* as "ritual" is contentious, and deserves a brief discussion. Clearly the extension of *li* is much broader than that of the English word "ritual." Ivanhoe and Van Norden note that *li* was originally connected to sacrificial rituals, but came to include "matters of etiquette and aspects of one's entire way of life, including dress, behavior, and demeanor."¹⁹ Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. worry about translating *li* as "ritual" because of the misleading and negative connotations of the latter word: "'Ritual' in English is almost always pejorative, suggesting as it

¹⁷ Williams (1981), p. 18.

¹⁸ John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 volumes (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Eric Hutton, "Xunzi," in Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), pp. 255-309. Burton Watson translates *li* as "rites." See Watson, *Hsün Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). In this essay, I mostly use Eric Hutton's translation; where Hutton has not translated a relevant passage, I use Knoblock.

often does compliance with hollow and meaningless social conventions.”²⁰ While I shall in fact argue that *li* as Xunzi describes it can reasonably be seen in a pejorative light, this claim must be established through argument, and not merely taken unearned from the connotations of the English word “ritual”. So, though I will use the word “ritual” in what follows, it is important to remember that it is the concept of *li*, not ritual, that is the topic of discussion.

Li is discussed often in the *Analects*, and it is widely accepted to be a central Confucian virtue: Mengzi considers it to be one of the four virtues, alongside *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), and *zhi* (wisdom). Xunzi, however, discusses *li* in far greater length and detail than Mengzi or Kongzi does. In this section, I focus on Xunzi’s treatment of *li*. Later, I return to the wider question of the general Confucian view (if there is such a thing) of *li*; it is possible that while Xunzi’s version of Confucian ethics succumbs to the problem of alienation, Mengzi’s, for example, does not.

Ritual dominated all aspects of life in ancient Chinese society in ways that would seem quite bizarre today. Some of the larger ritual events, like animal sacrifice and the elaborate funeral rituals seem strange, as does the attention to tiny details: e.g., in *Analects* 9.3, Kongzi wonders about the appropriateness of wearing a cap made of linen rather than one made of silk. However, if we are to apply Confucian ethics to contemporary life, we must seek out parallels. Fortunately, ritual pervades modern society as well, though contemporary rituals are less salient and more flexible than they were in Xunzi’s time. A contemporary Confucian ethicist would emphasize that both small rituals (such as handshakes and exchanging business cards) and large ones (such as funerals and weddings) have a critical moral role to play that is often overlooked.

¹⁹ Ivanhoe and Van Norden (*ibid.*), “Important Terms,” p. 390.

²⁰ Ames and Rosemont, “The Chinese Lexicon,” in their *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical*

Xunzi argues at some length that *li* is critical to moral development; all of us, except perhaps the legendary sage-kings, need to observe the rituals in order to cultivate virtue and to behave appropriately. Xunzi thinks that rituals play a key role in correcting the badness in human nature, and that they were developed by the sage-kings for precisely this purpose. We have rituals because we are not good by nature; ritual helps to make us good. The ancient sage-kings created the rituals to create in us the right sorts of behaviors and traits. Eric Hutton puts it this way:

... [I]f there are people [the sage-kings] who do have robust character traits and are resistant to situational variation, they can design and reliably maintain the broad range of institutions and situations that facilitate the good behavior of everyone else.²¹

Xunzi's emphasis on ritual flows from his conception of human nature: human nature is bad, and it includes desires that, left unchecked, will cause great harm and disorder. Xunzi seems (in contrast, perhaps, to Kongzi) to allow no exceptions for anyone, except perhaps the sage; the rituals must be followed. These rituals set up external conditions that correct human behavior so as to facilitate moral action. Xunzi does not think, however, that mere outward compliance with the rituals is enough to curb these dangerous desires. We must also have the appropriate inner feeling. When we perform the rituals with these appropriate feelings, Xunzi argues, our longstanding selfish desires will change. These selfish desires will be eliminated, and appropriate emotions will replace them. Ritual is a means of bringing about a change in moral character: "Ritual is that by which you correct your person."²² Xunzi does not think that everyone who follows ritual will become a sage, or even a gentleman (*junzi*), but he does believe that it is morally necessary for everyone to follow ritual, and that doing so will

Translation (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), p. 52.

²¹ Hutton (2006), p. 50.

²² Hutton (2001), p. 264.

contribute to that person's moral development. Ritual is not in itself sufficient, of course, to bring about moral improvement – we also need proper teachers, for example, and to study the classics – but it is absolutely necessary.

So, Xunzi's conception of ritual is not of a "hollow" or "meaningless" convention, but of a set of behaviors that are to be engaged in with appropriate thought and feeling. Rituals are not natural: many of our inborn desires do not fit comfortably with them (at least when we first begin to practice ritual). However, as we accustom ourselves to ritual, our innate desires are transformed, and we become better, less selfish people. Following ritual is important not only because of its outward effects, but, more important, because of its *inward* effects on moral character.

Now the fact that it is morally necessary to follow certain rituals does not in itself show that there's anything inauthentic, un-spontaneous, or alienating about Xunzi's theory. It may well be that the motives required for following the rituals are consistent with, even enhanced by, the authentically and deeply held commitments and feelings held by ordinary people. However, a closer examination of Xunzi's text shows that in fact, Xunzi's view of adherence to ritual is alienating in very much the same ways that Williams and Stocker thought that aspects of consequentialism and deontology were alienating. I have two kinds of cases in mind; both come from Chapter 19 of *Xunzi*, "On Ritual."

(a) Xunzi's discussion of the justification of the three-year mourning period suggests a kind of case where ritual sets an artificial limit to a person's natural feelings of grief and loss. This suggests that a feeling with which one strongly identifies (in this case, grief) must be set aside or altered in order to conform with ritual. Xunzi claims that after three years of mourning, we must bring the rituals of mourning to a close. The mourner must return to eating ordinary food, stop wearing mourning garments, and give up his ritual hardships. But Xunzi

realizes that many mourners may not want to give up these practices. Xunzi says:

That the mourning rite is finished in the twenty-fifth month means that even though the grief and pain have not ended and although thoughts of the dead and longing for him have not been forgotten, this ritual practice cuts off these things, for otherwise would not sending off the dead have no conclusion, and must there not be a definite interval for the return to daily life?²³

The mourner's natural feelings of sorrow, Xunzi thinks, have "no limit until the day they die."²⁴ But these natural feelings are unhealthy and must be altered; to allow them to continue would be harmful. If we do not set a limit to mourning, we might never return to our daily lives, wallowing in misery and poverty. On the other hand, if we cease showing the outward signs of mourning, and return to our lives, our feelings of grief will ebb, and we will be at peace.

The concern here is that this ritual may indeed require that one be alienated from one's natural feelings. If virtue ethics is supposed to be both spontaneous and authentic to the kinds of feelings to which a person is deeply attached (what Williams calls categorical desires), then it looks like Xunzi requires that one rein in these authentic responses. The agent who follows Xunzi's advice may feel a divide between her own sense of grief and the actions that conformity to the rituals requires. Imagine an agent who embraces her loss, makes it part of herself. (One thinks of a sort of reversal of Scarlett O'Hara's adherence to the ritual of mourning for her first husband Charles, whom she did not really know or much like.) She would find the requirement that she should stop mourning alien and intrusive - driven by abstract considerations that have no hold on her own sense of self.

Further, when she *does* do as ritual requires, against her own sense of what is important, she becomes like Stocker's Smith visiting the hospital to see a "friend". She will be following

²³ Knoblock (1994), p. 69.

the ritual but not properly – not as Xunzi himself requires. Of course, Xunzi thinks that eventually, someday she will be able to follow it properly, and that may be true, but the first time, at least, that she obeys, she performs an action (putting away her mourning garments) that is for her a betrayal of her deepest feelings. What her moral theory tells her are her reasons will be very different from her own motives.

(b) The second kind of concern is different, and it's illustrated by a passage concerning what it takes in order to have the proper kind of feeling. Xunzi says that ritual dictates an increasing distance between mourner and coffin over time, as the body decays. This is because the proper feeling when mourning is sadness and not disgust. So one institutes a rule (staying a distance from the coffin) that, when followed, helps us to feel what is appropriate. In this example, morality requires us to follow a rule that we have no natural motive to follow – our natural desire, by contrast, is to be physically close to the loved one that we are mourning. But ritual aims to alter these feelings: “Ritual cuts off what is too long and extends what is too short.”²⁵ Morality requires something different, and we do as morality requires not because of anything in us, but because of a rule. This is the kind of worry that Williams raises when he suggests that utilitarians are alienated from themselves when they see themselves as required to follow a rule whose justification is to be found in an abstract principle.

The reasons that we allegedly have for following the rituals are abstract and objective. They are grounded in what brings order to the state and in what promotes one's own virtue and well-being. But the problem of alienation is the problem of morality's dictates emanating from a source alien to one's sense of self. And while ritual is not as *impersonal* as the principle of utility, it can be just as remote from an agent's own desires and motives.

²⁴ Hutton (2001), p. 283.

²⁵ Hutton (2001), p. 280.

Each of these examples involves the use of a ritual to force agents not only to suppress or override feelings that Xunzi believes will naturally arise in us, but which also aims to alter those feelings. The first case illustrates that the obligation to abide by rituals will not always, or even often, fit with the feelings that people naturally tend to have; and the second case shows a set of concrete rules, as it were, are designed to modify one's natural emotions, so that it is reasonable to say that, on Xunzi's view, one's feelings and one's moral duties are very different sorts of things.

3. Responses and Conclusions

There are several things one can say on Xunzi's behalf. First, one of Xunzi's key justifications for these restrictions on natural emotions is that, left unchecked, they will go too far. That is, "excessive" grief and longing are not healthy for those who feel them, and so it is the agent herself who benefits by restraining them. In this way, one might say that Xunzi's theory does not alienate one from oneself, because the rituals exist in order to protect the self. While consequentialism and deontology are impersonal, Confucianism is not. It is for the sake of oneself, one's own good, not some abstract impersonal rule, that ritual aims to alter or limit our feelings.

But such a response will not do. What makes categorical desires special, according to Bernard Williams, is that they play a role in one's subjective self-conception. The fact that, objectively speaking, a feeling is not healthy, or is even objectively dangerous, does not in any way imply that this feeling cannot be constitutive of one's own sense of self. Williams writes:

There is no contradiction in the idea of a man's dying for a ground project – quite the reverse, since if death really is necessary for the project, then to live would be to live with it unsatisfied, something which, if it really is his ground project, he

has no reason to do.²⁶

If one really thinks of oneself in terms of one's grief, cannot imagine oneself without it, and so on, then the fact that such grief may be objectively unhealthy for me matters not at all. And any moral principle that separates me from that grief will be alienating. Williams' point is that only I can decide what counts as good for me, and even something that is "objectively" good for me only matters to me if it matters *to me*.

The second response follows close behind the first. The problem of alienation cannot simply be the problem that morality sometimes conflicts with *some* of one's emotions or desires. For morality to produce alienation, these emotions must play a rather special role in one's conception of self, or in one's relationships with others. And the particular emotions that Xunzi sees rituals as limiting – primarily grief, greed, and disgust – are ones that simply cannot play the role in self-conception that Williams and Stocker had envisioned. After all, the idea that a person is defined by her grief is pretty strange and grim, and surely no one feels that she is defined by what disgusts her. These emotions are highly important for moral motivation, one might say (because they may prevent one from doing the right thing), but not for self-definition.

The difficulty with this response is that it ignores the relational character of these feelings. It is true that it would be very strange to become attached to the feeling of grieving for the dead understood in the abstract, but one can certainly become attached to grieving for a particular person. (Xunzi's own examples make this quite clear – the death of one's ruler and one's parents, he thinks, give rise to excessive grief.) One can so define oneself in terms of one's relationship to another person that one's grief for her comes to be a central part of one's identity. Think, for example, of the terrible case in which parents lose an infant. A parent may become so wrapped up his identity as a father that grieving for that child becomes central to his

²⁶ Williams (1981), p. 13.

self-conception. If morality prevented him from displaying signs of that grief, then morality itself could indeed be alienating.

The third response is that rather than coming from the outside, the need to limit one's emotions has an authentically rooted basis. It is not out of impartial concern for one's objective well-being, or for morality in the abstract, that we limit our emotions, but because of our own deeply held desire to improve. Although human nature is bad, Xunzi also insists that all humans *hate* the badness in their nature.

In every case, people desire to become good because their nature is bad. The person who has little longs to have much. The person of narrow experience longs to be broadened. The ugly person longs to be beautiful. The poor person longs to be rich. The lowly person longs to be noble. That which one does not have within oneself, one is sure to seek from the outside.²⁷

Xunzi seems to think that each person does in fact reject his own bad nature, that we each have an authentic – in the sense that it originates from within the self – desire to improve ourselves. Since the rituals are designed precisely in order to fulfill this desire, the rituals cannot be alienating.

If this claim were right, then this would indeed be a strong reply to the concern about alienation. For morality is only alienating if an authentic commitment is displaced by an inauthentic one. And if the commitment to ritual is genuine and authentic, then it cannot be alienating. But I find myself quite skeptical about the claim. I cannot disprove it, of course, but it is rather surprising that Xunzi is seen as a pessimist about human nature in light of claims such as these. Xunzi's claim is that we authentically hate our own badness because we recognize it as a lack or deprivation. But I wonder: in light of what do we recognize our own bad desires as deplorable? Is everyone capable of seeing this? How do we come to see them this way? Is it not possible that we could instead see our bad desires as good? Even if we do

see these desires as bad and wish to correct them, might we not fail to see that ritual is the appropriate tool for correction? If this response is sound, it must be the case that all of us do in fact have the authentic desire to root out any other desires that could possibly conflict with following ritual. I am not sure how Xunzi would answer these questions. Perhaps he could, but I am skeptical.

A different kind of response is to reject Xunzi as the spokesman for Confucian virtue ethics. One can reject Xunzi's claims about ritual, and turn instead to the *Analects* or the *Mengzi* for a less rigid, and possibly less alienating, discussion. There are, after all, some serious differences between different versions of Confucianism. In *Analects* 3.4 and 11.10, for example, Kongzi seems to praise "excessive"²⁸ grief and mourning, which contrasts rather sharply with Xunzi's remarks on the subject. Insofar as a different version of Confucian ethics does not require agents to follow ritual when those rituals conflict with their deeply held authentic desires, the problem of alienation can be avoided.

I do not have room here to explore whether such a Confucian theory could work; perhaps it could. But one reason for doubt is that the *Analects* and the *Mengzi* both treat the rituals as important moral *correctives*. Ritual is supposed to play a role in moral development precisely because it modifies our feelings and responses, and develops healthier ones. In *Analects* 8.1, Kongzi says: "If you are respectful but lack ritual you will become exasperating; if you are careful but lack ritual you will become timid; if you are courageous but lack ritual you will become unruly; and if you are upright but lack ritual you will become inflexible."²⁹ The idea that ritual is a necessary part of shaping moral character and a corrective to certain

²⁷ Hutton (2001), p. 301.

²⁸ Slingerland's translation. See Edward Slingerland, *Confucius: Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), p. 18 and p. 114.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

common negative tendencies does not originate with Xunzi; its roots lie deep in Confucian thought. Ritual is a critical part of Confucian theory, and it is thought to play a critical role in becoming virtuous. Its role cannot be dismissed or marginalized; it must be explained.

A final response is to treat this result as a *reductio* for the problem of alienation. This may in fact be the strongest response. Xunzi's moral theory may be more plausible *prima facie* than the intuitions to which Stocker and Williams appeal. Perhaps a close look at what Williams would say about ritual just reveals how flimsy and self-destructive is his philosophy of psychology – if Williams can't allow that a person has a reason to avoid self-destructive grieving behavior, one might say, then Williams' theory of categorical desires is seriously flawed. (I think this might well be just the right thing to say. However, I will not argue that here.) But saying this has a cost. If the problem of alienation is admitted not to be a real problem, then it is not a problem for deontology or consequentialism either. The argumentative dialectic shifts, and virtue ethics no longer enjoys the advantage it once had over its rivals.

In sum, I don't think that the problem of alienation is fatal for Confucian virtue ethics, but I do think the problem helps us to see what kind of virtue ethics emerges from the Confucian tradition, with its emphasis on *li*. Further, I think it raises a general worry about how *li* is to be understood as a virtue in general – Xunzi puts more emphasis on it than Mengzi does, but clearly *li* is an important part of the Confucian tradition. When *li* is emphasized strongly as a part of virtue, certain concerns about alienation and authenticity do arise. And if Kantians and utilitarians owe us an explanation of how their theory can respond to the problem of alienation, Confucians do as well.