

Crafting Bowls, Cultivating Sprouts: Unavoidable Tensions in Early Chinese Confucianism

Edward Slingerland¹

Published online: 2 April 2015

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

I have very much enjoyed David Wong’s essay, which has made me think in new ways about both Confucian self-cultivation and the cognitive science–Confucianism connection. The productiveness of bringing Chinese thought and contemporary psychological research into dialogue is, in my opinion, one of the more exciting trends in the study of early Chinese thought, and Wong has been one of the pioneers in this regard.

In my comments I would like to focus on a few aspects of David’s essay that have struck me as particularly illuminating, but would also like to push back a bit against his take on some of my earlier work.

1 Confucianism and Cognitive Control

Cognitive control, or the ability to suppress dominant or spontaneous reactions in favor of non-dominant reactions, is a cornerstone of post-Enlightenment “rationalist” approaches to ethics, such as deontology or utilitarianism. It is also at the heart of certain early Chinese approaches to ethics, such as Mohism, that similarly aim to substitute behavioral patterns arrived at through rational calculation—actions reflecting “impartial caring”—for our innate, spontaneous tendencies to favor family and friends. I have previously described early Confucianism as time-delayed cognitive control, where insights produced by cold cognition are built into hot using various cultural technologies (Slingerland 2011a, 2011b). In this work I have largely neglected the importance of on-line cognitive control in the Confucian scheme. Wong’s work has convinced me to rethink this, forced me to think about cognitive control enhancement in a way that I had

✉ Edward Slingerland
edward.slingerland@ubc.ca

¹ Asian Centre, University of British Columbia, 607-1871 West Mall, Vancouver, B.C., V6T 1Z2, Canada

not previously, and given me new insights into how enhanced cognitive control might be part of the early Confucian strategy.

At the heart of the so-called “situationist” critique of virtue ethics is the claim that virtue theorists such as Aristotle require too much of character traits. Aristotelian virtues are described as being close to 100% effective, capable of inspiring, say, courageous or honest actions even in situations that strongly mitigate against such behavior. As the situationists point out, several decades of work in social psychology suggest that even the most optimistic views of the power of character traits to determine behavior fall far short on this front (Harman 1999; Doris 2002). I have referred to this as the “high bar” objection: virtue ethics requires too much of virtues. In a 2011 *Ethics* piece (Slingerland 2011b), I characterized the Confucian self-cultivation strategy as involving a two-pronged approach for overcoming this high bar: creating a “higher jump,” by downloading virtuous tendencies from cold cognition into hot cognition, while simultaneously “lowering the bar” by building into the social environment a variety of situational supports designed to enhance virtue. There is also a recognizable third strategy, one that I completely neglected, but that Wong quite rightly emphasizes: the possibility of enhancing cognitive control, whether through concrete cognitive techniques or through conceptual priming. In addition to the work cited by Wong, there are other recent studies (e.g., Tang and Posner 2009) that suggest that cognitive control is very much like a muscle: subject to depletion and exhaustion when used too much, but also capable of being strengthened by exercise.

2 Confucianism and Gene-Culture Coevolution

Although the theory of gene-culture coevolution has been very much part of my intellectual life for the past several years—my UBC colleague Joseph Henrich is one of its leading proponents—I had never thought about how Xunzi’s 荀子 account of the creation of Confucian ritual could be seen from this perspective. Wong’s bringing together of cultural evolution and Xunzian thought serves to illuminate both. On the one hand, Xunzi’s account of the gradual evolution of Confucian culture, through a long process of trial and error, can serve as a powerful example—fictional or not—of how cultural evolutionary processes can cause civilized order to arise out of disorganized chaos. Cultural evolutionary theory, in turn, can provide us with coherent and broad theoretical rationale for many aspects of Xunzi’s thought. For instance, it has long been recognized that Xunzi is a strong proponent of the “externalist,” in my terminology (Slingerland 2000), or “outside-in” approach to self-cultivation: when the individual’s own intuitions or preferences clash with traditional or social authority, it is the latter that should take precedence (Kline 2000).

Many scholars of Xunzian thought have seen this as motivated by what we can call the accumulation effect: tradition, and the social authority based upon it, is the result of a long process of accumulated learning that no individual could hope to reproduce on their own (e.g., Hutton 2000). Cultural evolution adds to this the observation that there are many problems that are, in principle, unsolvable within the scope of an individual’s lifetime because the relevant causal factors can only be “perceived” on a much longer timespan. For instance, it has been argued that many food taboos, such as Fijian taboos prohibiting pregnant women from eating certain species of fish, arose through cultural

evolutionary dynamics able to pick up the long-term relationship between chronic, but mild ciguatera poisoning and birth defects, a relationship that simply cannot be observed within a single lifetime because the effects take too long to observe (Henrich and Henrich 2010). Similarly, as Neil Levy notes in his response, certain European explorers in Australia doomed themselves by ignoring native food preparation practices that had similarly evolved as responses to a form of gradual vitamin depletion resulting from the consumption of a particular plant. The take-home message of examples such as these is, as Levy notes, “in many contexts and for many purposes, we do better to adopt the practices of those doing well, without seeking to understand the deeper purpose of the ritual”—a sentiment that would have certainly warmed the cockles of Confucius’ or Xunzi’s heart. We have here a rationale for a very Confucian-sounding cultural conservatism falling out of contemporary cultural evolutionary models.

So, Wong’s essay has forced me to look at topics that are quite important to me in an entirely new light, and I think that his work allows us to look at Confucianism from a contemporary perspective in a much more sophisticated and expansive manner. Since, however, the ritually proper stance in academic philosophy is to critique, I will leave aside my admiration for what Wong has achieved in his essay, and his broader corpus of work, in order to focus on two areas where I want to continue to insist that tensions remain despite Wong’s efforts to smooth them away.

3 Conflict between the Craft and Adornment Metaphors

I have previously argued that we see a tension in the *Analects* between two sets of metaphors for self-cultivation: the *craft* metaphor whereby self-cultivation is conceived of as a forcible imposition of an externally-derived form on a shapeless, recalcitrant material, and the *adornment* metaphor, whereby self-cultivation is understood as involving merely the refinement or adornment of previously existing, inborn qualities. Moreover, I have argued that this tension is essentially reproduced in the Mencius-Xunzi debate, where the craft metaphor is revived by Xunzi to counter Mencius’ agricultural or sprout model (Slingerland 2003; cf. Ivanhoe 2000). Most broadly, the tension maps onto a debate about the relative importance of internal resources vs. external guidance, or inner reflection vs. cultural training, that characterizes the rest of East Asian religious thought, and indeed seems to be found in virtue ethical traditions throughout world history.

Wong, in contrast, argues that the craft and adornment metaphors for self-cultivation do not compete, if we properly understand them, and he does an impressive job of showing how they can be reconciled. Each is necessary, he claims, because each emphasizes one important aspect of human education or self-cultivation, and both aspects must be acknowledged. In his own contribution to this volume, SHUN Kwong-loi concurs with Wong in this regard. I want to continue to maintain that the two metaphoric models are actually not as compatible as either Wong or Shun maintains.

In the adornment or sprout metaphor, natural or pre-existing structure plays a crucial role in determining the final product: a face that is not already well-formed will not be made beautiful through cosmetics, and a barley sprout will never, no matter what sort of

cultivation it receives, produce corn. The sprout metaphor in particular is deployed to emphasize the presence of a natural telos, a normal and dynamic course of development, that is completely lacking in the craft metaphor. Raw materials are unformed stuff, with the eventual shape determined entirely from the outside. Raw materials have no natural, internal tendencies, and the end product into which they are formed is often radically different in shape. When used as source domains to structure the target domain of self-cultivation, the two metaphors have radically different entailments regarding the amount of effort that self-cultivation will require (a lot for the craft metaphor, not so much for the adornment or sprout), as well as the degree to which the final goal of self-cultivation is one imposed from outside the individual (to a great degree in the craft metaphor, much less so in the adornment or sprout).

To be sure, we can invent new metaphoric images to try to reconcile the two—for instance, Wong’s image of a tool needing to be chosen in a way that is sensitive to the requirements of the material to be worked. However, we need to see that the adornment or sprout vs. craft reformation metaphors are actually *deployed* in Warring States texts in a way that is clearly meant to emphasize radically different entailments. Part of the confusion here results from a lack of clarity about how metaphors work in discourse. Metaphors do not come with pre-set, fixed entailments: images are, rather, drawn upon in arguments to convey particular entailments that are aimed at particular targets to make very context-specific points (Slingerland 2011c). Shun is very much correct that, when we look at the use of metaphor in early Chinese discourse, they are typically being deployed, not for general theory-building, but in the service of teaching or high-stakes argumentation, so the specific metaphors being used may be very situation or listener-specific. This recognition, however, actually sharpens difference between how these two sets of metaphors are being used in Warring States China.

When we look at the sprout vs. craft metaphor, for instance, we can see that they are being used to highlight substantive differences in models of self-cultivation and to convey very different conceptions concerning the sort of resources that the individual possesses *qua* individual. The famous Mencius-Gaozi 告子 debate in the beginning of *Mencius* 6A makes this quite clear. As Wong observes, you *could* note that, when it comes to woodcarving, the carver is actually trying to work with the natural grain of the wood, or that the nature of the wood will limit the kind of cup that he can make. This is *not*, however, what Mencius had in mind: as he states quite explicitly in rejecting the carving metaphor, the making of cups and bowls out of a willow tree is an act of violence, one that *mutilates* (*qiangzei* 戕賊, lit. “mutilates and steals”) the nature of wood. Similarly, consider Xunzi’s metaphor of self-cultivation being like steaming and bending into a circle an originally straight piece of wood. One could theoretically make a similar point about the nature of the wood possibly constraining the diameter of the circle into which you can twist it, but this is not what Xunzi is after: for him, this metaphor is meant to emphasize the radically transformative nature of Confucian self-cultivation.

Also important to note is that these differences in metaphoric entailments cash out into clearly opposed practical-religious implications. Consider the relationship between the individual and his or her tradition as pictured in the *Mencius* and the *Analects*. In *Analects* 3.17, when Zigong 子貢 suggests abandoning a sheep sacrifice because no one remembers the meaning or purpose of the ritual, he is sharply rebuked by the Master for presuming that he can rely upon his own individual rationality to evaluate a cultural

tradition. Just shut up and do it, is Confucius' response—an attitude that is later echoed by Xunzi. In stark contrast, when a student comes to Mencius, troubled because a passage in the sacred *Book of History* does not accord with his own personal moral intuitions, Mencius' reply is essentially, “You can't believe everything you read in the classics” (*Mencius* 7B3). Confucius of *Analects* 3.17 would not be amused. When tradition conflicts with individual intuitions, Mencius is advising, intuitions should be given precedence.

These two very different responses reflect a tension not only within Confucianism, but one found in all religious traditions, between essentially conservative vs. liberal attitudes toward the relationship between individual intuitions/desires and traditional norms/canons. The debate often takes the form of a disagreement concerning what sort of resources are possessed by the individual *qua* individual—or, more crudely, whether human nature is prone toward good or bad. In East Asian thought, we see the conservative Confucius-Xunzi view and the liberal Mencian view resurrected in the Cheng-Zhu 程朱 vs. Lu-Wang 陸王 conflict in neo-Confucianism. Even though Mencius has “won,” and his view that human nature is good has been enshrined as orthodoxy, we see ZHU Xi 朱熹 defending cultural conservatism by arguing that, yes, technically we are good, but as soon as we are born we become *bad* (our pristine *li* 理 contaminated by *qi* 氣), so individuals must hunker down and submit themselves to tradition in order to cleanse themselves. WANG Yangming 王陽明, in contrast, argues that this is a betrayal of Mencian liberalism: if human nature is truly good, we should be able to consult our own “innate knowledge” when it comes to moral dilemmas, even if this means pursuing behavior that might seem quite radical from a traditional perspective.

We see debates arising in other religious traditions, such as Christianity or Islam, that look very similar in terms of both the metaphors used and the basic issues at stake: where does the ultimate locus of moral authority reside, in the individual or in the tradition? As I have argued before (Slingerland 2003), the fact that this tension does not go away, and seems immune to being resolved by doctrinal fiat, is significant: it suggests that it stems from a genuine tension in human sociality, and may be related to heritable differences in tendencies toward liberalism-conservatism that are distributed in human populations (Alford, Funk, and Hibbing 2005; Hatemi et al. 2011). Wong does a great job of laying out how Xunzi's craft metaphor and Mencius' sprout metaphor *could* be reconciled by someone looking for common ground. Moreover, I agree with him that any viable contemporary model needs to borrow from both. However, it's important to keep in mind that what he ends up presenting is not really a Confucian, Mencian, or Xunzian picture, but something of his own creation—the “Wongzian” strategy of self-cultivation, perhaps. It's also not clear to me how this model would, once and for all, resolve the underlying tension concerning where to put the locus of moral authority: the individual or the tradition.

4 Confucianism and the Paradox of *Wuwei*

The paradox of *wuwei* 無為 has long been my particular hobby horse, and after spending the years since I first described it in Slingerland 2003 defending it against critiques (e.g., Ivanhoe 2007; Slingerland 2008), I can't be expected to let Wong explain it away too easily!

I was immediately struck by Wong's use of Robert Frank's work, since I have also been drawing on Frank in a popular book that I have just completed on the paradox of *wuwei* (Slingerland 2014). There I argue that the paradox of *wuwei* or virtue—the problem of how you try not to try, or how you can acquire a virtue that you don't already have—is related to the problem of cheater detection that arose when human beings made the transition from the kind of small-scale life that has characterized most of our evolutionary history to the weird new lifestyle that arose around 5,000 years ago. After eons of living in an environment where we interacted primarily with relatives or people well-known to us, the rise of agriculture and large-scale societies threw us into a situation where we were suddenly forced to cohabitate and cooperate with complete strangers. Game theoretical modeling suggests that kin selection and reciprocal altruism cannot get you across this transition—some new cultural technologies are required (Henrich et al. 2006).

There are two prevailing theories about how we made the transition. According to the first, the external institution strategy, basic human psychology, remained unchanged from our hunting and gathering days, with the only change being the external incentive structure set up through laws and other social institutions. Early Chinese examples of theories pushing this particular view include the *Mozi* 墨子 and the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, and it is also at the foundation of classical Western economic thinking. Frank argues that an insufficiently appreciated alternative is the commitment model—corresponding roughly to the Confucian strategy—whereby society-wide cooperation is achieved by instilling emotionally sincere commitments to new, shared norms, which are backed by religious beliefs and fostered by group rituals and other cohesion-building practices. As Scott Cook has noted, the tension between these two models is lurking in the background of many Warring States Chinese debates (Cook 2004).

The strength of the commitment model is that it relies upon internalized norms, rather than external carrots and sticks, to foster moral behavior. One of its weaknesses is that—in contrast to the purely self-interested, rationalist model—it is uniquely vulnerable to free-riding: individuals who have actually *not* internalized social norms, but are able to fake it, can gain the benefits of cooperation without paying the costs. This means that, in the commitment model, a premium is going to be placed on being able to identify defectors. You are going to need signals that can relatively reliably pick them out, and this will in turn set up an evolutionary arms race between the ability to fake commitment and the ability to uncover such faking.

In his discussion of Frank's work, Wong observes that Frank's models fail to take into account the possible role that *cultivated*, rather than innate, emotions could play in this dynamic. This represents an important, and extremely helpful, contribution to work on the evolutionary modeling of cooperation. However, a crucial point remains: new emotions can certainly be created through cultural training, but these cultivated emotions need to be relatively unfungible, as it were, to do their job. Bio-cultural evolution has honed in on hard-to-fake signals—ones outside, or very much resistant to, conscious control—as hallmarks of a genuine cooperator: the pupils of the eyes, micro facial expressions, details of posture, and tone of voice. It is no accident that the Confucian tradition focuses on precisely these features when discussing the problem of how to separate the village honest person—the “thief of virtue”—from the real gentleman.

In early Chinese thought, *wuwei* is very much linked to the concept of *de* 德—“charismatic virtue,” the power that someone who is really in *wuwei* has that makes

them attractive to others, inspires trust, and allows them to move through the social world effectively. The early Chinese have an essentially theological explanation for why *wuwei* and *de* hang together: a *wuwei* person is in harmony with the Way of Heaven, and therefore is rewarded by Heaven with *de*. I have argued, however, that *de* can also be understood in a naturalistic context as the collection of facial micro-expressions and behavioral clues that indicate that a person is not using their dorsolateral prefrontal cortex very much—that is, as a collection of signals that someone who is operating completely unselfconsciously and effortlessly kicks off (Slingerland 2014). Humans are built to be attracted to such signs because they signal honesty, assuring us that we are dealing with a genuinely committed member of our community and not a free-rider.

These considerations derived from evolutionary cooperation theory suggest a reason why the paradox of *wuwei* should be a real paradox: if *wuwei*, sincere commitment to norms, were something that could be easily and quickly obtained through conscious effort, or instantly alterable, it would not be a very good signal. The problem of how you can acquire a virtue, like benevolence, that you don't already have *has* to be a real problem, or bio-cultural evolution would not have zeroed in on signs of conscious effort as cheater detection mechanisms. This suggests that something like the paradox of *wuwei* is not only a universal cross-cultural problem, but actually a structural feature of the human shift from small-scale to large-scale societies—an insight, incidentally, that seems to have occurred to Warring States thinkers themselves, as evidenced in the recently-discovered Guodian 郭店 texts (Slingerland 2008).

5 Conclusion

Despite the disagreements voiced here, I have found engaging with Wong's essay profoundly stimulating and educational. I think we all emerge from the discussion that he has kicked off with a greatly enriched understanding of early Confucian thought, as well as the potential connections between early Confucianism and contemporary concerns. My hope is that the work of scholars such as Wong will help to bring the study of early Chinese philosophy out of the Sinological ghetto and into conversation with the broader fields of general philosophy, cognitive science, and evolutionary theory—conversations to which the early Chinese philosophers have a lot to contribute.

References

- Alford, John, Carolyn Funk, and John Hibbing. 2005. "Are Political Orientations Genetically Transmitted?" *American Political Science Review* 99.2: 153–167.
- Cook, Scott. 2004. "The Debate Over Coercive Rulership and the 'Human Way' in light of Recently Excavated Warring States Texts." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 64.2: 399–440.
- Doris, John M. 2002. *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamman, Gilbert. 1999. "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99: 315–331.
- Hatemi, Peter, et al. 2011. "A Genome-wide Analysis of Liberal and Conservative Political Attitudes." *Journal of Politics* 73.1: 1–15.

- Henrich, Joseph, and Natalie Henrich. 2010. "The Evolution of Cultural Adaptations: Fijian Food Taboos Protect against Dangerous Marine Toxins." *Proceedings. Biological Sciences / The Royal Society* 277.1701: 3715–3724.
- Henrich, Joseph, Richard McElreath, Abigail Barr, Jean Ensminger, Clark Barrett, Alexander Bolyanatz, Juan Camilo Cardenas, Michael Gurven, Edwin Gwako, Natalie Henrich, Carolyn Lesorogol, Frank Marlowe, David Tracer, and John Ziker. 2006. "Costly Punishment across Human Societies." *Science* 312: 1767–1770.
- Hutton, Eric. 2000. "Does Xunzi Have a Consistent Theory of Human Nature?" In *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, edited by T. C. Kline and P. J. Ivanhoe. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2000. *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis/Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company.
- _____. 2007. "The Paradox of *Wu-wei*?" *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34.2: 277–287.
- Kline, T. C. 2000. "Moral Agency and Motivation in the *Xunzi*." In *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, edited by T. C. Kline and P. J. Ivanhoe. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Slingerland, Edward. 2000. "Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of *Wu-wei*." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68.2: 293.
- _____. 2003. *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2008. "The Problem of Moral Spontaneity in the Guodian Corpus." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7.3: 237–256.
- _____. 2011a. "Metaphor and Meaning in Early China." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10.1: 1–30.
- _____. 2011b. "'Of What Use Are the Odes?' Cognitive Science, Virtue Ethics, and Early Confucian Ethics." *Philosophy East & West* 61.1: 80–109.
- _____. 2011c. "The Situationist Critique and Early Confucian Virtue Ethics." *Ethics* 121. 2: 390–419.
- _____. 2014. *Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity*. New York: Crown Publishing.
- Tang, Yi-Yuan, and Michael Posner. 2009. "Attention Training and Attention State Training." *Trends in Cognitive Science* 13.5: 222–227.