

Confucian Ritual and Moral Education

A brief outline

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ARGUMENT: I argue that an element of classical Confucianism, namely the notion of ritual (li 禮), can make substantial contributions to current work in moral education. Beginning with an analysis of one of the most plausible contemporary theories of learning and development, that of Lev Vygotsky, I examine how modern cognitive science can help us to conceptualize the role that ritual plays in Confucianism. I then elaborate how this nuanced understanding of ritual can supplement the basic Vygotskian account of learning and development and help guide the design of effective moral education programs.

DESCRIPTION: Although moral education has been a topic of interest in both ancient and modern philosophy, current philosophical discussions have arguably stymied with regard to advancing particular methods of moral development. This is striking given the fact that there have been significant advances in cognitive science over the past several decades, as well as a surging interest in the subfield of philosophy referred to as moral psychology. Approaches to moral education on offer, however, tend to emphasize only contemporary theories of education and learning, augmented with accounts of psycho-social development. While such accounts do well to draw on empirical support to provide a realistic basis for explaining moral education, they often provide little in the way of recommending specific resources to facilitate the process of moral education. This project also utilizes contemporary research in moral education theory, but contends that elements of ancient Chinese philosophy, particularly the ritual curriculum of pre-Qin Confucianism, can provide a more complete account of moral education by providing these resources. By combining particular educative techniques like scaffolding with Confucian tool of ritual, we can recognize new ways of enhancing the moral education of students, enhancing moral cultivation and the flourishing of both individuals and communities.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS OF THE PROJECT: After briefly dealing with the question of why we should invest in moral education, the text engages in an exploration of how we can enhance contemporary moral education pursuits by appeal to two distinct projects in human psychology, namely Vygotsky's increasingly influential theory of learning and development and the classical Confucian ritual model. The text can generally be broken down into three areas of inquiry: (1) What is moral education and what can contemporary cognitive science say about/do for it? (2) What is the Confucian ritual model and how does it bear on contemporary research (or vice versa)? (3) How can we harness the classical Confucian approach in modernity (and should we)?

Questions in the first area include:

(a) What do contemporary findings say about extant moral education programs?

- (b) What do contemporary findings say about how we develop morality and morally relevant dispositions?
- (c) What can Vygotsky's general account of learning and development tell us about how (and whether) we learn to be moral?
- (d) Can the Vygotskian account be adapted/co-opted to craft an account of moral development and, subsequently, approaches to moral education?

Questions in the second area include:

- (a) What, exactly, is ritual for Confucians, and what makes it distinct?
- (b) How does ritual differ from concepts like custom or law?
- (c) What makes ritual a moral concept in Confucianism?
- (d) Why were rituals created and how do they work (especially in terms of promoting personal and communal flourishing)?
- (e) Is the ritual model problematically authoritarian?
- (f) How can we understand the Confucian ritual education model by appeal to Vygotsky's theory?

Questions in the third area include:

- (a) Is a ritual approach to moral education empirically supported?
- (b) Is ritual education anything really new?
- (c) How does ritual differ from other educative 'tools'?
- (d) How can we deploy ritual effectively in the modern classroom?

INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MODERN MORAL EDUCATION

Have you ever been bullied, cheated, or generally disrespected? These sorts of behaviors are frequently harmful and unethical, so it is understandable that we seek methods of reducing or eliminating them. This book is written with the intent of making a valuable contribution toward such ends by invigorating philosophy of moral education and expanding on extant theories of moral development in the cognitive sciences. In particular, the text draws on two traditions that have until now escaped comparison: Lev Vygotsky's theory of learning and psychosocial development, and classical Confucianism's approach to moral cultivation. The core argument of the project has two main aspects, the first being that Vygotsky and the Confucians can complement one another in a manner that enables a nuanced, empirically respectable understanding of how the ancient Confucian ritual education model should be construed and how it could be deployed. The second aspect is that, just as ritual education in the Confucian tradition can be explicated in terms of modern developmental theory, this ancient notion of ritual can also serve as a viable resource for moral education in a contemporary, diverse world.

CHAPTER 1 – ADAPTATION AND EDUCATION: (NON)NATIVISM AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

There are clear motivations for adopting moral education programs in schools and communities; less clear is precisely how the education process itself is to proceed and what it should entail. Presumably, for an education program of any sort to be effective, it must be compatible with human cognitive architecture. Necessarily, then, moral education programs will benefit from being informed by the most viable theories of learning and development. At present, however, it is uncertain how empirical findings about moral development should be construed. One way in which interpreters have distinguished themselves is by joining one of two camps: nativists and social learning theorists. The general nativist thesis claims that the features of human psychology that are, in some sense, distinctly moral are innate. Social learning theorists, on the other hand, claim that the moral character of certain aspects of human psychology is learned through social experiences. In what follows, I critique several contemporary representations of and arguments for moral nativism. I argue that nativists underplay the empirical and theoretical weaknesses faced by nativism, and overstate the problems faced by social learning theories. Moreover, even if some weak nativist claims are plausible, they are insufficient to guide theory and policy for moral education; social learning theories are better situated in this regard. I conclude the chapter by introducing one such theory in particular, that of Vygotsky, as a viable and fruitful theory of learning and development.

CHAPTER 2 – EDUCATION AND MORAL EDUCATION: VYGOTSKY’S INCOMPLETE ACCOUNT

Over the last several decades, Vygotsky’s work has become increasingly important for research in psychosocial development and pedagogical methodology. Despite rising interest in his theory of learning and development, however, little has been written connecting Vygotsky specifically to moral education. The most comprehensive attempt at formulating such an account is given by Tappan. Herein, I critically evaluate Tappan’s account, raising several problems for his approach. I then offer potential resolutions for these issues by turning to research in socialization theory and elaborating how additional sociocultural tools can supplement moral education. In particular, the most viable sociocultural tools for the task will be ones that are capable of transmitting values and facilitating their practice and internalization.

CHAPTER 3 – CONFUCIAN RITUAL: A DEFINITION

Following the idea that a Vygotskian approach to moral education will require a particular type of sociocultural tool, this chapter introduces a potential resource from early (i.e., pre-Qin) Confucianism, namely ritual. The Confucian notion of ritual, however, is quite complex, and the Confucians never provide a concise definition of the term, instead giving explanations of its various functions. It is necessary, then, to provide an explicit account of what the Confucian notion of ritual entails. This chapter proceeds in four phases. First, I distinguish Confucian ritual from traditional Western notions, as well as between two primary conceptions of ritual within early Chinese thought: ritual as a prescription and ritual as a disposition. Second, I explain how the prescriptive notion pertains to certain performances and social divisions. Third, I contrast ritual with other recurring concepts in Confucianism that might be thought to play a similar role in moral development (e.g., laws, punishments, and other political measures). Finally, I recommend that

Confucian ritual be understood as those prescriptions governing the practices and standards that embody expressions of respect and related prosocial attitudes.

CHAPTER 4 – THE RITUAL CULTIVATION MODEL: A NUANCED INTERPRETATION

With an account of Confucian ritual in hand, it is possible to examine what, specifically, is involved in the classical Confucian educational model. The most suitable starting point for this task is arguably found in the work of Xunzi, an early Confucian whose advocacy for moral education is particularly well-documented. Despite ample extant scholarship on Xunzi's work, however, precisely how his approach bolsters moral development, and why a program touting the study of ritual could be effective, remain subjects of debate. In this chapter, I argue that these matters can be clarified by appealing to Vygotsky's theory of learning and development. Vygotsky's account of how development depends primarily on social interactions mediated by cultural tools that modify learners' cognitive architecture is remarkably similar to Xunzi's account of how studying and practicing ritual restructures learners' moral psychologies. Specifically, both Vygotsky and Xunzi offer nonnativist accounts of psychosocial development that emphasize the centrality of sociocultural tools for learning. This comparison yields a more nuanced and empirically supported interpretation of Xunzi's account of moral education, as well as an account that has applications in contemporary work in moral education and development.

CHAPTER 5 – RITUAL AND MORAL EDUCATION: HOW AND WHY IT WORKS

Having established several important overlaps between Vygotsky's theory of learning and development and Xunzi's account of moral cultivation through ritual education, this chapter elaborates how Xunzi's ritual education model provides a much-needed supplement to the general Vygotskian account when applied to moral development, as well as how Xunzi's ritual model is supported by additional findings in contemporary cognitive and education sciences.

CHAPTER 6 – IS IT NEW? IS IT NEEDED? RITUAL'S PLACE ALONGSIDE OTHER TOOLS

The previous chapters explained how an approach to moral education could be developed by supplementing a Vygotskian developmental picture with the tool of ritual as adapted from Confucianism. In particular, utilizing ritual can help inculcate, structure, and refine promoral dispositions, their deployment, and their reception. The ritual program, however, faces several concerns. For one, it is unclear whether ritual can add anything novel to moral education, especially considering the array of sociocultural tools (e.g., stories, games, rules of etiquette, etc.) that are already utilized for instruction (moral or otherwise). Additionally, one might worry that ritual brings with it a number of drawbacks that actually make it counterproductive to moral development. In particular, it is not clear how teaching through ritual would fare better than any other program built around inculcating moral traits and behaviors by appeal to models. This chapter addresses these concerns and argues that, while ritual is not a panacea for moral education, it can safely fulfill a useful and distinct function in a contemporary setting.

CHAPTER 7 – ORTHOPRAXY AND INTUITION: THE IMPORTANCE OF A RITUAL FRAMEWORK

Up to this point, I have focused primarily on the ritual tool derived from Confucianism, its functions, and potential applications. In this penultimate chapter, I examine contemporary comparative work that looks at the viability of Confucian moral cultivation accounts and fit the ritual education model into this context, particularly as adapted from Xunzi. Recently, studies of classical Chinese thought have been argued to yield valuable insight for contemporary discussions in moral psychology. A noteworthy resource for such studies is the disagreement between Mengzi and Xunzi. In particular, it has been argued that each philosopher's view of human psychology leads to a concomitant moral pedagogy. Mengzi, who advances the claim that human nature has a valence toward moral goodness, might be construed as an advocate of educative strategies oriented around self-reflection or self-discovery. In contrast, Xunzi, who asserts that human nature is "bad," has been aligned with educational authoritarianism. Herein, I provide an overview of each Confucian's position and argue that such depictions oversimplify the views of these two thinkers regarding moral psychology and, consequently, pedagogy. I then evaluate the viability of these pedagogical stances based on additional empirical findings concerning learning and development. I conclude that, while aspects of a Mengzian approach are useful, evidence supports a more structured approach to moral education, one better reflected in Xunzi's views. Consequently, this analysis provides more reason to take seriously not only the ritual tool, but also at least some features of the more general ritual education method.

CHAPTER 8 – DEVELOPING PROMORAL CLASSROOMS: ADDING RITUAL TO THE TOOLKIT

The early Confucians regarded the rituals of the ancient sage kings as a sufficient core for moral education in their time. Contemporary humans and cultures, however, are worlds apart from their forebears, and it is not obvious that an ancient moral tradition steeped in ritual is appropriate for the modern age. Consequently, if ritual is to be employed as a resource for moral education, then the content of the ritual method will likely need to be adapted to current circumstances. Even if one takes ritual seriously as a tool and method for cultivation, though, there remains a question of how one might design moral education programs incorporating ritual. This final chapter examines impediments faced by a ritualized approach to moral education, how they might be overcome, and how a ritual method might be developed for modernity. Specifically, I argue that the Confucian notion of ritual can contribute to moral education by helping to structure and inculcate a shared climate of respect both in- and outside the classroom.