

The Sources and Limits of Toleration in Confucianism: The Case of *The Xunzi*
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Joseph Chan

Department of Politics and Public Administration

The University of Hong Kong

Perfectionism and intolerance

Like other major ancient traditions as the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle, Confucianism contains profound reflections on ethics, society and politics. These ancient traditions of thought developed conceptions of the good life, the good society, and ideal politics. While they differ importantly in the substantive content of their conceptions, the structural features of these conceptions are strikingly similar. They are what I would call perfectionist theories on ethics, society, and politics. On ethics, these traditions of thought base their ethical judgments about values, virtues, and norms—or in short their conceptions of the good life—on their understandings of human nature or principles of nature (I call this *ethical perfectionism*). On society, they regard social groups as important sites where people develop ethical capacities and skills necessary for the good life (*social perfectionism*). On politics, they all hold the view that one of the major aims of the state is to help people pursue the good life by means of law, education, provision of resources, and coordination of social groups and their activities (*political perfectionism*).

Confucianism as a perfectionist perspective has certain attractiveness but it also faces serious challenges posed by the conditions of modern society, which Rawls calls reasonable pluralism. There are at least two challenges to perfectionist theories. First, the legitimacy of a perfectionist state would seem to be undermined if it promotes a conception of the good life which can be reasonably disputed by people who do not hold that conception. Second, even if the conception of the good life is correct and beyond reasonable doubt, there is a danger for a perfectionist state to paternalistically or moralistically impose its favored conception on people who fail to see its correctness.

What ideas within perfectionism that can prevent a perfectionist state from sliding into authoritarian rule? These are large and difficult questions, especially for Confucianism. Confucianism has been widely criticized by modern scholars as being a philosophy that favors authoritarianism in political and familial spheres and does not tolerate ideas and actions that are at odds with its fundamental ethical doctrines.

If one examines the basic ideas in Confucianism, one finds at least three elements that may constitute the sources of intolerance:

- a. its perfectionist conception of the state and society;
- b. its monolithic conception of the good; and
- c. its silence on the value of individual autonomy.

Though these three elements are closely related in Confucianism, they are distinct and separable from one another. A perfectionist theory of politics may endorse a pluralistic, hence non-monolithic, conception of the good. A monolithic conception of the good may uphold individual autonomy (or individual sovereignty) as the supreme value governing one's private sphere of life and hence it may reject political perfectionism. Each of these elements may supply a reason for political intervention. But each alone gives only one reason, which may be outweighed by one or more competing reasons favoring non-intervention.

The three elements joint together, however, may strongly push Confucianism down the road of state intervention and intolerance. Because of its monolithic conception of the good, Confucianism would find a wide range of practices existing in contemporary pluralistic societies disagreeable. Because of its social perfectionism, Confucianism would be worried about the harmful effects of bad ideas and ways of life on the social environment within which people develop their ethical lives. And because of its political perfectionism, Confucianism would expect political rulers to intervene to maintain or restore a healthy social environment for ethical development. For Confucianism, then, there may be a wide range of practices which the state has a strong reason to discourage,

contain, or even prohibit. In addition, Confucianism recognizes no value of individual autonomy or individual sovereignty, hence lacking a strong, principled defense against state paternalism or moralism. Putting all these elements together, we get the following picture: there is a strong propensity for Confucianism to slide into a strong form of state paternalism or moralism that may substantially restrict individual freedom. With just a few more steps, Confucianism might unhesitatingly embrace intolerance as a policy to promote its conceptions of the good life, or so its critics argue.

How accurate is this picture of Confucianism? One could raise several doubts about it. First, one might challenge the claim that the Confucian conception of the good is monolithic and argue that it rather contains a wide room for ethical pluralism. Second, one might challenge the claim that there is no idea of individual autonomy in Confucianism. For example, one might argue there is a certain conception of moral autonomy embedded in Confucianism that is able to counter the tendency of paternalism or moralism. Elsewhere I have argued that the first two replies are not entirely successful because of their interpretative or philosophical weaknesses.¹ In this paper I shall examine a third reply, which says that even if Confucianism contains the three sources of intolerance, it would not easily adopt coercive measures to promote its causes. This is because there are some other important ideas in Confucianism that can constrain the impulse of intolerance.

Sources of Toleration

Toleration is the idea that we should refrain ourselves from interfering/prohibiting others' expression or action which we believe is ethically wrong or worthless. But why should we do so? If something is morally bad or worthless, it seems natural that we should want to prevent its occurrence or minimize its bad influence if it occurred. So it calls for justification when we think we should act in an opposite way: to refrain from doing what

¹ This first strategy was discussed in my "Confucian Attitudes toward Ethical Pluralism," in Richard Madsen and Tracy B. Strong eds. *The Many and the One: Religious and Secular Perspectives on Ethical Pluralism in the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 129-153; the second strategy was examined in "Moral Autonomy, Civil Liberties, and Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (July 2002), pp. 281-310.

should naturally be done. In contemporary political philosophy, we can find three common types of argument for toleration:

- a. The moral argument: We ought to respect people's autonomy and therefore shouldn't interfere with their personal lives.
- b. The consequentialist argument: Intolerance is ineffective or creates more harm than good.
- c. The epistemological argument: We are not sure whether the speech or act to be prohibited is in fact wrong and therefore we have no strong reason to prohibit it.

Does Confucianism contain sources of ideas that can develop any of the three arguments? As discussed above, Confucianism has no moral argument of personal autonomy to reject policies of intolerance. But lacking such an argument to support toleration might not be a serious failure in Confucianism, for personal autonomy is a controversial value. The argument is powerful only to those who endorse personal autonomy. But the people who would be asked by the state to tolerate others (fundamentalist Christians to tolerate Muslims or *vice versa*, for example) may precisely be those who are unlikely to share the good of personal autonomy. To those who do not accept toleration as a virtue, appealing to personal autonomy to justify toleration seems a question-begging move. Moreover, even if personal autonomy is a value, it may not be the most important one. Moralists, paternalists, and perfectionists may regard it as just one value, which needs to compete with, and at times can be outweighed by, other values, such as virtues and moral well-being. Toleration is therefore not an absolute practice; intolerance not always unjustified.

Confucianism does contain some important consequentialist arguments for toleration. It is well-known that early Confucian masters do not favour coercion as a means to promote virtues. In their views, proper moral cultivation is more effective when it is done through learning, deliberation, and habituation rather than through coercive means. Confucian dislike of coercion is also based on an approach of moral socialization which puts a much greater moral demand on rulers rather than the common people. Confucian masters believe in moral edification by example: people are best able to learn by admiring and

imitating the personal example of rulers and teachers. A harsh and tough leader that often threatens people with swords only serves to alienate himself from the people rather than to motivate them to learn. These arguments, however, are by no means absolute guarantee for toleration. Punishment is still recommended as a last resort for prevention of moral decay in Confucianism (...to be developed ...).²

The rest of this paper considers the third type of argument, which challenges the epistemological basis of toleration. It says that there is no strong reason to be intolerant of an expression or action if the judgement of its alleged problematic nature can be reasonably challenged. We need to be more exact about the nature of this argument of skepticism. This argument is not one of *global* skepticism, which denies the possibility of knowing anything in the world. Such a position cannot be used to justify the moral correctness of toleration, for we cannot even sensibly talk about the moral correctness of anything, toleration included, if we adopt the view of global skepticism. Global sceptics can only express preferences, not moral reasons, for toleration.

The sort of argument we are considering here is one of *local and weak* skepticism, which only asserts that we lack adequate certainty about the correctness of a certain moral belief or moral practice. It is *local* in the sense that this skepticism is directed to *particular* truth claims rather than every possible truth claims; it is *weak* in that it entails only *doubt and uncertainty* about particular claims, not blanket denial of the possibility of knowledge about them. A theory that contains a strong dose of local and weak scepticism is less liable to dogmatism or intolerance. If we are not sure about the wrongness of a particular expression or action, we would be less inclined to condemn or suppress it.

This position is close to an attitude which Adam Seligman and Peter Berger have called “*epistemological modesty*.”³ This notion refers to the idea that we should be modest about what we believe—although we do believe things, we often hold these beliefs with an element of uncertainty. Contrast to this view is what can be called *epistemological*

² For more discussion, see my “Moral Autonomy, Civil Liberties, and Confucianism.”

³ “Epistemological Modesty: An Interview with Peter Berger.” Retrieved on 26 June 2004 from http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item_id=240,

certitude, an attitude that excludes doubts. There seems to be a certain psychological affinity between epistemological modesty and tolerance, and between certitude and intolerance.

Does early Confucianism embrace epistemological modesty or certitude on morality? Early Confucian masters differed quite significantly on their moral epistemology. In this essay I shall focus on Xunzi's philosophy, not only because he has a more developed theory of knowledge and mind, but also because he is more explicit on matters related to toleration. Most important, his philosophy embodies, as I shall argue, significant elements of dogmatism and (local and weak) skepticism as well as elements of epistemological certitude and modesty, so that there is a strong internal tension within his theory of knowledge and between his authoritarianism and his theory of knowledge.

Epistemological certitude and modesty in Xunzi's theory of moral knowledge

Xunzi explicitly advocates censorship of "heretical" opinions and doctrines. Among early Confucian masters, he is most intolerant of unorthodox doctrines. In his view, all such doctrines ought to be banned (The *Xunzi*, 6.9, 22.3e⁴). Moreover, those who cloak such doctrines to confuse the common people's mind ought to be sentenced to death (4.7). Xunzi even says that should a sage king arise, his first task would be to execute these people and only then deal with thieves and robbers, for "although one can succeed in getting robbers and thieves to transform themselves, one cannot get these men to change." (5.10)

It is important to note that the target of Xunzi's attack is a special group of people. Xunzi is not so worried about careless thinkers of blatantly wrong views, for they probably fail to have any persuasiveness to the common people. Xunzi's attack is rather those who can "cloak pernicious persuasions 邪說 (*xie shuo*) in beautiful language and present elegantly composed but treacherous doctrines 奸言 (*jian yan*) and so create disorder and anarchy in the world." (6.1) Xunzi even concedes that what these people advocate "has a rational

⁴ Translation and chapter/section numbers references are from John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 3 volumes.

basis and their statements have perfect logic 其持之有故, 其言之成理, enough indeed to deceive and mislead the ignorant masses.” (6.3) In Book 6 of *The Xunzi*, twelve philosophers of this sort are identified, including even Mencius. Their theories should all be banned because they are erroneous.

But by what standard to judge these theories as pernicious and treacherous, despite that they “have a rational basis and perfect logic?” Xunzi’s answer is deceptively simple:

“Every doctrine that is neither consistent with Ancient Kings 先王 nor in accord with the requirements of ritual and moral principles 禮義 is properly described as a “treacherous doctrine 奸言.” (5.6)

“Knowledge that does not fit with the standards of the Ancient Kings, though hard won, is said to be that of a “dissolute mind” 奸心. Discriminations and theories, illustrations and examples, though clever and sufficient, convenient and profitable, that do not follow the requirements of ritual and moral principles are termed “dissolute theories” 奸說. The sage kings forbade [these] dissolute things. (6.9)

Here we can see strong signs of dogmatism and epistemological certitude in Xunzi’s philosophy. For him, the moral standards of the Ancient Sage-Kings are the bedrock of truth and social order. (19.2c) These standards and rituals were already established and exalted in ancient times, and they have reached “their perfected form” that “nothing in the world can add to or subtract them from.” (19.2c) We can appeal to them to separate the right from wrong (21.9), and the enlightened lord in the position of authority would ban any doctrines that deviate from these standards. In Xunzi’s ideal society, there is not even a need for gentlemen to engage and openly criticize these dissolute theories by “dialectics and explanations,” for the ruler will forbid them with severe punishments. (22.3e)

However, how do people come to know the standards of ritual and moral principles set up in ancient times, assuming that they are the correct standards that everyone must follow? Mencius's moral introspection to know the standards is not open to Xunzi, for he denies Mencius's view that morality is ingrained in human nature. Moral standards and rituals are instead created by a few ancient sage-kings; they constitute what Xunzi calls the Way. But even Xunzi recognizes that it is not easy for people to correctly grasp the Way. Seeing how Xunzi grapples with the difficulties of knowing the Way will reveal another side of his philosophy: the side of skepticism and epistemological modesty.

Xunzi says that the rational order of ritual is profoundly “deep,” “great,” and “high.” (19.2d) It is profound because it is a comprehensive grasp of the complex relationships between men. The common people and “petty men” (19.2c) are not able to attain this comprehensiveness; only sage-kings who have reached the level of sufficiency can do so:

“Who has such sufficiency 至足? I say it is the sage king. Sageliness consists in a comprehensive grasp of the natural relationships between men 聖也者, 盡倫者也. True kingship consists in a comprehensive grasp of the regulations for government 王也者, 盡制也. A comprehensive grasp of both is sufficient to become the ridgepole for the world. Hence, the students take the sage king as his teacher and the regulations of the sage king as the model... To strive for this goal is to be a scholar-knight 士. To come close to realizing this ideal is to be a gentleman 君子. To know it is to be a sage.” 聖人 (21.9)

On Xunzi's view, then, a sage-king is one who has a comprehensive grasp of human relationships and government regulations. The common people should learn and follow him as a model. But how can a sage-king be identified? Presumably, it is by checking if the person who is thought to be a sage-king really possesses a comprehensive grasp of things. However, how can someone tell whether that person possesses a comprehensive grasp of things if such comprehension is beyond the reach of people except the sage-king

himself? Doesn't one have to be a sage-king before one is able to correctly identify another one? Doesn't it amount to mere self-recognition?

Xunzi recognizes that it is very difficult to attain a comprehensive grasp of the Way precisely because of its comprehensiveness. When people think they have grasped the Way, they may just have focused on one aspect of it and lost sight of other important aspects.

“The myriad things constitute one aspect of the Way, and a single thing constitutes one aspect of the myriad things. The stupid 愚者 who act on the basis of one aspect of one thing, considering that therein they know the Way, are ignorant 無知. Shen Dao had insight into “holding back” 後 but none into “leading the way.” 先 Laozi had insight into “bending down,” 誑 but none into “straightening up.” 信 Mozi had insight into “uniformity,” 齊 but none into “individuation.” 畸 (17.12)

Laozi and Mozi were no stupid people by any common standards of evaluation. Yet, Xunzi is confident to say that they have only partial insights of the Way and are stupid and ignorant. Doesn't it imply that Xunzi himself thinks he has reached the sufficiency level of a sage-king to be able to come to this judgment? But isn't it possible that Xunzi himself, or anyone who claims to have grasped the comprehensive order of things, has only partial understanding of the Way? Wouldn't Xunzi be just one of the “stupid” and “ignorant”?

Xunzi has a strong reason to be modest about his judgments of others and their views if he follows more closely his own theory of knowledge. In Book 21, “Dispelling Blindness,” 解蔽 (“obscuration” seems a better translation of 蔽), Xunzi says that “it is the common flaw of men to be blinded by some small point of the truth and to shut their minds to the Great Ordering Principle.” (21.1)

“What makes for blindness 蔽? One can be blinded by desire 欲 or aversion 惡, by the beginnings of things 始 or their end 終, by what is remote 遠 or what is near 近, by broadness 博 or shallowness 淺, by antiquity 古 or modernity 今. Since each of the myriad things evokes a different reaction, there is none that could not obsess the mind. This is the universal flaw of the operation of the mind 凡萬物異, 莫不相爲蔽, 此心術之公患也.” (21.2)

This passage gives a strong warning to anyone who is inclined to hold on to any views or preferences developed in particular contexts or times. It urges one to be *modest* about one’s own views and *skeptical* toward others’ views because they are always partial and limited. This constant danger of partiality and obsession implies that we should also be skeptical toward any claims that present themselves as a comprehensive grasp of the Way or toward any persons who claim that they, or some others, are sage-kings. Isn’t Xunzi’s unconditional adoration of the so-called ancient sage-kings an obsession with the past, a source of obsuration too?

The need for epistemological modesty is reinforced by Xunzi’s recommendations of the ways to overcome obsuration of the human mind:

“What do men use to know the Way? I say that it is the mind. How does the mind know? I say by its emptiness 虛, unity 一, and stillness 靜... Not allowing what has previously been stored to interfere with what is being received in the mind is called emptiness 不以所已藏害所將受, 謂之虛... Not allowing the one thing to interfere with the other is called unity... Not allowing dreams and fantasies to bring disorder to awareness is called stillness.” (21.5d)

People learn in part by accumulating information and knowledge of things. To be able to avoid obsession, it is essential that one does not let what has been learnt and stored in one’s mind be an obstacle to one’s reception of new information and knowledge. This requires a great deal of open-mindedness and modesty, or what Xunzi calls emptiness 虛.

To be modest is to understand that we have not yet obtained a full and sure grasp of the Way, and hence that we need to be open to further enlightenment and understanding. The opposite of modesty and open-mindedness are certitude and closure.

We can see that these two apparently contradictory sets of attitudes—modesty and open-mindedness vs. certitude and closure—exist in Xunzi’s philosophy. Yet Xunzi might see no contradiction in endorsing both of them, for he might argue that these two sets are appropriate for two different groups of people: certitude and closure are for the few sage-kings of ancient times because they had a full and comprehensive grasp of things, and modesty and open-mindedness are for those who have yet to struggle to become sage-kings. With this distinction, people can appeal to the authority of the sage-kings and their standards to judge the non-sage kings and expose their errors and one-sidedness.

But this line of defense is problematic. It presupposes that we do know who the sage-king is and what his principles of morality and rituals are. For the common people to identify the sage-king, however, is itself an epistemological challenge that goes beyond their capacity. An ordinary person with considerable moral understanding may recognize and appreciate another person who is *better* than him or her, but only a sage-king with complete moral knowledge can tell whether another alleged sage-king does possess complete knowledge. It seems, therefore, that epistemological modesty and skepticism should be applied to the very problem of finding out the sage-king.

If we cannot be sure of the existence of any sage-king, we will have no clear and certain comprehensive standards to judge others’ views. So how can we say with confidence, as Xunzi does, that the doctrines of such respectable thinkers as Mencious, Laozi, and Mozi, are all erroneous and should be banned? On the contrary, we have a positive reason to protect their doctrines, since they may well contain partial insights that help us better understand the Way. As Xunzi admits, Laozi and Mozi had insights into “bending down” and “uniformity,” and even treacherous doctrines may have a rational basis and logic. Forbidding these doctrines would mean that the gentlemen would miss an opportunity to learn about these insights and reasons. A person with a mind of emptiness 虛 should be

modest and open enough to appreciate having this opportunity and therefore support a good degree of the freedom of expression.

Conclusion

I have explored the internal tensions within Xunzi's theory of knowledge. I have argued that if one follows Xunzi's own theory of moral understanding and learning, one would be led to doubt his optimism about the existence of sage-kings and challenge his dogmatism and authoritarianism. From a Confucian perspective, the element of epistemological modesty in Xunzi's thought (though I certainly do not mean to say that Xunzi is modest epistemologically) and his emphasis on the limitations of the human mind deserve to be taken seriously, for this is one important insight that enables Confucianism to better grapple with diversity and differences in the contemporary world. Epistemological modesty is also important in its own right. The world today is troubled by fanatical fundamentalism and nihilism. Epistemological modesty, which is neither fanatical nor nihilist, is a workable basis for toleration.⁵

⁵ Needless to say, toleration is not an absolute value or policy. Neither is epistemological modesty intended to be a justification for absolute toleration. Both toleration and epistemological modesty are a matter of degree.