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“Wittgenstein and the *Xunzi* on the Clarification of Language”¹

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Abstract: Broadly speaking, language is part of a social activity in both Wittgenstein and Xunzi 荀子, and for both clarification of language is central to their philosophical projects; the goal of this article is to explore the extent of resonance and discord that may be found when comparing these two philosophers. While for Xunzi, the rectification of names (*zhengming* 正名) is anchored in a regard for establishing, propagating, and/or restoring a harmonious social system, perspicuity is for Wittgenstein represented as a philosophical end in itself. The article ventures study in particular the themes of perspicuity and aspect-perception in Wittgenstein together with the topics of correcting names and the cultivation of the heart-mind (*xin* 心) in the *Xunzi*. The

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aspiration of this project is to gain an overview of the role(s) of clarification projects in different philosophical traditions, all while not overlooking the different historical contexts and philosophical ends of these two philosophers.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Xunzi, language, clarification, rectification

A comprehensive, truly global approach to philosophy, one that would be inclusive of all its diverse expressions is the elusive goal of much comparative philosophy. Surely this mission is admirable, even if it is also hubristic. On what ground could one propose to organize a diverse array of intellectual activity as “philosophy”? The risk is that putting distant figures into contact creates the possibility that one voice will be silenced, or that salient differences will be overlooked or deliberately ignored.

The present essay aims for another model of contact: conversation that clarifies “defensible differences” (Clayton 2006: 59); that is, by comparing the forms and ends of argumentation of two distant philosophers possessing some similarities, the differences will become all the more apparent. What congruence that may emerge will be limited and contingent, and yet also a possible inspiration for future work. Arguably, both Wittgenstein and the *Xunzi* (荀子) identify lack of clarity regarding language as the source of problems (philosophical, for Wittgenstein, and social, for the *Xunzi*), and thus, the work of clarifying what otherwise might be confused is central to their conceptions and practices of philosophy. I contend in this paper that despite the

historical, cultural, and linguistic gulf that separates them, Wittgenstein's writings and the *Xunzi* may be brought into productive conversation.²

While interpretive insights into Wittgenstein and the *Xunzi* may arise from this initial conversation, the biggest promise, I take it, would be in comparative metaphilosophical inquiry focused on the value of clarification of language. Some might be tempted to proceed according to the claim that family resemblances – functionally similar but not identical uses of language – may be found across some philosophical traditions despite their cultural distance (Wittgenstein 2001: 27ef).³ While I do not doubt that claim, it may not be so helpful when comparing philosophers, whose use of language, after all, may deviate from ordinary usage. If Wittgenstein and Xunzi bear a resemblance to each other, philosophically in some respects, it is not best thought of in terms of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance. Yet, it can be asked of two philosophers who prize the clarification of language: do they have the same concepts of “clarification” and “language” or not? If they differ, in what respects do they differ? What is studied then are some of the different clarification projects in philosophy.

In this paper, I approach the theme of rectifying names (*zhengming* 正名) comparatively under the aegis of “clarification of language”. One might wonder if *zhengming* is best thought of as an instance of clarifying language.⁴ After all, twentieth century philosophy of language exists at considerable remove from the Warring States context of the *Xunzi*. Indeed, viewing the

² The first English-language study of Wittgenstein and Confucianism is Peterman (2015); however, his book does not focus on the *Xunzi*.

³ See van Brakel and Ma (2015) for the use of “family resemblance” in comparative philosophy.

⁴ Numerous philosophers have approached the exploration of *zhengming* in the *Xunzi* as an instance of philosophy of language (e.g. Chad Hansen, Chris Fraser, Chen Bo), yet it is prudent to be careful about terms of comparison, being aware of their historical points of origin and potential to distort distant phenomena.

concerns of twentieth century philosophy of language as normative for philosophy regardless of historical period would be an instance of intellectual chauvinism and counter to the aims of the present essay. By “language,” I do not have in mind particular natural languages (like English or Putonghua) but instead the sorts of language-games Wittgenstein discusses in works like *Philosophical Investigations*. Thus, it is not merely language (semantics) that is our concern here but also what people do with language (pragmatics) that matters.⁵

The idea explored here is that clarification of language is a priority of some philosophers through history and across a variety of cultures. Not every philosopher prizes clarity, and those that do may conceive of it differently or may justify its pursuit for different reasons. When approaching comparative philosophical inquiry with a theme like this in mind, the aim of this essay is to draw those differences to the surface, not to remove differences between traditions or figures. Through exploring the different roles that clarification of language has in the *Xunzi* and in Wittgenstein’s corpus, one can gain an overview of the distinctive philosophical projects of these two figures. Despite their differences (and indeed, because of their differences) such a comparative inquiry has the potential to open up new avenues for studies of Xunzi and of Wittgenstein.

1. The *Xunzi* on *Zhengming*

The *Xunzi*⁶ is a text that deals with a variety of themes across its thirty-two chapters. As Michael Nylan (2016) advises, philosophers should not presume the text to have organizational

⁵ On the importance of language being action-guiding in interpretations of the *Xunzi*, see Fraser (2016).

⁶ Both Hansen (1983: 308) and Hutton (2014: xxxiii) mention the work of Robert Eno in expressing caution in attributing the text of the *Xunzi* to the historical person. For details on the historical development of the text, see chapter one of Sato (2003).

unity across history, nor should philosophers assume that the text represents the view of the historical Xunzi. Generally, I refer to the work scholars now have, recognizing that it is the product of a scholarly tradition beginning with Xunzi and his school and culminating in eighteenth century scholarship (Sato 2003: 32). When I refer to “Xunzi,” it will not be to refer to the historical person but to the composite voice presented in the text “the *Xunzi*”.

While the text may be best known for its uncompromisingly sober picture of the human condition, including the human tendency for selfishness and shortsightedness and the subsequent need for rigorous moral education and ritual observance, the theme I would like to focus on is that of rectifying names.⁷ The scrutiny of words is a theme that appears in Chinese philosophy during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. The idea of *zhengming* occurs in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) in one or possibly two places (at 13.3 and, some contend, at 12.11) but receives in-depth treatment in the *Xunzi* (all of chapter twenty-two). Critical scrutiny of words also appears in the writings of the School of Names (i.e. the Dialecticians) and later Mohists.⁸ Criticism of the project of scrutinizing words appears in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子: the discourse on “this” and “that” treats the terms as mutually generating relative designations, not as expressions referring to enduring realities (Ziporyn 2009: 12 [2:16]). This “language crisis”⁹ sets the background for the account of language clarification in the *Xunzi*. Paul Rakita Goldin writes, “The exalted rectification — or rectification of names — is a tool that the philosopher can use to

⁷ See Sarah Mattice (2010) for more on the various ways “*zhengming*” has been translated into English.

⁸ See Goldin 1999 and Hansen 1983.

⁹ See Hansen (1992) for more on the historical development of the “crisis of language,” an expression drawn from Schwartz (1985).

distinguish lewd antinomies from truths compatible with the Way. Xunzi execrates the paradoxes of the Dialecticians because they obscure and even mock the Way.” (Goldin 1999: 98)

Sarah Mattice (2010) contends that *zhengming* in the *Analects* (論語)¹⁰, appears to concern the relationship between the roles people occupy, the responsibilities associated with those roles, the language used to describe people as occupying those roles, and the social order that would flow from appropriate linkages between names and roles. Arguably, the practice of *zhengming* clarifies the relationship between titles and role ethics. The *Analects* does not develop the concept further, but intratextual comparison suggests different possible avenues for understanding the practice of *zhengming* as integrated with other intellectual practices relating to discrimination of differences and application of values.¹¹

In the *Xunzi*, *zhengming* is connected first with the naming scheme established by the sage kings. Because the rituals and way (*dao* 道) of the sage kings are also valorized in the text, *zhengming* should not be seen as separate from these other salient themes in the text but rather thoroughly enmeshed with them. The point is that language and the social order are intimately connected in the *Xunzi*: “So when the kings established names, the names were fixed, and the corresponding objects were thus distinguished. This way was followed, and the kings’ intentions were thus made understood.” (Hutton 2014: 236) The image is of the sage kings divining the correct names for things and setting in motion a social activity in pursuit of an end. Correct naming stands in contrast to carelessness or recklessness about naming: “Thus, they called great

¹⁰ Some scholars, including especially Brooks and Brooks (1998), observe that the references to *zhengming* in the *Analects* come from a later strata than much of the text. This hypothesis would help explain the otherwise surprising lack of engagement with *Analects* 13.3 in the *Xunzi*.

¹¹ Carroll (2016) explores some of these connections between ethical practices and the clarification of language.

vileness to mince words and recklessly create names such as to disorder the correct names and thereby confuse the people and cause them to engage in much disputation and litigation.”

(Hutton 2014: 236f)

Kurtis Hagen argues that a major divide in Xunzi scholarship concerns whether *zhengming* is the practice of reestablishing names previously set by the sage-kings or whether it is the practice of attuning names to the requirements of particular social circumstances; the former, Hagen describes under the umbrella of “realist” theories of *zhengming*, while the latter Hagen calls “constructivist” *zhengming*.¹² Lin Chung-I (2011) exemplifies this tension as he describes the tension between his interpretation of Xunzi on *zhengming* over against remarks the text makes:

Norms are instituted by agreement-in-custom and so they are subject to change. They change when agreement-in-custom changes. They change because human practices are embedded in social, historical, and environmental contexts, which are full of contingent factors. This is a change due to our everyday practice, not a change in our opinions, or anyone’s opinion, including a king’s opinion, whatever reason and motivation he might have. I am not saying that Xunzi has explicitly endorsed that norms or *dao* are subject to change. He, unfortunately, says that *dao* applies timelessly. (Lin 2011: 338)

Another way of framing this is whether *zhengming* is retrospective only or whether it is to some extent prospective as well (Ames 2011: 101). The present paper does not advance an argument for either realism or constructionism; it proceeds, instead, with a view towards both

¹² See Kurtis Hagen (2007) for his argument.

interpretations and offers some assessment towards the end of the entailments of each for constructive conversation between Wittgenstein and Xunzi.

The *Xunzi* connects *zhengming* with the naming schemes of the sage kings. Naming is performed by the sage kings and the act of naming was a way of communicating the kings' intentions. Hagen argues that these remarks in Chapter twenty-two do not appear to entail that only kings (or other rulers) are entitled to establish or correct names. Hagen argues that the fact that the *Xunzi* contains this discourse on *zhengming* is itself evidence of a broad sensibility reflecting who may correct names. Furthermore, Hagen observes that Xunzi enacts the correcting of names through his moral teachings (Hagen 2007: 79). On Hagen's reading, Xunzi's models would seem to support similar actions being undertaken by other teachers and scholars.

While Hagen's interpretation might well facilitate comparison with recent Western philosophers like Wittgenstein, numerous scholars emphasize the authoritarian tendencies of the *Xunzi*, with the practice of *zhengming* being reserved for the ruler.¹³ Chad Hansen, for example, contends that Xunzi has a distinctly authoritarian (what Hagen would classify as a "realist") position. Hansen writes,

Xunzi's argument here has a pragmatic character, but he does not appeal explicitly to Mozi's [墨子] *li-hai*^{benefit-harm} [利害] gnomon as much as to the more Confucian *zhiluan*^{order-disorder} [治亂] gnomon. The utilitarian appeal is implicit, but the interpretive *standard of utility* seems mainly to be order. This partly accounts for Xunzi's more authoritarian conclusion. His calculation of the outcome from adopting any *dao*^{way} rests on a ruler's bias. Order is the

¹³ I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for constructive suggestions on this point.

good to be maximized. This particular calculation of benefit presupposes the standards of evaluation of the existing elite, the *junzi*^{superior} [君子]. (Hansen 1992: 317)

On Hansen's reading, Xunzi is an authoritarian morally and politically with respect to language because the alternative to a social order based on the historically-grounded moral language of the sage kings tends to be social chaos. Hansen frames this as a bias towards the ruler. Given the undesirability of chaos, the pragmatic adoption of historically-grounded moral language is justified. Chris Fraser concurs with this authoritarian reading of the *Xunzi* on *zhengming* (see Fraser 2012 and 2016). Hagen counters Hansen's reading of Xunzi by claiming that textual evidence supporting the constructivist reading of moral language undermines the realist, authoritarian reading.

However, *zhengming* does not just concern the initial act of naming, it also concerns the ongoing practice of rectifying people by means of the correct names when necessary. The *Xunzi* links the clarification of language with the people being "honest" (Hutton 2014: 237) or "guileless" (Knoblock 1994: 128):

Since they were honest, they were easy to employ, and since they were easy to employ, tasks were accomplished. Because none of the people dared rely on making up strange names so as to disorder the correct names, they were unified in following the proper model of the Way and were diligent in following commands. Because they were like this, the legacy of the kings was long-lasting. (Hutton 2014: 237)

One sees here a connection between established correct names and the "honesty" of the people. The idea of honest or guileless people being "easy to employ" ("easy to control" in Knoblock 1994: 128) would seem especially relevant to an authoritarian audience, but it is important that

for the *Xunzi*, this social unity and control is in service of the *dao*, not the ruler. The result of the rectification is not the mere removal of disorder but the enacting of a long-lasting legacy of a productive society.

That there is a problem relating to language, however, follows from the fact that the legacy of the sage kings did not last forever. Rectification is not performed once and for all but is a practice that even under optimal conditions would require updating. One living in the Warring States period would need to consider *zhengming* as the reestablishing of an order of, or through (in Hagen's constructivist approach), naming that had been lost or otherwise corrupted. If one begins an inquiry into what a good social order and a correct scheme of naming would look like, where should one turn? While the *Xunzi* points to the sage-kings as the originators of correct naming that anchors the people to a good social order,¹⁴ "Heaven-given faculties" play a vital role in the practice of *zhengming*:

[W]hat does one follow and use to distinguish the same and the different? I say, one follow's one's Heaven-given faculties. For all creatures belonging to the same category and having the same dispositions, their Heaven-given faculties cognize things in the same way. Thus one compares similarities with another party and thereby has communication. This is the means by which one shares agreed-upon names so as to align people with one another.

(Hutton 2014: 238)

Because rulers are not the only people with "Heaven-given faculties" ("sense organs given us by nature" (Knoblock 1994: 129)), Hagen interprets passages like these to indicate that *zhengming* is a practice performed not just by rulers but also by scholars, and that it is a practice not of

¹⁴ This kingly role for *zhengming* is emphasized by Fraser (2012) among others, but there is reason to pause at such readings (as Hagen 2007 argues).

reinstitution of the names given by the sage-kings, but is instead a practice of the attuning of names with their objects as performed by scholars in their contexts. Hagen writes, “The exemplary person may be considered to be in an analogous position [to the general who is, under certain conditions, not subject to the commands of his lord¹⁵]. When there is severe conflict between the ruler’s orders and what would be appropriate, the exemplary person follows the way, not his lord.” (Hagen 2007: 80)

In Hagen’s reading of the *Xunzi*, the manner in which the exemplary person follows the way is inflected by that person’s positions and roles. One might say that the mode of following the way would be indicated by a person’s relevant positions and roles. Hagen, again, writes, “The traditional form of critique in the Chinese tradition was not confrontational. Rather, disagreements with the ruler were raised in accordance with the rules of propriety...Observance of deferential ritual formalities is indicative of cultural attainment, qualifying one for having a contributing voice in the discussion of the way.” (Hagen 2007: 81)

While the text presents *zhengming* by means of enlightened rule as the primary model of reestablishing social order, it is not the only model of clarification of language the text develops. The *Xunzi* reads:

The people can easily be unified by means of the Way, but one should not try to share one’s reasons with them. Hence, the enlightened lord controls them with his power, guides them with the Way, moves them with his orders, arrays them with his judgments, and restrains them with his punishments. Thus, his people’s transformation by the Way is spirit-like. What need has he for demonstrations and persuasions? Nowadays the sage kings have all passed

¹⁵ See Knoblock (1990: 225f) and Hutton (2014: 152f) the cases referred to here where a general may reject the orders of the ruler.

away, the whole world is in chaos, and depraved teachings are arising. The gentleman has no power to control people, no punishments to restrain them, and so he engages in demonstrations and persuasions. (Hutton 2014: 240)

The enlightened ruler is the paradigmatic rectifier, but the scholar by means of demonstrations and persuasions also works to support the rectified order and bring the people to the *dao*. The virtuous ruler is one whose virtue has the “magic” (Knoblock 1994: 132) or “spirit-like” (Hutton) power to affect others, to generate an orderly society. For this reason, it would be pointless for an enlightened ruler to use demonstrations and arguments; however, for the (relatively) powerless scholar who is in no position to operate as a virtuous model or as a virtuosic ruler, demonstrations and persuasions are the primary means of clarification available.

In order to be able to assess what circumstances require, what clarifications are needed, the heart-mind (*xin* 心) needs to be cultivated. Thus, it is valuable to link the chapter of the *Xunzi* on *zhengming* with the preceding chapter on “undoing fixation” (*jiebi* 解蔽). Hagen writes, “Xunzi may, indeed, look to nature and the heavens for inspiration and analogy, but we need not infer that he assumes there to be a determinate grounding for morality.” (Hagen 2007: 16) For Xunzi, the senses do not give to a person unambiguous information about the world; instead, people contribute through their judgment to their sensory experiences. Hagen writes, “If people are responsible for constructing a moral system, and proper use of their natural faculties is insufficient to fully determine the specifics of such a system, then at least some degree of innovation would seem to be required.” (Hagen 2007: 16)

Xunzi uses the metaphor of mirror-like reflective water to explore the condition of a cultivated *xin*. Erin M. Cline writes, “For Xunzi, a heart-mind like a mirror describes a state that

is preparatory for learning about the Way.” (Cline 2008: 342) Commenting on the *Xunzi*’s metaphor of reflectivity, she continues,

He is concerned with the pan of water being tilted, which would disturb one’s ability to view an accurate, undistorted reflection. In addition to disturbing the water’s stillness, Xunzi tells us that tilting the pan makes the water murky, which also distorts a reflection. All of this, he maintains, resembles the task of the sage, who must not allow his heart-mind to be tilted or disturbed, and who must work to avoid stirring it up with distractions. (Cline 2008: 341-342)

The image of the mirror is explored in Chapter 21: “Undoing Fixation.” At the opening of this chapter, the *Xunzi* identifies fixation (bi 蔽) as a source of delusion: “In most cases, the problem for people is that they become fixated on one twist and are deluded about the greater order of things. If they are brought under control, then they will return to the right standards.” (Hutton 2014: 224) The fixation “on one twist” seems to refer to following an erroneous school and remaining committed to it. Despite one’s sincerity, fixation will prevent one from perceiving the true Way. The *Xunzi* reads:

If the heart does not apply itself to the eyes, then black and white can be right in front of you and the eyes will not see them. If the heart does not apply itself to the ears, then drums and thunder can be right at your side and the ears will not hear them. How much more so in the case of that which is applying itself in the first place! The person of true virtue and the true Way is denounced from above by the lords of chaotic states, and denounced from below by the followers of pernicious schools. Is this not lamentable? (Hutton 2014: 224)

Despite occupying the same world, two people will perceive it differently based upon the conditions of their respective heart-minds (whether one is fixated or has a mirror-like heart-

mind). For the *Xunzi*, the objective in cultivating one's heart-mind is grasping the Way that will bring social order. But the situation *Xunzi* describes is very much the situation scholars of his time faced.

The heart-mind can be deluded by a variety of things. The *Xunzi* mentions commitment to an erroneous school first, but then adds to this “desires”, “dislikes”, “origins”, “ends”, “what is far away”, “what is nearby”, “broad learning”, “narrowness”, “the ancient past”, “the present”, or “whatever way the myriad things are different” (Hutton 2014: 224). In short, becoming preoccupied with one salient feature of reality, or even oneself and one's own learning, can prevent the heart-mind from perceiving the Way.

How does one go about undoing fixations? The *Xunzi* recommends modeling oneself on “the sage and true king”:

The sage is one who completely carries out the proper relations, and the true king is one who completely carries out the proper regulations. One in whom these two are complete can be the ultimate standard for all under Heaven. Thus, when the learner takes the sage and true king as his teacher, he accordingly takes the regulations of the sage and true king as his model. He models himself after their models, so as to seek their guiding categories, and so as to work at resembling their characters. (Hutton 2014: 234)

Only after one commits oneself to following the model of the sage and true king can one's heart-mind begin to understand the Way. This is what Cline refers to when she writes that clearing the mirror of the heart-mind is preparation for learning the Way.

Goldin observes that for *Xunzi*, apperception of the world is automatic to any undistracted mind. Only minds fixated on erroneous schools or other distorting tendencies or habits will

perceive the world incorrectly. The idea, for Goldin, is “Xunzi does not seem to envision any kind of ontological confusion: what one person sees is what another will see.” (Goldin 1999: 96) For Goldin, this is an area of resonance between Xunzi and Wittgenstein. Goldin refers to Wittgenstein’s famous aspect perception discussion from *Philosophical Investigations*. Note that Wittgenstein also anticipates systematically ambiguous objects of perception (like the Necker Cube or Jastrow’s duck-rabbit¹⁶). Nevertheless, I think Goldin is correct in detecting a similarity here between Wittgenstein and Xunzi.

The capacity to engage in persuasion and demonstration in a reliable way is also related to the condition of one’s heart-mind. After all, how could one understand which reasons are germane without seeing clearly the phenomena in question? The *Xunzi* reads:

Procuring agreement and naming are the functions of demonstration and persuasion.

Demonstration and persuasion are the heart’s way of representing the Way. The Way is the warp and pattern of good order. When the heart fits with the Way, when one’s persuasions fit with one’s heart, when one’s words fit one’s persuasions, then one will name things correctly and procure agreement, will base oneself on the true disposition of things without going to excess, and will extend by analogy the categories of things without violating them. (Hutton 2014: 241)

One sees here why cultivation of the *xin* is a necessary part of *zhengming*. In order to procure agreement, the aim of *zhengming*, one’s heart-mind must fit the Way. The *Xunzi* then goes on to describe the “kind of person [who] is brilliant enough to listen to all cases, but has no combative or arrogant countenance...If his persuasions are successful, then all under Heaven is set right. If

¹⁶ See pp. 16ff of the present essay for more on “seeing aspects” and systematically ambiguous objects.

his persuasions are not successful, then he makes clear his way but lives in obscurity—such are the persuasions and demonstrations of the sage.” (Hutton 2014: 241)

The education of desire (following T. C. Kline III) is a key part of the cultivation of *xin*. That discussion of this cultivation takes place, in part, in the chapter on *zhengming* shows how important cultivation of *xin* is to the practice of clarifying language. Desires are inevitable for living things; to be a living thing is to have desires (for life and to avoid death). The *Xunzi* reads: “Among all people, no one fails to follow that which they approve and to abandon that which they do not approve. For a person to know that there is nothing as great as the Way and yet not follow the Way — there are no such cases.” (Hutton 2014: 242) To achieve complete satisfaction, one would need to see that one’s desires achieve their end in pursuit of the Way. Desiring the wrong things, for example material goods, can lead to a situation where one is fearful and insecure and unable to enjoy the material goods one has. On the other hand, one can be contented and happy without “the finest of the myriad things,” and such a person is capable of great good. (Hutton 2014: 246)

If one desires the Way, then one’s judgments will reflect that interest and direct others towards that end. If, however, one desires something more self-interested (such as fame or wealth), then there is no guarantee that one’s discriminations will likewise direct others towards the end of establishing the Way. The point here seems to be that the end towards which one’s desires and actions drive matters when it comes to one’s discrimination of differences concerning language; however, this should not be thought of as a one-directional relationship, according to Kline (2007). There is a close relationship between the clarification of role responsibilities and the education of desire. Kline writes, “We find ourselves torn between our desires and our

judgments of what should be done, our approvals.” (Kline 2006: 245). Kline writes, “By participating in ritual under the guidance of a teacher, we repeatedly perform intentional actions in accord with the Dao, thus habituating new dispositions that will give rise to new forms of desire, that is, desires aimed at the fulfillment of the Dao.” (Kline 2006: 245) Desires can affect what one perceives and yet what one perceives can create openings for habituating to new desires.

2. Wittgenstein on Perspicuity

A central theme in Wittgenstein’s philosophy is his pursuit of clarity or perspicuity (*Durchsichtigkeit, Übersichtigkeit*). I say “pursuit of clarity” rather than “clarity” because the emphasis on pursuit implies that this is a philosophical activity; it is in response to instances of unclarity that philosophy does its work of clarification. Furthermore, clarity does not mean objective or ideal clarity; rather, it means clarity within a language, within a particular place and time.

In a well-known passage from the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about’.” (Wittgenstein 2001: 42e) The idea here is that philosophical problems arise when one is lost, and particularly, lost with respect to the correct use of language (e.g. how to play a particular language-game). One may have lost sight of the point of language in its original context and this dissociation of a term from its context is what creates the possibility of philosophical problems. Examining the sources of confusion regarding language (and thus philosophical problems) becomes a central theme in *Philosophical Investigations*.

A “language-game” is a well-known notion in many of Wittgenstein’s later writings, especially in connection with accounts of meaning, but that does not mean that Wittgenstein is proposing a theory of meaning, one in which the notion of language-games figure centrally.

When framed against the background of a focus on philosophical problems, their sources, and their dissolution, the notion of a language-game takes on a different philosophical role.

Wittgenstein presents the idea of “language-games” as a corrective against tendencies that lead to philosophical problems. This is evident in a number of passages from *Philosophical*

Investigations. Consider the following from early in the text:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?--There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols”, “words”, “sentences”. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)

Here the term “language-*game*” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (Wittgenstein 2001:10e)

“Language-games” are instances of the operations of language, but they should not be thought of as discrete languages separable from a larger natural language. The notion is a conceptual tool used to indicate the background context against which an expression has its meaning; that context involves a broad set of assumptions as well as some sort of end (or multiplicity of ends).

Philosophical problems are bound to arise as contested meanings or ends are presented alongside each other (i.e. without concern for differences of context or end). Garry L. Hagberg writes of the work of clarification:

The achievement of conceptual clarity, of perspicuity, is also a result of the kinds of therapy Wittgenstein has shows us through his investigations. Indeed, that achieved perspicuity is very often described by Wittgenstein as a perspicuous *overview* (“*übersicht*”). Without such a clarification (itself of course initially an ocular term), “people will keep stumbling over the same puzzling difficulties and find themselves staring up at something which no explanation seems capable of clearing up.”^[17] (Hagberg 2010a: 68)

Insofar as languages contain segments of language coming into and going out of existence, problems concerning the meanings of terms are likely to be ongoing, even perpetual. Because philosophical problems will continually arise, the work of the philosopher is thus recurring and ongoing. The Wittgensteinian philosopher works on clarifying the confused language of his or her context.

In Wittgenstein’s writings, a variety of sources of philosophical problems appear, but one such source lies in the human will. Our human tendencies to insist that language must be one way rather than another generate philosophical problems. Wittgenstein observes that philosophy (in his conception) leaves everything as it is: “Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.” (Wittgenstein 2001: 42e) Yet, in describing language, philosophy is not passively recording what happens in language; the philosopher must free her imagination so

¹⁷ The internal quote comes from Wittgenstein (1998: 22e).

that the possibilities of language lay before her. Simply describing the use of language in a particular context requires an act of will, a refraining from ascribing to language what one wants or does not want to see. Wittgenstein sometimes refers to this clear overview of an instance of language use as perspicuity. The will of the observer, as much as the will of the confused language-user, is likewise potentially an obstacle to understanding insofar as it can compel the observer to view language in a particular way (rather than with an imagination free to arrange and rearrange the phenomena before her).

In seeking to better understand how Wittgenstein conceived on the will's role in perception, the section on "seeing an aspect" from *Philosophy of Psychology — A Fragment* is very helpful. Wittgenstein writes,

Two uses of the word "see".

The one: "What do you see there?" — "I see *this*" (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: "I see a likeness between these two faces" — let the man I tell this to be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself.

The importance of this is the difference of category between the two "objects" of sight.

The one man might make an accurate drawing of the two faces, and the other notice in the drawing the likeness which the former did not see.

I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience "noticing an aspect". (Wittgenstein 2001: 165)

Wittgenstein is here considering the difference between seeing something and seeing a similarity in aspect between two (or more) things. The distinction is evident when considering well-known

examples of systematically ambiguous objects (such as Jastrow's duck-rabbit or the Necker Cube¹⁸), Wittgenstein draws the reader's attention to the contribution the individual makes to an instance of perception. Registering this contribution of the person to perception is something the *Philosophical Investigations* has been doing from the beginning. It is not a new theme here; rather, it is a familiar theme receiving explicit discussion (see Day and Krebs 2010: 6ff). This contribution of the person to the act of perception is to some extent, however, something that may be brought under the control of the will. Drawing this connection, Wittgenstein writes, "Seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will. There is such an order as 'Imagine this', and also: 'Now see the figure like *this!*'; but not: 'Now see this leaf green.'" (Wittgenstein 2001: 182) Yet, it is important to remember here that "seeing an aspect" is not for Wittgenstein a mental content (i.e. something private) distinct from the object perceived. It is the noticing of publicly available relations between things (see Hagberg 2010b: 110ff). It is not just figures or discrete objects of sense perception regarding which human beings see aspects; it is also things we say, our pasts (Hagberg 2010b), and indeed, whole lives and whole worlds (Floyd 2010: 324). Juliet Floyd writes, "What holds these cases together is a sense that seeing necessity or possibility requires us *not* to imagine that we have seen *all* possibilities." (Floyd 2010: 324)

Elsewhere, Wittgenstein writes of philosophy as being like work on oneself, and by this one might link this with what Wittgenstein says just prior. In the *Big Typescript*, Wittgenstein writes:

What makes a subject difficult to understand – if it is significant, important – is not that it would take some special instruction about abstruse things to understand it. Rather it is the antithesis between understanding the subject and what most people want to see. Because of

¹⁸ See Wittgenstein (2001: 165-166). As Goldin observes, this distinction is not found in the *Xunzi* (Goldin 1999: 97)

this the very things that are most obvious can become the most difficult to understand. What has to be overcome is not a difficulty of the intellect, but of the will.)

As is frequently the case with work in architecture, work on philosophy is actually closer to working on oneself. On one's own understanding. On the way one sees things. (And on what one demands of them.) (Wittgenstein 2005: 300e)

Therapy of the will is a large part of philosophical activity in Wittgenstein's understanding of the discipline. Wittgenstein does not, however, develop an analysis of the will (*per se*) in the *Investigations* (or indeed, elsewhere in his corpus¹⁹), yet numerous remarks on the relation of our preoccupations to our philosophical obtuseness entail that a philosophy of the will is implicit in his later thought.²⁰ Reflection on the therapy of the will, and its connection to the pursuit of perspicuity, in Wittgenstein remains a promising area of inquiry.

That the pursuit of clarity and virtue are connected in Wittgenstein's philosophy has been observed by numerous readers of Wittgenstein, no less than by biographer Ray Monk. Monk writes, "Wittgenstein, of all people, knew that we have an inner life, that we have thoughts that we do not share with other people and desires that we deny even to ourselves. He knew what it was to have an inner struggle between inclination and duty, and a split between what we say and what we mean." (Monk 2001: 9) It is not that Wittgenstein achieved this clarity with himself, but he prized it. Writing of Wittgenstein's guilt about hiding his Jewish heritage (before 1936), Monk observes:

¹⁹ See Klagge (2011: 8-10) for the development of Wittgenstein's reflection on "the will" in his wartime notebooks, in the coded diaries, and in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophus*.

²⁰ See Day (2010) for some development of the role of the will in aspect-perception.

All of the deceptions were, he made clear, prompted by vanity, by his wish to appear better than he was. This implies to come clean, to confess, was also what lay behind his expressed wish to write an autobiography. He wanted to remove the obstacles between him and clarity... To think clearly and to dismantle one's pride were, for Wittgenstein, essentially linked, and to dismantle one's pride it was necessary to reveal that which, through vanity, one would prefer to remain secret. (Monk 2001: 10)

The link between the will in ethics and in inquiry is found in the human desire to appear better than we are, perhaps to seem to see connections we may not in fact see or to appear to know things we believe we should know. This temptation leads one to make hasty generalizations about language.

James Conant observes a number of causes of confusion in language. He observes a number of passages in Wittgenstein's writings that diagnose causes of confusion:

1. You cannot write anything about yourself that is more truthful than you yourself are.
2. Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.
3. If anyone is *unwilling* to descend into himself... he will remain superficial in his writing.
4. Working in philosophy... is really more a working on oneself.
5. That man will be revolutionary who can revolutionize himself. (Conant 2001: 24)

These remarks are found not in personal diaries but in the midst of philosophical reflections.

While Conant observes that they might appear to be non sequiturs, in fact, they are expressions of Wittgenstein's philosophical sensibility. Untruthfulness, self-deception, unwillingness to reflect on oneself or work on oneself, the great difficulty of "revolutionizing" oneself, these bad

habits prevent philosophers from doing philosophy, from overcoming recurrent philosophical problems.²¹

These passages suggest that if tendencies, which are a part of our nature (our human form of life), can develop into bad habits that the opposite may also be true, that one may be able to cultivate good habits of the will. Of course, this is merely speculative and not something that Wittgenstein develops explicitly in his philosophy; yet, implicitly, it is there. In connection with this, perhaps some inspiration might be drawn from the Xunzi for developing a positive account of good habits for perceiving the possibilities of language. One sees again and again Wittgenstein practice his perspicuous exploration of language, revealing the contextual sources of our confusion and suggesting methods for addressing still other forms of confusion. If this suggestion about the habituation of the will is correct, then, once habituated, one might be able to detect systematic ambiguity in a wide variety of objects of perception — including, of course, in instances of language — and this would create opportunities for the clarification of language.

3. Comparing Philosophical Practices

Pierre Hadot (1995) argues that philosophy in the ancient Mediterranean is best approached as a way of life, so as not to miss salient features of the nature of the traditions under investigation. In “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” Hadot writes:

Each school, then, represents a form of life defined by an ideal of wisdom. The result is that each one has its corresponding fundamental inner attitude – for example, tension for the

²¹ For discussion of “the will” in connection with Wittgenstein and Augustine see Shields (1993: 60-64). Wittgenstein’s interest in Augustine presents one more reason why a comparison between Wittgenstein and Xunzi may be instructive: both Augustine and Xunzi explored the phenomenology of virtue and vice within the self (for Augustine) or *xin* (for Xunzi). On Augustine and Xunzi, see Stalnaker (2006).

Stoics or relaxation for the Epicureans – and its own manner of speaking, such as the Stoic use of percussive dialectic or the abundant rhetoric of the Academicians. But above all every school practices exercises of reason that will be, for the soul, analogous to the athletes training or to the application of a medical cure. (Hadot 1995: 59)

The typical format of contemporary philosophical activity, the presentation of arguments and interpretations paradigmatically in the form of the essay is not always mirrored in ancient philosophy. Instead, in the ancient world, philosophy is found to be performed not just in philosophical texts but also in the lives of philosophers. Thus anecdotes about the actions or experiences of a philosopher could come to be instances of a philosophical life; the ability to perform or cultivate similar experiences or actions oneself would thus be a means of investigating those philosophies and assessing their strengths and weaknesses.

While perhaps relevant to the study of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, it is not obvious what the relevance is of Hadot's work to the study of classical Chinese philosophy, let alone to Wittgenstein. Some such as Aaron Stalnaker (2006: 19) see a connection between the "spiritual exercises" Hadot highlights in Greek and Roman philosophy and the self-cultivation developed and debated in Classical Chinese thought and the *Xunzi* in particular (see Stalnaker 2006). Indeed, Stalnaker "borrows" and "adapts" Hadot's notion of spiritual exercises as a bridge concept for his comparison of Augustine and Xunzi.²²

What is helpful in Hadot's interpretations of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and the adaptation of his salient concepts to comparative philosophy is the reminder to look to the circumstances of philosophical activity, its aims, its methods and the adequacy of its

²² See Stalnaker (2006: 159) for further details on the practices he has in mind within Classical Chinese philosophical practice.

philosophical approaches – that is, to the forms of life in which philosophical texts have been embedded. If happiness (*eudaimonia*) and freedom from being perturbed (*ataraxia*) were ends found in classical Greek and Roman philosophy, one finds social order (*he* 和) as the preferred end of the *Xunzi*, and the cultivation of the heart-mind (*xin*) as the practice conducive to successful persuasion, demonstration, and rectification (including *zhengming*). Following Xunzi's philosophy is thus not merely a matter of accepting certain doctrines as true or certain values as binding but instead actually doing the hard work to cultivate one's heart-mind so that one can make fine discriminations about language and thus understand how to live out one's role responsibilities with humaneness (*ren* 仁) and ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and how to persuade others to do the same. In this way, one may consider the philosophy of the *Xunzi* to be a way of life (especially if to follow the philosophy is to practice that philosophy regularly in all of one's doings), rather than a mere set of doctrines or doctrines plus arguments.²³

Whether Wittgenstein's philosophy can be approached as a way of life is contested in the secondary literature. Some, such as Monk, contend that Wittgenstein's philosophy and life were not separable, that one can see Wittgenstein's philosophical priorities in his life and that his philosophical activity was frequently evident beyond the boundaries of his texts.²⁴ In fact, even Wittgenstein's tendency to return to and rework ideas in manuscript form can be seen as an example of the pursuit of clarity, or "ethic of perspicuity" (Carroll 2014). Wittgenstein was infrequently satisfied with what he wrote (or what he said, in lecture or conversation); his

²³ Of course, pace Nylan (2016), to do the detailing of a form of life correctly, one would need to indicate which Xunzi one had in mind or trace the development of the text from its origins to the present. The great difficulty of this task should humble any interpreter hoping to say something definitive about Xunzi.

²⁴ See Phillips (1999) for a negative view and Conant (2001) for a positive assessment.

exacting standards for expression extended most intensely to his own assessment of what he himself had expressed. He also advised many students to avoid working in academics because the pressures of that work would corrupt them ethically and intellectually. Thus, I agree with those who count Wittgenstein's life as relevant to his philosophy.

Wittgenstein and the *Xunzi* are separated by, among other things, their embeddedness within different philosophical and cultural contexts. The *Xunzi*, being embedded within classical Chinese philosophical discourse, as well as Confucian tradition, is a text committed to the end of establishing a harmonious social order out of the disorder of the Warring States period. The assessments of human potential and the role of *xin* in clarifying language are each explored with an eye to how they will contribute to a good social order. This primary end is aided by the secondary end of developing a model of the scholar skilled in persuasion and demonstration, one who can teach the *dao* and be a voice for a just social order despite the absence of one. Clarification of language is for Xunzi, then, philosophical activity pursuing an ultimate end.

Wittgenstein, however, seems to see clarification as an end in itself. This, indeed, separates him from numerous other analytical philosophers who would see the clarifications that philosophers perform as a method that might enable them to more reliably build theories, which would be the exemplary activity of philosophers. Yet this difference between Wittgenstein and his analytic peers is exactly what makes him an interesting conversation partner with Xunzi. What clarification is — whether in the form of *zhengming* or demonstration and persuasion — is determined by whether the practice actually tends to produce the social order desired (a localized functionality, if you will); if perspicuity is that which enables Wittgenstein to stop doing philosophy, it is thus something that is determined also by a kind of localized functionality. Does

the proposed language clarification remove obstacles to understanding? If the answer is yes, then the instance is an example of *zhengming* for Xunzi or perspicuity for Wittgenstein. In this way, there is a “similar spirit”, as Chen Bo writes, between Wittgenstein and Xunzi with respect to language and society:

In Xunzi’s view, first, the relations between names and realities are established not by one person, even not by the sage king alone, but by the whole linguistic community collectively. All the members of the linguistic community make their own contributions to rectifying names, directly or indirectly, more or less. Second, in regulating names, community members are not at the same level, for example, the sage king has a more important position than that of his subjects; he has some privileged right to regulate names, and after finishing the regulation of names, he also can promote the extensive use of his names by means of his rights. (Chen 2009: 117)

Chen indicates that Wittgenstein’s philosophy is in agreement with the first element just listed of Xunzi’s view; however, he thinks that Wittgenstein’s approach to language commits him to an anti-essentialist view that would be in conflict with Xunzi’s elitism (i.e. the importance of the model of the sage-kings). Chen is concerned, however, that Xunzi’s elitism and Wittgenstein’s anti-essentialism would frustrate facile comparisons. No doubt, this is correct, but the weight of the claim depends on how “elitism” is unpacked. The passage quoted above would seem to put Chen’s views in agreement with Hagen, at least with respect to the question of who can perform *zhengming*.

Yet another problem arises when we look at the conversation from Wittgenstein’s side.

Wittgenstein’s approach to clarification privileges no particular voice; anyone could, in principle,

be the agent of clarification (i.e. take up this model of philosophy). Moreover, anti-dogmatic tendencies in Wittgenstein's thought would seem to be in deep conflict with the authoritarian tendencies²⁵ in Xunzi's account of *zhengming*. Consider, for example, Oscari Kuusela on clarification:

[A] philosophical problem must be cleared up, so to speak, from the inside. Clarification, as Wittgenstein conceives it, is not a matter of imposing an alleged standard of correct language use on the interlocutor from the outside, but of clarifying the interlocutor's language use to her on the basis of her own criteria for what makes sense. In this sense, clarification is essentially a dialogue between the philosopher and her interlocutor. (Kuusela 2008: 79)

For Wittgenstein, there are no sage-kings or other authorities to which a philosopher may or must turn to find a model for clarifying language. There is no universal language translation into which will solve all problems. Instead, philosophical problems are cleared up locally, in particular circumstances with trusted interlocutors.

In their ways, Wittgenstein and Xunzi were each philosophers out of their time. Wittgenstein wrote in the preface to his *Philosophical Investigations* of the "darkness of this time" (he wrote this in 1945) and his pessimism that the book would find its audience. James Klagge (2011) has written of Wittgenstein as a kind of exile, and he uses this trope to great effect in interpreting Wittgenstein's corpus. Klagge quotes Wittgenstein from the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*: "The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of

²⁵ Even though some interpreters challenge the authoritarian reading of the *Xunzi*, clearly the text admires an original monarchical order that serves as a model for later generations of clarifiers; Wittgenstein's philosophy has no real forerunner and his practice does not look to an earlier exemplar.

landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings. The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions.” (Klagge 2011: 76) To this, Klagge remarks: “This tour-guide metaphor fits well with the notion of exile: A philosopher has to be ready to be a guide for any part of the city. One who is too deeply immersed in a single part of the city cannot play this role...[B]eing an exile is an asset so far as philosophy is concerned.” (Klagge 2011: 76) The philosopher as exile or as learned servant to a ruler could not be more different, yet for both language is part of a social activity, and clarification of language is an ethically-charged enactment of their philosophical projects.

At the outset, I indicated that I thought that this study might hold promise for comparative metaphilosophical inquiry. If that is right, it would be because of the centrality of acts of clarification of language to some forms of philosophy through history and across cultures. It is safe to say that not every philosopher or philosophical tradition prizes clarity or rectification. After all, reveling in the free play of language or delving into vexing grammatical forms in order to think difficult thoughts are modes of philosophy that have been influential in both recent and ancient philosophical traditions. Instead, the value, or ethic, of clarification is something that is found sometimes in the history of philosophy (broadly construed), and when it does appear, it may be a useful theme for charting the careers of philosophy in various times and places.

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