

Ritual Education and Moral Development: A Comparison of Xunzi and Vygotsky

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Abstract Xunzi’s 荀子 advocacy for moral education is well-documented; precisely how his program bolsters moral development, and why a program touting study of ritual could be effective, remain subjects of debate. I argue that these matters can be clarified by appealing to the theory of learning and development offered by Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky posited that development depends primarily on social interactions mediated by sociocultural tools that modify learners’ cognitive architecture, enabling increasingly sophisticated thought. Vygotsky’s theory is remarkably similar to Xunzi’s account of how studying and practicing ritual restructures learners’ moral psychology. Specifically, both Vygotsky and Xunzi offer nonnativist accounts of psychosocial development that emphasize the centrality of sociocultural tools for learning. This comparison yields a more nuanced and empirically supported interpretation of Xunzi’s account of moral education, as well as an account that has applications in contemporary work in moral education and development.

Keywords Xunzi 荀子 · Vygotsky · Habituation · Developmental psychology · Ritual

1 Introduction

The first book of the *Xunzi* 荀子, as traditionally received, opens with the claim that “learning must never cease” (*Xunzi* 1/1/3)¹ and proceeds with a veneration of studying classical texts, poems and, perhaps most importantly, rituals. We are led to understand that such pursuits form the backbone of Xunzi’s philosophy of moral education and development: only by wholeheartedly engaging in a rigorous program of study,

¹ The numbering is from the ICS concordance (Lau and Chen 1996). Translations are from or based on Hutton 2014.

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observation, and practice with regard to these tools can one accumulate sufficient cultural refinement and become an exemplary moral person.

This description of Xunzi is largely uncontroversial; less clear is what Xunzi believes such diligent study and practice is doing for the learner's moral development. A common understanding of Xunzi's program, and one applied to many Confucian accounts of ritual-oriented moral education, is that ritual education is predominantly or wholly a matter of habituation. As Chris Fraser notes, for Confucians, "[the] keys to education are habituation, concentration, having a teacher and model, and perseverance" (Fraser 2006: 531).² A more extreme interpretation is offered by D. C. Lau, who argues that, based on Xunzi's position that morality is a "device" created by the sages, "the only way of instilling it into people is by sheer drill and habituation" (Lau 2000: 210). Presumably, given Xunzi's particular focus on ritual as a tool of moral inculcation, Lau's claim can be construed as a remark about the ritual education process: learning ritual is simply being habituated into ritual. By repeatedly practicing ritual forms, abiding by ritual eventually becomes reflexive; thus, the Confucian conception of moral development boils down to cultivating a collection of habits. Other scholars, such as YU Jiyuan, JIANG Xinyan, and Aaron Stalnaker, adopt more moderate views, allowing habituation a place in Xunzi's developmental picture but rejecting the idea that it is the foremost feature (e.g., Yu 2007: 98–100; Jiang 2012: 103–104; and Stalnaker 2006, especially "Artifice is the Way").

Notably missing from these interpretations of Xunzi are specific accounts of what habituation entails. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate with precision or consistency the claims made by those who have commented on this aspect of Xunzi. Relative to these sorts of views, my account offers a more precise interpretation of Xunzian developmental theory that elucidates features of Xunzi that may have been overlooked or underplayed. This is achieved, in part, by giving a clearer view of habituation, through which we can gain a better understanding of how Xunzi goes beyond it. I agree that there is something to be said for the role that habituation plays in Xunzi's account of moral education, but reading the program as merely or even mainly about habituation is insufficient for several reasons, foremost being that such a reading fails to explain the extent of the psychological transformation that moral education sparks in the Xunzian picture. According to Xunzi, moral education is not merely about changing human habits, but changing the very ways in which humans think about and interact with the social world. Discussion of habits only gets us so far; our account should explain *all* of these changes.

To this end, I engage in a comparative project that clarifies details of Xunzi's approach to moral education by appealing to modern research on learning and development. In particular, I look to the work of Lev Vygotsky, whose theory of psychosocial development has become increasingly influential for cognitive and education sciences over the past several decades. Vygotsky's account shares a number of important similarities to Xunzi's thoughts on moral education. Notably, both adopt a nonnativist stance regarding psychosocial capacities, both describe the developmental process as fundamentally transformative, and both grant sociocultural tools an integral role in development. I regard this project as making at least three contributions to our understanding. First, by drawing upon the Vygotskian account, as well as the

² Robins 2007 offers a similar perspective.

aforementioned discussion of habituation, I argue that we can come to a better understanding of Xunzi's theory of moral education and why such education can be effective. In particular, I compare Xunzi's appeal to ritual with Vygotsky's account of how sociocultural tools, especially language, facilitate increasingly sophisticated psychosocial development that is also, in Xunzi's case, promoral in nature. Second, given the empirical support that Vygotskian accounts of learning and development have garnered, we find support for the Xunzian approach to moral education in its own right, suggesting that Xunzi's account (and perhaps even a more broadly Confucian-inspired account) of how ritual assists moral development may be useful to current work in moral education. Third, and related to the second implication, I suggest that Xunzi's account of ritual and moral development can help to fill a gap in Vygotskian-inspired accounts of moral development, with ritual serving as a sociocultural tool to facilitate moral development in a Vygotskian scheme.

2 Vygotsky

Before proceeding, it will help to provide some exposition of the Vygotskian account of learning and development, as well as why it has garnered attention from current theorists. Although Vygotsky (1896–1934) died before completing much of his work on psychosocial development, and never wrote on moral development in particular, he laid the foundation for what has come to be referred to as “sociocultural constructivist” or “Vygotskian constructivist” developmental theory.³ The Vygotskian account argues that most development occurs as both a part and result of social interactions, making it strongly nonnativist with regard to cognitive development and setting it in opposition with so-called “nativist” theories of development. Briefly, nativism (as it appears in current literature) is the position that humans are born with certain prewired capacities that, if permitted and encouraged to develop along their natural course, can and (typically) will lead to more complex competencies, and do so (largely) independently of environment (Simpson 2005: 133).⁴ A contrast is illuminating: Jean Piaget, a contemporary of Vygotsky's whose theories of cognitive and moral development are widely known, suggested that, while development is partially a product of exploring one's environment, it also depends upon the maturation of innate mechanisms that correspond to certain stages of development. Such a stance aligns (to an extent) with a nativist position.⁵ Vygotsky, skeptical of the explanatory power of innate capacities, suggests instead that *social* interaction provides the foundation for sophisticated cognitive development, since such experiences appear to be necessary for subsequent developments to occur.

Furthermore, while both Piaget and Vygotsky accept that instruction is necessary for development, and that social factors affect learning, they make radically different

³ “Constructivism” here refers *exclusively* to a theory of psychosocial development and learning. Although the label is also applied to schools of thought in epistemology, metaethics, and sociology, educational/developmental constructivism is a distinct project. To avoid confusion, I refer to the account as Vygotskian.

⁴ Simpson's account has become standard among many contemporary nativists in the philosophy of science. Similar, although less explicit, views on nativism are expressed in Cosmides and Tooby 1992.

⁵ I hesitate to align Piaget completely with nativism, since his work leaves open the possibility that innate predispositions of development can be susceptible to social influences in a roughly Vygotskian manner.

assumptions regarding the extent to which such factors impact development. Piaget, tending toward a nativist line, emphasizes stages of development and an innate power for reasoning. Vygotsky, however, suggests that the capacities to learn and reason are themselves largely-to-wholly predicated upon social experiences: features such as the culture and language in which one is brought up *build and shape* these capacities. This is because one's social environs are filled with tools (such as language, customs, and dogmas) that serve as the media by which new information and experiences are introduced and internalized. The important distinction is that these social tools are not merely providing educational *content*, but functionally restructuring thought as a whole—this is the sense in which knowledge is *constructed* for Vygotsky's learner, and also the sense in which learning is itself a social phenomenon. Given the diversity of cultural tools that humans employ, then, we should expect humans to differ as learners not only on individual levels, but also as communities.

This feature of the Vygotskian account also emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity and, in so doing, yields a practical component absent from nativist and Piagetian accounts, namely the role that sociocultural interactions and tools play in cognitive development. These foci provide Vygotskian models with an advantage:

The influence of Vygotskian theory . . . on educational practice has been one of the most striking features of the past decade. Although a [Piagetian approach] had previously dominated pedagogy in schools, its lack of consideration of group learning processes, the social contexts of learning and the influences of cultural diversity, together with problems associated with the invariant notion of stages of development that are universal, has led to its demise as the primary means for explaining and providing contexts for learning and development. (Yelland and Masters 2007: 363)

While Piaget's work focuses primarily upon the development of an individual interacting with the physical world, Vygotsky focuses upon the individual as largely a *product* of the *social* world. Accordingly, Vygotsky places features such as group learning, cultural diversity, and learning context at the center of his theory. Like Piaget, Vygotsky emphasizes that development is facilitated by interaction with the world, but adds that social interaction in particular effects development in ways that not only help with advancing learners, but also differentiating them. This is important for theorizing about group learning contexts, in which instruction is "shared" by multiple learners and the learners themselves may then interact and reconstruct information in a variety of ways. Learning, then, is a social practice that drives development and, as with all social practices, features of the community will crucially frame and influence how the practice proceeds. These elements of Vygotsky's theory alone have made it invaluable for research on learning within and across communities, as well as developing instructional techniques for diverse learner groups.

The details of how socialization initiates and facilitates development in the Vygotskian account have also garnered support (e.g., Wertsch 1985; Wood and Wood 1996; Anderson, Fincham, and Douglass 1997; Tappan 1997, 1998; Renkl, Atkinson, Maier, and Staley 2002; and Garzotto 2007). For Vygotsky, development of higher psychological processes entails mastery, wherein "an operation that initially represents an external activity is reconstructed and begins to occur internally" (Vygotsky 1978:

56–57). Development is mediated by the acquisition and utilization of social tools, the most important being language: verbal language is the primary means of communication between humans, and the main developmental tool for transmitting information from adults to children. Furthermore, upon internalizing and appropriating language, it fundamentally transforms how thought is organized:

[The] nature of the development itself changes from biological to sociohistorical. Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behavior, but is determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech. (Tappan 1997: 94–95)

This process leads to what Vygotsky referred to as “inner speech” which, in the beginning, is

identical in structure with social speech, but in the process of [social speech’s] transformation into inner speech, it gradually becomes less complete and coherent as it becomes governed by an almost entirely predicative syntax. (Vygotsky 1934/1986: 243–244)

Inner speech provides a shorthand for organizing thought, enabling learners to more rapidly process and respond to experiences, as language becomes an increasingly effective means of encoding and deploying information.

According to Vygotsky, internalizing and appropriating social tools spurs development via a fundamental transformation of the learner’s cognitive architecture, both in terms of the physical brain and how the learner thinks and behaves. Learning drives development from an unsophisticated baseline (thought *prior to* language exposure and acquisition) to increasingly complex levels (thought *after* language exposure and acquisition). One of Vygotsky’s examples of such transformation is the mastery of scientific concepts: prior to a certain degree of development and, more importantly, exposure to scientific methodology (or *any* systemic way of understanding the world), children are capable of forming only spontaneous concepts. Spontaneous concepts form automatically and without participation in social practices, such as concepts from sense perception alone; this is a baseline capacity. *Scientific* concepts require instruction so that learners can obtain a system by which to generate more complex concepts. Commenting upon Piaget’s studies on children, Vygotsky writes:

It should be shown that all the peculiarities of the child’s thought described by Piaget (such as syncretism, juxtaposition, and insensitivity to contradiction) stem from the absence of a system in the child’s spontaneous concepts—a consequence of undeveloped relations of generality. For example, to be disturbed by a contradiction, the child would have to view the contradictory statements in the light of some general principle, i.e., within a system. But when a child in Piaget’s experiments says of one object that it dissolved in water because it was small, and of another . . . because it was big, he merely makes empirical statements of facts that follow the logic of perceptions. No generalization of the kind “Smallness leads to dissolution” is present in his mind, and hence the two statements are not felt to be contradictory. It is this lack of distance from the immediate experience . . .

that accounts for the peculiarities of the child's thought. Therefore, these peculiarities do not appear in the child's scientific concepts, which from their very inception carry within them relations of generality, i.e., some rudiments of a system. The formal discipline of scientific concepts gradually transforms the structure of the child's spontaneous concepts and helps organize them into a system: this furthers the child's ascent to higher developmental levels. (Vygotsky 1934/1986: 205–206)

There are two important points in this excerpt. First, as mentioned earlier, development is driven by the social practice of learning. The development of the ability to utilize scientific concepts (a complex, learned capacity) requires learners to advance beyond spontaneous concept formation, and this advancement requires instruction in scientific methodology so as to provide learners with the aforementioned system. The second takeaway is that going beyond the baseline in the developmental process involves not merely additive or eliminative processes with regard to spontaneous concepts, but also their (re)organization for the purpose of enabling complex conceptualization. It is the *absence* of a system for thinking that limits children to spontaneous concepts, and the *presence* of a system that enables developmental ascent. Once this system becomes part of the psychological repertoire, learners can develop increasingly complex conceptualizations based in and around this system. This is the general nature of the psychosocial transformation that Vygotsky envisions.

Additionally, recall that Vygotsky treats development as occurring on two levels, the social and the internal. Cognitive and sociocultural processes, such as language use, are encountered first on the social level (for example, when being spoken to) and then appear on the internal (as when producing speech of one's own accord):

Sociocultural processes on the one hand and individual functioning on the other [exist] in a dynamic, irreducible tension rather than a static notion of social determination. [Vygotsky's] approach . . . considers these poles of sociocultural processes and individual functioning as interacting moments in human action, rather than as static processes that exist in isolation from one another. (Penuel and Wertsch 1995: 84)

Development occurs when there is an overlap between the two levels, where the learner accesses the sociocultural processes, internalizes them, and then deploys them. The outcome is that the learner's cognitive architecture is genuinely transformed as the brain adopts, adapts, and alters the way in which it functions to facilitate and utilize these new tools.

This leads to another point about the restructuring process: it is representational. According to Vygotsky, internalization of information is mediated by sociocultural tools. These tools, such as language, are *appropriated* by the learner and then utilized to facilitate the internalization process. The tools do this by helping to represent and mediate information from one's social environs. We can describe internalization as follows:

Internalization is conceived of as a representational activity, a process that occurs simultaneously in social practice and in the human brain/mind.

Sociocultural researchers include the learners' appropriation of socially elaborated symbol systems as a critical aspect of learning-driven development. This appropriation of symbol systems was a central focus of Vygotsky's work, particularly as applied to educational pedagogy, and led to his most fully elaborated application of the concept of internalization—the transformation of communicative language into inner speech and further into verbal thinking. (John-Steiner and Mahn 1996: 196)

The transformative restructuring process influences how the learner interfaces with the world. As Vygotsky describes this transformation, “Speech does not merely serve as an expression of developed thought. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech” (Vygotsky 1997: 251). Acquisition of social tools and internalization fundamentally alter the way in which the learner processes, manipulates, and responds to information. This also enables the learner to broaden his or her developmental potential, as mastery of new knowledge expands the ability to internalize additional, more complex knowledge, thus improving one's degree of competency.

With this overview of Vygotsky in hand, let us turn to Xunzi.

3 Xunzi

My argument is that Xunzi held a theory of development similar to Vygotsky's. Let me start with a very important qualification: this project is concerned with comparing *only* the psychosocial developmental theories of Xunzi and Vygotsky and *not* their ideologies across the board. There are, of course, many points on which the two can (and do) differ. For example, Xunzi's account of development is presented in the service of a particular Confucian moral view. In contrast, it is at best unclear that Vygotsky's theory is intended to advance any particular moral agenda. While it may be worthwhile to compare Xunzi and Vygotsky on these and other matters, they are separate from and beyond the scope of my target comparison (developmental psychology).

Bearing this qualification in mind, let us examine the relevant features of Xunzi's account. Consider the following excerpt:

[I]f you never climb a high mountain, you will not know the height of Heaven. If you never visit a deep ravine, you will not know the depth of the Earth. If you never hear the words passed down from the former kings, you will not know the magnificence of learning. The children of the Han 干, Yue 越, Yi 夷, and Mo 貉 peoples all cry with the same sound at birth, but when grown they have different customs, because teaching makes them thus. . . . No spirit-like state is greater than having transformed oneself with the Way. (*Xunzi* 1/1/7–9; Hutton 2014: 1–2)

Two points of similarity between Xunzi and Vygotsky are observable here. First, moral development is thought to be rooted in learning (as with customs, rituals, and classic texts) rather than an innate tendency. Second, Xunzi treats moral development as being similar to language acquisition, like the Vygotskian account. I argue that additional

textual evidence further supports the claim that Xunzi's theory of moral development is roughly the same as Vygotsky's general theory of learning and development. This stems from Xunzi's position that humans are born morally incompetent, must acquire the means to become morally capable and, in the process, undergo substantial psychological transformation. The nature of the moral transformation in Xunzi's writings, including how it is brought about (via ritual), includes the cognitive restructuring needed for psychosocial development in Vygotsky's picture.

A good place to continue this comparison is with an aspect of moral cultivation in the *Xunzi*, namely the pursuit of intrapersonal harmony via ritual. That ritual is intended to promote and maintain harmony between members of a community is uncontroversial; less explored is how ritual is intended to facilitate harmony within one's person and how this pursuit contributes to the overall development of promoral dispositions.⁶ As we shall see, the manner in which ritual study and practice help guide and channel features of one's psychology not only refines and cements those dispositions that are relevant to morally-charged interactions with others, but also benefits one's psychological well-being. Here, we find another similarity between the role of ritual in Xunzi's moral cultivation system and Vygotsky's account of language as a tool for developing cognitive architecture: just as language facilitates communication between others *and* helps to organize and navigate one's own thoughts and experiences, so too does ritual facilitate promoral interactions and help organize one's own morally-relevant internal states.

To understand these features of ritual education, let us consider a reason for Xunzi's emphasis on the necessity of ritual instruction, namely his belief that humans are, at birth, morally incompetent. In Book 23 ("Xing E 性惡" or "Human Nature Is Bad"),⁷ Xunzi explains that humans are not innately good and, moreover, are often motivated by brute, uncultivated desires that seldom reflect prosocial attitudes like respect and compassion. Only after cultivation via the study and practice of ritual does one come to be reliably moral (*Xunzi* 19/90/3–5). This claim reflects a further overlap between Xunzi and Vygotsky: nonnativism.⁸ On both theories, the beginning of psychosocial development is a position of (near) complete incompetence, where the learner's knowledge and skills are minimal (if at all extant). This might seem intuitive: many accounts of learning will start from the assumption that learners begin in ignorance. What is significant about the incompetence described herein is that the ability to move beyond it is contingent upon social factors (that is, being exposed to the proper tools and experiences via which one then develops the target capacities).⁹ It is only via sociomoral training that one can become reliably moral.

Xunzi's nonnativism is made clearer in his broader account of human psychology, particularly with regard to the motivation of behavior which is governed by at least two faculties: the aforementioned desires (*yu* 欲) and a sense of approbation (*ke-buke* 可-不可, literally "approval-disapproval"). For Xunzi, some desires are simply part of being human:

⁶ This is not to suggest that there is *no* work on the topic. See, for example, Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon 2008; Sarkissian 2010; Mower 2011; and Berkson 2014.

⁷ It is noteworthy that several scholars (Kanaya 1951, Munro 1969, Robins 2001) have argued that Book 23 is *not* the work of Xunzi but a later interpolation. My arguments are not contingent upon the authenticity of this text, but upon the presence of nonnativist thought present throughout the *Xunzi*, particularly with regard to the claims that humans are not born with prosocial attitudes or concepts, and that said dispositions must be acquired.

⁸ I address a particular concern about labeling Xunzi as a nonnativist in Footnote 11.

⁹ This raises a puzzle for the Xunzian (and Vygotskian) accounts: if morality is based on social factors, then from whence did morality first arise? I will not engage this question, but for a possible resolution see Nivison 1996.

they are inalienable features with which any realistic theory of moral psychology must contend. If left unchecked or unguided, these desires may lead to contention and strife within the populace.

The sense of approbation (or approval) is also part of the human make-up, but it is to be refined rather than corralled. This is partially because, for Xunzi, the sense of approbation features in active deliberation. Like desires,¹⁰ the sense of approbation can motivate behavior; importantly, however, it can also *override* desires. As Xunzi notes, “All humans follow what they approve and turn away from that which they do not approve” (*Xunzi* 22/111/20). “Approval” here is akin to deeming an action or the object of action “permissible” or “appropriate.” Xunzi writes:

Life is what humans most desire; death is that to which humans are most averse. Yet there are cases of humans letting go of life and completing their own deaths. This is not because they do not desire to live and instead desire to die, but rather because they disapprove of living thusly and approve dying thusly. Thus, when desires are excessive but one does not act, it is because the *xin* 心 halts the action. (*Xunzi* 22/111/8–9; Hutton 2014: 244, modified)

When Xunzi discusses humans disapproving living but approving dying, the claim is that they do not deem their (way of) living permissible, but *do* deem their deaths permissible, even appropriate. The interesting point is that Xunzi directs us to this sense of approbation as an activity of the *xin* (heart-mind). The *xin* is the organ of deliberation, and it will follow a course of action according to feelings—such as the desires—and the attitude of approbation, acting in accordance with the latter. At birth, however, the sense of approbation is just as crude as the desires; it is not cultivated and it is unlikely that one’s baseline sense of approbation will be sufficiently morally sophisticated to judge against problematic desires. Accordingly, sociomoral training is needed so that one can reliably judge whether an action is appropriate; social learning helps fashion the sense of approbation/*ke-buke* into a promoral capacity.

Consider the example of a hungry person who, finding a loaf of bread, deems it appropriate to eat the bread regardless of whether someone else might have been saving it, or if someone else might have an even greater hunger and need for the bread. These factors would not necessarily affect the judgment of one whose sense of approbation has never undergone moral education. Sages might have a sufficient capacity for sympathy and awareness of others to make such judgments, but many people might not. As a result, the judgments of non-sages will be more strongly influenced by their desires. Just as learners in the Vygotskian model require tools like language during cognitive development, Xunzian learners need a guide for the development and execution of moral deliberation. The manner in which this deliberation occurs can be modified and conditioned by moral training; without such conditioning it is likely that the consistency and ability to process moral situations will be impoverished. Xunzi recognizes this need, and this is where ritual education enters: rituals were designed to

¹⁰ This claim has detractors (notably Sung 2012), but I will not address them, as doing so is not crucial to my argument.

refine the sense of approbation and guarantee that what one deliberates in favor of will align with what is acceptably moral.¹¹

These features can be further explicated by appeal to Vygotsky's inner speech. Recall Vygotsky's claim that language transforms the nature of thought by providing structure.¹² The function of language/inner speech, I suggest, is equivalent to the function of ritual for Xunzi. From birth, Xunzi claims, we lack the resources to (harmoniously) cope with and respond to emotionally disruptive scenarios, being without sufficient sustenance, and even general interactions with others. Xunzi illustrates this with the metaphors of shaping and honing to describe education:

Crooked wood must await steaming and straightening on the shaping frame, and only then does it become straight. Blunt metal must await honing and grinding, and only then does it become sharp. Now since people's nature is bad, they must await teachers and proper models, and only then do they become correct. They must obtain ritual and *yi* 義,¹³ and only then will they become well ordered. (*Xunzi* 23/113/9–10; Hutton 2014: 248, modified)¹⁴

Ritual helps organize, coordinate, and even prime our affective responses to these sorts of scenarios: it restructures a learner's psychological landscape by helping to inculcate responses to, and understandings of, a variety of ethically-charged situations. Just as Vygotsky regards lacking language as developmentally inhibitory, Xunzi regards lacking ritual as morally stunting.

One place where we see Xunzi's similarity to Vygotsky in more detail is with ritual's ability to channel and refine feelings to make them appropriate, tolerable, and comprehensible for oneself in various situations. Ritual's function in this sense is to provide an internal moral language by which to assess, structure, and organize feelings. The standards provided by ritual help coordinate one's feelings much like how ritual prescriptions provide standards to coordinate social behavior. Similar to how mastering a verbal language aids one's analysis of both the world and oneself, ritual facilitates moral development by providing normative standards that are assimilated into one's sense of approbation/moral judgment (*Xunzi* 4/15/13–17).¹⁵ The effect on moral judgment is similar to how linguistic expressions provide culturally-based connotations of approbation, constraining as well as guiding them. By adhering to these cultivated judgments, individuals gain a source of moral guidance that is more objective and reliable than the uneducated baseline sense of approbation. In terms of satisfying and

¹¹ It might be objected that, given this explanation of ritual's function, Xunzi's position appears to be nativist insofar as ritual is working upon an extant capacity that is (in some way linked to) human nature. If the complaint is simply that Xunzi allows for the presence of certain innate tendencies and that this makes him a nativist, then certainly we would all be nativists (Vygotsky included), for no one will deny that humans possess *some* capacities/tendencies at and even before birth. As explained earlier, however, this is *not* the account of nativism with which I am working. Additionally, and as previously noted, the sense of approbation is a part of one's deliberate effort (*wei* 偽), rather than one's nature (*xing* 性). Accordingly, I think it is safe to say that Xunzi's developmental view is nonnativist.

¹² A more complete explanation can be found in Vygotsky's text, *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky 1934/1986).

¹³ I intentionally leave *yi* untranslated here. Roughly, I understand it to mean "standards of righteousness."

¹⁴ A similar sentiment appears at *Xunzi* 23/115/16–18.

¹⁵ For a previous analogy between ritual and language, see Li 2007.

harmonizing desires, Xunzi's educational program uses ritual to refine the sense of approbation in a way that enhances self- and social-awareness when seeking to fulfill desires. When deliberating whether to fulfill a desire, deliberation is subject to the cultivated sense of approbation as framed by ritual, just as language often frames reasoning (*Xunzi* 22/111/8–9). Establishing these norms throughout a community sets a basis for order and harmony.

This returns us to the topic of what ritual education does for learners. As noted earlier, some scholars have construed ritual education reductively as habituation. The problem is that such readings (seemingly) assume that ritual learning is *only* or *mainly* a matter of habituation. In fairness, it is not totally clear what notion(s) of habituation these scholars have employed regarding this topic. If we want to bring Xunzi into discourse with contemporary cognitive science, however, it will be helpful to use the definition of habituation applied therein, and acknowledge that it may be the case that this notion of habituation is not what the aforementioned scholars have in mind.¹⁶ A common definition of habituation has been applied by cognitive scientists since 1966 (Thompson and Spencer 1966). In a recent update, habituation is defined as

a behavioral response decrement that results from repeated stimulation and that does not involve sensory adaptation/sensory fatigue or motor fatigue. . . . Behavioral responses that undergo habituation may include any final output of the nervous system including simple reflexes such as pupillary responses and sweating, and muscle contraction or even motor neuron activity. One additional example is hormone release, which is the final output of the neuroendocrine system; hormones have a persistent action in regulating many behaviors. (Rankin et al. 2009: 136)

At the most general level, then, habituation amounts to a collection of automatic responses on the part of the body's neuroendocrine system. Constant exposure to specific stimuli, coupled with target scenarios and behaviors, may develop an association between stimulus and scenarios/behaviors in learners, resulting in their becoming habituated.

If this is what habituation means for Xunzi, then what this would mean for his educational program in ritual is that it could be explained strictly in terms of associating certain behaviors with particular stimuli, with the rituals providing the context and materials of stimulation. On this account, what practice (*xi* 習) of ritual involves is a kind of training/conditioning. It is common, for example, to develop a daily routine as a matter of habituation: one wakes up around 6:00 AM, has a cup of tea, dresses, heads into the office, greets colleagues already present, and then sits down for the day's labors. Part of what facilitates the smoothness of this routine is the habituation to both the processes involved and the accompanying stimuli (for example, the alarm going off elicits a trained clicking of the "OFF" button, Cheryl's sing-song "Hello" elicits a reflexive "Hello, Cheryl," and so on). So strong can the habituation become that one may find oneself going through the motions regardless of whether the appropriate stimuli are present (as when replying "Thanks, you too," when the server tells you to enjoy your meal). The analogous assumption for Xunzi would be that ritual is also like this: upon seeing the person in mourning garb, one automatically shrinks away; upon meeting one's superior, one automatically adopts a deferential posture.

¹⁶ If it is not, then the onus is upon these scholars to clarify their definition(s) of habituation.

It is true that practice is a feature of ritual education, and the sort of habituation described above is likely part of this practice. We are also told, however, that elements other than practice are present in the ritual education curriculum, reflection (*si* 思) being perhaps the most notable. Reflection appears to have involved a number of cognitive and metacognitive capacities, including contemplation, deliberation,¹⁷ reminiscence, and even visualization. These features are arguably present in contemporary conceptions of reflection as well, but more importantly indicate that ritual practice involves a considerable amount of activity on the part of the practitioner that will go beyond the reflexive behavior involved in mere habit and the process of habituation.

Examples of ritual practice using reflection can be found by examining the relationship between the two concepts, which can be explained in terms of two recurring themes in the *Xunzi*: ritual requiring reflection from the practitioner, and ritual as an object of reflection. The use of ritual in helping to cope with the grieving process exemplifies the first theme, since the bereaved employ ritual to help both dwell upon and move past the death of a loved one. Other examples involve deliberating upon one's conduct while using ritual as a standard.

For simple-minded rectitude or scrupulous honesty, make it suitable with ritual and music, and enlighten it with reflection. (*Xunzi* 2/6/9; Hutton 2014: 12)¹⁸

As the long night is passing by slowly,
I think long whether I acted wrongly.
I lapsed not from the ways of high antiquity,
Nor did I deviate from ritual and *yi*.

So why should others' words be of concern to me? (*Xunzi* 22/110/17–8; Hutton 2014: 242)

These sorts of passages indicate that one should determine one's actions according to ritual, and that the determination of how to act is itself both part of the ritual and deliberative in nature. In these cases, according with ritual does not merely require that one behave according to habit, but that one act in consideration of the prescriptions of ritual.

The second theme is exemplified by passages encouraging learners to look at the ritual *itself* and attempt to discern its importance. For example:

The gentleman examines ritual carefully, and then he cannot be deceived by trickery and artifice. (*Xunzi* 19/92/14–15; Hutton 2014: 205)

To be able to reflect and ponder what is central to ritual is called being able to deliberate. (*Xunzi* 19/92/17; Hutton 2014: 206)

[People's] nature does not know of ritual and *yi*, and so they must think and reflect and seek to know them. (*Xunzi* 23/114/21; Hutton 2014: 251, modified)

¹⁷ Indeed, *si* 思 is sometimes simply rendered as "deliberation."

¹⁸ A similar sentiment is expressed in *Xunzi* 27/130/8.

In these cases, practicing ritual demands reflection because ritual *itself* requires the use of one's deliberative faculties. Rituals are collections of prescriptions, but the prescriptions themselves are (supposedly) directed toward social and psychological well-being. Additionally, sometimes the effective application of ritual requires flexibility on the part of the practitioner, such as in cases where one lacks the proper implements of ritual (for example, materials for caps or money for offerings). One is not permitted to merely abandon the ritual in such cases, so one must deliberate upon how to adapt to the situation while still maintaining the spirit of the ritual. Were ritual practice merely a matter of habit, it is unlikely that such reflection would (or could) be part of learning and practicing ritual. With such features of the Xunzian model aforesaid, it is best not to reduce ritual education to habituation.¹⁹

What remains is to demonstrate that the moral cultivation process for Xunzi entails the same sort of cognitive restructuring involved in Vygotsky's account. Returning to the pursuit of intrapersonal harmony, Xunzi identifies the following difficulty for his moral theory: it must provide an ethic that attends to our (sometimes turbulent) affective states and also transforms us into reliable moral performers. For Xunzi, the first issue consists in the aforementioned desires and dispositions; the second is a matter of developing a capacity to gauge appropriateness and act accordingly. Given Xunzi's moral nonnativism, and ritual's centrality to moral development, we should expect ritual to help restructure or build upon extant psychology, and help canalize new dispositions for how to think and feel in promoral ways.

Several textual excerpts support this point. For example, Xunzi claims that sacrificial rites involve feelings of "remembrance and longing," allowing practitioners to cope with grief and show love and respect for the departed (*Xunzi* 19/97/20–19/98/1). The forms dictated by ritual are intended to provide humans with the therapeutic means of grasping such feelings and bringing inner peace by channeling the feelings in a constructive manner. Sacrificial rites, a mourner's diet, and other such ritually-prescribed practices are not merely for external shows of respect and devotion; they are the means of giving rest to one's feelings, providing for internal harmony. Additionally, Xunzi provides the following description of transformative moral education:

[The sage kings] set up ritual and *yi*, and established proper models and measures. They did this in order to straighten out and beautify people's nature and inborn dispositions and thereby correct them, and in order to train and transform people's nature and inborn dispositions and thereby guide them. (*Xunzi* 23/113/11–13; Hutton 2014: 248–249, modified)

What features are being transformed by education? The answer seems to be human psychology, or at least one's capacity for moral thinking. To see this, let us consider a worry that Xunzi encounters with regard to maintaining intrapersonal harmony: morally problematic desires that persist even after a disapproving judgment. How can harmony be attained when desires continue to conflict with the sense of approbation? Xunzi's solution is transformation/refinement. T. C. Kline suggests that this process occurs alongside the cultivation of the sense of

¹⁹ This is a point with which I am sure many other scholars, having these details, would likely agree. See, for example, the previous quote from Fraser 2006, which lists a number of other items in addition to habituation.

approbation via learning ritual: since one's natural dispositions (*xing-qing* 性情) provide the origins of desires, it is reasonable to assume that refining these dispositions will result in refined desires that no longer conflict with the educated sense of approbation (Kline 2006: 242).²⁰ What occurs is a kind of habituation alongside deepening understanding: the sense of approbation reshapes the dispositions to be promoral and, as the source of desires, the desires also become promoral. This is the means of moral transformation for human beings, and it takes place by refining one's dispositions.

How does ritual education entail cognitive restructuring? According to Xunzi, adherence to ritually-prescribed order is what enables us to structure the ways in which we interface and cope with our experiences in a manner that gives our feelings proper measure without allowing them to overwhelm us. To employ an architectural metaphor, ritual provides both the blueprints and the scaffolding around which a promoral, socially competent individual is built. This description fits rather well with Xunzi's writings:

At his greatest, the gentleman achieves the most elevated state of ritual, and at the least he fulfills completely its lowest form, and when in intermediate circumstances he dwells in its intermediate form. Whether going slowly, quickly, or at full gallop, he never departs from this, for this is the gentleman's *home* and *palace*. (*Xunzi* 19/95/15; Hutton 2014: 206, modified and italics added)

Note the treatment of ritual as an edifice for morally exemplary persons, one from which they "never depart." This suggests that ritual is literally an artifice by which moral persons are constantly both sheltered and constrained, never deviating (departing) from it.

This analysis provides us with the image of ritual as a resource for constraining humans in some way, as well as an architectural metaphor, but does not necessarily demonstrate that Xunzi views ritual as transforming moral thought and feeling in learners. Let us consider, then, a passage from Book 8 utilizing the structural/architectural metaphor:

"For his words, the gentleman has a foundation and roof. For his conduct, he has levees and depth markers." This means that what he requires of people's ways and virtue goes no lower than security and preservation for people. It means that what he requires of people's intentions and thoughts goes no lower than becoming a well-bred man. If a person's model deviates from the later kings, he calls it unrefined. Whether one elevates him or demotes him, belittles him or makes him a minister, he does not go outside these bounds. That is how the gentleman exercises his intentions and thoughts within a foundation, roof, and halls. (*Xunzi* 8/34/20–24; Hutton 2014: 67, modified)²¹

²⁰ Compare with *Xunzi* 22/111/7: "A single desire received from *tian* 天 (heaven), controlled by many things received from the *xin*, is certainly difficult to categorize as a thing received from *tian*" (Hutton 2014: 243–244, modified).

²¹ See also *Xunzi* 10/46/22–10/47/1.

As evidenced elsewhere, the “depth markers” and “foundation, roof, and halls” are the rituals:

Those who cross waters mark out the deep places, but if the markers are not clear, people will fall in. Those who order the people mark out the Way, but if the markers are not clear, there will be chaos. The rituals are those markers. (*Xunzi* 17/82/22–17/83/1; Hutton 2014: 181)²²

Returning to the excerpt from Book 8, Xunzi clarifies with the architectural metaphor that what is being constrained and structured are the “intentions and thoughts” of the morally exemplary person. Specifically, by learning and practicing ritual, one comes not only to behave according to the guidelines of ritual, but also to think and feel within the framework of those guidelines. Ritual, then, is depicted as providing both a bastion for practitioners as well as a space in which their thoughts and attitudes can be both restrained and guided along a promoral pathway. In this way, the ritually educated person is thought to be transformed, as ritual gives an order to thought and intention where, as noted, there would otherwise be chaos. Indeed, Xunzi says:

Another kind of person practices the rituals reverently, and his thoughts are restrained. (*Xunzi* 23/117/8; Hutton 2014: 256)

There is thus a clear likeness between Xunzi’s treatment of ritual as a collection of constraints/guides and sociocultural tools in the Vygotskian account of development. For Vygotsky, the appropriation of tools facilitates the processes of internalization and mastery. Just as language helps to develop basic communicative competency by transforming the way the individual thinks and interacts with others, ritual facilitates promoral psychosocial development by providing direction and placing constraints on behavior, thought, and feeling.

4 Implications

In closing, I want to address some of the implications that this project holds both for Xunzi scholarship and contemporary work in moral education and development. For one, the comparison with Vygotskian developmental theory provides a richer, more detailed account of Xunzian moral education. It gives us a means of understanding both why the study and practice of ritual are advocated (to facilitate learning and development of promoral dispositions), as well as how said study and practice affect learners (cognitive restructuring). The first feature is especially useful insofar as it gives us reason to reject or revisit accounts of Xunzi’s program that reduce it to being merely (or mostly) habituation. Previous commentaries have not offered well-defined accounts of the role of habit for Xunzi, and my appeal to a particular definition of habituation

²² This claim is restated in *Xunzi* 27/127/4–5. Strictly speaking, these passages only relate ritual to the markers but, given Xunzi’s association between the “foundation and roof” and “levees and depth markers” in the earlier passage, it is reasonable to assume that the metaphor holds there as well.

(adopted within contemporary cognitive science) provides a novel way to elaborate the role of habituation in Xunzi. The second feature helps to demonstrate the psychological sophistication inherent in Xunzi's account: what I am offering is a more precise way of making sense of Xunzi's developmental theory, how it goes beyond habituation, and how it is intended to achieve moral transformation via a learning process mediated in part by ritual.

Another implication of the comparison is that there is reason to construe Xunzi's program as being (hypothetically) well-supported empirically. Both Xunzi and Vygotsky advocate socially-mediated education set against a backdrop of psychological nonnativism. As I noted, the Vygotskian approach to education has been well-received within the cognitive and education sciences. It stands to reason that the Xunzian program, at least where it overlaps with Vygotsky, should also find empirical support. In addition to granting additional plausibility to Xunzi's account of moral psychology, this may help to explain why Xunzi focused so heavily upon ritual.

Finally, assuming that a Vygotskian theory of development is viable, the Xunzian account of moral development may provide a resource for modern moral education programs, particularly those that draw upon Vygotskian developmental theory. As I mentioned early on, Vygotsky never completed any work on moral learning/development and, although many have drawn upon Vygotsky as a resource for theorizing about education in general, few have attempted to apply Vygotsky's work to moral education in particular. Of the work on moral development that has employed Vygotsky, only that of Mark Tappan has provided anything substantive that expands upon the source material (Tappan 1997, 1998). Tappan, however, focuses upon the idea that a Vygotskian account of moral development will parallel linguistic development (Tappan 1997: 87), and neglects how other sociocultural tools may contribute to the developmental process. Xunzi's account as I have depicted it can help to fill out a Vygotskian account of moral development, especially insofar as ritual provides humans with a blueprint for how to act and feel in moral scenarios.²³ Taken alongside my remarks regarding ritual's ability to facilitate intrapersonal harmony, it should be readily apparent that ritual is a plausible sociocultural tool to mediate promoral development in a Vygotskian scheme. Just as language helps to shape and guide thought in general, ritual study (properly deployed) should help inculcate understandings of certain behaviors and precepts, *and* help learners to cultivate general promoral attitudes like respect and compassion. Accordingly, it is worth investigating ritual as a resource for moral development.

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²³ I should emphasize, of course, that I am appealing to ritual in principle, abstracted from the content of the specific rituals prescribed by the Confucians themselves.

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