Curie Virág

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Introduction

The recent scholarly enthusiasm for restoring the emotions to its presumably rightful status has found common cause with proponents of a certain narrative of traditional Chinese thought.¹ According to this narrative, early Chinese thinkers, in contrast to their rationalist counterparts in the West, did not clearly distinguish between reason and emotion. Instead, they believed that cognitive and emotional processes were integrated, and flowed out of a single, unitary process.² This view of China as essentially “holistic” in intellectual and spiritual orientation is a seductive myth with a long history. And it continues to captivate scholars who seek to find, in some idealized Other, an alternative to the rational philosophical discourse that developed in the West. More recently, a number of scholars have countered the narrative of Chinese holism in its various guises.³ Edward Slingerland, for instance, has contended that Chinese thinkers, from around the fourth century onwards, became increasingly aware of the “higher” cognitive capacities of the human mind (xīn 心),⁴ as distinct from its more emotional processes, and that we can discern in early Chinese thought a “weak dualism” in which mind and body remained “functionally and qualitatively


⁴ Xin is a notoriously difficult term to translate. There exist numerous standard translations of this term, including not only “heart” and “mind” but also awkward hybrid versions such as “heart-mind”, “heart-and-mind”, “heart/mind” and so on. Here I will adhere to the Chinese and leave it untranslated to allow its shifting meanings to emerge in the context of its varying uses.
distinct”. Such a level of dualism, Slingerland concludes, is “likely to be a human cognitive universal”.

The recognition that early Chinese thinkers appreciated the cognitive capacities of the mind represents an important advancement over previous approaches, which did not much acknowledge the profound concern among early philosophers with knowledge and intelligent perception as vital features of the sagely ideal. However, the proposition that Chinese and Western thinking can be characterized as having either an integrated or bifurcated view of cognition and feeling, reason and emotion, only takes us so far. It cannot take into account, for instance, the tremendous diversity of views in both traditions or the fact of change over time. Moreover, in replacing a unitary vision with a dualistic one, it introduces deep oppositions into the reading of early Chinese thought – oppositions that are not necessarily applicable, and that may obscure the ways in which cognition and feeling were linked together by early Chinese philosophers. Between holism and dualism, or even between holism and “weak dualism”, there is much room for refinement.

My goal in this paper is to flesh out some of the distinctive features of the discourse of emotions and cognition in three major philosophical texts from the fourth and third centuries B.C.: the Mencius, the Daodejing, and the Xunzi. A basic premise of my study is that a sound understanding of the emotions and their ethical significance in these texts requires an approach that recognizes the multiple ontological layers at which emotions operate. Thus, while these layers are linked insofar as they relate to a certain basic repertoire of feelings that are recognized as more or less universal among human beings – joy (xi 喜), anger (nu 怒), sadness (ai 哀), and delight/pleasure (le 樂), desire (yu 欲) – these can refer to quite a range of experiences, from immediate, physiological reactions to stimuli, to judgments and evaluations, to the patterned workings of nature within human beings.

Much of what has been understood as “emotions” in the existing Sinological literature has recognized only a part of this broad spectrum, either collapsing them into the realm of the cognitive or rational, or else opposing it to this realm. Without erasing the meaningfulness of the categories of the emotive and the cognitive, I propose that we might productively discuss how the two might be connected insofar as both are of fundamental importance in the ethical enterprise of apprehending, and properly engaging with, the world. In advocating that we go beyond the dichotomy of “holism” and “dualism”, my basic aim is to highlight the role of emotions within a general move in the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.) towards a naturalistic understanding of

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the world, and towards a conception of human beings as capable of achieving true knowledge about this world.\(^6\)

I specifically seek to counter the idea, closely linked to the widespread characterization of Chinese ethical thought as “emotional” or “practical” in orientation, that Chinese thinkers were not concerned with knowledge as such, or with justifying knowledge on the basis of non-subjective criteria.\(^7\) In exploring a broader array of functions that early Chinese thinkers attributed to the emotions – including the cognitive – I would like to link the discourse of emotions in early China with an emergent concern with understanding the world and recognizing its underlying patterns. In speaking of emotions, then, we are not necessarily dealing with a domain that is subjective, individual, or counter to reason: as the philosopher Li Zehou has stressed in the context of early Chinese music theory, we are concerned, rather, with the endeavor to link up to what we might call the “law, order, and logic of the cosmos”\(^8\).

A brief note about my sources and method. I have chosen to focus on canonical writings that represent the mainstream philosophical tradition in China, rather than bring to light more obscure and little-known texts. My reason for doing so is that I am interested in understanding the character of the mainstream line of ethical thought that came to win out over other possibilities. The question of why this line became the dominant tradition is itself a question of profound historical significance.\(^9\) Moreover, if we consider the broad range of possible definitions and interpretations of the emotions, this mainstream tradition offers a way of thinking about emotions that contrasts markedly with a widespread modern conception of emotions as mere physiological feelings of attraction and repulsion to external stimuli.\(^10\) In its recognition of the way in which

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\(^7\) Such a conception has been prevalent not only among Western scholars of China, but also among Chinese scholars reflecting on the Chinese tradition. Xu Fuguan (1903-1982), for instance, argued that intellectual curiosity about the world was not an important priority among early Chinese thinkers, in contrast to the ancient Greeks, who envisioned humans as rational beings and pursued knowledge as a goal in itself. In *Zhongguo renxinglun shi* 中國人性論史(The History of the Theory of Human Nature in China), Beijing, Hong shifandaxue chubanshe, 2005.


\(^10\) Among early Chinese writings, the excavated texts from the Guodian tombs, such as the “Xing zi ming chu”, contain accounts of emotions that are much closer to the reactive, physiological accounts given by modern psychologists like William James. For an analysis of the “Xing zi ming chu”, see Michael Puett, “The Ethics of
emotions could represent patterned forms of responsiveness to the world, and are therefore
cognitive in orientation, the mainstream Chinese tradition has more in common with premodern
Western thinking about emotions, as well as with important lines of 20th century reflections on the

Understandably, it is this mainstream tradition that has been the topic of major scholarly
controversies involving early Chinese philosophical texts, since these disputes ultimately have to do
with the legacy of the early ethical tradition, and how it shaped thought and values in subsequent
centuries. The task of envisioning the full range of ideas proposed by early Chinese thinkers would
necessitate exploring a more diverse range of texts, including those that have not been much
studied. While this is certainly a worthwhile project, it is not the goal of the present essay. The
priority here, rather, is to take up the issue of how the early Chinese philosophical tradition has
been approached by major interpreters of this tradition, focusing on one of its most important
bones of contention, namely the issue of how early Chinese thinkers envisioned the relationship
between what we might call cognition and feeling. Although this is an issue that has particularly
interested recent Anglo-American Sinologists, the approaches they challenge are of direct
relevance to most Sinological scholarship on early philosophy, from China to Europe and beyond.

The primary goal of this study, then, is not empirical but interpretive: it is not to fill in missing
pieces of a bigger picture whose contours are familiar, but to interrogate the picture itself – to
confront those persistent assumptions with which scholars have approached the emotions and
understood their ethical significance in the early Chinese tradition. It thus calls attention to the fact
that deep-seated presuppositions about reason and feeling – and correspondingly, about human
agency – have been at work in the interpretation of early Chinese thought. I will argue that the
ways in which these categories have been deployed in Western Sinological scholarship have led to
the imposition of dichotomies and distinctions that are not necessarily apt in the early Chinese, and
that what is needed is an interpretive strategy that can overcome some of their limits without
abandoning their relevance altogether. My discussion will focus on one concept of crucial
significance: that of \textit{xin} – the mind or heart. As has been widely observed, the mainstream
philosophical tradition in China conceived of the \textit{xin} is a site of both cognition and feelings. In these
writings, we find a tension between these two functions, but also a recognition that the highest
level of ethical attainment involves their harmonization. This bespeaks not so much a ready
acceptance of the integration of emotion and cognition, so much as an \textit{argument} that the gap
between the two ought to be overcome. Moreover, any “higher” resolution of the tension posed by
emotive and cognitive sources of moral direction is not to be achieved theoretically, but through

the awareness and practical action of the fully realized individual – the sage or the junzi (『superior person』) – which involved, as it were, a technē, suggesting an ideal and a method of integrating oneself with the workings of the reality as such.

Developing a taste for virtue in Mencius

Mencius (Mengzi 孟子, 372 B.C.E-289 B.C.E) was the most influential latter-day disciple of Confucius. Like many of his contemporaries, Mencius assumed that what defined human beings were certain biologically-rooted preferences and inclinations, such as their desire for food, drink and sex. Mencius argued, moreover, that the basic moral virtues – humaneness (ren 仁), rightness (yi 義), ritual propriety (li 礼) and wisdom (zhi 智) – could be traced back to a set of emotive “sprouts” (duan 端) that all human beings shared, namely, “pity and compassion”, “shame and aversion”, “courtesy and modesty”, and a sense of “right and wrong”. These sprouts were the origins of virtue. To be sure, the sprouts of virtue in themselves did not bring about goodness in human beings; they had to be properly “extended” (tui 推) if they were to develop into full-fledged virtue. But this process of extension in the endeavor to realize our moral potential was accompanied by a certain inherent satisfaction of our desires, and thus led to pleasure and emotional fulfillment. Emphasizing this latter point, a number of scholars, including Bryan Van Norden, Craig Ihara and James Behuniak, have stressed that emotive and cognitive sources of motivation cannot be so clearly distinguished in Mencius’ thought, but must be seen as fundamentally integrated.12

If we examine Mencius’ conception of xin, we notice some complications with such an approach. For Mencius, xin is the locus of spontaneous moral feelings and also the faculty of intelligence and moral judgment. But on a number of occasions, he clearly describes this xin as fundamentally distinct from the other bodily senses because of its capacity to think (si 思):

The organs of hearing and sight are unable to think and can be misled by external things. When one thing acts on another, all it does is to attract it. The organ of the xin can think.

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But it will find the answer only if it does think; otherwise, it will not find the answer. This is what Heaven has given me.\textsuperscript{13}

While the senses were vulnerable to the push and pull of external things (\textit{wu} 物), the \textit{xin}’s capacity for thought allowed it to resist the onslaught of things and pursue something other than what it might be immediately attracted to at a given moment. It was thus desirable to cultivate an «unmoved \textit{xin}» (budongxin 不動心) or to possess a “fixed \textit{xin} (heng \textit{xin} 恆心)\textsuperscript{14} that could remain constant in the midst of changing circumstances. \textit{Xin}, then, was the site of both the biologically-rooted “moral feelings” as well as of judgment that could transcend the attractions of the bodily senses. Mencius continued to adhere to the idea that spontaneous feelings aroused by the senses were a necessary feature of moral inclination. But through his reassessment of \textit{xin} as an independent locus of cognition and moral awareness, he also insisted on its ability to rise above these feelings.

What do we make of this two-fold account? It is clear that Mencius makes a distinction between thinking vs. feeling, if by feeling we refer to unreflective attraction and responsiveness to external stimuli. But there is also feeling involved in the beginning of morally inclined sentiments leading to virtues such as humaneness. Benjamin Schwartz has concluded from this that that there exists in Mencius’ thinking a dichotomy between thinking and feeling. Less charitably, Edward Slingerland points to an internal contradiction between two competing metaphors: the “purely inclinational ideal” of \textit{wuwei} 無為 that is “characterized by a feeling of spontaneous ease and graceful effortlessness”, and the “externalist” ideal involving the use of force outside the self.\textsuperscript{15} Slingerland explains the coexistence of these incompatible metaphors as a kind of \textit{ad hoc} measure deployed by Mencius to address the limits of a moral theory based purely upon inclination.\textsuperscript{16}

Part of the problem is terminological: both Schwartz and Slingerland work from within a conventional modern language that makes a categorical distinction between feeling and thinking.

But if Mencius holds that moral motivation is not constituted by emotions and desires, neither does he simply bifurcate the two and explain proper motivation as independent of such feelings and desires. One way of breaking it down is to consider the relationship as part of a process of self-cultivation that involves not only “making the desires few” (\textit{gua yu} 寡欲), but also “nurturing the

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Mencius} 6A15. Passage citations follow the format of D.C. \textsc{Lau}, Ho Che \textsc{Wah} and Chen Fong \textsc{Ching} eds., \textit{A Concordance to the Mengzi} (\textit{Mengzi zhou zi suo yin} 孟子逐字索引), Hong Kong, Commercial Press, 1995 (Hereafter \textit{ICS Mengzi}), 11.15/60/27-11.15/61/1. Translation adapted from D.C. \textsc{Lau}, \textit{Mencius}, London, England, Penguin Books, 1970, p. 168.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Mencius} 2A2. \textit{ICS Mengzi} 3.2/15/1.

\textsuperscript{15} \textsc{Slingerland}, 2003, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{16} \textsc{Slingerland}, 2003, p. 172.
Although nature”, brightness, pleasure and potentiality for thought and detached judgment, xin desires and experiences pleasure like the ordinary sense faculties. As part of our natural, physical endowment, it seeks out, and experiences pleasure in the objects of its preference, just as the mouth, ear and eyes desire and experience pleasure in things they crave, such as delicious food and beautiful objects. In the end, it is only when feelings are cultivated in the right way, through the exercise of one’s capacity to think and reflect, that they become part of an intelligent structure of responsiveness.

Although Mencius has little to say about the actual technique of cultivating one’s responsiveness – in significant contrast to Xunzi, for whom the issue was quite central – his appeal to the workings of nature is crucial. As Irene Bloom has emphasized, when Mencius speaks of xing or “human nature”, he is in fact speaking of a nature in a biological sense.19 I would argue, however, that the “natural” goes even further to encompass the broader natural world beyond the borders of the

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human person, and that, if Mencius does not theorize much about the cosmos as such, his recurring references to plants, animals and the dynamics of water suggest a concern with the workings of the natural world more generally. It is more than a matter of using imagery for explanatory purposes. This is of central relevance to our discussion of emotions. For what it means is that, for Mencius, the feelings and desires are part of a patterned mechanism of human responsiveness and are thus potentially a source by which the world – and, by extension, the proper course of human action – could be known.

We are not, then, necessarily confronted with the irreconcilable options of spontaneous feelings, on the one hand, and higher cognition and judgment, on the other. The various functions that Mencius attributes to the xin – the heart as well as mind – do not necessarily conflict, nor are they to be conflated. Like a number of his contemporaries, Mencius recognized that human emotions, being deeply intertwined with bodily processes, were vulnerable to the push and pull of external things (wu 物) and easily shaped by their environment. He thus highlighted the distinction between the passive operations of the senses and the xin’s capacity to think and reflect. But his insistence upon the rootedness of moral potential in natural and emotional inclinations, as captured in his theory of the «goodness» of human nature, is critical to his moral theory. The gap between the two called for a way to reconcile them through a process of growth and development that could only be fulfilled by those who undertook to examine themselves and nurture their morally-disposed feelings by developing a «taste» for virtue.21 This would ensure that morality would be in harmony with the spontaneous workings of our emotions, without becoming an artificial construct that needed to be imposed upon our “natural” feelings and desires.

Desire and the multiple levels of knowing in the Daodejing

The Daodejing is often read as an ascetic text that rejects both the emotional and cognitive processes of the mind as obstacles to the supreme goal of attaining oneness with the Dao, conceived here as the natural and spontaneous workings of the cosmos itself. For instance, unlike in the Mencius, where the xin’s capacity to think and reflect serves as a counterbalance to the force of sensual appetite, the Daodejing has little regard for what the intelligent workings of the xin can offer to humankind. Indeed, as the interface between the «natural» human being and the world, the xin is opposed to the natural and spontaneous workings of things themselves: “When the xin directs the physical force (qi 氣), it is called ‘forcing’ (qiang 強)”22. If Mencius relies on the xin to control and direct the physical force, the Daodejing insists that the xin’s activity of directing the qi is a form of violence. The aspiring sage should thus try to cultivate stillness and emptiness in the xin –


both in his own and in those of the people. The sage is to “have no constant xin of his own” (wu chang xin 無常心),23 and in ruling the people, he “empties their xin (xu qi xin 虚其心)”, “fills their bellies”, and brings it about that they are “without knowledge and without desire” so that they do not dare to act.24

The text similarly disapproves of emotions, desires and sense perceptions as self-destructive obstacles that hinder one’s proper goal of intuiting the Dao and living in accordance with it. While it denounces certain specific emotions, such as anger (nu 怒) and courage (yong 勇), the focus of concern is the problem of desire (yu 欲). Chapter 19 states that one who seeks to emulate the Dao should strive to «have little thought of self and as few desires as possible» (shao si gua yu 少私寡欲). Elsewhere we find these lines:

There is no crime greater than having too many desires (ke yu 可欲);
There is no disaster greater than not being content;
There is no misfortune greater than being covetous (yu de 欲得).25

In this text, yu refers specifically to a kind of grasping desire that is particular to human beings and that is aroused by the attractions of the senses. A number of passages warn against the dangers of the senses of sight, hearing, and taste, which can easily fall prey to an indulgence that can undermine their proper workings:

The five colors make man’s eyes blind;
The five notes make his ears deaf;
The five tastes injure his palate. (Ch. 12)

The basic problem here seems to reside in the human body’s susceptibility to invite sources of its own distress. “The reason I have great trouble”, we learn in Chapter 13, “is that I have a body (shen 身). When I no longer have a body, what trouble do I have?” But this is not a rejection of the body and the material world per se. Some biologically-driven desires, such as those for food, drink, comfort and sex, are capable of being “satisfied” (zu 足) and should be satisfied. So should the aspiration of rulers for political success, provided that it be directed towards the moderate goals of achieving a stable and viable state in which the people are left in peace to pursue their livelihood. In contrast to these are the “unnatural” desires caused by sensual attraction: created (zuo 作) by the “sharp” tools and ingenuity of civilized life, they are directed towards things that exceed the basic requirements of life. And because they represent an incessant yearning for new sources of pleasure and delight, such desires simply perpetuate themselves and “can never be satisfied (bu zhi zu 不知足)".

23 Daodejing Ch. 49.
24 Daodejing Ch. 2.
25 Daodejing Ch. 46.
The Daodejing’s ethical standpoint vis-à-vis desire is further complicated by its role in a multi-layered vision of perception and knowing. While the text clearly dismisses sensually indulgent desires and narrow forms of knowing, it seems to embrace what it regards as higher versions of these processes. It neither calls for a wholesale rejection of the realm of desires as an obstacle to unity with the Dao, nor does it despair of the possibility of knowledge and understanding. Instead, it points to more optimal realizations of both. At the highest level of sagely perception, there exist multiple levels of knowledge—one achieved through desirelessness, the other through the possession of desire. Desire can become a vehicle for knowledge and is bound up with the achievement of power and efficacy (de 德) in the world. The consumate awareness of the sage is rooted in his ability to transcend his human desires and yet remain connected to them, which enhances his potency and his ability to achieve his ends. This, then, is the paradox of wisdom in the Daodejing—a paradox that takes as its starting point the tension between emotions and desires, on the one hand, and higher perception and proper action, on the other. It is this very paradox that is presented in the opening passage of the text:

The Dao that can be spoken of is not the constant Dao

The name that can be named is not the constant name.

The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;

The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

Hence always be without desire in order to observe its secrets (miao 妙);

But always allow yourself to have desires (chang you yu 常有欲)

So as to observe its manifestation (jiao 徵)

These two are the same but diverge in name as they issue forth.

Being the same they are called mysteries

Mystery upon mystery—

The gateway of the manifold secrets. (Ch. 1)

The injunction to be “constantly without desire (chang wu yu 常無欲)” and yet “constantly possess desire (chang you yu 常有欲)” has baffled many a translator. Many older translations have rejected the possibility that desire plays a role in apprehending the Dao, and have thus translated the passage to mean that desire amounts to approaching the Dao through a perceptual veil which
allows one to see merely its jiao – its “outer fringe”, “mere shell”, or “Outcomes” (Waley 1934). This approach is usually based on a dualism of corrupt matter/transcendent truth, apparently inspired either by a Platonic/Christian perspective or by Buddhism. Others have avoided the issue altogether by simply ignoring the passage.

Alternatively, one might accept the injunction to possess desire as part of a two-fold path of knowing, in which both the conditions of having and not having desire are necessary for perceiving different dimensions of the Dao – its jiao (“manifestation”) as well as its miao (“mystery”). The 1884 translation of Frederick Balfour underscores the necessity of both these aspects:

It is therefore in habitual passionlessness [the Quiescent phase of DAO] that its mystery may be scanned;
And in habitual desire [the Active phase of DAO] that its developments may be perceived.

The injunction to constantly have desire but also constantly be without it could then mean that both are necessary, at different levels and at different times. If it is only by way of rising above our human desires that we can achieve deep insight into the Dao, it is nevertheless through the functioning of these very desires that we can fathom its actual workings in the real world. Rather than ignoring the role of desire, we might explain it as part of a more complex, multi-layered conception of knowledge and understanding – one that takes into account the understanding that accompanies the experience of desire.


One way to think about how desire and desirelessness can work in tandem would be to consider it as self-consciousness in the form of awareness of one’s own desires. It is possible to have desires and, at the same time, step out of oneself and the immediacy of one’s desires so that one sees the workings of desire in oneself. One is self-aware of one’s own desiring and non-desiring. Here, as in the Mencius, moral self-realization depends on a recognition of one’s emotions and desires as part of the natural workings within oneself. The importance of this higher psychological perspective, as it were, shows how desire can be both a vehicle and a precondition for knowledge and insight about oneself and the world. It also points to an ethical vision in which living in accordance with the Dao depends on being in tune with one’s inner promptings and desires.

If we consider how the Daodejing evokes multiple levels of knowing through the power of negation and contradiction, one of its most puzzling passages becomes more readily explicable as a statement about the complex nature of reality and about how one can come to abide by it. Working through the inherently problematic medium of language, which it constantly seeks to undermine, the Daodejing deploys paradox – rooted in the very tension between knowledge and desire – to appeal to the desiring minds of individuals. In the spaces within this paradox is a Dao that reveals itself by activating desire as well as the intellect. The ultimate “teachings” of this text are thus not transmitted so much as evoked, and its message is to be found beyond the surface of the text and beyond the categorizing mind, in the realm of the deep knowing of the human subject.

Xunzi: Two models of the mind

In the infamous chapter titled “Human nature is bad” (xing’恶), Xunzi 荀子 (c. 310-c. 230 B.C.) challenged Mencius’ claim that the beginnings of virtue lay in human nature (xing 性) – in certain spontaneous inclinations and tendencies that all human beings possessed innately. He emphasized, instead, that human nature worked at cross purposes with virtue, since it was inclined to pursue selfish desires rather than what was good and proper. What made goodness possible was our capacity to override our physical desires and yearnings, and to choose the right course of action, as when we suppressed our own hunger to offer our food to a person in need. This capacity, which Xunzi referred to as wei 为 or “conscious exertion”, was due to the workings of human intelligence. Xunzi’s basic distinction between xing vs. wei, the inborn nature vs. conscious exertion, comprised the basis of a moral dichotomy between the spontaneous, “unthinking” realm of feelings, desires, and physical impulses, on the one hand, and the reasoned process of thinking (li 直) and reflection (si 思), on the other:

The sage accumulates reflections and thoughts (ji si lü 积思慮), and practices conscious effort and reasoned activities (xi wei gu 巧偽故) so as to produce ritual and rightness, and establish proper models and measures. Thus, ritual and rightness, proper models and measures, are produced from the deliberate efforts of the sage; they are not produced from people’s nature.29

29 Xunzi Yinde (A Concordance to Xunzi). Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 22, 23/114/8-13. Translations of longer passages from the Xunzi are mostly modified from two main sources:
While the natural human disposition, which preferred pleasurable sights, sounds, flavors, and personal benefit, responded spontaneously when “stimulated (gan 感)” and did not “await being worked at” (bu dai shi 不待事), the thought that produced ritual and rightness involved reasoned consideration and effort. Through wei, people’s originally amoral or immoral tendencies could be reformed and made “good”.

It would appear, then, that for Xunzi, virtue was strictly a matter of overcoming deviant emotions and desires through reason. A number of scholars have, accordingly, differentiated the moral approaches of Mencius and Xunzi in terms of a distinction between emotion-based and reason-based sources of moral direction, with reason constituting an “external” force of goodness and emotions comprising the “internal” force of badness. Schwartz notes that, whereas with Mencius “we have a natural, dynamic tendency to growth”, with Xunzi “we have bare intellectual capacity” and a model of sagehood in which certain extraordinary individuals managed to overcome their brutish nature and internalize ritual propriety and rightness by means of “their enormous intellectual exertions and insights”. Edward Slingerland and Torbjörn Lodén have also focused on the “rationalist” approach to morality in Xunzi—the latter describing Xunzi’s account of self-cultivation explicitly as a movement away from feeling towards reason:

Xunzi emphasizes the opposition between original evil and acquired goodness, and this opposition seems to involve feelings and reason. Original human nature gravitates toward the realm of feeling and emotion, whereas the personality of the noble person or the sage, and his acquired goodness, gravitates toward the realm of reason.\(^{31}\)

While Xunzi does envision a basic contrast between the emotions and dispositions of human nature, and the reasoned activities of conscious exertion, we cannot conclude from this a dichotomy of reason vs. emotions. Xunzi’s ethical vision is far more complex than what such a dichotomy would suggest, and involves a significant positive role for emotions. For one thing, at a certain level, emotions are simply human givens. In Ch. 17, Xunzi describes the feelings of love, hate, delight, anger, sorrow, and joy as “the emotions given by Heaven/Nature” (tian qing 天情) and the sense faculties of the eyes, ear, nose, mouth, and body as “the faculties given by Heaven/Nature” (tian guan 天官). The sage is one who “nurtures his Heavenly/Natural emotions” and “follows his desires”\(^{32}\) while enabling the people to do the same: he “nurtures people’s desires” (yang ren zhi yu 養人之欲) and “satisfies their seeking” (gei ren zhi qiu 給人之求).

\(^{30}\) Schwartz, p. 300.


\(^{32}\) In Chs. 17 and 21, respectively.
The basic human emotions and desires are, then, vital features of what it means to be human, and while they could impel us towards badness, they are also the foundation of our existence and of our engagement with the world. Thus, even if “badness” in human beings could be traced back to certain basic instincts and desires, it does not follow that goodness is simply a matter of reason overcoming emotions, or that one could not—without contradiction—recognize emotions as forms of understanding or proper responsiveness. However, much of the existing scholarship has tended to proceed from such assumptions, and to recognize a basic opposition between Xunzi’s reference to these “Heavenly emotions” and his pessimistic view of emotions and desires in his account of human nature. A.C. Graham has read the coexistence of these seemingly opposing claims as an indication of conflicting impulses within Xunzi, and speculates that they might represent an evolution in his thinking. Michael Puett explains the tension in terms of an “ambivalence” towards emotions stemming ultimately from the rhetorical need to make two distinct assertions to justify the traditional rituals handed down from the ancients. That is, Xunzi was committed to the necessity of ancient rituals (for controlling qing), but also needed to explain that these rituals were objectively proper (thus according with qing).

While it is conceivable that Xunzi changed his mind, and probable that he was faced with multiple competing rhetorical exigencies, we might also explain these seemingly contradictory accounts of emotions by way of certain intrinsic features of his thought. Considered in light of other passages in Xunzi’s text, this apparent shiftiness can be taken as part of a move towards a more complex paradigm of self in which the emotions are present in multiple layers of human responsiveness and engagement with the world, from the most immediate level of sensual desire for bodily satisfaction[,] to righteous indignation at an injustice. For Xunzi, emotions could very well represent right forms of responding to situations, which are arguably derived from an innate capacity to distinguish right from wrong, what is acceptable and what is not. And as in the Mencius and the Daodejing, the potential normativity of the emotions was based on a recognition that they were part of the natural dynamics that operated within human beings—and therefore, on their commonality with the patterns of the natural world more broadly, which were coming into view during the Warring States period. Correspondingly, moral agency came to be understood increasingly in terms of a capacity to contend with multiple levels of inclinations, and to navigate the possible conflicts among them.

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34 Puett, p. 56-58.

35 See, for instance, Xunzi’s extended criticism of Songzi 宋子 (Song Xing) in Ch. 17 for failing to give due weight to the reality of human desires. Xunzi Yinde 64/17/52.

36 The naturalism of Xunzi’s ethics has been an important topic of recent Sinological research. For a recent study and overview of major issues in this discussion, see Sor-hoon TAN, “Xunzi and Naturalistic Ethics”, in Journal of Value Inquiry, 49, Jan 2015, p. 247-265.
For Xunzi, then, the ethical project of human beings was not about overcoming feelings through reason, or imposing external norms upon raw and inchoate inclinations. Instead, it was about arriving at the optimal course of action given these contending forces. Xunzi shared with Mencius the awareness that the moral cultivation of the individual began with the reality of human feelings and desires, and with the natural human drive to fulfill them. These emotions and desires did not necessarily conflict with morality, but neither did they spontaneously lead to it. What they required for their proper realization was that they be developed and appropriately channeled through deliberate human effort. This was larger project of ritual (li 禮), the centerpiece of Xunzi’s vision of self-cultivation. As Xunzi describes at great length, ritual was primarily about giving proper form and expression to emotions as they arose in particular situations. Within the extended trajectory of a person’s life, ritual was a vehicle through which one’s emotions and inclinations came to recognize, appreciate, and desire goodness and virtue. It was also, crucially, efficacious insofar as it was designed to properly minister to the emotional workings of human beings.

The locus and crucible of all of this effort was the xin. Xunzi embraces at least two distinct conceptions of xin, corresponding to two distinct forms of knowledge. He captures this duality and its apparent paradoxes in the “Dispelling Fixations” chapter (Ch. 21, Jiebi), where he compares the xin variously to a pan of clear water as well as to an empty vessel that can accumulate and contain things. Paradoxically, then, this mind embodies seemingly opposing qualities: it can be empty and yet full, still and yet in motion, one and yet two:

How does the xin know the Way? I say that it is by its emptiness (xu 空), unity (yi 異), and stillness (jing 靜). The xin never stops storing; nonetheless it possesses what is called emptiness. The xin never lacks duality; nonetheless it possesses what is called unity. The xin never stops moving; nonetheless it possesses what is called stillness. Humans from birth have awareness. Having awareness, there is memory. Memories are what are stored, yet the xin has the property called emptiness. Not allowing what has previously been stored to interfere with what is being received in the xin is called emptiness.

The xin thus possesses multiple functions and identities, embodying both emptiness and fullness, movement and stillness. Because it can always remain still, empty and impartial, it is capable of clear and undistorted perception of the world; but because it is empty, it is always receptive to things and can accumulate experiences.

These two paradigms of xin reflect two distinct accounts of knowledge: on the one hand, the achievement of a balanced, objective, and broad perspective onto things, and, on the other, the accumulation of experience (ji 積). But they also correspond to two different ways in which knowledge relates to emotions. The idea of knowledge as clear perception emphasizes


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comprehensive understanding that culminates in knowledge of the “underlying pattern of things” (wu zhi li 物之理也).\textsuperscript{39} This is to be contrasted with the more limited knowledge of particular things. The difference between the two is the difference between the knowing of «one who is expert in regard to things» (精於物者) and “one who is expert in regard to the Way” (精於道者也): while the former considers only “one thing against another” (yi wu wu 以物物), the latter “measures all things together” (lian wu wu 兼物物).\textsuperscript{40}

The paradigm of knowledge as comprehensive and balanced perception suggests a kind of objectivity that is achieved through one’s ability to detach oneself sufficiently from the particularities of one’s situation so as to have mastery over one’s emotions and desires, but not necessarily to transcend the experience of emotions. This is what Lee Yearley has referred to as Xunzi’s notion of the xin as a “spectator”. In this conception, the xin “can view with detachment the emotions generated by desire” without having to eradicate the desires altogether.\textsuperscript{41} This means that if emotions and desires can be problematic, they are not necessarily so, since the xin’s capacity for knowledge enables it to engage with them and arrive at the proper course of action. Among other things, it is capable of deliberation (lu 盪), which Xunzi explains as “when there is a certain emotion and the xin chooses on its behalf” (情然而心為之擇謂之慮). Building upon this idea, he explains wei or conscious effort as “when the xin deliberates and one’s abilities move on its behalf”, and also “what comes into being through accumulated reflection (lu ze 盪積) and the training of one’s abilities”.\textsuperscript{42} In defining deliberation as a matter of the xin making a choice on behalf of emotions, Xunzi asserts the independence of the cognitive faculty but also assumes its cooperation with the emotions. He also links “conscious effort” with deliberation, indicating that the efforts that give rise to goodness in human life require the involvement of knowledge and judgment. Instead of a dichotomous theoretical model of xing vs. wei, feeling vs. thought, internality vs. externality, we have a model of practical self-realization that shows how the innate nature and conscious effort, feeling and deliberation, should ultimately work in tandem.

The other paradigm of knowledge as “accumulation (ji 積)” refers to a gradual and cumulative process based on direct, sensory engagement with the world.\textsuperscript{43} This type of knowing stresses the

\textsuperscript{39} Xunzi Yinde 82/21/79.

\textsuperscript{40} Xunzi Yinde 80/21/51-52. Hutton 230. Cf. the preceding paragraph, where Xunzi refers to the ideal of knowing whereby “the myriad things can all be known together” (wan wu ke lian zhi ye 萬物可兼知也).


\textsuperscript{42} Xunzi Yinde 83/22/2-4.

\textsuperscript{43} David Nivison has persuasively shown that, despite the resemblance of the balanced objective knowledge of the sage to Daoist knowing, Xunzi’s vision does not signify an ideal of detachment. D. Nivison, “Xunzi and Zhuangzi”, in Kline and Ivanhoe, 2000, p. 176-187.
role of practice and repeated effort in the endeavor to cultivate oneself. In Ch. 1, “Exhortation to Learning (quanting 劉學)” Xunzi compares the process of learning to accumulating earth to form a mountain, which gives rise to wind and rain, and to accumulating water to form a deep pool, which “produces dragons”. Similarly, he speaks of virtue (de 德) in terms of an accumulation of goodness (ji shan 積善) that naturally leads to the achievement of “spiritual intelligence” (shen ming 神明). This is a vision of self-realization that depends upon gradual and cumulative effort: “without accumulating steps there is no way to travel a thousand li; without accumulating small streams, there is no way to form a river or sea”. Cultivating oneself to become a sage is, in this sense, no different from training oneself to become a farmer, a craftsman, or a merchant: attainment of any sort is to be understood as a matter of “accumulating” experience.

Conceived in this way, the path to sagehood is one in which emotions and desires are not simply unruly forces that need to be controlled, directed and mastered: as the very basis of human motivation and experience, they play an active and determinative role in moral life. Sagehood requires, in the first instance, a commitment to achieve it, and this is itself a form of desire. That is, it is not simply a matter of reason overcoming desire, but of committing to one type of desire over another. At some level, this signals a reasoned choice of preferences: as Lee Yearley has argued, the choice ultimately comes down to a preference for “long-range desires”, which broadly considers one’s needs, over “short-range and narrowly selfish desires”. It accords with Xunzi’s larger ethical concern with fulfilling human potential and of achieving long-lasting satisfaction. But Xunzi also remains committed to the idea that the true criterion of virtue is that it be spontaneous and motivated from within, and not imposed from without.

Xunzi’s cumulative model of knowledge, then, defines virtue and rightness as a matter of having right feelings. Virtue can never be perfected if one merely follows external patterns of behavior or passively internalizes forms of knowledge: perfect virtue must be perfectly spontaneous. Xunzi thus follows Confucius in insisting that the sage is one for whom the distinction between what one ought to do and what one desires to do must ultimately disappear. True learning is a process of self-cultivation that inspires a desire for right action, and it is this desire that differentiates the sage from the “petty person” and that represents the depth of the learning of the fully-realized individual. As Xunzi describes it, the learning of the junzi radiates through his entire body: it “enters through his ears, fastens through his heart, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions”. In contrast, the learning of the petty person likewise enters through the ears but

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44 Xunzi Yinde 2/1/18.
46 YEARLEY, p. 466.
47 See e.g. Analects 2.4.
48 Xunzi Yinde 2/1/31.
does not enter his heart and body: it proceeds directly to his mouth, remaining therefore on the surface and having no transformative effect on his person. A petty person is thus able to speak the language of propriety but does not embody it. He has no genuine feelings to authenticate his virtue.

Conclusion

The three texts examined here share a common awareness of the moral dangers posed by the bodily impulses, feelings and desires, and of the importance of exercising one’s intelligent mind to overcome the potential pitfalls they may lead to. They exemplify the growing awareness in the fourth and third centuries B.C. of xin as a site of cognition and moral direction, capable of steering the emotions and harmonizing them with normative patterns and principles. I would submit, however, that the emergent discourse of the intelligent mind does not necessarily signal a growing bifurcation of mind and body, reason and feeling. In all three texts, there remains an insistence that self-cultivation is more than a rational endeavor to control the emotions, and that the highest moral achievement is to remain perfectly moral and perfectly spontaneous. Rather than being a site of pure intelligence, the xin is a hybrid, composite entity with multilayered functions.

To speak of the hybrid identity of xin, rather than of its holism or dualism, may seem like splitting hairs. But it signals an approach that differs fundamentally from the discussion of holism and dualism in at least one important respect: it shifts the attention from ethical theory to ethical practice. The hybridity of xin emphasizes the motivating power of an ideal of integration between intelligent awareness and emotional fulfillment. The point is not that there is or isn’t a distinction between the emotional and cognitive realms, but that the tensions posed by their encounter are what define the poles that a life of virtue should navigate. The goal of self-cultivation is to achieve a state in which the potential conflicts between them ultimately dissolve. Such a moral conception suggests a psychologically refined understanding of the emotions that recognizes their close connection to knowledge and cognition, and asserts their vital function as a source of moral direction.

The notion that self-cultivation is a matter of navigating the inherent tensions between personal, subjective experience and a higher awareness of what is right also points to a heightened awareness of moral agency in the individual. A number of recent scholars have pointed to an emergent consciousness of individual agency as a distinctive feature of intellectual developments in the Warring States period.49 While a focus on the dualism of these perspectives would suggest that the sense of agency derives from a recognition of the mind’s capacity for “higher” understanding, it is necessary to balance out this picture by stressing how this sense of agency is also fundamentally connected to the idea that emotions and their proper fulfillment have normative value, and should

not simply be subordinated to more strictly reasoned and absolute moral principles. The thinkers that have come to represent the mainstream of Chinese ethical thinking, exemplified by the three texts examined here, share the conviction that it is necessary to cultivate ourselves in such a way that we can, at the same time, follow the dictates of our hearts and do the right thing—without any affective engagement, a meaningful and orderly life is not possible.

Référence électronique


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Résumé
Autour du IVe siècle avant J-C, en Chine le terme xin 心 (« cœur », « esprit », « cœur-esprit ») commence à acquérir des fonctions cognitives distinctes. Alors que xin était jusqu’alors identifié avant tout comme le lieu du ressenti, il est dès lors compris également comme un organe de la pensée et de la réflexion. L’article examine ce développement dans la trajectoire plus large des transformations des valeurs éthiques et politiques en Chine ancienne. Il considère la conception éthique des émotions dans trois textes majeurs qui servent à définir généralement la pensée chinoise traditionnelle : le Mencius, le Tao-tê-king et le Hsiunn-tseu, et cherche à comprendre comment ces textes concevaient les rôles respectifs du penser et du sentir dans le contexte d’une vie proprement réalisée.

En étudiant les perspectives de la Chine ancienne, j’évite les deux approches usuelles, à savoir le mythe du holisme (selon lequel les penseurs chinois antiques ne distinguaient pas la cognition et les sentiments/sensations), et la supposition d’un dualisme (i.e., que certains penseurs chinois acceptaient une dichotomie stricte de la cognition et du sentir). Plutôt j’essaye de montrer que les auteurs de l’époque avaient une conscience forte de la tension potentielle entre les sources de direction cognitive et émotive, tout en montrant le souci de réconcilier cette tension par divers modèles du sujet moral. C’étaient des modèles hybrides, composites qui reconnaissaient eux-mêmes divers canaux de la connaissance, de la perception et de la compréhension et déployaient des métaphores mixtes et des paradoxes apparents. Ce qui sous-tend ces solutions diverses, c’est une conscience partagée, chez les auteurs, du fait que toute résolution de la tension doit se faire non pas sur le plan théorique, mais sur le plan de l’action pratique de l’individu entièrement réalisé – du sage ou du junzi, personne supérieure.

Abstract
Around the fourth century B.C. in China, the term xin 心 (“heart”, “mind”, “heart-mind”) came to acquire distinct cognitive functions. While xin had previously been identified primarily as a site of feeling, it now came to be understood as an organ of thought and reflection as well. My paper examines this development in the larger trajectory of shifting ethical and political values in early China. It considers the ethical conception of emotions in three major texts that would come to define the mainstream in traditional Chinese thought – the Mencius, the Daodejing, and the Xunzi – and seeks to understand how these texts conceived the respective roles of thinking and feeling in the context of the properly realized life.

In characterizing early Chinese perspectives, I avoid two common approaches: the myth of holism (i.e., early Chinese thinkers did not distinguish between cognition and feeling) and the assumption of dualism (i.e., some Chinese thinkers accepted a strict
dichotomy of cognition and feeling). I argue, rather, that these early accounts were marked by a strong consciousness of the potential tension between cognitive and emotive sources of direction, but that they also reveal a concern with reconciling this tension through various distinct models of the moral self – models that recognized multiple channels of knowledge, perception and understanding. These were hybrid, composite models that deployed mixed metaphors and apparent paradoxes. Underlying these varying solutions was a shared awareness that any resolution of the tension was not to be achieved theoretically, as it were, but at the level of the practical action of the fully realized individual – the sage or the junzi (superior person).

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : émotions, esprit, philosophie chinoise, cognition, connaissance, Daoisme, Confucianisme, éthique, désir, culture de soi

Keywords : emotions, mind, Chinese philosophy, cognition, knowledge, Daoism, Confucianism, ethics, desire, self-cultivation