
How Virtue Reforms Attachment to External Goods: *The Transformation of Happiness in the Analects*

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Abstract

After distinguishing three conceptions of virtue and its impact on ordinary attachments to external goods such as social status, power, friends, and wealth, this paper argues that the *Analects* is most charitably interpreted as endorsing the whole-hearted internalization conception, on which virtue reforms but does not completely extinguish ordinary attachments to external goods. I begin by building on Amy Olberding's attack on the extinguishing attachments conception, but go on to criticize her alternative, resolute sacrifice conception, on which the virtuous retain their ordinary attachments to external goods but are able to master them and willingly settle for virtue. I argue that we should reject this view because, unlike the wholehearted internalization conception, it cannot capture the facts that virtue silences or attenuates attachment to viciously obtained external goods and that virtue grounds positive emotional and cognitive self-assessments that are incompatible with some ordinary attachments to external goods.

Keywords: virtue, Confucianism, *Analects*, well-being, external goods, Olberding

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1.

Across the millennia, many if not most people live their lives in pursuit of what we could call conventional success, and, again across the millennia, philosophers have argued that this is a mistake. Specific conceptions of conventional success vary from culture to culture and person to person but they typically include conventional goods (often called external goods or externalities by philosophers)¹ such as health and physical strength, power and social status, profit and material wealth, pleasure and luxury, flourishing friends and family, and leaving a significant mark on the world. The pursuit of conventional success certainly does not require, and is often at odds with, the earnest pursuit of sagely or saintly virtue or a life-defining devotion to wisdom, beauty, or knowledge so it is no surprise that philosophers are thought of as unconventional seducers of the young. Emerging adults who are tempted by philosophers to make life shaping choices with an eye to love, art, virtue, or a noble cause instead of conventional success are liable to be told that this is nothing but the naïve idealism of youth. Parents, politicians, and even alleged friends often assure budding adults that when they are older and wiser they will regret any failures to “be realistic.” They often tell the young to focus on what matters in the “real world,” namely the conventional world in which conventional goods and success are taken to be of prime importance.

Given that the pursuit of conventional success does not require and might be at odds with the pursuit of virtue and wisdom, it is no surprise that rebels such as Socrates, Aquinas, the Buddha, and Confucius argue that it is both imprudent (bad for us) and foolish (a regrettable, or even shameful, waste) to devote our lives to the ac-

¹ Roughly, external goods are putative goods that are available to the virtuous and vicious alike and they are called “external” because western moral philosophers such as Socrates and Plato take virtue to constitute the inner good of the soul. Olberding (2013) uses “ordinary, prosaic goods” but I think “conventional” is better because it highlights the possibility that philosophers aim to buck conventional thinking about these goods and the wisdom of devoting one’s life to getting them. Refer to Olberding (2013, 429n13) where she discusses the term “external goods.”

cumulation of conventional goods. In the first place, they maintain that it is a mistake to pursue conventional goods and success instead of, or at the price of, virtue. Second, they all hold that one needs to be virtuous to have a proper attitude toward or to make proper use of conventional goods such as health, a good reputation, material wealth and comfort, friends and family. They hold that to live well we must put conventional goods in their proper place. We must stop idolizing them and orient our lives toward more important and noble ends; and that means developing or cultivating virtue.

This essay focuses on the Confucian *Analects* and the attitude or attitudes that it suggests that the virtuous have toward conventional goods and success. I mention the possibility of multiple attitudes or views because, as Olberding (2013) makes clear, the text of the *Analects* can appear to contain conflicting passages that suggest different, incompatible answers to questions about how virtue shapes attachment to conventional goods.

First, there are more theoretical, argumentative, and didactic passages that might be taken to suggest that the virtuous completely shed or transcend ordinary attachments to conventional, external goods and success.² For example, consider the *Analects* 4.5 and 7.16:

The Master said, “Wealth and social eminence are things that all people desire, and yet unless they are acquired in the proper way I will not abide them. Poverty and disgrace are things that all people hate, and yet unless they are avoided in the proper way I will not despise them.”

“If the gentleman abandons Goodness, how can he merit the name? The gentleman does not go against Goodness for the amount of time required to finish a meal. Even in times of urgency or distress, he necessarily accords with it.”³

² See Section 3 of Olberding (2013). Of course, some of these have dramatic aspects—I use “didactic” and “dramatic” to refer to passages that seem to support the shedding concern and resolute sacrifice conceptions of virtue respectively because it is convenient and because those terms reflect the characteristic differences between the two types of passages.

³ All translations are from Slingerland (2003).

The Master said, “Eating plain food and drinking water, having only your bent arm for a pillow—certainly there is joy to be found in this! Wealth and eminence attained improperly concern me no more than the floating clouds.”

In his commentary, Slingerland maintains that these and other didactic passages⁴ indicate, “the gentleman’s independence from externalities” (2003, 61). He claims that the *Analects* in general expresses the view that, “the true gentleman⁵ is dedicated to the Way as an end in itself, and does not pursue it for the sake of external goods . . . as a result, he embodies the Way unselfconsciously and effortlessly, and derives a constant joy that renders him indifferent to externalities” (2003, 31). He thereby apparently adopts the *shedding conventional* concerns conception of virtue,⁶ on which virtue utterly transforms ordinary thinking about well-being and how to live well. On this view, the virtuous embody the view that conventional success and failure simply have no impact on the quality of one’s life, and this allows them to joyfully follow the righteous course even when it leads to conventional failure or requires conventional sacrifice.

In apparent contrast to these didactic passages, there are more dramatic passages in which Confucius reacts to the loss or lack of conventional goods in his own life. Assuming that Confucius is some sort of exemplar of virtue, his reactions can seem⁷ to conflict with the idea that the virtuous are indifferent to conventional goods or “externalities.” For example, these passages depict Confucius as being dramatically upset (e.g. angry or sad) about losing his students

⁴ In his commentary, Slingerland connects the theme of indifference to lack of orientation towards externalities with 1.14, 4.2, 4.5, 4.9, 4.16, 6.11, 7.12, 7.16, 7.19, 8.12, 9.29, 14.1, 14.24, 15.32.

⁵ It is generally agreed that the terms translated as “gentleman” and “true gentleman” refer to virtuous exemplars of some sort or other.

⁶ Olberding calls this view “moral maturity as autonomy,” but I prefer a label that highlights the way virtue shapes attachment to conventional goods. However, like Olberding (2013, 433), following Annas (1998), I use “transform” and “alter” to distinguish the ways that one can picture virtue affecting ordinary assumptions about well-being and the well lived life.

⁷ See the response I develop on behalf of shedding concern interpreters in Section 3.

and failing to influence rulers as he wishes he could. Take *Analects* 11.9–10:

When Yan Hui passed away, the Master lamented, “Oh! Heaven has bereft me! Heaven has bereft me!”

When Yan Hui passed away, the Master cried for him excessively. The disciples reproved him, saying, “Master, surely you are showing excessive grief!” The Master replied, “Am I showing excessive grief? Well, for whom would I show excessive grief, if not for this man?”

Of course, we might answer the rhetorical question at the end of 11.10 with “How about your wife?”; but, that aside, the passage can be taken to imply that the virtuous may or should care about more than virtue and that they may or should take more than virtue to impact their level of well-being.

This is how Olberding takes things; she argues that various dramatic passages⁸ depict Confucius as a relatively down to earth guy, who cared and complained about the conventional failures and sacrificed “externalities” that marred his life. On her view, the virtuous have more or less typical or ordinary attachments to conventional goods and success, but they differ from the rest of us because they “resolutely regulate,” their attachments to conventional goods so that they never “trump” or “overmaster” their apt commitments to doing the virtuous thing (2013, 433). On this *resolute sacrifice conception*⁹ of virtue, virtue alters but does not radically transform ordinary thinking about well-being and how to live well—for example, it leaves in place the assumption that conventional success and failure have a huge impact on the quality of our life but leads us to recognize that it is better to do the virtuous thing and have a lower quality of life than to abandon virtue in order to gain conventional goods or success.

⁸ See Section 4 of Olberding. She points to the following passages: 5.7, 5.27, 9.9, 9.12, 9.13, 9.14, 11.17, 11.26, 14.35, and 17.19.

⁹ Olberding calls this view “moral maturity as settling,” but I prefer a label that highlights the way virtue shapes attachment to conventional goods.

In the light of the apparently conflicting (what I will call didactic and dramatic) passages, there are two interesting questions that readers of the *Analects* face. First, there is the interpretive or exegetical question about whether there is an account of how virtue shapes attachment to conventional goods that can explain all of the passages and yield a unified interpretation of the whole text. Second, there is the substantive question about whether there is an intuitively and philosophically plausible account of how virtue shapes attachment that is suggested by the *Analects*, i.e. an account we can accept or take seriously in our own lives. In what follows, I will address the exegetical question and the question about intuitive plausibility. In short, I will criticize both the shedding concern and resolute sacrifice conceptions of virtue and introduce a better, third option—what I call the *wholehearted internalization conception* of virtue. As I will explain, this conception is better than the other two because only it can ground a unifying interpretation of the *Analects* and fit with our ordinary intuitions or assumptions about virtue and the good life.

My discussion proceeds as follows. Section 2 more carefully describes the three conceptions of virtue and their implications for our guiding question. Section 3 critically assesses the shedding concern conception, starting from Olberding's attacks on it. Section 4 turns to the resolute sacrifice conception of virtue, which Olberding prefers. I argue it actually fares worse than the shedding concern conception when it comes to giving a unified reading of the dramatic and didactic passages and that it is also counter-intuitive for reasons that Olberding does not discuss. I conclude that we need to find a better third option that avoids the problems that bedevil the shedding concern and resolute sacrifice conceptions. Section 5 returns to the wholehearted internalization conception of virtue and explain why it is more in line with ordinary pretheoretical sensibilities and intuitions than the resolute sacrifice or shedding concern conceptions and how it also grounds a unified interpretation of the *Analects*. Finally, Section 6 returns to the opening questions I raised about how virtue transforms ordinary attachments to conventional goods and success and explain how the wholehearted internalization

conception grounds answers that are more plausible than ones suggested by the other conceptions.

2.

Before we evaluate and build on Olberding's discussion of the shedding concern and resolute sacrifice conceptions of virtue, it will be useful to more carefully describe those views and the wholehearted internalization conception of virtue that I ultimately favor. To begin, it is worth noting that all three of these conceptions of virtue fit with the idea that Confucian virtue enables people to achieve a kind of reflective self-determination or autonomy—an arguably essential part of a good or ethical human life that some older interpreters have taken the Confucians to ignore or dis-value.¹⁰ Following many other more recent interpreters,¹¹ I disagree and think that we can attribute the following view to various Confucian texts.

Virtuous Self-determination: Virtue involves (a) improving one's character, interactions with others, and activities, (b) appreciating and valuing virtue in oneself and others, (c) noticing and disvaluing the lack of virtue in oneself and, to a lesser extent,¹² in others, and (c) transforming and guiding one's activity in the light of one's apt appreciation of virtue and its absence in oneself and others. For one thing, the self-reflective appreciation of virtue leads the virtuous

¹⁰ Fingarette (1972) is most commonly associated with this reading and he may have been influenced by western thinkers such as Hegel and Weber.

¹¹ For a recent overview of related interpretive debates, see Kim (2013).

¹² There are passages in the *Analects* that suggest that virtue requires the ability or tendency to notice the lack of virtue in other people (e.g. 1.16, 2.9, 2.10, 4.7, 12.20; cf. the *Great Learning* 9.1). But there are also passages that suggest that the virtuous person's awareness of, negative reactions to, and attempts to correct, her own lack of virtue should be more reliable and stronger than her awareness of, negative reactions to, and attempts to correct lack of virtue in other people (e.g., 1.4, 3.26, 4.17, 7.22). Fuller discussion of this issue would also need to take into account the different attitudes that the virtuous have when they inhabit specific roles such as teacher, ruler, parent, or child, and related Legalist attacks on Confucians discussed in Hutton (2008).

to choose virtue instead of conventional goods if and when a choice must be made.¹³

While likely agreeing with this background view, advocates of the shedding concern, resolute sacrifice, and wholehearted internalization conceptions provide us with different accounts of how virtue, and its self-reflective appreciation, shapes attachment to the various externalities that are conventionally taken to be good and bad, e.g. social affirmation and rejection, wealth and poverty, health and sickness, and refined and shabby material goods. Consider, first, the conception favored by interpreters such as Slingerland:

Shedding Conventional Concerns: The virtuous person ceases to care about winning conventional goods and never chooses conventional goods at the price of virtue. Her awareness of her degree of virtue completely determines her assessment of how well her life is going and this assessment is wholeheartedly embodied in her attitudes and actions (e.g. emotions and verbal statements). She presupposes that one's degree of virtue is the only thing that affects one's level of well-being and determines whether one is living a good, satisfactory life or not.¹⁴

¹³ See, for example 4.11. This appreciation of virtue should not be thought of as necessarily propositional; see Darwall (2002) chapter four. In addition, it is worth noting that the sort of self-reflective appreciation of virtue need not be focused on the self or the virtuous person's character. Instead the appreciation can be responsive to the value of the virtuous person's modes of activity and the ways in which he or she thinks and feels about, interacts with, and relates to others (and herself). This value will often be relational and can be second-personal in a broad sense. From what I can tell, Confucian thinking about virtue is better able to ground these views than Aristotelian thinking, but that is an issue in need of more exploration. For a related discussion of virtue and social morality see Cokelet (2014).

¹⁴ Olberding (2013, 429) describes the relevant view as one on which becoming virtuous, "transforms how happiness and satisfaction will be constituted, such that being virtuous is the principal good of life, the good [one] wins for [oneself] independently of luck and from which comes profound joy." I think we should distinguish between the view that only virtue affects one's level of well-being and the view that our well-being is unaffected by luck. If the scope of the field in which one can engage in virtuous activity and interactions is conditioned by luck, then one might hold that virtue is all that matters when it comes to well-being but also hold that one's level of well-being is subject to luck. For more on this version of the shedding concern view, see page 21.

On this view, the virtuous are always and everywhere free in the sense that they always whole-heartedly and joyfully choose the virtuous path as they navigate their way through life. Because they have transcended conventional attachments to things such as fancy food and a soft bed and pillow, they *never* feel ambivalent about taking the “high road” of virtue, which sometimes lacks conventional goods or leads to conventional failure. In addition to this forward-looking attitude, the virtuous person’s indifference to conventional fortune is reflected in present and past-focused judgments and feelings about herself and her life; her judgements and feelings about how her life as a whole is turning out, about how well or poorly she has lived her life, and about herself are all unaffected by conventional factors such as her social standing or rejection, her material wealth or poverty, or her health and sickness. For example, on the shedding concern conception, a virtuous person will feel no shame if, due to misfortune, she has to show up at a job interview or a fancy dinner with her prospective in-laws in worn, second-hand clothes (cf. *Analects* 9.27).¹⁵

Although Olberding recognizes that the didactic passages in the *Analects* can reasonably be taken to suggest the shedding concern conception of virtue, she argues in favor of a different conception that we can formulate as follows:

Resolute Sacrifice: The virtuous person cares about winning conventional goods in ways that ordinary people do but she is resolutely committed to sacrificing all relevant conventional goods in order to follow the path of virtue and always acts on this commitment. Her assessment of how well her life is going reflects the view that both virtue and conventional goods impact one’s level of well-being and whether one is living a good life or not. Her assumption that conventional goods sacrificed to pursue virtue have prudential value is wholeheartedly embodied in her attitudes and actions (e.g. emotions of anger, fear, and sadness).

¹⁵ See Olberding’s discussion (2013, 421–422), including her reference to 9.27.

On this view, which is, incidentally, embraced by Immanuel Kant,¹⁶ the virtuous are down to earth in the sense that they have the same sort of conventional attachments that the rest of us do. When the “high road” of virtue requires conventional loss or sacrifice, these virtuous people feel ambivalent but they are willing to settle for the better option, namely the path of virtue, and they feel good knowing they have what it takes to act in line with that choice. In addition to this forward looking attitude, the virtuous person’s ordinary attachments to conventional fortune are reflected in present and past-focused judgments and feelings about herself and her life; her judgements and feelings about how her life as a whole is turning out, about how well or poorly she has lived her life, and about herself all reflect her attachment to conventional factors such as her social standing or rejection, her material wealth or poverty, or her health and sickness. For example, Olberding interprets Confucius’ past-focused attitudes at the end of his life as follows:

The cumulative complexity of [the virtuous exemplar’s] responses to his life are perhaps distilled in one final passage, one in which Confucius appears to summarize the mixed results of his life. Believing his death near, Confucius addresses Zilu’s disappointment with Confucius’ lack of success by noting the great consolation that he shall die among friends (*Analects* 9.12). But this is not all he says. He elaborates, “Even though I do not get a grand state funeral, I am hardly dying by the roadside,” an addendum that again suggests wit pitched at self-consolation. Confucius will “not get a grand state funeral” and, implicitly, did not get the life he wanted but, he dryly notes, things could be worse. (426)

Finally, I want to introduce the third conception of virtue, which I contend we should attribute to the *Analects*:

Wholehearted Internalized Virtue: Full virtue involves (a) improving one’s character, interactions with others, and activities, (b) wholeheartedly appreciating and valuing virtue in oneself and

¹⁶ See Baxley (2010a).

others, (c) noticing and wholeheartedly devaluing the actual or potential lack of virtue in oneself, and (d) transforming and guiding one's activity in the light of one's apt appreciation of virtue and its absence in oneself and others. The self-reflective appreciation of virtue leads the virtuous to choose virtue instead of conventional goods if and when a choice must be made, to wholeheartedly spurn vice, and to stake their self-assessments on their degree of virtue instead of their social standing or conventional fortunes.

On this conception, the virtuous have some but not all of the attachments to conventional goods that the rest of us do. Looking forward they have no desire for conventional goods attained by vicious means or goods whose general pursuit is inimical to virtue, so they can wholeheartedly and joyfully pursue the "high road" of virtue if and when it requires turning away from those. But in other cases, the virtuous will be willing to act virtuously while bearing misfortune but feel ambivalent about the conventional costs of righteousness. In addition to these forward-looking attitudes, the virtuous person's *reformed* attachments to conventional fortune are reflected in present and past-focused judgments and feelings about herself and her life; her judgements and feelings about how her life as a whole is turning out, about how well or poorly she has lived her life, and about herself all reflect her reformed attachment to conventional factors such as her social standing or rejection, her material wealth or poverty, or her health and sickness. She might feel disappointed about having a meager, rather than grand, 80th birthday party but she would not feel ashamed as a result because she stakes her self-assessments on her degree of virtue not her conventional fortunes.¹⁷

3.

Now that we have the different conceptions of virtue on the table, we are ready to start assessing them on exegetical and substantive

¹⁷ For more details, see sections 4 and 5.

grounds. To begin, we can consider Olberding's two-step argument against the shedding concern conception. First, she argues that although there are didactic passages that can be taken to suggest the shedding concern reading, we should prefer a reading that also accounts for the dramatic passages that testify to Confucius' complaints (about conventional losses and failures). Olberding admits that when we take both kinds of passages into account the *Analects*, "appears to offer two bodies of testimony regarding the felt, experiential qualities of leading a life of virtue" (2013, 417), but she goes on to argue that while the shedding concern conception can explain the didactic but not the dramatic passages, there is a way for the advocate of the resolute sacrifice conception to account for both. Second, she argues that we should prefer the interpretation that is more in line with "ordinary pretheoretical sensibilities" (419–420) and that this tells strongly in favor of the resolute sacrifice conception. In short, she claims that the shedding concern view is out of step with ordinary sensibilities, because the virtuous person it depicts, "risks appearing insensate where the sorrows of ordinary lives and ordinary people are concerned" (432). The resolute sacrifice view, on the other hand, is sensitive to these sorrows because it entails that they are compatible with virtue. So, she concludes that, on both exegetical and substantive grounds, resolute sacrifice is the way to go.

Olberding is surely right that we should prefer an interpretation that can account for both kinds of passages over one that can only explain one, but I don't think she establishes that the shedding concern conception fares worse on this exegetical score than the resolute sacrifice conception. To see why, we need to first consider her argument that fans of the shedding concern view, such as Slingerland, cannot explain the dramatic passages. She recognizes that fans of the shedding concern interpretation might respond to her initial observation—that the text at least seems to offer conflicting bodies of testimony—by showing how the shedding concern view can explain the dramatic passages that she takes to favor her resolute sacrifice approach.

To head off this line of response, Olberding considers some possible shedding concern explanations of the relevant dramatic passages and argues they are inadequate (430–431). For example, she mentions and rejects the proposal that Confucius' complaints could be explained as manifestations of virtuous dismay at the bad character of the people and corrupt times with which he finds himself confronted. Olberding rightly rejects this suggestion because Confucius is depicted in dramatic passages as being upset about the impact of these people and time *on his life*, and not just about the fact that his world is peopled by corruption, bad luck, and vice. In addition, she argues that while shedding concern readers might try to explain specific reactions to conventional losses, such as Confucius' sorrow at Yan Hui's untimely death, as reactions that are themselves virtuous and that embody the proper spirit of the relevant rites, this strategy cannot explain the, "*general frustration and despair Confucius sometimes appears to confess or a rather global despair about how one's life is going*" (431). For example, she points to her interpretation of Confucius' past-focused attitudes at the end of his life.¹⁸

Olberding does not consider, however, what I take to be the most promising approach that is open to shedding concern interpreters. On the shedding concern view, virtue involves assessing how well one's life is going solely by appeal to the extent of one's virtue, but this presumably includes assessment of both one's inner virtue and character and the extent to which one is able to engage in virtuous activity and interaction. With the second aspect of the assessment in mind, the shedding concern interpreter can argue that Confucius' complaints are an expression of his dismay at the way that the loss or lack of conventional goods *narrows the field of (embodied, enacted) virtue* in his life. Olberding rightly points out that Confucius' complaints are not just targeted at specific losses and that they express a general dissatisfaction or disappointment with his life, but the fan of the shedding concern view can argue that this is because his life in general is shaped by a various conventionally bad things that narrow the amount or kinds of virtuous activities and interactions in

¹⁸ See her reading of 9.12 quoted in the last section.

which he can engage.¹⁹ On this view, conventional failures or losses do not in and of themselves lower one's level of well-being, but they are often the occasion for a narrowed field of virtuous activity and interaction, and that narrowing is bad for you and an appropriate occasion for lament or anger. In other words, the virtuous are not attached to conventional goods per se but they are attached to the scope of their field of virtue and that is often subject to luck and depends on having various conventional goods.

Even if Olberding granted this response and admitted that the shedding concern conception can explain the didactic and dramatic passage, she could argue that the resolute sacrifice conception should be preferred for substantive (not exegetical) reasons. Specifically, she could appeal to her argument that we should prefer the resolute sacrifice conception to the shedding concern one because the former is more in line with the pretheoretical sensibilities of ordinary people or the explanation of the dramatic passages is more accord with those. As mentioned, she claims that the shedding concern view is problematic because it is out of step with ordinary pretheoretic sensibilities, because the virtuous person it depicts, "risks appearing insensate where the sorrows of ordinary lives and ordinary people are concerned." She goes on to develop this worry as follows:

If the *Analects'* presentation of a good life indeed entails an exquisitely refined species of joy and, moreover, sees this joy as profoundly motivating in living a life of virtue, the good life here appears to stand at a worrisomely far remove from ordinary lives and people. It promises something grand and ambitious, to be sure, but its very grandeur and ambition rather radically defies pre-theoretical sensibilities, declaring as more experientially good than most a life, Confucius' life, that transpires in conditions most people would find deplorable and cruelly tragic. Despite all of his life's sorrows, we must believe, Confucius' life is more abundantly joyful than most, he wins all he deeply wants and, by extension, all anyone should deeply want. (432)

¹⁹ As noted earlier, it can *also* picture the virtuous as ruing the reduced amount of good in the world and express virtuous sadness that honors the dead.

The first thing to note about this quote is that it reflects her failure to consider the version of the shedding concern view that I have introduced to explain the dramatic passages. If the shedding concern interpreter adopts my suggested response, then he has an easy response to the last line quoted above, namely that on his view Confucius does not win all that he deeply wants and, by extension, all anyone should deeply want. Even if one assesses one's life only in terms of the virtue in it, one may want to have both good character and to embody that virtue in a wide field of relationships, activities, and situations. Confucius, on this way of thinking, is depicted as experiencing joy and equanimity because he has good character but complaining about his life because conventional failures have narrowed the field in which he can embody virtue and treat others well.

This shows that Olberding's argument is unsound, but I think we can build a new, stronger argument for her conclusion—that if virtue involves shedding concern for conventional goods, then it puts one at a distance from (and might be thought to “radically defy”) many people's pretheoretical sensibilities. To begin, imagine a virtuous person who loses her job, all her savings, and her home, and who is barely getting by in conventional terms at a shelter for the homeless. The shedding conventional concerns view of virtue entails that because this woman is virtuous she will simply not care that she is now homeless, jobless, and penniless *unless*, and then because, that narrows her field of virtuous activity. Presumably many people have pretheoretical sensibilities that reflect the assumption that conventional failure or loss is bad for you in and of itself and even if it does not narrow your field of virtue so this conception of virtue will conflict with their sensibilities. But things get even more problematic if we turn from the virtuous person's attitudes towards her own conventional misfortune, to her attitude to the misfortune of others. For example, imagine that instead of the virtuous person falling on hard times, it is the virtuous person's decent-but-far-from-virtuous parent, child, or friend who becomes homeless, jobless, and penniless and is barely getting by living at a homeless shelter.

If it is virtuous to be indifferent to conventional loss and lack in your own case, then it is presumably virtuous to be indifferent to

such loss and lack in other people's case; so, the virtuous person—according to the shedding concern conception—will not feel any sincere sympathy for those who are in bad conventional straights unless that narrows their field of virtue. That kind of attitude is likely to strain or break the bonds of affection, trust, and commitment that the virtuous have with ordinary people, who still care about conventional goods and losses. In fact, it goes against many people's pretheoretical sensibilities to think that a good parent, friend, or son, would feel no sorrow or sympathy for her child, friend, or father who is deeply upset about a conventional harm (for its own sake, so to speak). Imagine that Andy is close friends with Sue and Sue's spouse unexpectedly dies. Andy is there for Sue as she mourns and is glad to also himself pay his respects to his lost friend. But later when Sue is remarried and mentions that she still misses her old spouse Andy responds by saying that she is not actually any worse off now because she has a new spouse and the lack of her old spouse is not stopping her from doing good or being a good person. Sue responds by saying that she feels like her life is missing something just because her old spouse is gone, and not because of how it affects her ability to be a good person. Andy thinks this feeling is unwarranted and that Sue would be better off, and more virtuous, without it. If you are like me, I think that this attitude shows that Andy is not being a good friend to Sue; and if you are like me, it conflicts with your pretheoretical intuitions about what a virtuous person would do. Moreover, my pretheoretical intuitions about this case hold up well when I think about the Confucian golden rule, which I take to represent an important part or measure of Confucian virtue. If I think about how I would want a friend to react if I become upset at the *unlucky loss of conventional goods*, I would want them to feel sincere sympathy for me and to respect my belief that I am worse off even if my field of virtue has not been restricted. If a supposed "virtuous friend" instead argued I should not be upset about the loss (of a spouse or pet or house for example) or that the loss was not bad for me, that would strike me as insensitive and strain our relationship. Presumably similar problems would crop up when the virtuous inhabit various other roles, e.g. being a parent or ruler or

leader of less than virtuous men and women (cf. *Analects* 7.11 and 7.13).

This new argument against the shedding concern conception of virtue follows Olberding in assuming that we should prefer a theory of virtue that fits—or at least does not defy—the pretheoretical sensibilities of “ordinary people.” But if we think about Confucius’ emphasis on ritual and the importance of good upbringing, we can easily imagine how a shedding concern interpreter might respond: he might raise worries about whether the relevant pretheoretical sensibilities are really the product of theoretically neutral, or ethically benign, cultural forces. For example, he could note that a strong attachment and belief in the prudential value of conventional goods can seem natural, if one is raised in an environment that strongly encourages those attitudes and this cultural environment might explain why some (but not all) human beings have pretheoretic sensibilities that jibe with the view that conventional success and not just virtue matters when assessing how our lives are going. For example many of us live in cultures that celebrate conventional success and its pursuit, many of us are taught to value our education, career options, and relationships as means to or aspects of conventional success, and many of us know parents who place prime importance on how well, in conventional terms, their children are doing.²⁰ As mentioned at the outset, in many cultures or sub-cultures, emerging adults who are tempted to make life-shaping choices with an eye to love, art, virtue, or a noble cause instead of conventional success are liable to be told that this is nothing but the naive idealism of youth. It would be no surprise if people raised under these kinds of conditions have pretheoretical sensitivities that clash with the shedding concern view. And perhaps people raised in a very different culture, with different rituals and distributions of rewards and recognition, would have pretheoretical sensibilities that would resonate with that view and conflict with the assumption that it is virtuous to care about conventional goods for their own sakes.

²⁰ They might express fear or disappointment when a son faces conventional failure or when a daughter in art school rebelliously questions the value or importance of achieving conventional success.

In the absence of empirical investigation, it is hard to know how to fully assess the strength of the argument I have given and the proposed response.²¹ The claim that the shedding concern view conflicts with “ordinary” pretheoretical sensibilities will surely resonate with many readers—as I have explained, it resonates with me. But it is very hard to determine how much weight these sensibilities should be given especially when we are talking about how to interpret a philosopher who was explicitly concerned about the bad impact that cultural institutions and education can have on our sensibilities. I think a stronger argument would involve the claim that the shedding concern conception conflicts with claims about how a well-functioning human being would inhabit various natural human relationships (parent, friend, etc.) well, but that would require appeal to a substantive account of human nature and natural relationships—a topic for another paper.²² With that all said, I will for now simply agree with Olberding that, if possible, it would be best if we can improve on the shedding concern conception of virtue.

4.

Olberding argues that we should reject the shedding concern conception of virtue and adopt the resolute sacrifice conception instead. In this section, I examine the resolute sacrifice conception and argue that it actually has more problems than the shedding concern conception. Specifically, it is unable to ground a unified interpretation of the more didactic and dramatic passages in the *Analects* and it conflicts with pretheoretic assumptions about virtue and how the virtuous inhabit relationships well (just as the shedding concern conception does).

²¹ For some empirical evidence that living under modern individualist capitalist conditions leads people to an overvalue conventional goods, see Kasser (2002). For evidence that it generates a bad environment for virtue development, see Narvaez (2016). This issue needs more systematic discussion.

²² For naturalist friendly steps in this direction, see Fowers (2015), Navarez (2016), and Flanagan (2017).

In her essay, Olberding paints an appealing picture of virtue understood as resolute sacrifice.

Rather than ceasing to care about ordinary, prosaic goods, [the virtuous person] engages in a continuous process of calibrating his desires, resolutely regulating them so that his caring about prosaic goods never trumps or overmasters his desire for the admirable. That is, he resolves never to betray the admirable in pursuit of the desirable, even while he wants both. . . . Insofar as Confucius wins some freedom in this alteration, it is the more modest freedom achieved by a clarity about one's priorities that precludes existentially destabilizing confusion about what to do where one must lose part of what one wants. This achieved existential constancy and resolve does not, however, preclude the pain of those losses. . . . Confucius rues his lack of recognition and position, grieves his losses, and fancifully imagines escape routes from his life, but what he does not rue is what he has done in life. (433)

As mentioned in Section 2, on this view the virtuous person is often ambivalent about choosing the path of virtue, but she is dead set on choosing it. Moreover, her judgements and feelings about how her life as a whole is turning out, about how well or poorly she has lived her life, and about herself also reflect her attachment to conventional factors such as her social standing or rejection, her material wealth or poverty, or her health and sickness.

At first blush, it is hard to see how someone adopting this approach can explain the (didactic) passage in the *Analects* which suggest that the virtuous differ from the rest of us in that they (i) are able to joyfully take the high road and (ii) feel good about themselves because they are virtuous. Olberding admirably addresses this point and offers a strategy for explaining these passages, which seem at first pass to speak in favor of the shedding concern conception. She writes:

What consistently privileging the admirable has won for Confucius is not clean joy but a clean conscience. . . [his] joy here is not in liberation from challenge but in challenge well met, a joy that comes

from serially and consistently doing well what is radically difficult to do, loving the way even where it is most difficult to love.” (434)

The (didactic) passages rehearse re-assurances that the costs of following the way are worth it, reminding the practitioner, for example, of pleasures his life can afford even in adversity and invoking his admiration for exemplars in whose noble company persistence will place him. They encourage him to seek out subtler species of joy that might, in better conditions, escape notice, alerting him to the profundity of pleasures found in exercising one’s own resolve, doing so with beloved companions, meeting the end of life without regret over one’s conduct, and so forth. . . . Joy is not refined away from feeling the vicissitudes of fate but is instead found in one’s capacity to endure them and locate redemptive satisfactions even while they injure. Experience is here enriched by recognition that while one settles for less than one would wish, one has not compromised one’s deepest commitments. In this, we might say that winning the best life one can get comes coupled with a sense that one will feel as well as one can given what fate has offered. (434–435)

Olberding seems to here argue for a version of the resolute sacrifice conception on which the virtuous person is disposed to value and enjoy the, perhaps small and simple, conventional goods that she has even if (in conventional terms) her life is marred by loss or failure. In addition, she argues that the virtuous person can enjoy positive self-regard when reflecting on her strong-willed commitment to virtue and the fact that this trait puts her in the company of noble exemplars. These moves are, I think, plausible and point us towards the best version of the resolute sacrifice conception—which is incidentally the version endorsed by Kant²³—but even this improved version of the view can only explain some of the didactic passages; it runs into problems in two sorts of cases.

To identify the first set of problem cases, we need to distinguish between three kinds of conventional misfortune that can befall the virtuous.

²³ See, for example, Baxley (2010b) and Walschots (2017).

Victim of Misfortune: The person suffers an absence a conventional good due to bad luck.

Victim of Vice: The person suffers an absence of a conventional good due to someone else's vicious activities.

Rejection of Vicious Goods: The person foregoes a conventional good either because it is itself ethically bad (e.g. unjust profit or pleasure in an enemy's suffering), because the available means to obtain it involve shameful or vicious activity (e.g. debasing oneself or slandering a competitor in order to win a promotion), or because general conventional attachment to the goods is inimical to virtue (e.g. desiring the power that comes when one is admired by bad but influential people).

In cases of the first two sorts, the resolute sacrifice conception looks quite good, as evidenced by reflection on cases from the *Analects*. First, assuming that Yan Hui died of natural causes his death constitutes a case in which Confucius was a victim of misfortune. The resolute sacrifice conception of virtue holds that it is virtuous to have ordinary attachments to conventional goods and aversions to bads so it can picture the virtuous person in this kind of case being beside himself at his prudential loss, in something like the way that Confucius is pictured at 11.9–10. Normally, when one is a victim of significant misfortune, the virtuous will manifest their attachment to the relevant (absent) conventional goods with negative emotions (e.g. regret, anger, or grief) and behavior (mourning, lamenting, etc.) and by downgrading their overall degree of satisfaction with the way their life is turning out. Second, Confucius' failure to obtain a professional post and influence rulers as he would like to is presumably in good part due to other people's vicious activities so these cases provide examples of being a victim of vice. Here again, the resolute sacrifice conception plausibly affirms that the virtuous will have and manifest attachment to the conventional goods that they have been robbed of by the vicious way of the world. Finally, in all of these cases, Olberding could plausibly add that the virtuous will still take pleasure in the little things and feel good about themselves

because they are resolutely committed to the high road of virtue and that places them in the company of admirable exemplars.

To see that the resolute sacrifice conception gets into trouble in rejected vicious goods cases, we should consider passages such as 4.5 and 7.16:

The Master said, “Eating plain food and drinking water, having only your bent arm for a pillow—certainly there is joy to be found in this! Wealth and eminence attained improperly concern me no more than the floating clouds.”

The Master said, “Wealth and social eminence are things that all people desire, and yet unless they are acquired in the proper way I will not abide them.” Poverty and disgrace are things that all people hate, and yet unless they are avoided in the proper way I will not despise them.”

The resolute sacrifice conception can affirm that the virtuous will not choose to keep improperly acquired conventional goods such as wealth and social eminence, and that they can find joy even while being upset to be missing conventional goods such as fine food and a soft pillow, but these passages reflect the further idea that the virtuous, unlike ordinary people, *are not attached to conventional goods that are improperly obtained or avoided*. More generally, the resolute sacrifice conception will not be able to explain passages that suggest that there are ordinary attachments to conventional goods that the virtuous will characteristically lack and not just willfully regulate and choose against.²⁴

To identify the second set of problem cases for the resolute conception, we need to recall that ordinary attachments to conventional goods are often reflected in people’s self-regarding attitudes and judgments. For example, people are often ashamed and not just dismayed when they fall into poverty or face rejection by the popular and powerful. According to the resolute sacrifice conception

²⁴ For example, 4.9, 6.11, 7.19, and 15.32.

these sorts of effects need not be undercut or transcended when one becomes virtuous. As mentioned at the outset, on the resolute sacrifice view, the virtuous person's judgements and feelings about how her life as a whole is turning out, about how well or poorly she has lived her life, and *about herself* all reflect ordinary attachments to conventional factors such as her social standing or rejection, her material wealth or poverty, or her health and sickness. Of course, as Olberding suggests, the virtuous person will feel good about herself in virtue of her resolute commitment and will to follow the high road and the fact that this puts her in the company of exemplars such as Confucius. Nonetheless if someone with this sort of moral or ethical self-respect or self-satisfaction is still attached to conventional goods in ordinary ways, she will *also* be liable to feeling pride when she is promoted thanks to the approval of bad people and shame when she has only stained and torn cloths to wear to a fancy dinner or reception after a lecture. Her ordinary conventional attachments will not touch or undermine her feelings about her degree of moral rectitude, but they certainly will still shape how happy she is with her character and herself.

This is a problem for the resolute conception because there are many didactic passages in the *Analects* that suggest that the virtuous person's evaluative sense of self (as manifest in feelings of self-respect, self-esteem, pride, shame, etc.) is staked on her degree of virtue and not affected by her conventional status and fortune. For example, consider *Analects* 4.9 and 4.14:

The Master said, "A scholar-official who has set his heart upon the Way, but who is still ashamed of having shabby clothing or meager rations, is not worth engaging in discussion.

"Do not be concerned that no one has heard of you, but rather strive to become a person worthy of being known."

In general, I believe that many passages suggest that, on Confucius' view, the virtuous base their sense of self-respect and self-esteem on their degree of virtue (which makes them worthy of being known)

instead of social approbation or the positional goods they do or do not have. And these are passages that the resolute sacrifice conception cannot explain.²⁵

At this point it makes sense to pause and sum up the argument so far. In the last section, we saw that the shedding concern conception can explain all the dramatic and didactic passages, but, in this section, we have seen that while the resolute sacrifice conception can explain all of the dramatic passages, it can only explain some of the didactic ones—it runs into the two sorts of problem cases just discussed. So, when it comes to exegetical assessment, the shedding concern conception looks a bit better. Of course, even if the shedding concern conception can explain more passages of the text than the resolute sacrifice conception, we should keep in mind the other negative conclusion that we reached about the shedding concern conception in the last section, namely that it offends ordinary pre-theoretical sensibilities (recall the case of Sue who misses her dead spouse). With that in mind, we might be tempted to think that the resolute sacrifice conception is still better than the shedding concern in one important respect. However, this is a conclusion we should resist; as I will now explain, the resolute sacrifice conception clashes with ordinary pretheoretical sensibilities just as the shedding concern conception does.

To see why the resolute sacrifice view clashes with ordinary pretheoretical sensibilities, note that in a wide variety of cases it is admirable or more virtuous to lack ordinary attachments to conventional goods. In many cases, full virtue requires not just that we *master* or willfully overcome conventional attachments and their psychological effects, but that we *rid ourselves* of those attachments and effects. This is a matter of ordinary intuition and something that is affirmed by ordinary pretheoretical sensibilities, and yet the resolute sacrifice view denies it.

²⁵ Interestingly, Olberding mentions these passages when first surveying the didactic passages but she does not return to them when arguing that we should adopt her view. See her discussion starting with, “Confucius’ lauding of exemplars” (2013, 422–423).

For example, consider Brandon, who is attached to praise and recognition from his boss and therefore greatly affected by his boss's attitudes about gender norms and many other things. Brandon's boss thinks women should stay home and raise their kids and that men should not have to do any housework. He looks down on, and is less likely to favor, men who disagree or whose wives do not conform to these norms. This leads Brandon to *dislike* his wife's quest to find a part time job and *wish* that he could tell her to drop it. It also leads him to resent or at least be more *averse* to doing housework and wish that his wife would do it all. If his boss found out that he was doing his fair share he would feel ashamed in the face of his boss' derision. Next, assume that virtue requires Brandon to support his wife's quest to have a part time job and that it also requires him to do his fair share of the house work. Moreover, imagine that Brandon recognizes this and willfully forces himself to encourage his wife and to grit his teeth and fold the laundry on a regular basis. In this case, Brandon is not a vicious person because of his less-than-virtuous desires for his wife to drop her quest and do all the housework, but those desires nonetheless hold him back from being fully virtuous. They are desires to treat his wife in vicious (objectionably nonvirtuous) ways. We might even imagine Brandon noticing this and wishing that he could be a fully virtuous person and be able to *wholeheartedly* encourage his wife and do his share of the housework. He might recognize that his attachment to his boss' approval, and perhaps to advancing his career, is at odds with virtue because it leads him to have vicious desires that stand in the way of his treating his wife as he would want to be treated if her were in her shoes.

I take it that this is just one of numerous cases in which ordinary pretheoretical sensibilities will conflict with the resolute sacrifice conception. That conception would have us believe that while virtue requires us to have a resolute will to choose the virtuous path, it is also compatible with attachment to the bad or vicious path when that attachment is caused or motivated by an ordinary attachment to some conventional good. It would have us, implausibly, conclude that Brandon is already fully virtuous as long as he overmasters his desire and forces himself to do the right thing. So, it turns out that

both the shedding concern and resolute sacrifice conceptions of virtue conflict with ordinary pretheoretical sensibilities.

5.

We can sum up the results of our discussion so far as follows. The resolute sacrifice conception plausibly insists that the virtuous have a resolute will—a commitment and disposition to effectively choose—to be virtuous even at the price of various conventional goods. Unlike the shedding concern conception, it allows or even requires that the virtuous have attachments to conventional goods just as ordinary people do. However, it errs in holding that the virtuous can or will have *all* the kinds of attachments to conventional goods that ordinary people do and that all virtue requires is a resolute will to “resolutely regulate,” these desires so that they never “trump” or “overmaster” our desire for virtue (Olberding 2013, 433). The truth, however, will be found in a middle ground view on which virtue involves the transcendence of some but not all ordinary attachments to conventional goods. In some cases, having an attachment to a conventional good and choosing virtue anyway is not enough for virtue—there are some kinds of ordinary attachments that the virtuous lack so they will not have to exercise will power to regulate them or feel upset later that they did not get the object of the relevant attachment. Meanwhile, in other cases, such as the victim of misfortune and the victim of vice cases, virtue will be compatible with or even require an attachment to the relevant conventional goods. Among other things, such attachment shows that we are human and recognize that conventional goods, which are subject to external fate, are indeed part of the good life.

To develop a third way conception of virtue that we can apply to the *Analects*, I suggest that we return to, and improve on, the idea of self-determining virtue (additions in italics).

Wholehearted Internalized Virtue: *Full* virtue involves (a) improving one’s character, interactions with others, and activities,

(b) *fully* appreciating and valuing virtue in oneself and others, (c) noticing and *fully* devaluing *the actual or potential* lack of virtue in oneself, and (d) transforming and guiding one's activity in the light of one's apt appreciation of virtue and its absence in oneself and others. For one thing, the self-reflective appreciation of virtue leads the virtuous to choose virtue instead of conventional goods if and when a choice must be made.

Next, I think we should add two more specific claims in order to explicate conditions b-d.

Turning Away from Vice: One notices and fully devalues the actual or potential lack of virtue in oneself, only if: (i) one has no affective attachment to getting benefits by vicious means and (ii) one *wholeheartedly* chooses to act virtuously when the relevant alternative courses of action are vicious or less than fully virtuous.

Appreciating Virtue: One fully appreciates and values virtue in oneself and others only if one is: (i) disposed to choose the virtuous path even if it requires conventional sacrifice and (ii) one's core affective and cognitive self-assessments—including one's sense of self-respect and self-esteem—are centrally grounded in awareness of one's degree of virtue and vice and not in one's standing in one's local social, cultural, economic, or political order.

Putting these together, I propose that we conceive of virtue as a form of self-determination that involves turning away from vice and appreciating virtue, but that also includes those ordinary attachments to conventional goods that are not uprooted when we turn away from vice and ground our self-assessments in an appreciation of virtue's significance. To be a virtuous human being we need to retain those attachments to conventional goods that are compatible with a wholehearted and internalized appreciation of virtue and its value.

The wholehearted internalization conception of virtue allows that we sometimes suffer a prudential loss—a reduction in our well-being—when we forgo conventional goods, but it sets restrictions on how attached we should be to these losses. For example, Brandon

may well be worse off—have a lower level of well-being—if he encourages his wife, provokes his boss’ disapproval, and then fails to get the next promotion. This would make him a victim of vice so he could aptly be upset about not getting the promotion. But in order to be virtuous he would need to more fully turn away from vice: he would need to uproot his affective attachment to gaining a promotion by vicious means and become able to *wholeheartedly* choose to act virtuously. And this would presumably involve coming to care less about his boss’ approval and perhaps to care less about his promotion. Becoming virtuous may, as this illustrates, attenuate or discipline our attachments to conventional goods without extinguishing them.

This view does better than the resolute sacrifice conception because it gets results in line with ordinary pretheoretical sensibilities in cases like the Brandon one. By extension, it fits unchosen vicious goods passages from the *Analects*, such as 7.16:

The Master said, “Eating plain food and drinking water, having only your bent arm for a pillow—certainly there is joy to be found in this! Wealth and eminence attained improperly concern me no more than the floating clouds.”

This passage suggests that the virtuous person is unattached to wealth and eminence attained by vicious means, and while the resolute sacrifice conception could not support that claim, the wholehearted internalization conception can. The virtuous person is unattached to such wealth and eminence because she has turned away from vice. In addition, the wholehearted internalization conception is tailored to capture the fact that the virtuous stake their sense of self on virtue and not conventional goods such as the quality or fashionableness of one’s clothing or the approval of vicious but powerful people like Brandon’s boss. So, this interpretation can easily explain, for example, why it is virtuous of Zilu to feel no shame while being dressed in, “only a shabby quilted gown” (9.27).

Summing up, the wholehearted internalization conception of virtue effectively combines the strengths of the resolute sacrifice and

shedding concern conceptions, but it has further strengths that allow it to avoid the defects that bedevil those other views. It allows us to provide a more unified reading of both the dramatic and didactic passages of the *Analects*. And it ascribes a conception of virtue to Confucius that fits well with our (current) ordinary pretheoretic sensibilities. So, all things considered, it looks like the right one to ascribe to the *Analects*.²⁶

6.

Now that we have three conceptions of virtue on the table and have seen that the wholehearted internalization conception seems to best fit ordinary pretheoretic sensibilities and provide a unified interpretation of the *Analects*, we can return to our starting questions about how virtue transforms or transcends ordinary assumptions about the importance of conventional goods and conventional success. All three of our conceptions entail that the virtuous will choose the virtuous path instead of the conventional one if and when they conflict. Therefore, to that extent any advocate of virtue will no doubt run afoul of parents and politicians who want kids and citizens to think and act as if conventional success was the most important thing in life. The shedding concern view goes much further and would have us believe that the virtuous completely cease to care about conventional goods and success. However as I have argued, that would put a strain on the relationships or bonds that the virtuous can have with more ordinary people. The resolute sacrifice conception does better on that score but it provides us with an unsatisfying picture of virtue because it fails to account for the way that the virtuous are able to wholeheartedly repudiate vice and maintain a stable sense of self-respect and esteem, based on virtue, in the face of social pressure, disapproval, or disdain. We might say that while

²⁶ Tiwald (2018) discusses issues that would be relevant to thinking about which conception of virtue fits other texts and figures in the Confucian and Neo-Confucian tradition.

the shedding concern conception pictures the virtuous as slightly inhuman, the resolute conception pictures them as all too human and insufficiently inspiring.

The wholehearted internalization conception of virtue hits the mean between the extremes and helps us see that some, but only some, attachments to conventional goods and success are uprooted by virtue and that virtue grounds an admirable and perhaps enviable sort of self-respect and self-esteem. Perhaps this points to one of the things that allows philosophers to seduce the young away from conventional success. Perhaps the young can see that it is not good to have one's self-evaluations tethered to conventional goods such as social approval and the accumulation and display of positional material goods. That makes not only one's well-being but even one's sense of self-respect and esteem hostage to external fortune. The path of virtue is appealing in this context because it offers us a way to secure an inner basis for self-respect and self-esteem that will contribute to our well-being regardless of whether we achieve conventional success or not.

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