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From Virtue to Duty: Xunzi's *Gong-Yi* 公義 and the Institutionalization of Public Obligation in Early Confucianism

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Abstract: This paper challenges the conventional view that pre-Qin Confucianism represents kingly virtue politics that lacks institutional duty. By interpreting Xunzi's notion of *yi* 義, particularly *gong-yi* 公義, as a form of public obligation, I show that Xunzi exposes *yi* to state institutions to oblige people to serve public ends. While institutional duty is often associated with post-Enlightenment political philosophy, this paper argues that Xunzi's philosophy offers a comparable framework of public–private exchange. Xunzi's *gong-yi* may be a public-servicing sense of duty that combines moral and civic dimensions, compelling individuals to cooperate for the collective good. Unlike social contract theories that trade private rights with public duties, Xunzi's system relies on moral compulsion and normative reciprocity. This system posits a sensible exchange between individual duties from inner compulsion for the public good. By contrasting *gong* 公 (the public) with *si* 私 (the private), Xunzi envisions the public as an entity that is serviced through public duties and a place for human flourishing. Positioning the role of *gong-yi* in Xunzi's broader institutional project crystalizes this nascent concept of a "public" and its relationships with civic duties.

Keywords: Xunzi; public duty; Confucian virtues; institutionalism; pre-Qin Confucianism

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1. Introduction

Institutional duty is rarely associated with pre-Qin Confucianism; this paper challenges this view and reinterprets Xunzi's *yi* 義, specifically *gong-yi* 公義 as the pre-Qin Confucian attempt at institutionalizing virtue as a public duty.[1] By institutionalization, I mean the externalized principle-based practice of a social norm such that the norm's existence necessarily depends on a multitude of compelling social factors *including but not limited to* internal compulsion.[2] More specifically, Xunzi's *yi* is a duty embedded in social-political structures, in contrast to Kongzi's and Mengzi's *yi* as a virtue. This notably marks a departure from Kong-Meng's familial-based political philosophy. The claim "從義不從父", translated as "follow *yi* and not your father", appears to show *yi* as a non-familial obligation overruling filial duties.[3] Select comparisons with post-Enlightenment public–private separation and duty–interest exchange will uncover the key similarities and differences that reveal Xunzi's *gong-yi* as possessing elements of both moral and civic duty.

The historical context of this shift is the expansion of state authority during the Warring States China (475–221 BCE), where completing public works became a matter of survival for the state.[4] Against this backdrop, institutional duty is needed to securely and predictably enable public cooperation. The central thesis of this paper charts *yi*'s shift from virtue to duty, arguing that it represents a Confucian response to the pressing issue of public works.

Xunzi's institutionalism represents a genuine innovation that advances virtue politics into institutional politics. Securing public duty from the people requires a sensible framework of exchange. Fulfilling public obligations, such as military duty or bond services, requires personal sacrifices and thus is reasonable to expect compensation. In the social contract theory, natural freedoms are exchanged for civil obligations to secure one's property, liberty, and life. Under this view, institutional duty depends on the fair and reasonable exchange of private rights and interests with public duties and state-secured rights. Xunzi's *gong-yi* partially resembles the structure of this exchange, but crucial differences remain.

It is widely known that Xunzi thought people were naturally chaotic and relied on social institutions to shape orderly behaviour. Scholars have highlighted self-interest as the main psychological handle leveraged to make people orderly (Sung 2015). Through satisfying interests, many contended that Xunzi's political philosophy possessed utilitarian characteristics (Feng 1931; Mou 1979; Xu 1969). A challenge of the utilitarian reading is how *yi* as a virtuous inclination stands concerning self-interested inclinations *li** 利 (profits). Suppose that people become orderly from acting out of self-interest, how should we understand Xunzi's claim that people are also motivated by *yi*, often risking their own interests? Closing this gap, I argue that *yi*, as feelings of obligation, is the more powerful psychological handle leveraged as an institutional principle to shape public behaviour.

The Classical Chinese discourse places *gong* 公 (the public) in opposition to *si* 私 (the private). Placed together with *yi*-duty, *gong-yi* may be understood as a public duty. Here, I borrow from David Nivison's (1996) influential interpretation of *yi* as an "unfilled sense of duty". Firstly, I ask how *yi*'s public function stands concerning profit *li**, showing the structure of this institutional exchange. Explaining the structure of *yi* as duty requires two steps, discussed in two sections: (a) the explication of *yi* as a psychological characteristic that is "an unfilled sense of duty"; (b) an explanation that joins *yi*'s psychological structure to the institutional exchange of *yi* and *li**. Next, I propose that *gong-yi* implies a concept of a "public" serviced by normatively obliged duties and enforced legal measures.

2. *Yi* 義—Duty as Institutionalized Virtue

For philosophers in antiquity, civic responsibilities were inseparable from moral obligations. Aristotle's (1981, 1.1-2) ideal city, *koinonia politike* (political community), requires virtuous citizens to maintain the city-state's integrity. The Chinese Axial thinker Mengzi thought virtues such as *ren* 仁 (humaneness) and *yi* were essential for similar reasons. This section explores the distinction between Xunzi's institutionalized *yi*-duty from Mengzi's *yi*-virtue. While Aristotle and Mengzi were virtue ethicists (Angle and Slote 2013; Huang 2020; Kim 2019; Tan 2005; Van Norden 2007), this section will demonstrate that Xunzi's *yi* is a principle of inner compulsion that generates action through the shameful feeling of an "unfilled duty".

The term *yi* does not have a single definition and is usually associated with virtues of "rightness", "appropriateness", "integrity", and "duty".[5] The ancient lexicon *Shuowenjiezi* (說文解字) suggests an association with rituals and rightness, with the top radical meaning "lamb" and the bottom being the first-person pronoun, likely referring to sacrificial rituals. Sinologist John Knoblock (1988) translates the term as "morality", focusing on "rightness" as a normative guidance of behaviour. Burton Watson (2003) uses "righteousness", conveying the inner conviction of being morally right. Eric Hutton (2014) leaves *yi* untranslated. In these translations, I wish to draw attention to how both Knoblock and Watson highlight *yi* as an inner compulsion that obliges normative action. This is the way *yi* can be understood as "duty"—obligatory acts compelled by feelings of shame and guilt *ru* 辱 if left unfilled. In other words, the inner feeling *yi* becomes the "handle" social institutions leverage to oblige people to perform duties.[6]

This should be first contextualized within Xunzi's theory of moral transformation whereby human nature *xing* 性 is bad and *wei* 偽 (deliberate effort) makes people good. Xunzi's moral transformation is generally understood to involve nurturing *yi* from impulse into fully fledged morality. *Yi* is a latent moral capacity (Li 2011), associated with feelings of indebtedness or an impulse to return good for good (Nivison 1996). This moral capacity, requiring reflection through rituals, depends on institutional support (Ivanhoe 1994; Kline 2000). But why are these feelings, which are congenial to good, not strong enough to overcome bad human nature? In insecure conditions, these feelings will be overwhelmed by self-interests *li**, necessitating ritual guidance (Wong 2000). Thus, if private self-interests are controlled, *yi* feelings may then be directed to moral ends.

Xunzi accepting *li** as a solvable limitation rather than a moral hazard per se starkly contrasts Mengzi's position in the "debate between *yi* and *li**" 義利之辯. Mengzi argues that seeking profits will ruin King Hui's Liang kingdom because self-profit leads to the expansion of greed and ruinous competition between peers.[7] In this instance, *yi* is categorically opposed to *li**, closely resembling Aristotle's concern for virtuous citizens within a *koinonia politike*. In their views, political integrity and order relied on virtuous individuals. It is worth noting that Xunzi agrees with Mengzi in thinking political leaders should cultivate *yi*. In *Wangba* 王霸, he asserts that *yi* is how one becomes a true king, as seen in the phrase *yi-lì-er-wang* 義立而王: "if *yi* is established as your foundation, then you will be a true king." (Hutton 2014, p. 99), explaining thus

> Those men with whom he collaborates in conducting the government are all men of *yi*. The punishments and laws he sets out for state and clan are all laws in accordance with *yi*. Those things which the ruler is extremely vigorous in leading his various ministers to turn their heads to are all *yi* intentions. When it is like this, then those below will look up to those above for being *yi*. (Hutton 2014, p. 99)

Xunzi echoes Mengzi's claim that a leader's *yi* influences his subordinates, but expands the concept beyond personal virtues.[8] The passage above displays *yi* as a principle by which laws and punishments are aligned, akin to Aristotle's view of politics grounded in "justice".[9] Taking note of this expansion from personal virtue to institutional principle, P. J. Ivanhoe (2025) groups *yi* together with rituals (*li* 禮), and distinctions (*fen* 分) and argues that they are all artificial constructs. Ivanhoe writes that *yi*, *li* and *fen* "are products not of natural human inclinations, i.e., spontaneous features of human nature, but the result of human invention and experimentation, the result of what Xunzi calls 'deliberate efforts'" (Yang 2021, pp. 4–5). Institutional deliberation is crucial because people's desires (*yu* 欲) outstrip limited resources.[10] To prevent conflict, social institutions ensure people satisfy chaotic desires in an orderly manner.[11] This tells us that social institutions are pivotal to morality and order, but *how* do these social institutions leverage innate human tendencies, and what are their effects on civic orderliness?[12]

The scope of this question rests outside of ordinary moral transformation. Specifically, it requires us to understand the public institutional framework that commutes with an individual's *yi*. Shuo Dongfang (2023) offers a provocative perspective in highlighting the difference between Mengzi's *yi* in "the debate between *yi* and *li** 利" and Xunzi's *yi* in "establishing *yi* to become the true king". For Dongfang, Mengzi's *yi* illustrates a "moral understanding of politics" whereas Xunzi's *yi* is an "objectivized principle" that views morality through the lens of politics (372). Moreover, Dongfang (404) underscores the significance of this move, Xunzi's *yi* shifts from "the individual to the collective", becoming an externalized and quantifiable factor. This is a partial departure from the autonomous self-regulation of *yi* as a personal virtue and makes it so that institutions can hold people

to the standards of *yi* through external verification, introducing a commutation between a public authority and private individuals.

This profound transition invites an externalized reading of *yi* that explains how an individual's psychology serves public ends. In my explanation, I draw heavily from Nivison's (1996) definition of Xunzi's *yi* as an "unfilled sense of duty". Nivison argues that *yi* amounts to a psychological characteristic of feeling obliged to others, describing it as the uncomfortable sense in which "there is something I am *not doing* that I could do, and I am perhaps painfully, aware of this" (211). Addressing how *yi* does not contradict Xunzi's claim that *xing* is bad, Nivison maintains that *yi* should not be confused with Mengzi's *yi* as a positive sense of duty. He lays out the problem: duty could either mean a positive sense of obligation to help others or a negative fear of being shamed when one is neglecting duty. Mengzi's *yi* represents the first version and is rejected because it would contradict Xunzi's claim that human nature is bad. Therefore, *yi* is a negative fear driven by feelings such as shame and guilt. Institutions transform this psychological tendency into measurable external action.

Psychologically, *yi* is rooted in the fear of shame from others, and this feeling obliges people to perform duties. This resonates with Aristotle's view of the moral education of the city's citizens (Hutton 2002; Cua 2003; Zhao 2024) in sharing a moral reasoning process based on intrinsic moral values rather than extrinsic social constraints. As an inner sense of compulsion, this process requires a moral recognition of shame (Cua 2003, p. 180), where one experiences emotional uneasiness as a consequence of social misconduct.[13] Xunzi possibly goes further than Aristotle by showing that, if leveraged correctly, this internal compulsion can be the basis of consistent performance of civic duty to complete public works. To my knowledge, this is an original, if not controversial interpretation as Confucians often focused on the inner virtuous dimensions of *yi*.

In defence of this view, we may examine how the text links *yi* with *xing** 行 (conduct), connecting *yi* to physical actions.[14] For instance, Xunzi writes in *Dalüe* 大略: 義，理也，故行, which can be understood as *yi* is reasonable and thus should inform your conduct and action. This association is found again in *Zhengming* 正名: 正利而為謂之事，正義而為謂之行, which means acting on straightened profit *li** is called work and straightened *yi* is called conduct. In Xunzi's context, "duty" captures *yi* as a psychological structure of being compelled by obligation and the external acts generated by this inner feeling. This precise sense of consistent act-compulsion is not captured by other English translations such as "morality", "rightness", and "appropriateness" because one can possess them as innate virtues or evaluative attitudes without forcefully acting on them.[15]

In summary, this section presents duty as the definition of Xunzi's *yi*. I make this distinction based on the idea that duties are externally measurable on the action end and internally motivated in the psychological structure. However, public duty is only fair if people are compensated for performing them, how does Xunzi address this problem? It is worth noting that the *yi* presented here also stands in a new relationship with *li**, (benefits or profits). Kong-Meng Confucianism despised acts motivated by *li** and thought *yi* and *li** were categorically opposed.[16] In the following section, we shall examine further how Xunzi's *yi* challenges Mengzi's view that *yi* and *li** are incompatible. Through comparisons to Western theories, I hope a clearer picture of the structure of institutional exchange between interests and duties will emerge.

3. *Yi* 義 and *Li** 利—Reciprocal Not Traded

The previous section explains how *yi*-duty may be understood as a leveraged psychological principle. This section will demonstrate that Xunzi's duty–interest exchange parallels (but differs from) the effects of the institutionalization of public duties in social contract

theories. Xunzi's public duty *gong-yi* may be a sensible normative reciprocity between *yi*-duties and public interests that benefit all. I shall begin by explaining, with comparisons, the institutionalized structure guiding this reciprocal relationship.

Thomas Hobbes's (1651) well-known scepticism of human nature has often been likened to Xunzi's belief that *xing* is bad and the two are frequently compared (Cua 2003; Dongfang 2011; Kim 2019; Wong 2000). Here, I am using Hobbes's social contract theory simply to clarify the structure of Xunzi's *yi-li** institution. Unlike Aristotle's *koinonia politike*, where duties are natural moral obligations, Hobbes (1640) believed that state authority is derived from natural individual rights. Laws must rest on people's desire for self-preservation.[17] I will not recount Hobbes's well-known social contract argument but draw attention to three important features of Hobbes's contract and John Locke's (1689) challenge to Hobbes to draw comparisons to Xunzi's *yi-li** institution:

1. Trade-off: Hobbes argues the social contract benefits all people. Avoiding a vicious all-versus-all state of nature, people can thrive in the structured security of sovereign authority.
2. Compulsion: Hobbes grants the sovereign full legal authority to compel people to do their duties.
3. Consent: Hobbes argues that people implicitly consent to civil duties in the social contract and thus must accept sovereign coercion.

Duties compelled through political institutions require conformity and justification as to why one should conform. Hobbes justifies conformity to laws through self-interests and appeals to our self-preservation instincts, which he calls "the natural law".[18] The underlying assumption is that people are primarily motivated by self-interests, an assumption challenged by Locke. Locke thinks duties cannot just rest on self-interest because significant duties come at personal costs, such as conscription and heroic sacrifices during battle (PE 127–133). Thus, duties cannot be reduced to self-interested considerations (Crisp 2019, p. 58).

Carefully examining this disagreement, we see that Locke and Hobbes underscore two distinct aspects of duty. Hobbes's conformity to civic duty originates from the *psychological impulse* to preserve self-interests and profit. Answering Locke's challenge, Hobbes may say that people do not have the duty to sacrifice themselves and are justified to escape if threatened with death. Locke's argument against egoism, on the other hand, underscores the *moral requirements* of duty. Xunzi's concepts of *yi*-duty and *li** profit involve both *psychological impulses* and *moral requirements*.

Although Xunzi shared a concern for the chaotic state of nature and affirmed the necessity of communal life,[19] he does not explicitly frame civic duty as a self-interested trade-off. Like Hobbes, Xunzi recognizes the *psychological impulse* for profit *li**. In tandem with Locke's critique, Xunzi also thinks that satisfying interests *li** does not lead to duty *yi*. Instead, the relationship of *yi* and *li** may be better understood as normative reciprocity. *Yi* is a moral requirement, at the same time, *li** is an immutable desire that needs to be satisfied. Both to satisfy private interests and fulfil public duties, the public authority and private individuals enter into a form of reciprocal exchange.

The character of *yi-li** reciprocity may be understood as an evolution of Confucian *yi* and synthesis of Mohist 墨家 *li** that aimed to preserve some aspects of Confucianism while being receptive to arguments from other schools of thought. Amid a collapse of order during the late Warring States, Xunzi lived in a turbulent era and may have been much more concerned with the art of public statecraft than Kongzi and Mengzi. This was also a period of expansion of state institutions. Faced with an emerging new institutional reality, Xunzi participated in the discourse, initiated by Mohism, on how benefits can be

secured for all. The term *gong-li** 公利 as (public profit, public interest), central to Mohism, is also found in Xunzi's chapter *Fu*.

Carine Defoort (2008) credits the Mohists with moving the needle in accepting *li**, profit and interests, as legitimate political concerns. Confucian aristocratic attitudes saw *li** discussions at court as petty and crass, typified by Mengzi's admonishment of King Hui of Liang—a common sentiment in the earlier Spring Autumn period (771–481 BCE.).[20] Positive sentiments towards *li** emerged later (after 470 BCE.) in debates between the Mohist and Yangist 楊家 schools on how a ruler should profit the state.[21] This is the critical context of the phrase in chapter *Fu*, *zhi-ai-gong-li* 志愛公利 (literal translation: will to-love-public-profit) and may be an indication of "public interest" entering the Confucian purview. Xunzi praises Sage-king Yao for abdicating because "he cared for his people and wanted them to widely profit" 泛利兼愛, showing that care can entail allowing others to profit.[22] For Xunzi, yielding (讓) interests and profit to the common people was an admirable political goal as it showed care for others and promoted public productivity. Partially agreeing with Mohist state utilitarianism, Xunzi writes that "acting on straightened *li** is called work".[23] More importantly, however, Xunzi pushed back against the earlier Confucian idea that *yi* and *li** are categorically opposed; *yi* ranks above *li** 利, but an ideal state accommodates both (Zhu 2022). He writes that those who place *yi* before *li** are honourable and the reverse is a disgrace.[24] Ideally, *li** should be wholly directed at others and never pursued for its own sake.[25] Seeking *li** is certainly not virtuous in and of itself, but Xunzi understood that the natural desire for self-profit was immutable and thus should be accommodated.[26] One may even argue that Xunzi stands closer to the Mohists than past Confucians in believing interests can be directed to the public's benefit. That is to say that the state should re-direct people's profit-seeking desires into work that benefits all. In contrast, Mengzi is not open to this possibility and morally repudiates all profit and interest-seeking desires.[27]

It is important to understand that although *li** is accommodated, public duty is not purchased through interests. In this sense, Xunzi's *yi* is close to Aristotle's civic duty. Akin to how the *koinonia politike* is maintained by virtuous citizens, *yi* originates from the obligatory impulse of reciprocity, to return good for good. Take the following passage in *Fuguo* 富國, for instance:

> Both superiors and subordinates were enriched, and the commoners all felt affection for their superiors. The fact that people turned to their leaders like water flowing down, loved them with the same kind of delight they had for their own parents, and happily marched out to die for them (為之出死斷亡而愉者) was for no other reason than that the superiors had achieved the ultimate in loyalty, trustworthiness, harmoniousness, and evenhandedness." (Hutton 2014, p. 92)

Profit and interest do not motivate self-sacrifice, nor is loyalty a transactional purchase.[28] *Yi*'s reciprocal structure as obliged civic duty may be closer to the affectionate relationship between a parent and child. The ruler yields *li** interests to profit others, further creating conditions of reciprocity. On this note, we must also understand that institutional *yi* is not enforced with legal threats. Instead, this reciprocity hinges on the sense of "returning aid".[29] We do not be naïve about the problematic power asymmetry between a ruler's affection and the compelled sacrifices of the common people. My point is that the inner obligation that drives people into action is not the compulsion from a contractual trade-off between the desire for profit/interest at the pain of legal punishment. Instead, *yi*-duties are maintained by the inner obligatory shame and guilt associated with leaving duties unfilled.

Finalizing this comparison, we may distinguish the voluntariness in normative reciprocity from consenting to sovereign authority. In the social contract theory, people con-

sent to public duties because they have given prior consent to sovereign authority. *Yi*-duty, in contrast, is a volunteer agreement depending on the agent being compelled by an inner sense of moral obligation. No explicit consent is given to the sovereign or the specific terms of public duty. Nevertheless, a person feels a *moral responsibility* through an inner obligation to act in reciprocal ways vis à vis the state.

This section highlights that Xunzi *yi* was not arbitrary or unconditional and depended on reciprocity. Mengzi and Xunzi agree that normative reciprocity may naturally emerge from a true king's *yi*, but Xunzi may think depending on virtuous rulers makes *yi* generation unreliable. In lieu, institutionalized duties can be generated from the ruler yielding interests to the common people to show his care and affection. In turn, the common people are obliged to perform *yi*-duties. As a whole, this institutional arrangement may bring public benefit (*gong-li**). Hopefully, this shows a sensible framework that can be partially credited to Mohist state utilitarianism. At this point, the contours of the public emerge: as a beneficiary to *yi*-duties and as a body that collectively works towards a common purpose. This final section joins *yi*-duty, *li**-interests and *gong* public to show a nascent conception of early Confucian public philosophy.

4. *Gong* 公 vs. *Si* 私—A Public Body

The previous section explains the exchange between duty and interests as normative reciprocity. In the following section, I hope to show that Xunzi's exchange structure services a collective body, a "public". The idea of a "public" is commonly associated with the Western political tradition, thus transplanting this concept onto Xunzi's philosophy will first require justifications as to why we may place aside the difficulties in commensurability. By focusing on two facets of the concept, I hope to show that Xunzi's *gong* 公 can be plausibly understood as a form of "public", insofar as it is a space for moral flourishing and a collective body.

Two specific similarities justify this comparison with Xunzi. Firstly, I discuss the moral pertinence of *public participation* as a sphere of human flourishing. According to Hannah Arendt (1970), Aristotle thought participation in public political activity led to human flourishing. The family household's private activities, on the other hand, were despotic because the relationships (master–slave, husband–wife) were not participatory. For Aristotle, the public sphere was where citizens would cultivate virtues such as justice and contribute to the common good. Secondly, I draw attention to the *collective body* as a concept that imagines the public as a personified singular entity and a moral subject worthy of normative recognition. The "public" in the minds of Enlightenment thinkers was the "embodiment of wills". Hobbesian sovereign is the embodied will of the collective people, built on the European Medieval legal concept that recognizes "corporate entities" as a *persona ficta* (Pettit 2008).[30] The most striking similarity may be found in the philosophies of Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1755), where the public was a "general will" aimed at a common good that is not the sum of individual goals and interests. Specifically for Hobbes and Rousseau, the distinct concept of a public *collective body* as more than the sum of individuals, suggests this body is normatively significant. For Rousseau, good governance must reflect the will of this body. Hobbes argues that laws are legitimate because they originate from the impersonated sovereign. This constructed, fictional body is recognized as a subject that requests normative obligations similar to how we owe real people inherent moral obligations, such as respect and relational appropriateness. The clearest example is how modern people personify nations as a "collective body" that demands individuals to recognize it as a normatively worthy entity. For instance, people may believe it is wrong to "insult a nation" much like how it is wrong to "insult a real person".

The current three prominent English translations do not distinctly show the two faces of *gong*. Hutton (2014) translates *gong* as "without prejudice" and "impartiality". This reading emphasizes the moral attitudes of a *junzi* 君子, a cultivated person, who holds no prejudices and is impartial in judgment. Hutton explains that his use of "avoidance of prejudice" means both "opposing selfishness and one-sidedness", and "public-spiritedness" (54). Knoblock (1990) translates *gong-yi* to "common good" and "public spiritedness". Watson (2003) translates *gong-yi* as "public right". In trying to contextualize *gong* in the text, English translators differentiated the "public" and "impartial" dimensions without settling on a unified explication.

The moral attitude of impartiality is evident in Xunzi's *gong*, but the idea of public-spiritedness has not been fully explained. Crucially, translations have not expanded on the senses in which *gong* may be a public body. Let us first examine the two passages where Xunzi uses *gong-yi* and weigh in on the two different ways *gong* is used. The first passage is found in *Xiushen* 修身:

> The Documents says: "Do not create new likes. Follow the kings' way. Do not create new dislikes. On the kings' path stay. This is saying that through *gong-yi*, gentlemen overcome capricious selfish desires. (Hutton 2014, p. 15, modified).

The second mention is in *Jundao*君道:

> Make clear people's allotments, their responsibilities, assign to people proper works, arrange activities, use those having talents, grant office for abilities, so none are not well ordered, nor have improprieties, then *gong* ways (*dao*) will enjoy success, and selfish (*si*) approaches make no progress. *Gong-yi* will shine bright and clear, and selfish (*si*) pursuits wholly disappear. (Hutton 2014, p. 125, modified)

It is clear from these passages that *gong* opposes *si* 私 and is associated with promoting talent and following the king's order as a form of *public participation*, requiring impartial moral attitudes. Xunzi's usage of *gong-zheng* 公正, seen four times, is most related to Hutton's understanding of "without prejudice". By being impartial, one moves away from the parochial and selfish perspective and cultivates unprejudiced judgments towards others. Being *gong* is a part of becoming *junzi*, a morally transformative process likened to Aristotle's *public participation* as a cultivation of virtues. Supporting this reading, Winnie Sung (2015) argues that people reflect and "realize that the self and other are related in virtue of being members of humankind". By this, Sung suggests moving from a self-interested "default mode of operation" shifts focus from the self to others. In this manner, Sung argues that Xunzi's *gong-yi* moves a person from private desires (*siyu* 私欲) towards other-regarding *yi*. Being publicly spirited undoubtedly involves other-regarding inner moral attitudes. However, the political sense in which public-spiritedness represents a positive attitude towards the body of the collective falls outside the scope of this explanation.

The discussion of the political *gong* has garnered significant interest among Sinophone scholars in recent decades. Notably, Zehua Liu (2003, p. 139) argued that the Warring States was a period of "establishing the public and eliminating the private" (立公滅私). In Liu's view, the period underwent significant shifts in moral attitudes that saw private desires and private wills as problematic because they were partial to factionalism, where powerful families accumulated interests at the expense of public interests. Before the Warring States, *si* was used in *Analects* and *Mengzi* without negative connotations to mean "private matters" in a neutral way.[31] In *Xunzi*, the Legalist 韓非子 *Hanfeizi* and *Mozi*, *si* became closely associated with being partial to forming "private interest groups" to influence state policy (Shun 2005, p. 5). The question here is, however, why are *gong* considerations morally superior to *si* considerations? Past Confucians who prioritized private

familial-based duties thought common people benefitted from the ruler's cultivation of private virtues. This alludes to a missing explanation of how *gong* is a subject worthy of normative obligations that rank above private obligations towards subjects in kinship ties.

Explaining this gap returns to the distinction made at the beginning of this section. *Gong* in opposition to *si*, as moral obligations, should be understood as both the motivation to be impartial and a *collective body* serviced by duties. This more robust concept of *gong* posits a constructed bodily subject worthy of moral obligations. *Gong* eliminating *si* thus should be understood in two senses, as a cultivation of moral attitude through *public participation* and the re-direction of moral obligations, from private interests to the *collective body*. The robust version shares important parallels with the public body in social contract theories. Thus, using the Enlightenment public as a comparative tool will hopefully yield important insights into Xunzi's *gong*. Although Xunzi, like his Classical contemporary Aristotle, assumed that people were born into a collective, he possibly went further with a more pronounced normative notion of a *collective body*.

In this vein, *gong* has indeed been used to describe things as belonging to a "public" or "collective" as early back as the Western Zhou period. The term *gong-tian* 公田, public fields, was mentioned in both the Book of Poetry *Shijing* 詩經 (11th–7th century BCE) and by Mengzi in the saying "雨我公田, 遂及我私", which means "let rain fall on the public fields before my own private ones".[32] The *Spring and Autumn Annals* (呂氏春秋) used *gong* as a praise for rulers who are willing to sacrifice for the greater good (Sato 2020, pp. 32–33). Placed together, we may see that *gong* represents a form of collectivism that is not a loose self-interested association of familial groups coming together for private benefit. In other words, people are obliged to work for a collective rather than working for themselves and kin through collective effort. In the same vein, *gong* in the term for public threat (*gong-huan* 公患) is also an instance of politically identifying a problem that concerns this *collective body*. In *Fuguo*, Xunzi challenges Mozi's claim that *gong-huan* is the shortage of resources, arguing that it is instead it is chaos and strife.[33] Similarly, the aforementioned *gong-li** implies a distinct morally worthy body that is serviced through individual or private obligations. Minimally, *gong* must imply some entity that receives and benefits from duty. Maximally, Xunzi implies that this moral entity ranks above private duties and obligations.

The text offers no definitive proof, but I contend that solid evidence suggests a nascent form of a public body in Xunzi's writings. Fundamentally, Xunzi thought that *qun* 群 (the collective, group) was the basic human condition, and states thrived when it protected the interests of all (Zhu 2022; R. Wang 2023). We should remember here that *qun*, described in *Wangzhi* 王制 and *Fuguo* refers to the natural inclination of people to form communities. The chapters suggest that governing the collective requires the proper allocation of resources, but the term *qun* does not have obvious normative qualities. The argument from *gong* goes further and shows the collective is recognized as a moral subject worthy of individual normative obligations. Given that Xunzi often addressed Mohist and Legalist positions, that contained more vivid illustrations of this concept, I believe this is a plausible assumption.[34] To clarify Xunzi's concept of the *gong*-body, the social contract public body elucidates its composition and function in the sense that the "constructed" body in Hobbes and Rousseau is like *gong*, as a *collective body* serviced by duties. Locke's protection of private interests against public encroachment is the reverse of the opposition between *gong* and *si*. Contra Locke, Xunzi and other Classical Chinese thinkers wanted to protect *gong* from *si*. Specifically, we may posit Xunzi's *gong-yi* as follows:

1. As a collective, Xunzi's *gong* is a body serviced by public duties *gong-yi*. Through *gong-yi*, the *gong*-body receives public interest *gong-li**. Xunzi's aim is for the collective to exert effort with unified force and praised rulers who were able to make people "exert force as if one person" 若使一人.[35] The "public" here resembles Rousseau's

"general will" in that the common good is not a collection of individual interests. Like Hobbes's bodily analogy, Xunzi's *gong* is a collective body that acts in unity. *Gong*-body as a constructed person has been incepted.

2. As a moral attitude, being *gong* means participating individuals must be publicly spirited, eliminate selfishness and direct moral obligations towards *gong* and not *si*. *Gong-yi* in this sense is the publicly spirited practice of *yi*-duties. Xunzi writes that shame compels avoidance of *si* because it aligns with normative reciprocity.[36] For those who have no shame or reciprocity, legal punishments can be used.[37] The chapter *Yibing*議兵 is the clearest example of how Xunzi understood that military service, a public duty involving considerable risk, can only be effectively motivated by *yi*-duties.[38] Echoing Locke, Xunzi thinks that if people are only motivated by rewards and punishments, people would desist any risky public duty. Soldiers would flee at first sight of danger. Through normative reciprocity, however, people are joined in collective action even at considerable personal risk. *Gong-yi* describes the *yi*-duties that benefit the collective but present significant private sacrifice. According to Xunzi, great public work is only possible when exceptional kings master the art of leveraging *yi*, threatening punishments or offering *li** should only supplement *yi* institutions.[39]

Returning to the historical context, we can see that *gong-yi* indeed reinforces the strength of this body. The survival of Warring state kingdoms practically depended on a steady supply of conscripts and bonded services in building defensive walls and the failures of these public works led to harm for all. By eliminating selfishness, *gong* also prevents private interests from interfering with collective interests.

Gong-body as a nascent form of "public" can be further clarified through a final comparison with Mengzi, who demonstrably did not believe the *gong*-body to be a normative worthy subject. Mengzi's idea of public–private distinction is much more comparable to Locke's. For Locke, the public is the collective association of free persons. Locke gives special moral consideration to the family and argues that paternal power is the first political authority. He argues that the "first society was between Man and Wife, which gave beginning to that between Parents and Children." Mengzi affirms paternal authority and thinks the family unit should be fenced as a protected space. A ruler following *daoyi* 道義 "the way and *yi*" gives special protection to this unit (Liu 2023). Ideally, this protected space will be used to nurture virtues, for example, cultivating love for parents into "extendable love" to others. Therefore, growing private virtues come before public-spiritedness. In Mengzi's view, *yi*'s pertinence to the benefit of all is its effects on the state's ruler. People benefit from a ruler who extends his virtues to his people and thus the public benefits from his private virtues. Mengzi did not think virtuous actions in the public sphere trump private virtues.

To summarize my argument so far, the central thesis of this paper shows that Xunzi's *gong-yi* is a significant institutional innovation away from virtue ethics. In my reading, two arguments mark this difference. Xunzi's *gong* is a *collective body* and the subject of moral obligation. This body is maintained by institutionalized *yi*-duties that consistently leverage the psychological structure of shame and guilt into normative obligatoriness. This is a novel argument, and I would like to present two responses to potential disagreements. The radical institutional expansion supported by Legalism and Mohism, which subsumes all private moral space, should be distinguished from Xunzi's defence of individual moral potential. As a Confucian, Xunzi did not fully commit to institutional legal, utilitarian duties. Here, we should remember that *gong-yi* is not only a civic duty but also a moral aspiration. The great *ru* 大儒 is "fully at ease in being public-spirited in their intentions" (Hutton 2014, p. 67) showing that being *gong* should involve deliberate cultivation. In this sense, I disagree with the view that *gong-yi*'s civic demands amount to legal institu-

tionalism, where "following duties is simple legalism" (J. Wang 2009, pp. 95–96). From the analysis above, I show that Xunzi clearly understood that punishments and rewards could not motivate self-harming duties and held penal codes as a last measure against those who lack normative reciprocity. Furthermore, while Xunzi's idea synthesized some Mohist state utilitarianism, I maintain that *gong-yi* is not utilitarian per se. You-Lan Feng (1931) succinctly draws attention to Xunzi's uneasiness of being caught between Confucian's *yi*, seeking moral rightness even at the cost of harming interests *li** and Mohist's plain focus on collective interests. However, Xunzi affirms that it is inherently good to practice *gong-yi*, and the great Ru was at ease with being publicly spirited. More precisely, Xunzi thinks that although *gong-yi* services the collective, it is unlike sterile Legalist duties and is internally, and autonomously morally motivated (Harris 2013, pp. 108–19).[40]

A fruitful way to understand this apparent uneasiness is to see that Xunzi compromises with the popular trend of expanding public authority during the Warring States. By synthesizing moral autonomy with the demand for public cooperation, Xunzi preserves the core Confucian idea of *yi* as an autonomous act. The inner virtue is conserved as a psychological structure, an inner sense of obligation. Rather ingeniously, Xunzi's innovation is to show that this psychological structure, if used correctly, might be the most powerful motivator of public duties. A critique (Mou 1979; Xu 1969) of this move suggests Xunzi's retreat from virtuous-*yi* towards *gong-yi* semantically damages the intrinsic morality of Confucian *yi* since publicly spiritedness practices may not be necessarily moral. Arguably, if *gong-yi* pertained only to formal politeness and obeying laws, it does not capture *yi*'s deeper commitment to virtues and values. My main disagreement with this critique is that this conflates *yi's* intrinsic moral necessity with *yi* as the necessary conditions of morality. Instead, it is useful to understand *gong-yi* as a morally necessary condition of other virtues. Chenyang Li (2011) explains this problem and gives us the framework of this dilemma. Li argues that the "aversion to disorder, motivated sage kings to set up rules in order to prevent chaos." (61). This motivation does not itself constitute morality, but the establishment of rituals makes people morally good by instilling orderly behaviour. Li contends that *yi* is not functional before rituals and that *yi* is actualized through rituals. Li's argument illuminates a crucial connection between the conditions of morality and *yi*'s ritual-institutional activation but remains incomplete. How does *yi* activate and create social order? My interpretation of *gong-yi* may show that *yi* is activated through moral obligation and order is created when *yi* is directed to *gong*—institutionalized rules stop conflicts between private interests and *yi* leverages a psychological sense of obligation to compel people to act in publicly spirited ways. Specifically, *yi*-duties are institutionally activated when assigned to divided (*fen*) social roles (Harris 2016), ensuring fluid normative exchanges between bodies and creating reciprocal mutual dependences.[41] This institutional reality creates fertile conditions for moral transformation. Unlike the classical virtue ethical paradigm, which asserts that political institutions thrive on the virtue of their participants, Xunzi recognized that an orderly public life enables virtuous pursuits—resonating with post-Enlightenment public institutionalism.

Another profitable reading of Xunzi's *gong-yi* is to understand that it situates halfway between Kong-Meng Confucian virtue ethics and Legalist, Mohist state utilitarianism. Xunzi pursues a dual-track approach: rulers should cultivate *yi* in the common people but if *yi*'s normative reciprocity fails, rulers should fall back on laws to preserve the public. In two sayings: "the law defeats the private" and "act according to the law, keep one's will firm and do not let private desires twist what you hear, this is an upright person",[42] Xunzi makes clear that moral transformation, although desirable, cannot be entrusted to a person's autonomous motivations alone.[43] Thus, Xunzi ranked *gong* above moral autonomy and protected the *collective body* with legal measures if *yi* failed. Here, we may see how

overcoming private selfishness straddles Xunzi's ethical and political goals. He insists that a *junzi* is both morally cultivated and law-conforming: "*junzi* does not become lazy when at ease, because he is heedful of good order…He is neither excessively harsh when angry nor excessively indulgent when happy, because his adherence to *fa* 法 (laws, regulations, norms) overcomes any private concerns *si*."[44] (Hutton 2014, p. 15, modified)

Finally, I wish to place Xunzi's argument within the historical context and show it is a reasonable response against the perceived destructiveness of private-*yi*. We should note that the widespread rejection of Mengzi's "family politics" coincided with the collapse of the historical system of Zhou feudalism. Thinkers of the Warring States period observed that many rulers were nowhere near being true kings and had no virtues. Recognizing this, Xunzi may have thought past Confucian virtue-*yi* was too unreliable. Private wills were prone to selfishness and normative reciprocity became unstable when private interests were hostile to one another. Xunzi may have concluded that consistent orderly public behaviour is better compelled through the unfilled duty, normative reciprocity built on shame and guilt, with the force of *gong*—a public body. Hostility to *si* undoubtedly marks a distancing from the older Confucian tradition of treating familial obligations as a part of a special "closely-knit small unit" and personal virtues as the main source of good behaviour. Rather than privileging family over others, *gong* also implies treating community members impartially or indifferently as a part of a collective (Li 2023). I close this section with an example of public works recorded in the agricultural chapters of the *Spring Autumn Annals* (上農) to explain how *gong-yi* benefits the state and an increasing mistrust of the private. The *Annals* writes that ancient sage-kings understood cooperative agricultural work is essential for profiting from the land. Further, through cooperation, there would be fewer *siyi* 私義—private *yi*, and thus public regulations *gong-fa* (公法) can be easily established.[45] In this vein, the Legalist explicit rejections of private *yi* can be understood as a forceful repudiation of all private, family-based duties.[46] The Legalist text *Shangjunshu* 商君書 blames political chaos on private *yi*. Han Feizi reiterates that acting on private *yi* causes chaos, and acting on gong-*yi* creates order. Legalism is a frontal challenge to Kong-Meng-type private family special obligations in that it deems private obligations dangerous as it inevitably leads to conflict between opposing private spheres. In the West, Hobbes (1640) has precisely the same concern, and thought diverse private definitions of "justice" would inevitably lead to conflict. Legalism and Hobbes, therefore, subsumes all private obligations under a single public body without consideration of moral autonomy. Xunzi's compromise on *gong-yi* stood between the two extremes of Kong-Meng Confucianism and Qin Legalism.

I hope my arguments here offer a substantial framing of Xunzi's assertion: "從義不從父" follow *yi* and not your father.[47] The assertion may indeed suggest that Xunzi prioritized the public *yi* of community service above the private *yi* duties to parents and kinship ties. *Gong* needs to be protected from competing private families and the "public" is a moral entity worthy of greater obligations than families. Deeply resonating with social contract theories, *yi*-duty's normative reciprocity prevents chaos, benefits the public and must be upheld through institutions. However, it would be a mistake to think Xunzi has given up on the maximal Confucian goal of moral flourishing. Instead, *gong-yi* is also the cultivation of impartiality towards others, a re-orientated internal attitude that motivates actions towards the benefit of all. From this, it is fair to say that Xunzi's *gong-yi* represents a significant early Confucian attempt at public philosophy.

5. Conclusions

The main aim of this paper is to show the critical differences in pre-Qin Confucian *yi* to space apart its Kong-Meng meaning from its development by Xunzi: Kong-Meng

yi is a cultivated inner virtue and Xunzi's *yi* extends to a normative obligation *qua* duty. In sections one and two, I contend that *yi* has clearly defined political and institutional dimensions and explored its implications. In section three, I join my interpretation of Xunzi's *yi* with the pervasive interest in *gong* within the Warring States discourse to show that a nascent concept of a "public" existed—serviced by individual *yi*-duties. With these arguments, I hope that the discernable existence of institutionalized *gong-yi* as a public duty is a defensible central thesis.

In the contemporary world, public philosophy is an increasingly salient topic. Xunzi's theoretical framework helps us understand that living a good public life involves both moral character and institutional regulation. Moving beyond Kong-Meng virtue ethics, Xunzi highlights that overly privileging private duties and familial obligations may conflict with the public interest. Confucian *yi* is not abandoned, but preserved and nurtured through public activities. Challenging state utilitarianism, Xunzi defends virtuous moral autonomy as crucial to the good life (Harris 2013). The arguments here resonate deeply with today's problems of public institutional decay in the world's democracies. Xunzi underscores the importance of institutional arrangements in civic duties. They protect the integrity of a public sphere from malignant or excessive private interests. Furthermore, *yi*-duties are not perfunctory and involve genuine moral transformation. Thus, the public sphere should not be sterile; an individual's moral autonomy needs to be protected for the public to be a place for human flourishing.

Confucian public philosophy (儒家公共思想) has garnered significant interest in Mainstream Chinese literature in recent decades and I have hopefully presented a substantive argument supporting this philosophy. The claim that ancient China had a robust conception of the public (Liu and Zhang 2003) may be further reinforced by this interpretation of Xunzi's seminal Confucian contributions to the Warring States discourse.[48] Limited by the scope of my central thesis, I could not fully connect the political *gong-yi* to Xunzi's ethical project, offering only a partial explanation in section three. Nevertheless, the central thesis of this paper identifies an institutional-structural layer to Xunzi's well-known theory of moral transformation that has so far eluded contemporary discussions of *yi*. Scholars (Dongfang 2011; Feng 1931; Sung 2015) addressing the origin of goodness often attribute the beginning of moral transformation to self-interested, utilitarian considerations, such as how living in a community (*qun*) offers individuals a better chance at survival. However, if *yi* is understood as a normative obligation, this utilitarian argument hides a more complicated picture. Xunzi understood that natural self-interested considerations and psychological impulses were both immutable. Therefore, moving towards ethical civility involves institutionally directing self-interested desires and shaping unfilled, obligatory psychological impulses.

In my opinion, Xunzi's institutional theories represent a remarkable pre-Qin philosophical innovation. Perhaps more attention could be paid to institutional *yi* as many interesting questions remain. Is *yi* a reliable source of public duty? What are the harms and benefits of enforcing civic duties through shame and guilt? Could Xunzi be mistaken in waging on the public-spirited psychological quality of *yi* and would *yi* instead be more easily filled with harmful, anti-social duties, such as "obligations" to members of gangs?[49] Although my thesis may problematize current interpretations, I hope it generates further discussions on the institutional dimensions of early Confucianism.

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Notes

1 *Gong-yi* may remind us of the modern Chinese usages of public duty *gongong-yiwu*公共義務. Despite appearing similar, the two terms may not have etymological or semantic connections. Here, we must be careful not to jump to conclusions based on the two's similarities otherwise we may fall into the trap of attributing them as false cognates—words that appear similar but are unrelated in meaning and etymology. The modern Chinese "public duty—*gongong-yiwu*" can be traced to the May Fourth New Cultural Movement in the 20th century. This is when the Western concepts of "public" and "duty" were imported into China and adapted through calquing (loan translation). To better grasp the philosophical meaning of Xunzi's *gong-yi*, and appreciate it within the ancient context, we should distinguish it from modern Chinese *gonggong-yiwu*. Thus, the "public duty" and "public obligation" used to describe *gong-yi* should be understood as a decontextualized abstraction from existing contemporary cultural associations. This paper does not attempt to reveal any explicit connections from this reading with the modern Chinese term *gonggong-yiwu*.

2 Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) define institutionalization as the process where social practices become habitual routines. Berger and Luckmann maintain that these habituated actions retain meaningfulness for individuals, but the change is that the meaning becomes embedded in routines and "a general stock of knowledge". In philosophy, John Searle (1995) also contended that institutionalization represents a social reality that explains collective actions through constitutive rules. The modern definitions capture the two-ended *yi*-duty as an individually meaningful virtue and an externalized duty embedded in social routines, governed by rules.

3 The full passage of this phrase is "入孝出弟，人之小行也。上順下篤，人之中行也；從道不從君，從義不從父，人之大行也。" (*Xunzi* 29.1). Xunzi thinks that filial duties are important, but in comparison, *dao* and *yi* is more important.

4 According to Sima Qian's 史記：太史公 *Shiji:Taishigong*, state power became a matter of survival in late Spring-Autumn, where each dukedom and kingdom had to fend for itself. This marked centralization of authority was a precursor to the Warring States reforms that saw greater expansion of public institutional power (Liu 2003). The latter period is what historians have called "the ruler-centred state" (Lewis 1999), with reforms including limitations on hereditary office, official salaries, and county-official system. This gave rise to a new class of *shi* that profoundly changed Classical China's political landscape. This is the background to Xunzi's institutionalism in that it replaces hereditary aristocracy with an educated bureaucracy.

5 For all Confucians, *yi* is: 1. Relational duties, and obligations; 2. Justness, rightness. For both Xunzi and Mengzi, it is the trait that distinguishes humans from animals because it specifically refers to the capacity for humans to function within our social arrangements (Tan 2005) and can be distinguished from *ren* humaneness as a personal trait or characteristic (Lau 1979).

6 As Donald Munro (1969) explained, Chinese ethics uses emotions rather than being opposed to them.

7 *Mengzi* 1A1.

8 John Knoblock explains *Wangba* within the historical context of the Warring States when the quality of stateman varied greatly. The ideal leaders were those like the ancient Kings like Tang and Wu, but Kongzi's exceptional performance in political stewardship was also included.

9 Incidentally, Aristotle thought justice was the most important virtue for a city because fairness and even-handedness in governance ensure all are given their due. The Hobbesian institutionalization of state "justice" under the "sovereign" marks the most radical challenge to Classical theories in that Hobbes believes the term needs to be strictly defined and rigidly regulated by the "sovereign" to avoid conflict and confusion. For Hobbes, justice is an artificial virtue merely necessary for an orderly society and a product of the social contract. Xunzi proposes a far less radical move on *yi* but its institutionalization "demystifies" the virtue in a similar sense by anchoring it to state institutions.

10 In *Fuguo* (*Xunzi* 10.1), Xunzi claims that desires are many and resources are few: "欲多而物寡". For Dongfang (2023), this proposition is an admittance of the chaotic state of "nature" in positing conflict is inevitable if resources cannot satisfy everyone's desires. This reminds us that Xunzi deeply resonates with Hobbesian natural law and the deep mistrust of humans. Given the natural scarcity of resources and the insatiable nature of human desires, without artificial constraints, both Xunzi and Hobbes agree that conflict and chaos are inevitable.

11 Rituals (禮*li*) here is used in a general sense to refer to the social norms that govern social behaviour according to hierarchy and status. According to Xunzi, this social institution distributes resources because it introduces an ordinal way for each to receive their due and avoids the all-versus-all competition for limited resources. Explaining this in *Fuguo*, Xunzi (*Xunzi* 10.1–10.2) claims that competition leads to poverty and rituals portions resources (*jie* 節) according to rank and status, noble and petty (*gui-jian* 貴賤). Xunzi elaborates further in *Lilun* (Xunzi 19.1 and 19.3) that rituals avoid conflict by satisfying desires in an orderly manner. He affirms that these desires are immutable, therefore the only solution to the conflict is social institutions. Rituals and *yi* 禮義

appear together roughly over half of the total times *yi* is mentioned 115 out of 315 times and warrant lengthy discussion that will be beyond the scope of the argument here.

12 Writing *Dalüe* Xunzi (27.21) tells us that *yi* is treating people according to their social rank and status. But this is far from a satisfying answer because it just pushes the functional question further down and raises the question: how does hierarchy produce orderliness and morality? However, it is indeed useful that this statement tells us that Xunzi's *yi* must also be sensitive to hierarchy, and thus social-political leveraging.

13 Note here that the modern distinction between guilt and shame does not hold in the Classical writings of Aristotle or Xunzi. In the modern socio-psychological nomenclature, guilt is the inner emotion, and shame is concerned with the opinions of the community. But in both Aristotle and Xunzi, shame has been associated with both inner reflection and community opinion (Zhao 2024, p. 106). Thus, it is not useful to understand shame in this context as external, community-driven.

14 In Confucianism, *yi* is often placed along ren 仁 as core virtues. D. C. Lau (1979) writes that *ren* is a virtue of character, *yi* is the virtue of acts and "its application to agents is derivative", supporting my view from a broader perspective.

15 Another way Mengzi uses *yi* in the term 義憤填膺 *yi* righteous indignant (although *yi* does not always induce rage) also captures this sentiment of *yi* being some internal sentiment that bursts out into action.

16 Kongzi's view on *li** is slightly more nuanced than Mengzi's. *Analects 4:16*: 君子喻與義，小人喻與利。Stating that a *junzi* knows the *yi* and the petty person knows *li**, placing the two in opposition. At the same time, *Analects 20:2*: 因民之所利而利之，斯不亦惠而不費乎。Saying that a person in authority can benefit the people, a view closer to Xunzi. Overall, I placed Kongzi here together with Mengzi to demonstrate Kong's deep commitment to virtues in contrast to Xunzi.

17 Leo Strauss famously contends that Hobbes's political focus on self-preservation at the foundations of political legitimacy incepted the modern, liberal discourse of rights versus duties and spawned the powerful legal institutions that enabled our orderly societies today. As Western "legal rights" are not even a concept in Classical China, it does not come close to Xunzi's public duty and I will not pursue this comparison.

18 Hobbes (1640) reconstructs the Medieval natural law theory and posits in *Leviathan* that natural law is derived from reasons based upon the basic instinct of self-preservation. Xunzi shares the sentiment that people are naturally chaotic and that people cannot be allowed to pursue their own goals. In contrast to Hobbes, the general rule that rescues humans from chaos is not derived from reason as such. Instead, morality is cultivated by transforming the heart-mind (心 *xin*) to seek the right types of desires (*Xunzi* 22: 14, *Xunzi* 1.18). Herein lies a major difference between Xunzi and social contract theorists in that Xunzi posits morality qua civility whereas Western contract theories posit civility as rational-legal constraints.

19 "今以夫先王之道，仁義之統，以相群居，以相持養。" (*Xunzi* 4:10), "故人生不能無群，群而無分則爭，爭則亂，亂則離，離則弱，弱則不能勝物。" (*Xunzi* 9.20)

20 It is sometimes hard to distinguish how they are different. Defoort mentions that emotive and descriptive definitions of *li** 利 are that: 1. Used to mean selfishness and profitability that is bad for aristocrats to discuss; 2. To describe how to derive benefits.

21 This change is partly traced to a debate between the idea that *li** diminishes when shared and *li** is enhanced when shared, captured in the saying "以義生利, 利以豐民。" (Guoyu, Jinyu 國語·晉語一) An important contribution also came from the text Guanzi (管子), where it was argued that sharing *li** enhances its benefits, a text that Xunzi was likely influenced by (Sato 2003).

22 There is some controversy over the translation of the phrase 志愛公利 *zhi-ai-gong-li*, literal translation: will to-love-public-profit in *Fu* (*Xunzi* 26.11). T. Wang's (2005) compilation of past annotations contrasts Zhu Xi's (Song Dynasty) reading, which suggests taking this as a criticism meaning "profit from public office" with Yang Liang's (Tang Dynasty) interpretation to mean "use public office to benefit the people". Eric Hutton (2014, p. 514) provides a good summary of the problem, as the confusion arises from the format of the poem where it juxtaposes a line of "good deeds" with the next line's "bad deeds". I will not delve into the literary side of this interpretation, but I find Yang Liang's reading more convincing as it is too much of a stretch to extend *ai* in this phrase to mean "My will (*zhi*) love (*ai*) profit so much, I am willing to exploit others". Suppose Yang Liang is right, we could further say that profiting is permissible if it benefits the common people.

23 Defoort identifies three levels of public profiting in Xunzi's writings ranked in three levels of desirability: 1st—"One who benefits them and does not benefit from them, who cares for them but does not use them, will get the realm. 利而不利也, 愛而不用也者, 天下矣。"; 2nd—"One who benefits from them only after benefiting them, who uses them only after caring for them, will protect the altars of soil and grain. 利而後利之, 愛而後用之者, 保社稷矣。"; 3rd—"One who benefits from them while not benefiting them, who uses them while not caring for them, will endanger his state (and family). 不利而利之, 不愛而用之者, 危國家也。" (Defoort 178). Quotations taken from *Fuguo* (*Xunzi* 10). Furthermore, Xunzi accepts that a *junzi* can cautiously seek *li**利: "In seeking profit, the gentleman acts with restraint."

24 "先義而後利者榮，先利而後義者辱。" (*Xunzi* 4.7).

25 The Chinese concept of affection and care should not be confused with the Christian notion of agape love or romantic love. On this topic, Chengyang Li (2023, p. 63) writes that Confucian care encompasses a broad range of sentiments such as the impulse to care for another and affection towards another.

[26] Xunzi's refutations of Songzi and Mozi clearly show his understanding of desires *yu* as an immutable force. He argues that Songzi is mistaken to believe people have little desires (*Xunzi* 18. 40–43). He further refutes Mozi's frugal state and rejects the idea that people would be satisfied with basic life-sustaining food and water. For Xunzi, rituals and social institutions such as music and rituals are not extravagant wastes because without them life would be needlessly bitter (*Xunzi* 10.10). Xunzi raises a thought experiment against Mozi and Songzi's position, even if people are living minimally as Mozi wishes, would there truly be no competition? (*Xunzi* 18.43) Taken together, Xunzi has a coherent position on human desires: it is a powerful and numerous force that must be accommodated.

[27] Again, returning to Mengzi's argument in *Mengzi* 1A1, he treats the very idea of *li** pejoratively. A brute comparison with Mengzi will show that he mentions profit *li** 利 much more: 201 times as opposed to 39. This is a very coarse comparison as the character sometimes can mean "sharp" and "harsh" and not just "profit", but we do get the sense that the difference in total times mentioned is quite large.

[28] This contrasts with Hobbes, who thinks sacrificing one's life is not a public duty. This further complicates our comparison, but usefully shows the extent of Xunzi's moral obligation extending beyond Hobbesian right-to-preservation. There are some senses in which Locke's *moral obligation* argument is similar, but this is still not normative reciprocity. Locke carefully registers this exchange, taking the familiar Liberal line which is that duties should be matched to protected fundamental rights and held that the requirements of obeying the civil government under a social contract are conditioned on the protection of natural rights.

[29] The potential of care ethics being compatible with Confucianism was first raised by Chenyang Li (1994). In Confucianism this ideal political state is called the 'Great Community', while in care ethics it has been called the 'Caring State'."

[30] Hobbes writes: "A person, is he, whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of another man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed." Xunzi does not fully align with Hobbes' idea that private individuals are subsumed under a collective body. This body has a will and requires service from these individuals in a way not dissimilar to this covenant. But I think the similarities end here, and risks becoming too superficial if extended further.

[31] Yan Hui was asked by Confucius to reflect on his private life *si* (*Analects* 2.9) and Mengzi uses *si* to refer to private affairs without prejudice (*Mengzi* 3A3).

[32] The public fields are likely referring to the well-field system井田制. Each family would own their private land and a central field in the middle would be collectively operated by families of the surrounding fields as a form of physical labour tax.

[33] The other instances are in *Rongru*, Xunzi claims that *lou* 陋 "boorishness" is of public threat. In *Jiebi* he claims that fixating on this is a common problem.

[34] Indeed, Yang Liang annotates Xunzi's use of *gong-yi* with Mozi's line on how to select capable ministers 舉公義 辟私怨, "uplift public-*yi*, punish private grudges". For Mozi, we just need to know that he thought that people should love each other equally. He calls this *jian-ai*兼愛. Mozi does think *yi* and *li** 利 are opposites, stating that public dutifulness will bring about mutual benefit *jiaoxiang-li** 交相利 (Liu 2023). This was far from Xunzi's position so I will not delve into this topic any further.

[35] "推禮義之統，分是非之分，總天下之要，治海內之眾，若使一人。" *Xunzi* (3.10), which Hutton (2014, p. 21) interprets as the influence of rituals and *yi* allowing the mass (*zhong* 衆) to be ordered: "as though employing one person". Knoblock also explains this passage in this vein but (171) pains to trace the idea of a gentleman/ruler's (*junzi*君子) capacity for such a move to the belief that virtues and genuine nature (*cheng* 誠) move people by moral exemplification. T. Wang (2005) summarized the Sinophone annotations and suggested that a *junzi* uses succinct (*yue* 約) moral principles to achieve the grand effect of the employment of a mass. Core ideas of these interpretations centre on the collective unity and the ability of this body to act in unison.

[36] *Xunzi* 2.12.

[37] "政令以定，風俗以一，有離俗不順其上，則百姓莫不敦惡，莫不毒孽，若祓不祥；然後刑於是起矣。是大刑之所加也，辱孰大焉！將以為利邪？則大刑加焉，身苟不狂惑戇陋，誰睹是而不改也哉。" (*Xunzi* 15.25)

[38] See note 37, Xunzi's *Yibing* argues that *yi* is the primary motivator for fighters because of the shame of failure.

[39] See note 33, *Xunzi* 3.10.

[40] I agree that there is a significant distance between Xunzi and Han Feizi. My minor contention with Erik L. Harris's (2013, pp. 105–9) assessment is his claim that Xunzi represents a defence of virtue politics in believing rulers could become virtuous. In my view, Xunzi accepts this only as a remote possibility and holds moral standards as an aspirational goal rather than an immediately actionable possibility. In *Wangba*, he is sanguine about the dire state of governance. Although he thinks virtues are the ultimate solution, Xunzi seems to me as saying that virtues alone are necessary but not sufficient. This is also why I think the institutional elements of Xunzi's moral argument ought to receive attention.

[41] Harris (2016, p. 111) argues that *fen* is the descriptive allotment of roles and the success of this allotment depends on *yi* as the types of conduct that expresses a person's character. I am very sympathetic to this argument and agree that *yi* is conduct-based. I may further my explanation may show that *fen*-allotments are roles by which *yi*-duties are assigned. In the same way, the division of labour creates productivity and mutual dependence, the allotment and assignment of roles and duties allow people to be normatively dependent. We need our teachers, parents, children, and students to perform their *yi*-duties so that schools

and families can function. On the scale of the *gong*-public, we could further speculate that Xunzi may have thought public duties helped similarly state productivity and normative reciprocity.

[42] "法勝私" *Xunzi* 2.12, "行法至堅，不以私欲亂所聞 如是，則可謂勁士矣。" (*Xunzi* 8.11) See also note 36.

[43] The willingness to use the law against a private impulse suggests that Xunzi's *gong* resembles Rousseau's view of the "legislator". However, Xunzi does not base his arguments on natural freedoms nor attempt to ground *gong* legal coercion through anything like being "forced to be free"; frankly admitting the public needs to be protected from private duties.

[44] Yang Liang's annotation also supports this reading: 以公滅私, 故賞罰得中也, "using the public to eliminate the private, reward and punish fairly".

[45] 吕氏春秋·上农: "古先圣王之所以导其民者，先务于农。民农非徒为地利也，贵其志也。民农则朴，朴则易用，易用则边境安，主位尊。民农则重，重则少私义，少私义则公法立，力专一。民农则其产复，其产复则重徙，重徙则死处而无二虑。"

[46] 商君書: "國亂者，民多私義". 韓非子: "私義行則亂，公義行則治。"

[47] For how Xunzi's view of filial relationships progressed, we may refer to Li's (2023, pp. 108–9) chapter on "Filial Care" in *Reshaping Confucianism.*

[48] Although I would caution against excessively drawing on historical concepts to explain phenomena in modern Chinese public spheres, as they may not be related. See note 1.

[49] It is perhaps telling that many organized crimes and underground societies use *yi-qi* (義氣) to label the sense of duty owed to one another in their collective anti-social behaviour. In colloquial Chinese, this is sometimes called 江湖義氣 (brotherhood *yi*, underworld *yi*).

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