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Moral Perfection as the Counterfeit of Virtue

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Abstract
It is sometimes assumed that the best people—those whom it would be appropriate to admire and emulate—ought to be free of all moral defects. Numerous contemporary scholars have attributed this assumption to the early Confucian philosophers with moral perfection said to be a necessary condition for sagehood. Drawing upon the early Confucian literature I will argue in support of two claims. The first is that the early Confucians did not insist on the moral perfection of the sage; on the contrary, the sage was explicitly understood to be morally fallible. The second claim is that the early Confucians were right to reject moral perfection as a suitable ideal. I conclude with a discussion of the relative merits of taking "love of learning" (*haoxue* 好學)—rather than moral perfection—as one's ideal.

Keywords Early Confucian ethics · Exemplary persons · *Haoxue* 好學 · Perfection · Sages

> "There is a pathology of goodness as well as of evil."
>
> - John Dewey (Dewey 1922: 4)

1 Introduction

When we reflect on the persons we admire—those whom we emulate, those whom we consider our role models or exemplars—some of us assume that it would be best if they were normatively perfect, and that we all ought to be normative perfectionists: striving toward the projected ideal of being without fault even if we may never realize that

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ideal.[1] While by no means universal, these assumptions pervade contemporary culture. Our public memory is often distorted by our inability to acknowledge the faults of historical figures, as we can see in the case of those who feel compelled to employ the Lost Cause mythology to vindicate their Confederate ancestors (Coates 2010). Additionally, addressing racist policing in the United States is often made unnecessarily difficult because of the presumption that only perfect victims—that is, victims of police brutality who are themselves without any civic fault—are deserving of sympathy and social justice (Touré 2014). Furthermore, feminist philosophers have shown that the myth of the aesthetically perfect female body is both pervasive and oppressive.[2]

The presumption that exemplary persons ought to be morally faultless is present within various religious and philosophic traditions—with Stoicism and Christianity perhaps the clearest examples.[3] Several Stoics, including Chrysippus, conceive of sages as faultless. While this renders the sage quite rare—with some Stoics even regarding sagehood beyond human attainment—the Stoics still regard the sage as a crucial moral guide and source of inspiration (Sandbach 1989: 11–12). As for the Christian tradition, the widespread presumption of moral perfection appears in the dominant interpretations of the life of Jesus, and in the Catholic conception of sainthood.[4] Take, for instance, the case of Jesus's violent expulsion of the money-changers from the Temple, mentioned at John 2:13–15. While an impartial reader today would likely regard whipping others for perceived impiety to be a moral error—expressing, as it does, the vices of rage and religious intolerance—Christian commentators through the centuries have attempted numerous strategies to avoid this sort of interpretive outcome. Origen, one of the first to comment on the passage, takes the conduct's immorality as evidence that Jesus did not do it—and proposes an allegorical reading of the passage. Commentators who have accepted the surface reading of the text, on the other hand, have attempted to avoid attributing moral failure to Jesus by either arguing that his conduct was excusable (because he only whipped the animals, or whipped human beings but only with a "whip" made *in situ* from string) or justifiable (as Augustine argues by subjecting our moral intuition to the pious critique that if Jesus conducted himself in this way it should convince us that anger and violence can sometimes be appropriate).[5] The various contortions on the part of these biblical interpreters serve

[1] As every major normative theory—virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontology, and so on—is able to acknowledge the possibility of moral fault in some form or another, we need not tether our discussion of moral perfection to any one of them.

[2] "Culture … has taught women to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical 'improvement'" (Bordo 2004: 57). For a classic and sustained discussion of this cultural phenomenon, see N. Wolf 1991.

[3] Buddhism is another relevant tradition, as the Pali Canon attributes moral perfection to the Buddha (Bodhi 2012: 1056–1057). Steven Katz goes so far as to claim that "Every religious community, and every mystical movement with each community, has a 'model' or 'models' of the *ideal* practitioner of the religious life" who is "the *perfect one*" whom other practitioners ought to imitate (Katz 1983: 43–45).

[4] For a repudiation of this assumption, at least when it comes to saints, see Doris Day (quoted in Woodward 2016: 51).

[5] Huang Kan 皇侃, commenting on the *Lunyu* 論語 during the Han 漢 dynasty (Slingerland 2003: 223), and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (Angle 2009: 19) in discussing the sage during the Ming 明 dynasty, employ a similar strategy, arguing that any apparent faults committed by a sage are innocent or excusable mistakes since the sage lacks the moral psychology necessary to knowingly or willfully err.

to highlight one of their shared assumptions: Jesus is, axiomatically, morally perfect. In a similar vein moral perfection became the defining characteristic of sainthood after the Catholic Church took over the official process of canonization in the Middle Ages (Woodward 2016: 109, 596). By the 12th century, the church no longer regarded the popular standard of miracles as either necessary or sufficient for sainthood, preferring instead to focus on the person's moral worth. After Pope Innocent IV proclaimed that a saint must be impeccable, the hagiographical texts of previously canonized saints began to be expurgated, and repentant sinners were no longer considered for canonization (Vauchez 2005: 514). There was simply no place in the life of a saint for learning from previous errors. One was a saint from birth or not at all.

While the Confucians after the Han 漢 dynasty may have assumed that the greatest exemplary persons—"sages" (*shengren* 聖人)—were morally faultless individuals, this does not reflect the pre-Han Confucian understanding of sages.[6] It is true that the early Confucian literature—*Lunyu* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子, and *Xunzi* 荀子—will occasionally describe sages as "complete" (*jin* 盡) or "utmost" (*zhi* 至), and these terms can connote perfection or faultlessness.[7] The thesis of this essay is, however, that the early Confucians (Kongzi 孔子, Mengzi, and Xunzi) did not ascribe faultlessness to sages; that, in fact, the early Confucians regarded even the aspiration to moral perfection, on anyone's part, to be problematic. This thesis thus represents a rejection of the dominant view of Confucian sagehood in contemporary scholarship (Cua 1978: 67; DeBary 1991: 6; Angle 1998: 281; Angle 2009: 15, 21; Csikszentmihalyi 2004: 6; and Stalnaker 2009: 191).[8] It also presents

[6] For contemporary scholars commenting on the perfection of sages in neo-Confucian philosophy, see Angle 1998: 281; Angle 2009: 19–20; Ching 1986: 273–291; and Gardner 1990: 58. For relevant passages in the early neo-Confucian literature see Chan 1963: 60–61, 202, and Chan 1967: 68, 289–290.

[7] A natural assumption is that anyone or anything that exhausts (*jin*) a given category will admit of no exceptions; one of Mengzi's interlocutors makes this clear when he assumes that if one can describe a sage as completely consummate (*jinren* 盡仁) and completely wise (*jinzhi* 盡智), then that sage can never be unfeeling (*buren* 不仁) or foolish (*buzhi* 不智) (*Mengzi* 2B9). This, however, does not appear to be an assumption shared by the early Confucians. The description of someone or something as being the "utmost," "best," "greatest," "unsurpassed" (*zhi* 至) or, as Xunzi sometimes puts it, the "pinnacle" or "acme" (*ji* 極) is also suggestive of faultlessness. Yet it is possible for someone to be the best without being perfect: you might be the best cyclist if you are only compared with your six-year-old niece, but that does not make you a perfect cyclist (cf. Stalnaker 2020: 183).

[8] Michael Ing and Amy Olberding represent potential exceptions to this view (Ing 2012, Olberding 2013). Ing says that even sages are capable of failure because of unforeseeable external forces and the ambiguities of impinging agencies. Yet it is not entirely clear that this failure amounts to a moral fault. Ing says that it is hard to justify holding someone morally responsible for tragic failure; it would follow that it will also be hard—perhaps impossible—to thus attribute moral error to such persons on the basis of tragic failure alone. Olberding's position seems most similar to the one I am defending: "The Confucius of the *Analects* is importantly not like Jesus," she says. "While he is a total exemplar, there is no suggestion that his goodness is total. He is not perfect. And the moral sensibility to which he points does not, I think, aspire to perfection" (Olberding 2013: 106–107). The trouble is that the exemplarist moral theory Olberding utilizes in her interpretation of early Confucian ethics commits her to the possibility and desirability of moral perfection. Exemplarist moral theory is defined by granting the example of specific persons a foundational role in our ethics so long as they reflect the relevant "deep structure," or "the nature of good persons" (Olberding 2013: 18, 50, 53; see also Zagzebski 2017). This Platonism does not commit Olberding to the moral perfection of Kongzi or any other Confucian sage, but it does commit her to the view that it is entirely conceivable that Confucian exemplars would be perfect if they were to fully participate in the universal. It is also hard to imagine that this Platonism, were it endorsed by the early Confucians (pace Hansen 1983), would not remove any meaningful objection to pursuing moral perfection; it would in fact argue for the value of its potential actualization.

the early Confucians as potential critics of Stoicism and Christianity, several contemporary cultural assumptions, as well as the later Confucian tradition.

2 The Fallibility of Sages in the Early Confucian Literature

There are several passages in the early Confucian literature that attribute faults to exemplary persons.[9] "Noble persons" (*junzi* 君子), for instance, are said to be capable of "going too far" (*guo* 過) and to occasionally lack "consummate conduct" (*ren* 仁) (*Lunyu* 14.6, 19.21). Even sages, commonly ranked in the literature as morally superior to noble persons, are not immune from moral faults. Mengzi describes the Duke of Zhou 周 as a sage even though the Duke committed the grievous error of giving the territory of Yin 殷 to his brother, Guan Shu 管叔, who used it as a powerbase from which to stage a rebellion (*Mengzi* 2B9). In a similar fashion Mengzi describes Bo Yi 伯夷 and Liuxia Hui 柳下惠 as sages despite, in the very same book of the *Mengzi*, describing the former as guilty of going to the extreme of narrow-mindedness, and Liuxia Hui of the extreme of irreverence—rendering each of them potentially dangerous persons to emulate (*Mengzi* 2A2, 2A9). Besides implying the startling conclusion that not every sage is an exemplary person (at least not if we think of "exemplary persons" as those whom anyone ought to personally emulate), Mengzi is again presenting us with examples of imperfect sages. Such examples illustrate the point that for some Confucians, at least, moral perfection is not requisite for sagehood.

Yet even if *some* sages are imperfect, one might wonder whether other sages—Yu 禹 or Kongzi, for example—might be faultless. When discussing Yu in *Lunyu* 8.21, Kongzi says, *yu, wu wu jian ran yi* 禹,吾無間然矣. D. C. Lau translates this line as "With Yu I can find no fault," implying that Kongzi regards Yu to be a faultless sage.[10] While not being faulted by others is not the same as being faultless, that Kongzi—of all people—fails to find a fault with Yu is quite suggestive. This is why it is important to point out that it is possible to translate the line so that Kongzi says, "I lack faults like his."[11] Read in this way, Kongzi is not claiming that Yu is, as far as he can tell, faultless; rather, he is claiming that Yu's faults are better than his own—with the implication that neither Yu nor Kongzi, by the latter's own estimation, is morally perfect. Of course, the tradition commonly celebrates Kongzi as the very best sage. Mengzi tells us that "there has never been one greater than Kongzi"—a sentiment we also find at the end of the *Lunyu*

[9] Throughout "exemplary persons" does not refer to *junzi* 君子 per se, but—functionally—to persons whom we can rightfully take as objects of emulation.

[10] "I can find no flaw in the character of Yu" and "I can find nothing like a flaw in Yu" (Legge 1893: 215); "In him I can find no semblance of a flaw" (Waley 1938: 137); "As for Yu, I can find no fault with him at all" (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 125); and "I can find no fault with Yu" (Slingerland 2003: 85). In each of these translations the "lack of fault" (*wu jian* 無間) is attributed to Yu.

[11] Not only is this translation more felicitous, it is also supported by the early commentaries. As Kong Anguo 孔安國 (156–74 BCE) remarks, "[In this passage] Kongzi praises the abundance of Yu's great accomplishments. As he [sc. Kongzi] puts it, he is unable to even have faults of the same caliber as the faults of Yu" (Huang 2007: 112–113).

where Zigong 子貢 claims that Kongzi cannot be matched: "Kongzi is the sun and moon which no one can climb beyond" (*Lunyu* 19.24).[12] Yet it is important to note that the claims of Mengzi and Zigong are comparative in nature: they are claiming that Kongzi is the best or utmost sage; but it is entirely possible that one might exceed others—even everyone else—without necessarily being perfect or faultless.[13] Besides, Kongzi at times claims to have fallen short of the excellence of others—as my translation of *Lunyu* 8.21 makes plain. And when Kongzi tells us that at the age of seventy, he could act spontaneously without risk of overstepping the mark, the "mark" (*ju* 矩) here—it is important to note—is most likely the outer boundary of acceptable conduct, not the straight and narrow of faultlessness.[14] Compliance with the principle—or the "mark"—is insufficient for the total avoidance of moral error. Even at seventy, the sage Kongzi may only have been able to consistently avoid obvious or extreme errors.

In the end, there is no conclusive support that any of the particular sages named by the early Confucians were regarded as "utmost" or "complete" in the sense of being faultless. They may have been regarded as utmost and complete only because their faults tended to be better than the faults of others. Sages—so conceived—enjoy only relative stability as North stars or exemplary persons; the possibility persists that one day they might be surpassed by another.

Yet even supposing that the sages of the past all had their faults, one might point out that the early Confucians could still regard the perfect sage as at least a regulative ideal in one of two possible senses: the morally perfect sage might be taken to be a very unlikely, yet not impossible, human achievement to which we all ought to aspire, or the morally perfect sage might be understood to be an abstracted ideal one ought to strive toward despite the impossibility of success.[15] Some contemporary scholars (Angle 2009, Stalnaker 2020) attribute the latter view of sagehood to the early Confucians. By such accounts the Confucians are quite similar to the Stoics in regarding the sage as an abstract ideal that is impossible to realize, and yet ought to regulate our conduct all the same. There

[12] See also *Mengzi* 2A2 and *Lunyu* 19.25. All translations of the *Lunyu* are taken from Ames and Rosemont 1998, and all translations of the *Mengzi* are taken from Lau 1970.

[13] This is why, as we will discuss below, anyone who is committed to the possibility of moral perfection must also be committed to the possibility of a fixed or noncomparative standard of moral success.

[14] Were the Chinese *buguo* 不過 rather than *buyuju* 不踰矩 we might interpret this passage as a categorical denial of moral fault. *Ju* is literally the carpenter's square, equivalent to the Latin *norma*; and like the Latin word, *ju* extends to cover a range of social norms but does not exhaust the normative domain. We see this use of the term in the *Daxue* 大學 (*Great Learning*): after admonishing us that "what you dislike in your superiors do not use when employing your inferiors; what you dislike in your inferiors do not utilize when serving your superiors," the text goes on to describe this principle of role-specific consistency as "the regulating norm of the way" (*xie ju zhi dao* 絜矩之道) (*Liji* 禮記, "Daxue," 43.2; *Liji* 1992). The same principle is discussed in the *Lunyu* as *shu* 恕: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want" (*Lunyu* 15.24).

[15] According to Immanuel Kant, a regulative ideal is one that we are rationally committed to even though it is not possible for that ideal to be realized or instantiated in experience (see Friedman 1992). While not endorsing the rational necessity of moral perfection, I am using the phrase to emphasize the possibility of regarding moral perfection as regulative even when it is not part of experience (either due to improbability or impossibility).

are, however, two problems with this sort of interpretation. The first is that, unlike the Stoics, the early Confucians never speak of sagehood as an impossible yet regulative ideal. The second problem is that it overlooks the early Confucians' reluctance to allow one's general normative vocabulary to supersede one's moral experience. As one can easily see, the early Confucian literature is resplendent with references to "sages," "noble persons," "petty persons" (*xiaoren* 小人), "deviants" (*weisuo* 嵬瑣), and "those whom we ought to guard against" (*jie* 戒). This vocabulary is often employed without any mention of a specific person, and thus appears to denote a general type of exemplary or deficient person—a paradigm. These paradigmatic persons are articulated and distinguished, one from the other, in terms of general normative traits. For instance, throughout the *Lunyu* noble persons and petty persons are often defined by contrast: we are told that noble persons cherish their generosity while petty persons cherish their land, that noble persons understand what is appropriate while petty persons understand personal advantage or profit, and so on. In these passages exemplary and deficient persons are characterized not with concrete conduct but *generic* normative traits—that is, traits true of the genera of noble person or petty person. As paradigmatic persons they can thus function as a kind of shorthand that allows for quick distinctions between what is generally appropriate and generally inappropriate, as well as a tool to use when attempting to persuade others—as when Mengzi attempts to vindicate some of his conclusions by claiming, "were a sage to arise today, he would agree with me" (*Mengzi* 2A2).[16] Yet, for all of their heuristic value, the early literature expresses an awareness of the risks associated with the use of such abstractions. Kongzi, for example, insists upon the need to put the lives of particular persons ahead of abstract norms—even the abstract norms that are often used to describe paradigmatic exemplars:

> The Master said, "Zilu [子路], have you heard of the six failures to anticipate [*liu bi* 六蔽] that can accompany the six norms [*liu yan* 六言]?"
>
> "No, I have not," replied Zilu.
>
> "Sit down," said the Master, "and I'll tell you about them. Being fond of consummate conduct but not of learning [*xue* 學], you will not anticipate being duped; being fond of wisdom but not of learning, you will not anticipate being self-indulgent; being fond of keeping your word but not of learning, you will not anticipate finding yourself in harm's way; being fond of uprightness but not of learning, you will not anticipate being rude; being fond of courage but not of learning, you will not anticipate being unruly; being fond of firmness but not of learning, you will not anticipate being rash." [*Lunyu* 17.8; translation modified]

For the early Confucian, "learning" primarily designates the process of learning by the example of others, and thus involves an appeal to concrete and, often, living

[16] See *Lunyu* 17.21 for Kongzi's own attempt at using an appeal to generic noble persons to persuade Zaiwo 宰我.

exemplary persons.[17] Kongzi is thus warning Zilu that fondness for the various abstract traits of paradigmatic exemplars—consummate conduct, wisdom, keeping one's word, uprightness, courage, firmness—ought to be secondary to one's fondness for learning from the examples of others. To do otherwise is to suffer misfortune because one failed to anticipate. In short, anyone who would prioritize paradigmatic exemplars and their abstract normative traits over particular exemplars—as many Stoics did—will be beclouded (*bi* 蔽) and undiscerning (*yu* 愚).[18]

Having ruled out the possibility of a generic sage functioning as a regulative ideal of moral perfection, we are left with only one way to substantiate the thesis that the early Confucians regarded moral perfection as a regulative ideal: by showing that even if all the sages in the past had their faults, moral perfection remains a "practical possibility"—that a perfect sage could theoretically be instantiated in human experience.[19] To see how this might be substantiated, despite the lack of historical instances of moral perfection, we can turn to an argument Owen Flanagan provides in *Varieties of Moral Personality* (Flanagan 1991). Even if moral perfection is highly unlikely and psychologically unrealistic, he says, it may still be possible: if it is possible for a person to act perfectly in one situation, it is possible—even if unlikely—that a person might act perfectly in every situation over the course of her or his life (Flanagan 1991: 29–30). Mengzi seems to engage in a similar form of reasoning when he describes Kongzi as "the sage who gathered together all that was good with the other sages" (*Mengzi* 5B1). Kongzi may not have been perfect, but take Mengzi's reasoning to its extreme conclusion, where a hypothetical sage is fashioned out of only the good parts of all actual sages, and it seems possible to at least project a perfect sage who might exist one day. Furthermore, the assumption that a sage ought to be perfect, combined with the assumption that such perfection—while possible—is quite unlikely, can actually help explain why Mengzi and Kongzi refuse to call themselves sages, and why Kongzi laments the rarity of sages.[20] Perhaps they are assuming that while they and others have referred to flawed persons

[17] Not only is *xue* sometimes used in the early literature as a verb for "according with another's example" (see, for example, *Mengzi* 2A2), Zixia 子夏 and Kongzi both endorse the view that one might be "learned" even without a formal education in the Classics and the Six Arts (*Lunyu* 1.7, 11.25). Yet even studying the Classics and the Six Arts is understood by the early Confucians as a process of learning from the example of past sages. As Xunzi puts it, "The *Songs*, the *Documents*, the *Rites*, and the *Music* all revert back to the sages. The *Songs* express the sages' intentions, the *Documents* their affairs of state, the *Rites* their conduct, and the *Music* their harmoniousness" (*Xunzi* 8.7, my own translation). Sima Qian's 司馬遷 story about the time Kongzi learned music from Shi Xiang 師襄 illustrates how the various Arts are also rooted in the example of former sages (Yang and Yang 1979: 13–14). For the value of prioritizing living exemplars over deceased ones, see *Xunzi* 1.10 and 1.11. (Passage numbers for the *Xunzi* are taken from Knoblock 1988, 1990, and 1994.)

[18] The Stoic neglect of concrete exemplars is discussed in Sedley 1999. For an account of "beclouding" see *Xunzi* 21; on being "undiscerning," see *Xunzi* 2.3.

[19] Practical possibility is not assumed to be either strictly empirical or metaphysical in nature.

[20] Of course, nothing Confucius or Mengzi says prevents the attribution of the title to themselves by others; they are, however, unwilling to ascribe the title to themselves. As Confucius explicitly puts it at *Lunyu* 7.34, "How dare I describe myself as sagely and extensive (*ruo sheng yu ren ze wu qi gan* 若聖與仁則吾豈敢)?" Compare this with the delusional rulers, mentioned in *Shangshu* 尚書 (*Venerated Documents*), who "sage themselves" or "refer to themselves as sages" (*zisheng* 自聖) (Legge 1865: 586). It seems that self-ascription of sagehood is the real heart of the problem.

as "sages," they have done so only because these particular persons were simply the best available examples of sagehood, not realizations of the fullest ideal. We thus turn, in the next section, to the Confucian arguments against the practical possibility of moral perfection.

3 The Fault of Faultlessness

The early Confucian literature discusses the aspiration to faultlessness in connection with three types of persons: the village worthy, the hermit, and the stickler.[21] Kongzi introduces the moniker, "village worthy" (*xiangyuan* 鄉原), and refers to them as the counterfeit of virtue (*Lunyu* 17.13). When Mengzi is asked to clarify this expression he describes village worthies in the following terms:

> Their words and deeds take no notice of each other, and yet they keep on saying, "The ancients! The ancients!—Why must they have walked along in such a solitary fashion? Being of this era, one must behave in a manner pleasing to this era. So long as one is adept [*shan* 善], that is enough." They try in this way to cringingly please their era.… If you want to censure them, you cannot find anything; if you want to find fault with them, you cannot find anything either. They share with others the practices of the times and are in harmony with the era. They pursue such a policy and appear to be conscientious and faithful, and to show integrity in their conduct. They are liked by the multitude and are self-righteous. It is impossible to embark on the way of Yao or Shun with such persons. Hence the name "counterfeit of virtue." Kongzi said, "I detest what is specious.… I detest flattery in case it should pass for what is right; I detest glibness in case it should pass for truthfulness … I detest those who pass for honest men in the village in case they should be mistaken for the virtuous." [*Mengzi* 7B37; translation modified]

Village worthies confuse social approval with genuine moral worth, and seek to win the approval of others by conforming to the norms of conventional morality. Since they are motivated by the opinion of others they have no scruples about adapting their conduct to the shifting values of their society. The apparent genius of this approach is that, when one is evaluated by contemporary morality, one will appear to be faultless.

If a village worthy measures faultlessness in terms of popular approval, the "hermit" or "recluse" (*yinzhe* 隱者) measures it by their ability to remain "unsullied" or "pure" (*jie* 潔) in their conduct and associations. Mengzi describes Bo Yi as someone who took a hermit's approach to moral perfection. Bo Yi, we are told, would not listen to improper sounds, nor look upon improper sights. When

[21] Susan Wolf's moral saint is yet another attempt at faultlessness that is itself a kind of imperfection—though the imperfection here is of a nonmoral normative variety (S. Wolf 1982: 419). Since the Confucians did not anticipate our sharp distinction between moral and nonmoral norms (see Rosemont 1976), they did not anticipate Wolf's moral saint.

it came to the company he kept he would only befriend the right sort of people. He was averse to the company of his villagers; and if one of his fellow-villagers did not have his cap on correctly, Bo Yi "would walk away without even a backward look, as if afraid of being defiled" (*Mengzi* 2A9). Living under what he regarded as an illegitimate dynasty, and yet committed to serving only the right sort of ruler and only in times free from social disorder, Bo Yi rejected even the most polite offers of office. In the end, he retired to the North Sea and died waiting for better times. Hermits, such as Bo Yi, are essentially committed to selectively associating with others. This selective association may be the result of an acute sensitivity to the potentially compromising influence others can have upon one's own reputation and conduct, but this selective association must surely also stem from one's moral certainty about what can and cannot be done.

The third approach to faultlessness is taken by those who have no moniker in the literature but whom we might refer to as "sticklers." They seek moral perfection not by means of conforming to conventional morality, nor by means of conforming to a fixed set of moral prescriptions and proscriptions that force them into seclusion; rather, sticklers hope to avoid all faults by being narrowly fastidious. Xu Gan 徐幹 (170–217) provides us with a neat catalogue of such sticklers:

> In the past Cangwu Bing [倉梧丙] took a wife, but because she was beautiful he gave her to his elder brother. It would have been better not to have deferred to him at all than to have been deferential in this manner. Wei Sheng [尾生] arranged to meet his wife at the edge of the river. When the water suddenly rose he would not leave and so drowned. It would have been better not to have kept his word to her at all than to have done so in this manner. In the community of the Governor of She [葉], a father stole a sheep and his son bore witness against him. It would have been better not to have been honest with his community at all than to have been honest in this manner. [Makeham 2002: 81–83][22]

Each of these examples concerns a basic Confucian value such as "brotherly fidelity" (*di* 第), "living up to one's word" (*xin* 信), or "uprightness" (*zhi* 直). While each of these is often involved in good relationships the sticklers choose to embrace a mononomic focus. It is not that sticklers are unable to tailor norms to the circumstances (*quan* 權), so much as it is that they are unable to anticipate the possibility of competing normative claims on their conduct that would require them to relinquish a single way of doing things; it is not, for example, that Cangwu Bing could have been a better brother by adapting the rituals of brotherly deference to the circumstances, but that he could have been a better spouse—that brotherly deference was

[22] Many sticklers discussed in the literature are clearly comical in nature, with faults so obvious that it is hard to imagine anyone deliberately acting in such a fashion. Yet in Xu Gan's list there is at least one stickler that the tradition takes quite seriously: the Euthyphronic son who turned in his own father for stealing a sheep, first mentioned in *Lunyu* 13.18. Even today some of us appear to take sticklers seriously; surely that is the case if we agree with Kant that lying is never morally permissible, even if we lie to a would-be murderer in an attempt to save a friend's life.

not the most salient moral value in the situation.[23] Yet the sticklers assume that a single-minded approach to proper conduct—a dogged adherence to a single norm—is enough to ward off moral failure.

There are problems with every one of these attempts at moral perfection. The village worthy confuses popular approval with genuine worth, is principally motivated not by moral cultivation but a desire to avoid even legitimate criticism, and sacrifices all their moral creativity and personality for the sake of conformity. Hermits are guilty not only of having a "fixed notion of how things ought to be done," but of neglecting their obligations to others in the pursuit of an abortive notion of purity. By avoiding public office they neglect their obligation to their ruler and state; and insomuch as self-cultivation is a social enterprise, such willful isolation also undermines their own development and possibly even their ability to sustain what good dispositions they had before they went into seclusion. Finally, sticklers suffer from a fastidiousness that sees them willfully ignoring the complexity of situations in which their preferred norm conflicts with other, salient norms. Given the moral costs of these three approaches and the obvious moral conflicts they seem to deny, a likely explanation of their conduct is that despite their unique moral psychologies—a desire for public approval, an aversion to compromising social situations, or a taste for the comfort that comes with an inviolable principle—they are all pathologically afraid of moral uncertainty and failure. It is their moral perfectionism, in other words, that ultimately explains their moral shortcomings. Yet as moral perfection must exclude moral failure, the normative contradiction in each of these three approaches appears to render moral perfection practically impossible.

One might object, however, that even if these three approaches to dealing with moral situations serve to highlight pitfalls to some varieties of moral perfectionism, these pitfalls do not stem from the enterprise of moral perfectionism *per se*, but from features unique to these three approaches. The three types of perfectionists discussed in the early Confucian literature may simply be endorsing counterfeit standards of moral success. It remains to be seen whether an adequate standard might be utilized, thus rendering moral perfection at least normatively—and thus practically—tenable. The trouble is that, at least exegetically speaking, this is a possibility the early Confucians do not endorse.

Anyone who takes moral perfection to be practically possible must, at least tacitly, endorse two basic tenets. The first is that every situation in which two or more of our values conflict admits of at least one correct solution.[24] To think every moral dilemma can be correctly navigated is, of course, to assume that all such dilemmas are merely apparent: they might be the product of ignorance or incontinence, but not of a genuinely irresolvable conflict of equally valid norms. The first tenet, in short, denies the possibility of genuinely tragic moral situations. The second tenet presupposed by the possibility of moral perfection is that we can, at least in theory,

[23] For a discussion of *quan*, see *Mengzi* 4A17 and *Liji*, "Sangfusizhi 喪服四制 (Four Regulations of Mourning Apparel)," 8 (*Liji* 1992).

[24] For a similar claim that moral perfection necessarily endorses the inevitability of correct solutions see Michael Slote's recent work (Slote 2011, 2013).

evaluate both others and ourselves by referencing a fixed standard of moral success.[25] While we may not wish to endorse the fixed standards of any of the three wayward perfectionists discussed by the early Confucians, it is by virtue of their respective standards that the village worthies, hermits, and sticklers are able to both simplify every moral situation they encounter (effectively preventing any genuine moral dilemma from arising), and claim to be faultless.

There is some indication in the literature that the early Confucians did not subscribe to either of the tenets required for the practical possibility of moral perfection—that, in fact, they considered the subscription to either tenet as tantamount to a moral failure. The idea that every moral situation admits of a correct solution is excluded by the Confucian claims of the persistence of legitimate moral doubt. The *Lunyu* presents moral doubt—when it is a proactive response to moral uncertainty that spurs discussion and inquiry into how best to respond to our given situation—as a precondition for a fruitful teacher-student relationship. Yet lest we think this sort of moral uncertainty is properly restricted to the neophyte we should notice that it is also attributed to noble persons, who are said to not be fastidious, nor prejudiced in favor or disfavor of a given course of conduct; rather, they are said to give first priority to appropriate conduct (*Lunyu* 4.10). The *Lunyu* also describes Kongzi as neither claiming nor demanding certainty, as not being inflexible, and even hating inflexibility (*Lunyu* 9.4, 14.32, 18.8).[26] It is, he says, his lack of fixed notions when it comes to what is and is not permissible that distinguishes him from other luminaries in the tradition. One way to explain the apparent persistence of legitimate moral doubt and the corresponding need to be flexible is to draw upon John Dewey's argument in "Three Independent Factors in Morals" (Dewey 1984). Outlining the diverse genealogies and social psychologies of some of our more common moral values, Dewey concludes that it is unrealistic to assume that our values will cohere in every moral situation we face.[27] As such, solutions cannot always be correct; inevitably, even the best solution to a moral situation will require sacrificing one value for another. This is not to say that such solutions cannot be justified, but it does highlight the fact that even when such sacrifices can be justified they remain tragic. Solutions may be appropriate or better than the alternatives, but they are not always correct in the sense of being entirely free of moral defect.

[25] In a private conversation Steve Angle suggested to me that moral particularism would allow us to conceive of a perfect sage without needing a static standard of moral success. One problem with this approach might be that it salvages perfect exemplary persons by abandoning the relevance of these same persons. As Jonathan Dancy makes plain, particularism—at least his extreme version of it—denies repeatability. The implication is that past actions of exemplars are irrelevant to ourselves. A second problem is that even if particularism avoids moral tragedies without appealing to a fixed standard, it offers us no alternative to the correlativity of evaluation, discussed below.

[26] The traditional commentaries speak of *wubi* 無必 as a matter of "timeliness" in one's employment—that is, taking and leaving official posts when it is appropriate to do so. As for *gu* 固, it appears to be synonymous with lacking fixed preconceptions as to what is appropriate and inappropriate. Yet both terms are also linked, as moral inflexibility (*gu*) explains why hermits—such as Bo Yi, Weisheng Mou 微生畝, and others—refuse any offer of employment (see *Lunyu* 14.32).

[27] A similar conclusion has been defended more recently in Berlin 1958, 1990.

The early Confucian response to moral situations correlates with Dewey's point. Rather than seek out a foundational norm to which they might reduce all other norms, and so preclude genuine moral conflict, the Confucians respond to moral dilemmas by rendering them trilemmas or tetralemmas—they respond by seeking to include more and more normative variables within their considerations, using moral theory to strengthen rather than replace moral practice. For example, when faced with the question of whether one should accept an official position in a state that has lost its way, Kongzi is presented in the earlier layers of the *Lunyu* as taking a stance quite similar to that of the hermits.[28] He counsels against even entering a state in crisis or living in one that is in revolt; when the way prevails we should seek employment, yet when the way does not prevail, we should be hermits (*Lunyu* 8.13). Failure to avoid office in a state that has lost the way, he says, is legitimate cause for shame.[29] In time, however, Kongzi and the tradition find this response unsatisfactory. Hermits not only deny themselves the wider human companionship necessary for moral conduct; they also disregard the obligations they have to their ruler and state to try to cultivate the way (*Lunyu* 18.7). On the other hand, there is no indication that hermits are entirely wrong in their response—they at least avoid profiting by corruption, and are right to be worried about their personal purity. Rather than insist on a fixed way of doing things, the early Confucians preserve the moral conflict, using it to drive creative engagement. They discuss the value of cultivating a love of learning (*haoxue* 好學), which entails—among other traits—an indifference to the levers of corruption, such as rank and wealth (*Lunyu* 1.14, 8.13).[30] They suggest being cautious with one's words when employed in a wayward state in order to minimize the chances of martyrdom (*Lunyu* 14.3). While such strategies might prove helpful, they by no means constitute a complete and correct solution to the issue—a solution that would justify having a fixed notion of what is appropriate and thus a clear apprehension of the correct way of doing things. If the developing complexity reflected in the literature's response to this moral tension over employment in a wayward state is itself normative—reflecting not only how the early Confucians thought their way through this particular moral situation, but how one ought to go about developing a response to any moral situation—then it would follow that for the early Confucians a failure to completely resolve a moral situation is not itself a moral failure. The moral failure, rather, would be to posit a correct solution.

The early Confucians also do not endorse the second tenet of moral perfection. Rather than evaluate persons by appealing to a fixed standard, they evaluate them in a correlative fashion. Take, for example, Mengzi's estimation of Bo Yi and Liuxia Hui. It may be a bit puzzling that despite describing both figures as sages, Mengzi also says that Bo Yi was "narrow-minded," that Liuxia Hui was "irreverent"—and that these two potential exemplars present particular approaches to keeping oneself unsullied that are much too extreme to be emulated by noble persons (*Mengzi* 2A2,

[28] By "earlier layers" I mean book 8, rather than books 14 and 18. For the historical and textual evidence of the temporal separation and sequence I am alluding to, see—for example—Brooks 2010.

[29] See Harris 2014.

[30] *Haoxue* is further discussed in the next section.

2A9). The only tenable solution to this puzzle is to attend to Mengzi's pragmatic analysis of these two figures. He suggests that the example of Bo Yi will transform a covetous man and a weak man—breaking the former of his covetousness, and giving the latter resolve; in a similar vein, the example of Luixia Hui is said to be capable of making a mean man generous, and a narrow-minded man tolerant (*Mengzi* 7B15).[31] In other words, what Bo Yi and Liuxia Hui each did will be appropriate when compared to the conduct of weak or mean persons; but when compared to the conduct of noble persons the two sages become inappropriate. In this context the image of the markers of a river ford (*biao* 表) becomes quite useful (*Xunzi* 17.14; cf. 27.13). For those who are too far up or down the moral riverbank to make a crossing between the two pairs of markers, the markers will themselves stand as a proper target; yet for those who stand a chance of staying within these markers and making a safe crossing these two pairs of markers are not targets but warnings—delineating, as they do, the more obvious borders of propriety. Bo Yi and Liuxia Hua are just such markers: exemplars for some, counter-exemplars for others.

Thus early Confucians do not endorse the necessary tenets that make moral perfection possible; yet, beyond this exegetical point, we can say that the Confucians are right to reject the possibility and desirability of moral perfection. The ethical argument, rooted in the early literature, is that moral perfection is always bought at the price of moral simplification that is both corrosive to moral practice and, if ever realized, counterfeit—that, as the contemporary adage has it, the perfect is the enemy of the good. To proffer a noncorrelative evaluation of someone tends to elide the moral diversity of the person's individual character traits and actions. Not only does such distortion risk omitting the details of the person's life that might be instructive to others, it seems plainly unfair. Secondly, because a noncorrelative evaluation precludes the possibility of revising an evaluation on comparative grounds, one cannot justify revising a previous evaluation simply because someone in the future, either the same person or someone else, responded to similar situations in a better way. But to deny this possibility seems to require that we claim to know more than we possibly could. Finally, noncorrelative evaluations ignore the pragmatics of exemplars—that different people are often better off taking different persons, even those with contrary conduct, as their exemplars. It is to insist that the markers of the ford be placed in the same relative location for all. Such a view correlates with a kind of cultural imperialism that would have everyone emulate your exemplars by either ignoring alternative exemplars or by translating every unfamiliar exemplar into familiar normative terms.

Moral error is thus engendered by assuming that anyone might be evaluated in a noncorrelative fashion. It also appears to be engendered by assuming that every moral situation admits of a correct solution. Since moral perfection as a regulative ideal presupposes the viability of these assumptions, to conclude that their endorsement produces moral error implies that moral perfection itself is impossible. Because the only remaining defense of moral perfection as a Confucian regulative

[31] The affable Luixia Hui was the antithesis to Bo Yi. He was gregarious and felt no need to keep away from anyone (see *Mengzi* 2A9, 5B1).

ideal was to show that it remained a possibility, our argument now supports the conclusion that moral perfection is a defunct ideal. In the section that follows we will consider the alternative ideal offered by the early Confucians, and discuss its comparative merits.

4 Better than Perfection

Rather than characterize exemplary persons as free from moral error Mengzi claims that they possess an acute responsiveness to their errors.

> When the noble persons of the past made a mistake, they would correct it. When the "noble persons" of today make a mistake, they persist in it. When the noble persons of antiquity made a mistake it was there to be seen by all the people, like the eclipse of the sun and the moon; and when they made amends the people looked up to them. The "noble persons" of today not only persist in their mistakes but try to argue that they are not mistakes to begin with. (*Mengzi* 2B9; translation modified)

If we look to the *Lunyu* we find a similar train of thought, but with a slightly different vocabulary. Instead of dividing people into the two groups of noble persons—one of the past and one of the present—the *Lunyu* classifies persons as either noble persons or petty persons. When they observe their faults, noble persons seek to correct themselves; while petty persons (if they ever realize their mistakes) endeavor to hide their faults from others (*Lunyu* 19.8)

The difference between such worthy and unworthy persons, according to the early Confucians, is that the former take the "love of learning" as their ideal. While "learning" certainly involves learning from the examples of others, as we have already said, its goal is the cultivation of one's relational virtuosity. It is fundamentally both personal and practical, aiming—as Xunzi says—at nothing less than becoming a sage (*Xunzi* 1.8). To love learning is, in part, to prioritize self-cultivation over competing goods, and to educate one's anxieties (*Lunyu* 1.14, 7.37). Unlike petty persons, those who love learning have aspirations not defined by selfish gains or external goods. Those who love learning do not look for satiety from their food, nor comfort from their dwellings (*Lunyu* 1.14). They are, like Yan Hui 顏回, capable of being content with a bamboo bowl of rice to eat, a gourd of water to drink, and a dirty little hovel in which to live (*Lunyu* 6.11). For them, ill-begotten and selfish gains are but floating clouds (*Lunyu* 7.16). Furthermore, to love learning assumes that no matter how successfully one might respond to a given moral situation, there may be someone else who responds to a similar situation in a better fashion.[32] After all, the "other" might be oneself in the future (and to deny that possibility is, in fact, to no longer love learning).[33] Thus, if those who love learning exceed others, it is

[32] This is yet another exegetical reason moral perfection seems to be an untenable position for the Confucians—how, after all, can moral perfection be achieved if learning must never come to an end, as *Lunyu* 8.7 and *Xunzi* 1.1 and 1.8 claim?

[33] I would like to thank Cassandra Swett for pointing this out to me.

not necessarily because they have fewer faults (though there is a tendency for that to be the case) but because they are less likely to repeat their previous mistakes. They manage to do this by willingly acknowledging their mistakes. This is why those who love learning will not hide their faults from others, nor seek to blame others for their own mistakes (*Lunyu* 6.3). It is also why they are comfortable with the company of persons who would correct them through remonstrance, counsel, or simply by means of their better example (*Lunyu* 1.14). Oddly enough, those who love learning are even said to appreciate being informed of their faults: Kongzi says that he considers himself fortunate to have his mistakes pointed out to him; Zilu was even said to be delighted when he received criticism (*Lunyu* 7.31, *Mengzi* 2A8).

There are several reasons to conclude that the Confucian love of learning is a better ideal than moral perfection. First, anyone who takes the love of learning as their ideal will find it much easier to admit their mistakes—and thus improve. Moral perfection, on the other hand, is a zero-sum ideal defined by results rather than a process. If our focus is on becoming or remaining faultless, we will be naturally inclined to avoid acknowledging any faults we might have—to justify or excuse our conduct, to shift the blame to others, or hide our mistakes. And if we evaluate others by means of the ideal of moral perfection, we will praise those who appear faultless, often rewarding and praising those who are simply adept at hiding their faults from us. In these ways moral perfection as an ideal promotes the conservation of moral error rather than its eradication. The ideal of loving to learn, on the other hand, allows us to more easily admit our faults because it celebrates the process of learning rather than only seeing value in the outcome.[34]

Second, those who aspire to a Confucian love of learning rather than moral perfection are less likely to experience acedia. Moral perfection is an impossible goal that is bound to discourage because it blithely ignores the inevitability of moral exhaustion and moral inattentiveness. The all-or-nothing nature of moral perfection is also likely to be discouraging; it was, after all, this feature of moral perfection that led some Stoics to claim that everyone who is not a sage—everyone who is morally imperfect, in other words—is equally vicious. To find oneself lumped together with the very worst of humanity, past and present, might suggest to many of us that the project of moral cultivation is a hopeless one. While the early Confucians readily admit that loving to learn is peculiar (it is so rare, in fact, that in the *Lunyu* only three persons are characterized as loving to learn), it is not as unrealistic as moral perfection. Furthermore, one need not defer the attainment of one's ideal if it is to love learning; it is defined by a response to error, rather than a total freedom from error, and can thus be immediately realized.

[34] Thus the Confucian love of learning, as an ideal, is quite different from moral perfection. While the latter requires a goal and a static, external standard of success, loving to learn is defined by properties of our practice rather than the results of our practice, and need not get cashed out in terms of a static standard of success. To admit one's faults and seek not to repeat them surely presupposes a notion of what counts as a fault, but loving to learn entails that one is open to the possibility that one's current standard of faults may be mistaken and in need of revision.

Third, the Confucian love of learning does a better job of supporting the practice of learning by exemplars. If we expect our best exemplars to be perfect, we will either suffer from a lack of worthy exemplars or will find ourselves transforming available exemplars into mere fantasies or abstractions. The latter promotes the view that worthy exemplars are wholly other—different from ourselves in profound ways simply because they appear capable of what is highly unlikely or impossible. This sort of categorical distance will discourage emulation because it undermines the very precondition of learning by the example of another, namely peerage or relevant similarity. If moral perfection requires divinity or an otherwise auspicious birth, only hubris could explain our own attempt to become like those said to be perfect. No doubt for most of us the morally perfect person can only be imagined: an abstract amalgam rather than a concrete experience. But to privilege such abstract imaginings is to sacrifice the unique advantage of drawing upon exemplary persons in the first place: the details of their lives that help displace our own assumptions about what it means to live well. One might also argue that a drive to expurgate our best exemplars is not simply evidence of a preference for moral perfection over a love of learning, but an active repudiation of the value of learning from one's mistakes.[35] Furthermore, since moral perfection is impossible, when we construct a moral fantasy of the perfect person we will not only outstrip our own experience, but also produce a vision of perfection that is bound to be flawed. This will, in turn, condemn us to repeating the mistakes of such constructs, thinking them to be perfect when they are not. If, on the other hand, our best exemplars are defined by their love of learning, we can echo the early Confucians' claims that each of us is of the same category as the sages—that anyone can become a sage (*Mengzi* 3A1, 4B28, 4B60, 6B22; *Xunzi* 23.15). Finally, with loving to learn as our ideal, there is the added benefit that more sages—or those whom we might regard as the very best exemplars—would exist in the world.

5 Conclusion

The early Confucians did not expect sages to be faultless, nor did they take moral perfection to be their ideal, regulative or otherwise. Drawing upon the early Confucian literature we have also argued that moral perfection is normatively and thus practically impossible because the philosophic preconditions of moral perfection engender moral failure. Finally, we have discussed the Confucian alternative to moral perfection, and provided several reasons to embrace a love of learning rather than moral perfectionism.

[35] As Kenneth Woodward points out in his study of the Catholic process of making saints, "By identifying holiness with perfection of virtue, the saint-makers are forced to exclude from *positiones* any evidence of human failure; in doing so, they omit what is really exemplary in the life of a saint" (Woodward 2016: 596).

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Declaration

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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