**Confucianism, Curiosity, and Moral Self-Cultivation**

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I propose that Confucianism incorporates a latent commitment to the closely related epistemic virtues of curiosity and inquisitiveness. Confucian praise of certain people, practices, and dispositions is only fully intelligible if these are seen as exercises and expressions of epistemic virtues, of which curiosity and inquisitiveness are the obvious candidates. My strategy is to take two core components of Confucian ethical and educational practice and argue that each presupposes a specific virtue. To have and to express a ‘love of learning’ requires the virtue of curiosity, while the normative practice of good questioning requires exercise of the virtue of inquisitiveness. Taken together, people engaging in the foundational Confucian project of moral self-cultivation must desire and acquire a range of epistemic goods, a set of dispositions that manifest in the virtues of curiosity and inquisitiveness, possession of which is admirable and excellent. Such, at least, is the claim defend in this chapter, which is an exercise in cross-cultural virtue epistemology.

**Confucianism and curiosity**

Confucianism is the most enduring philosophical tradition in China, tracing its roots well beyond the lifetime of its titular founder, Confucius (551-479 BCE). Its abiding ambition is the promotion of moral self-cultivation, a lifelong process that requires a deep understanding of a whole complex of moral and social concepts, norms, and practices. Success in this project is marked by one’s development into a *jūnzǐ*, a consummate, morally excellent person, described in *Analects* – the main Confucian text, a complex collection of remarks, anecdotes, and observations, focused on the Master and his disciples.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Understandably, moral self-cultivation requires extensive learning and study. The Confucian syllabus is broad, including Six Arts (*liu yi*), like poetry, archery and calligraphy, and the Six Classics (*liu jing*), the classical writings on rites, music, and history. Despite the Master’s focus on the classics, learning encompasses all of these practical, social, and academic subjects, each of which teach moral lessons – poetry and eloquence, say, or calligraphy and gracefulness. Underlying learning is the ‘practice of emulating and internalizing [the] ideal models of behavior and speech exemplified in these works’ (Slingerland 2006:239). The first stage of moral self-cultivation, explains Confucius, is to ‘set [one’s] mind upon learning’, initiating a systematic study of ‘rites’, dance, poetry, music, practical skills, exemplary figures from history, and more besides (2.4). Through such learning, a person could become ‘free of major faults’, cultivating virtues (*de*) and mastering a rich range of competences, marking them out as a truly consummate person (7.17).

The centrality of learning to this fundamental moral project encourages the thought that curiosity might figure centrally on Confucian tables of the virtues.[[2]](#endnote-2) The Chinese term *de*, though often rendered as ‘virtue’, has a broader sense of a ‘power’ or ‘charisma’, a capacity to create certain effects in others. Curiosity, for instance, might both express an appetite for epistemic goods and elicit that same appetite in others – a power or capacity valued in teacher. An active curiosity can drive a desire for learning, while learning reciprocally nurtures curiosity. It comes as a surprise, then, to find it absent from the virtues listed in the *Analects*. Curiosity does not feature among the ‘six virtues’, nor are its deficiencies and excesses, like incuriousness and prurience, among the ‘six vices’ (17.8). When disciples enquire about the virtues, Confucius never cites curiosity, nor indeed any other typical epistemic virtues: instead, he discusses such stalwart ethical and civic virtues as benevolence (*hui*), courage (*yong*), and filial piety (*xiao*). Nor is curiosity listed in an early educational tome, the *Xueji*, as a quality to be cultivated by students and exemplified by teachers.[[3]](#endnote-3) Given this, it may seem unpromising to consider the place of the virtue of curiosity in Confucianism.

Such pessimism is too quick, however, since the absence of specific citations of curiosity should not be taken as a sign that it is absent from Confucianism. For a start, Confucius avoided definitive listings of the range of virtues constitutive of the cultivated, ‘consummate’ person. Although certain virtues, like truthfulness, reliably recur, others are mentioned in response to the needs of Confucius’ particular interlocutors: the six virtues and vices, mentioned earlier, are listed in the context of a direct personal teaching to a certain disciple, which also makes clear the centrality of a love of – or ‘appetite for’ – learning (*haoxue*) to moral self-cultivation:

The Master said, “Zilu! Have you heard about the six [virtuous] words and their six corresponding vices?”

Zilu replied, “I have not.”

“Sit! I will tell you about them. Loving Goodness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of foolishness. Loving wisdom without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of deviance. Loving trustworthiness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of harmful rigidity. Loving uprightness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of intolerance. Loving courage without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of unruliness. Loving resoluteness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of willfulness.” (17.8)

The love of learning – a desire for knowledge of ‘rites’, the Arts, and Classics – here emerges as a check against the degeneration of virtues into vice, including those to which an overzealous student, like Zilu, is most vulnerable.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Second, though curiosity is not cited explicitly, it is surely implicit in many of the character traits admired by the early Confucians, not least the Master himself. Most obvious is the love of learning, a quality admired alongside crucial Confucian virtues like loyalty and trustworthiness (5.28, 8.13). Confucius credits himself with an unmatched love of learning and laments its absence in other people, who fail to give time and energy to ‘learning the cultural arts’ (1.6). Yan Hui – the most capable of all the disciples – was celebrated for the depth and intensity of his appetite for morally relevant epistemic goods (6.3, 11.3, 11.17).

Although curiosity is not named, the trait being admired in those with a love of learning is something very close to it. One way to show this is to consider Roberts and Wood’s (2007: ch.6) account of a virtue they call ‘love of learning’. Like curiosity, it is an ‘appetitive orientation’, a disposition to ‘thirst for and enjoy’ epistemic goods that are *significant*, *relevant*, and *worthwhile*. I suggest that what Roberts and Wood refer to is virtuous curiosity coupled to a rich conception of the good. In the Confucian case, this conception is the ideal of consummate excellence, one that stipulates what is significant, relevant, and worthy—study of the Classics, say. That is why the ‘ideal student’, as depicted in the *Analects*, is ‘possessed by an inchoate need for what learning is able to provide and a passion for acquiring it’ (Slingerland 2006:242). Such a student has a desire for the epistemic goods that are integral to their guiding project of moral self-cultivation. This set of goods only acquirable if one has a strong, stable desire for them, given the difficulties involving in acquiring and internalizing them. Indeed, the vices associated with the love of learning described in 17.8 manifest in failures that are as much ethical and practical as they are epistemic, such as ‘foolishness’ and ‘rigidity’.

A third, related reason to resist pessimism about curiosity in Confucianism lies in its incorporation of systematic practices of questioning. Over one hundred and thirty of the *Analects*’chapters take the form of questions, whether rhetorical, ironic, probing, reproachful, sarcastic, or ambiguous. Although Confucius initiates many of these questions, he is himself regularly questioned, often critically, by his disciples, in ways that aim to balance respect, deference, and authority (see Elstein 2009). Typically, however, interest focuses on the Master’s responses to questions, given his status as an exemplary moral teacher: the ultimate object of Confucian teaching is, after all, moral self-cultivation, a point clear in the patterns to the sorts of questions that are praised and criticized. Certain styles and topics of questions are praised as ‘noble’ or ‘incisive’, for instance, when a disciple remarks that wisdom involves ‘asking questions about abilities that one does not possess’ (3.4, 19.6, 8.5).

An emerging theme over the last few paragraphs is a connection between love of learning and learning, training, and questioning. A good student has a desire for certain types of epistemic goods, but must also be trained to desire the right sort of goods. Consider, as an illustration, Confucius’ refusal to talk – or, presumably, answer questions – about prodigies, feats of strength, and other issues irrelevant to moral self-cultivation (7.21). A desire to learn about *these* topics is not expressive of love of learning, since an appetite for knowledge about these is proscribed. An aim of Confucius’ teaching was to train students to have a love of and appetite for the right sorts of epistemic goods, and how to express that desire in the right ways, not least by engaging in effective practices of questioning. In the terms of contemporary virtue epistemology, a distinction emerges between two epistemic virtues—*curiosity* and *inquisitiveness* (see Watson 2018). I aim to show that this distinction is operative in Confucianism.

The centrality of the love of learning and practices of good questioning to Confucian moral self-cultivation give us good reasons to ask whether that tradition is committed implicitly to the virtues of curiosity and inquisitiveness. Certainly scholars affirm the virtue-ethical character of Confucianism, appealing to its focus on the cultivation of virtue, moral practice and education, and exemplars of lives that are ‘consummate’ (see Angle and Slote 2013 and Olberding 2013). But epistemic virtue is not a prominent theme in Confucianism scholarship, although it does appear. Xunzi, an early Confucian, esteems a virtue that Stephen Angle (2009:14) calls ‘epistemic creativity’ – based on a reading of *The Book of* *Xunzi* 19 and 21 – and there is a small, growing literature on Confucianism and virtue epistemology.[[5]](#endnote-5) I do not want to claim that the ancient Chinese tradition distinguished ethical and epistemic virtues, as many Western virtue theorists do. Although there is a range of virtues, many with a strongly epistemic dimension, all are ultimately directed towards the fundamentally moral project of becoming a self-cultivated, ‘consummate’ person.

**Love of learning**

A guiding theme of *Analects* is the importance of a love of learning to the attainment of a consummate life, since its opens with a rhetorical question—‘To learn and then have occasion to practice what you have learned—is this not satisfying?’ (1.1). In this remark, Confucius makes clear that ‘learning’ is not confined to academic study of an intellectual sort, like knowledge of history and literature, nor even to more obviously ‘practical’ skills like archery and chariot-riding.

Indeed, the Master warns his disciples that ‘acquiring knowledge’ is not sufficient for genuine learning, since to be ‘unschooled’ (*weixue*) is to fail to improve oneself through study (1.7). Study and learning require not only raw knowledge of ritual, arts, and the classics, but the application of these to refinement of one’s character. Confucius chides his disciples for not studying the *Book of Odes*, since they offer not only lovely poetry, but ‘a source of inspiration and a basis for evaluation’ in moral, civic, and personal affairs (17.9). A mastery of ritually correct behavior (*li*), emulation of exemplary persons (*jūnzǐ*), and cultivation of virtues (*de*) should be aimed at, driven by, a desire for goodness (*ren*).A person who genuinely loves learning aims not to acquire knowledge, for its own sake, but rather to employ it to improve their character. The process of learning is completed in the attainment of consummate conduct, the transformation of one’s life.

The Confucian love of learning is an appetite for the complex set of morally transformative epistemic goods. It is accompanied by a deep disdain for people who fail to put into practice what they learn or who settle for the satisfaction of a facile curiosity about the world (1.1, 1.4). Confucius repeatedly criticizes a trait, *ning*, often translated as ‘superficiality’, ‘glibness’, and other vices that mark a failure to improve one’s conduct by taking seriously, by acting on, the fruits of learning (2.13, 4.22, 5.5).

Similarly, two of the main ‘faults’ students can evince described in the *Xueji* are ‘failing to practice what one has learned’ (*xuezhibujiang*) and ‘failing to cultivate virtue’ (*dezhibuxiu*), each marking a culpable failure to apply one’s learning to self-improvement (Chen Lai 2016:85). Genuinely to love learning is to be committed not only to acquiring epistemic goods – such as knowledge of tradition or the ‘rites’ – but to consistently apply them to the improvement of one’s character. Two things need to be distinguished here. First, that being committed to *applying* what one learns is part of a genuine love of learning. Second, that such commitment is necessary for the love of learning to be a good thing, a virtue. *Learning* therefore includes both the acquisition of the relevant epistemic goods and their application to self-cultivation. It is this deeper desire, explains Zixia – notably one of the most insightful, scholarly disciples – that makes a person ‘worthy of being called “learned” (*xue*)’ (1.7).

I suggest that the Confucian conception of a love of learning, as characterized in these remarks, can be understood in terms of the virtue of curiosity. After all, 'love of learning’ is not a bad gloss of the conceptual core of that virtue, reflecting how we think and talk about curious people. Moreover, Confucians think and talk about love of learning as a character trait, whose cultivation and exercise is praiseworthy, and it plays the same motivational roles attributed to it by virtue epistemologists. Curiosity is ‘essential to a successful pursuit of the truth’ (Baehr 2011:19), since it acts as the ‘mainspring of motivation’ (Miscevic 2007:256) and is a ‘desire’, blending thought and feeling, for epistemic goods (Zagzebski 1996:134f). Curiosity, as a virtue of the mind, manifests itself as an affectively charged desire to acquire epistemic goods, motivating a person to engage in activities that might enable them to do so.

To class as virtuous, however, that desire cannot consist of an indiscriminate desire for all or any epistemic goods. Curiosity must be directed and disciplined, lest it degenerate into one of its many associated vices. First, a person could act to reacquire epistemic goods that they already possess, endlessly chewing on truths or knowledge already in hand, rather than seeking out newer, perhaps more difficult ones that might be of value to them—the vice of *indolence*. Second, a person could seek epistemic goods that lack salience or significance, relative to some articulated set of interests and concerns—a sort of *indiscriminate curiosity*. Third, a person could desire epistemic goods that are inappropriate that leads them to act in intrusive or insensitive ways—the vice of *prurience*. Fourth, a person could simply lack any desire for epistemic goods, beyond those minimally required for the basics of living—the vice of *incuriousness*. .

A fifth vice of curiosity, of particular concern to Confucians, is what we might call *counterfeit curiosity*, feigning or faking a desire for epistemic goods as a means of gaining social capital. Since Confucians prized learning as a way of gaining social status and advancement, the temptation to *appear* to love learning – being curious about the cultural arts (*wen*), say – must have been particularly acute. A person who loves learning, explains Confucius, is not motivated ‘by the desire for a fully belly or a comfortable abode’ (1.14). Unfortunately, it is ‘not easy to find someone who is able to learn’ without thinking of ‘official salary’, status, or ‘profit’ (4.16, 8.12). Invidious concern with externalities is part of Confucius’ pessimism about his time and culture:

‘The Master said, “In ancient times scholars learned for their own sake; these days they learn for the sake of others’ (14.24)

As Huang Kan explains, the ancients strove to learn about their deficiencies, desiring ‘to personally put into practice and prefect themselves, nothing more’ (in Slingerland 2006:164). Such admirable moral motivations are, however, increasingly eroded by a pervasive tendency, among ‘petty people’, for power, wealth, and status. This means that, though there are many vices associated with curiosity, some of them are of special concern to Confucians.

I propose that the Confucian love of learning can be understood as an implicit commitment to a virtue of curiosity coupled to a particular conception of the good: the ideal of becoming a morally self-cultivated, consummate person. Self-cultivation as a project requires, among other things, acquiring various epistemic goods, the desire or appetite for which is provided by curiosity. The ideal of consummateness specifies the sorts of epistemic goods that are relevant and significant, which educational and social institutions ought to promote and facilitate. Various vices can block or corrupt the appetite for and acquisition of those epistemic goods leading to epistemically objectionable behaviour, like prurient curiosity about morally irrelevant topics or the laziness and superficiality that marks a person who is *ning*. Genuinely loving learning means being sufficiently motivated not to settle for low-hanging or pre-picked epistemic fruit, and disciplining one’s appetites by seeking only morally nourishing epistemic goods.

Such motivation and discernment are nourished and informed by the project of moral self-cultivation. For Confucians, this emerges as a vision shaped by tradition – of the Sage Kings, their dynasties, and their ‘rites’ - guiding our sense of what sorts of ignorance require correction and what sorts of topics should interest us. That vision places constraints on the legitimate topics and objects of curiosity that may, to some, seem illiberal or restrictive. But the Confucian proscription of curiosity about topics or issues that are morally trivial, corrupting, or objectionable is intelligible given their guiding vision.

The ways that Confucian curiosity is rooted in a guiding moral vision becomes clearer if considered against a sophisticated account of that virtue developed by Lani Watson (2018). Using a virtue-epistemic framework, she proposes that the virtuously curious person is characteristically motivated to acquire worthwhile epistemic goods that they lack or believe that they lack. Virtuous curiosity is discriminating, attaching only to worthwhile goods, where those are defined relative to some conception of the good – whether that means the one shared by a community, or appropriate to one’s social and professional roles, or constitutive of one’s projects. Such virtuous curiosity does not entail or require success in acquiring those goods, since bad epistemic luck, contingencies, and other factors can thwart one’s efforts. What matters, for virtuous curiosity, is that one makes those efforts, such that an agent’s character will not play a role in explanations of failures to acquire those goods.

I suggest that the Confucian conception of love of learning can be understood in terms of the virtue of curiosity, as described by Watson, since it accommodates all three of its components. First, love of learning is an appetitive epistemic disposition, such that it plays the crucial role of motivating enquiry. When Confucius attributes to himself a capacity for ‘learning … yet never becoming tired’ (7.2; 7.34), he testifies to the essential role of that disposition to the demanding epistemic dimensions of moral self-cultivation.

Second, love of learning is located within a wider structure of normative interests and concerns that stipulate what sorts of epistemic goods are or should be recognised as worthwhile. Most obviously, these are the knowledge, skills, and forms of understanding integral to moral self-cultivation, such as mastery of the rites, the Six Arts and Classics, and so on. To ‘love antiquity and diligently look there for knowledge’, says Confucius, is an excellence in a person, since it reflects a proper sense of what really matters (7.20; 17.9).

Third, the Confucian love of learning is part of a wider structure of practices, exemplars, and motivations that enable a person to identify essential epistemic goods that they do or might lack. Since love of learning is partly a matter of being ‘aware every day of what [one] still lacks’, it constantly puts at the front of one’s mind a sense of the goods one does or might lack (19.5). Confucius explains that this is why learning must be coupled to thinking, since each without the other leads into danger – thoughtless learning to confusion, unlearned thought into danger (2.15). To love learning is, then, a disposition to acquire the epistemic goods integral to moral self-cultivation that one either does or might lack – knowledge of ‘rites’, classic literature, and so on – balanced by carefulness, thoughtfulness, and other virtues.

The Confucian love of learning contains the components of virtuous curiosity, but this does not, as it stands, justify the further, different claim that it should be understood as a virtue, an excellence of persons (*de*). The virtue-theoretic character of Confucianism supports that claim, but further argument is needed to secure it. For this, three points stand out. First, a love of learning is invariably attributed to certain persons, such as Confucius and Yan Hui, who are admired because they possess that characteristic (5.28, 6.3, 7.33). Second – conversely – people are criticised if and when they fail to naturally possess or to work to cultivate a love of learning, such as the disciples who fail to study the Odes (17.9). Confucius’ criticisms of people who fail to evince a love of learning – who instead seek to acquire material goods, sensual satisfaction, and other distractions – is couched in a language of vice, of superficiality and glibness (eg 9.18). And third, there are debates, throughout *Analects*, about the possibility of cultivating curiosity through educative practices, which suggests that it is a character trait that can be built up through deliberate effort. When a disciple worries that the love of learning is ‘precisely what we ... are unable to learn’, and Confucius unable to teach, the concern is that curiosity is a virtue that cannot be acquired by effort (7.34). Indeed, the worry that love of learning cannot be taught sits ‘at the heart of the paradox of Confucian self-cultivation’, as a distinguished commentator puts it (2003: 76). If a virtuously curious desire for the epistemic goods that are integral to moral self-cultivation cannot be acquired except through the learning practices it inspires and sustains, then how can people without that desire pursue self-cultivation?

I do not have a solution to this paradox, since it appears here only to support my claim that, if the love of learning is a specifically Confucian articulation of the virtue of curiosity, then it sits close to the heart of that tradition. A love of learning is an excellent, admirable character trait that manifests in a desire to acquire epistemic goods defined as worthwhile relative to a deep conception of good – that of applying one’s practical, social, and academic learning to the improvement of one’s character. This project of becoming consummate person is, as Confucius affirms, a lifelong one, initiated and sustained by a desire, appetite, or ‘love’, for goodness and for learning. Put another way, the edifying process that ends in consummate excellence does and must begin with curiosity—which is why it is so esteemed by Confucius.

**Questions in the *Analects***

The Chinese title of *Analects*, *Lunyu* – ‘Edited Conversations’ or ‘Selected Remarks’ – capture the character of the work. It is not a book written by Confucius, but a diverse set of remarks, recollections, anecdotes, and observations, whose style and content often puzzles readers unfamiliar with its context and history. Indeed, the allusive and cryptic style also reflects Confucius’ own pedagogic strategy of trying to provoke and facilitate an enquiring attitude on the part of students—for instance, that he ‘will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand’ (7.16). Open-ended and allusive remarks, replete with latent meanings, coupled to open-ended observations are apt to invite questions and responses from students—which also honours the ‘conversational context’ of Confucius’ teaching (Slingerland 2003: vii-viii). Indeed, English translations of the *Analects* often inevitably sacrifice what Alice Cheang (2000: 568-569) calls the ‘opacity’ and ‘latent ambiguity’ of the text, making it seem ‘clear, comprehensible, and pellucidly simple’.

An unfortunate cost of this is that *Analects* is apt to lose the very features – opacity, ambiguity, openness – that invite and sustain disciplined practices of questioning. The very style of the *Analects* can be edifying, in the sense of affording readers opportunities to cultivate and exercise certain virtues – attentiveness, carefulness, and imaginativeness. Among those virtues is, I propose, the virtue of inquisitiveness. In this section, however, my focus is not the edifying nature of the *Analect’s* literary style – a task that requires discussion of hermeneutic issues that go beyond my purposes in this chapter. Instead, I explore the claim that a latent feature of *Analects* is a normative conception of good questioning—one that, as with curiosity, requires a distinctive epistemic virtue, namely, *inquisitiveness*.

The purpose of many questions is to improve one’s epistemic standing, one’s stock of true beliefs, knowledge, and understanding. But other questions have other purposes – to express interest, to mock, to be ironic, and so on. I focus only on the epistemically motivated questions that interest Watson, who also notes that asking questions is only one way – or set of ways – to improve epistemic standing. However a good question is a very good way to improve epistemic standing. Inquisitiveness, for Watson, is a virtue with a special relationship to questioning, so wherever one finds practices of questioning, one should expect to find something like the virtue of inquisitiveness. In Confucianism, there is an obvious range of things about which one can – and, given its guiding project, should – ask questions about – the nature of ritually correct behaviour (*li*), the behaviour of moral exemplars (*jūnzǐ*), the range of virtues (*de*), among others. Curiosity operates simultaneously in what many Western philosophers would separate into the social, epistemic, and moral dimensions of life. Moral self-cultivation requires a person to gain increasingly broad, deep, and accurate knowledge and understanding of tradition, rites, exemplars, virtues, the arts, history, and oneself and one’s peers, among many others. Given the diversity and complexity of these objects of curiosity, an aspiring moral agent requires a capacity – or a set of capacities – for increasingly skilled questioning. Indeed, there is a value not only in getting *answers* to these questions, but also in *asking* them – that is why the Master reported that he could not ‘do anything’ for those not ‘constantly asking, “What should I do? What should I do?”’ (15.16).

Since the scope and depth of questioning pertinent to Confucian moral self-cultivation is considerable, there is good reason to suppose that it may involve a distinctive virtue. One can, after all, question well – asking the right questions, at the right times, of the right people, in the right ways; and one can question badly, asking the wrong things at the wrong times of the wrong people in the wrong ways. It’s also clear that a capacity for good questioning is something that everyone requires, since no-one is born with the sort of epistemic standing they need. Confucius distinguishes people according to their native capacity for insight, manifested in the extent and intensity of questioning they require:

Confucius said, “Those who are born understanding it are the best; those who come to understand it through learning are second. Those who find it difficult to understand and yet persist in their studies come next. People who find it difficult to understand but do not even try to learn are the worst of all.” (16.9)

Those rare people, ‘born understanding’, like Yan Hui, have immediate, acute insight into the epistemic goods constitutive of moral self-cultivation (eg 2.9, 5.9, 9.20). The second group, who gain understanding through study, includes Confucius: their love of learning drives them to ‘diligently look … for knowledge’, so they ‘listen widely … see many things’ and, one presumes, question, too (7.20, 7.28). In the third category are those who fail to engage in epistemic practices, like questioning, which Confucius regards as reprehensible (see 8.7, 9.11).

Since few people occupy the first category, the cultivation of a capacity for good questioning emerges as a necessary component of moral self-cultivation. But even gifted students, like Yan Hui, still need to engage in questioning, as indeed does Confucius. Good questioning, then, is not an optional extra, not least since the range and nature of epistemic goods – like knowledge of ritual behaviour, understanding of *jūnzǐ*, and so on – is immense. Indeed, some may not admit of exhaustive definition. I think we see this in many ways in the *Analects*, but perhaps most vividly in the cases where Confucius is asked about *ren* – a famously capacious term, variously rendered as ‘goodness’, ‘benevolence’, ‘humanity’, among others. In the sections that follow, I render it, following Slingerland, as ‘Goodness’.

There are six occasions in *Analects* where Confucius is directly asked about Goodness, rather than related topics, like wisdom or *jūnzǐ*. Consider three, from the opening sections of Book Twelve, which concerns *ren*, government, and other moral concerns. First:

Yan Hui asked about Goodness.

The Master said, “Restraining yourself and returning to the rites (*keji fuli*) constitutes Goodness. If for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to the rites, in this way you could lead the entire world back to Goodness. The key to achieving Goodness lies within yourself—how could it come from others?”

Yan Hui asked, “May I inquire as to the specifics?”

The Master said, “Do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual.”

Yan Hui replied, “Although I am not quick to understand, I ask permission to devote myself to this teaching.” (12.1)

Second:

Zhonggong asked about Goodness.

The Master said, “When in public, comport yourself as if you were receiving an important guest, and in your management of the common people, behave as if you were overseeing a great sacrifice.’ Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire. In this way, you will encounter no resentment in your public or private life.”

Zhonggong replied, “Although I am not quick to understand, I ask permission to devote myself to this teaching.” (12.2)

Third:

Sima Niu asked about Goodness.

The Master said, “The Good person is hesitant to speak (*ren*).”

“‘Hesitant to speak’—is that all there is to Goodness?”

“When being Good is so difficult, how can one not be hesitant to speak about it?” (12.3)

Based on these examples – and the others (see 6.22, 12.22, 13.19) – we see complex practices of questioning, with several features. First, Confucius gives different answers to the same question—goodness is explained in terms of restraint, ritual conduct, and circumspection, among many others. Such diversity is not a sign of confusion on Confucius’ part, but rather reflects the complexity of the concept of *ren*. In a later chapter, a disciple expresses puzzlement, if not frustration, at the Master’s practice of giving different answers to the question of whether one should act immediately or not upon learning of some problem (11.22). The Master answers affirmatively to one and negatively to the other, explaining that the first interlocutor, an ‘overly cautious’ disciple, needs ‘urging on’, whereas the second, being ‘impetuous’, needing ‘holding back’. A skilled answer is, then, adapted to the needs, whether epistemic or developmental, of the questioner.

Second, the disciples often do not understand the answers they receive. They often ask a series of follow-up questions, or, in other cases, simply resolve to try to practically enact what they have learned in the hope that understanding will follow. Zhonggong does not fully grasp Confucius’ points about the various forms of good ritual conduct, and Yan Hui asks for further elaboration, this time in response to the rhetorical question offered by the Master. The capacity for good questioning can develop over time, such that disciples learn to ask sharper questions that can be met with answers that more precisely secure for them the desired epistemic goods. If so, Confucians invert Watson’s account of the aims of good questioning: on her account, the primary aim is information-elicitation, alongside a set of secondary aims, like demonstrating care or challenging authority. But for Confucians, the primary aims are ethical and social, with the elicitation of information the secondary aim.

A third, related point is that some of the follow-up questions are effective – Yan Hui’s elicits a detailed account of the complexity of *li* – whereas others, like Sima Niu’s, are met with a testy rhetorical question. In that case the Master is likely irritated at the evident presumption that the moral life is easy, an attitude utterly contrary to his emphasis on its difficulty. Questions can therefore act to reveal a person’s attitudes, assumptions, and ideals, and not always in ways liable to reflect well on the asker.

A fourth feature of these and other examples is that there are conventions of questioning that extend to bodily and interpersonal comportment – two things that Confucians do not sharply separate. Yan Hui and Zhonggong use a standardized reply – ‘Although I am not quick to understand, I ask permission to devote myself to this teaching’ – and other chapters describe the practice of standing to ask a question of the Master, who then invites the asker to sit to hear the answer. Good questioning is therefore for Confucius and his disciples an embodied practice that should express virtues, like respect and restraint, as well as elicit information. Certain dimensions of questioning practices are shared with other social practices – like avoiding rudeness – but others are distinctive to it. I now want to propose that the Confucian normative practice of good questioning requires cultivation and exercise of a specific virtue – inquisitiveness.

**Asking the right questions**

Attention to the *Analects* indicates an implicit normative practice of questioning that is evidenced in Confucius’ exchanges with his disciples. The Master praises a disciple who asks about the roots of ritual by ‘exclaiming’ that it is a ‘noble question’ (3.4; cf. 12.21). The praise of the question as ‘noble’ is due to its reflecting a concern – one deeply felt by Confucius – with the deep origins of ritual, whether in tradition, the teachings of the Sage Kings, human nature, or the Mandate of Heaven. Since neglect of the ‘roots of ritual’ leads to superficiality, turning attention to them is a path back to virtue. In Book Nineteen, a disciple, Zixia, praises the quality of being ‘incisive in one’s questioning’, while another rebukes someone for a rash remark – or perhaps a poor question – since a person can be ‘judged wise or unwise on the basis of a single comment’ (19.6, 19.25). A disposition to ask bad questions not only fails to improve a person’s epistemic standing, by delaying acquisition of the relevant knowledge, but can also diminish one’s moral standing among one’s peers.

A disciplined practice of questioning is also evident in the *Xueji*, as one would expect of a practical educational text. Many of its remarks testify to the ways that teachers should encourage students to motivate their own learning, by teaching in ways that ‘open their minds’ rather than ‘provide them with fixed answers’ (§12). Two remarks stand out with reference to questioning. The first, from section seventeen, compares the asking of good questions to carving:

‘Those who are good at asking questions approach their task as if carving hard wood. First, they chip away at the soft parts and then set to work on the knots. If they keep at it, the difficulties are gradually resoled. Those who are poor at asking questions do just the opposite.

Good questioning involves careful, continuous effort, rather than a single request for information. Simpler issues are resolved, which exposes more difficult issues, as one slowly gets to the heart of an issue. A good student develops a knack for spotting the more tractable aspects of a topic, only then moving onto more difficult issues. Sima Niu’s question, quoted earlier, is a poor question because it tried to remove a need for further, more intensive questioning. The ideal of good questioning is *formative* as well as *informative*—a process of guided and reflective practice through which one is increasingly better able to acquire and internalize epistemic goods. To be informed is part of being formed as an ethico-epistemic agent.

Second, the *Xueji* also directs advice to teachers, urging them not to ‘respond to questions by the mindless recitation of memorized texts’, advising instead careful attention to their interests or concerns. Only when students are ‘unable to formulate their own questions’, having reached the limits of their competence, should teachers move onto direct instruction (§18). Here we see the roots of Confucius’ own practice of customizing his responses to questions, ensuring that the answers given are apt to enhance the epistemic standing of his disciples in the best way – by customizing the epistemic goods given to their needs. This has a double satisfaction: one gets exactly what one requires, and, even better, enjoys the distinctive pleasure of kinship with another.

If there is a Confucian practice of good questioning, then what virtues does it require? No doubt many, although the terms ‘noble’ and ‘incisive’ offer clues. The noble questions are, it seems, those that mark a deep concern with moral goods; an incisive question, similarly, is one that – to use the *Xueji*’s carving metaphor – cuts right to the heart of the issue. But both aspects are crucial: a good questioner needs to be able to recognize the epistemically relevant issues, and be able to formulate an effective question, one able to indicate precisely what it is one wishes to know. What is needed, in effect, is a virtue of inquisitiveness, which, recall, is a virtue with a special relationship to good questioning.

A virtuously inquisitive person, argues Watson, is characteristically motivated to engage sincerely in good questioning. As an epistemic virtue, it has *motivational* and *success* components. An inquisitive person must be motivated to ask questions, where the motivation must be admirable, such as a desire for truth. Wanting to ask questions because one is being paid is to be badly motivated and therefore not virtuous. A questioner must, therefore, be *sincere*, enquiring due to a genuine desire to improve epistemic standing – their own or, in the case of teachers, their students – rather than some extrinsic non-epistemic motivation. But a question must be not only sincere, but also successful, to some degree, in getting the desired epistemic goods. It sounds odd to attribute the virtue of inquisitiveness to a person who, for all their sincerity, repeatedly fails to acquire epistemic goods; of course, many things can thwart one’s enquiries, but if being inquisitive made no real difference to one’s ‘success rate’, then it would be odd to call it a *virtue* (Watson 2015: 277-279; cf. Watson 2018). (A point amplified by the Chinese term, *de*, being renderable as a ‘power’ or ‘charisma’, terms that incorporate a capacity to create effects, to make differences).

The Confucian conception of good questioning has all three of the components of virtuous inquisitiveness described by Watson. I suggest that we can use her account to usefully articulate and explain the Confucian practice, justifying talk of its incorporating the virtue of inquisitiveness. There are three components. I take each in turn, starting with the *content component*, the capacity of an inquisitive agent to clearly specify what is being asked. Second, the *communication component*, asking or ‘performing’ the question in its simplest, clearest, most convenient form – a well-communicated question being more likely to achieve its aim. Third, the *context* *component*, asking appropriate questions, at appropriate moments, of appropriate sources. Some questions are well-articulated, but badly timed, or misdirected, and a skilled questioner learns how to avoid all of those faults.

Gathered together, Watson proposes that a virtuously inquisitive questioner *competently elicits worthwhile information*, by sincerely asking effective questions. A sense of the difficulty of this practice, justifying talk of an associated virtue, comes in Watson’s characterisation of the virtuously inquisitive agent as able and disposed to:

‘[I]dentify the information they are missing and the information at their disposal, in order to target worthwhile content […] then accurately, efficiently and aptly communicate their desire for this content, at an appropriate time and place, and direct this towards an appropriate source’ (Watson 2018:000)

I suggest that the Confucian practice of questioning, sketched earlier, corresponds to this characterisation, since it includes all three of its components. But it also adds new dimensions, including an array of epistemic and non-epistemic motivations and a sensitivity to the *bodily performance* of questions.

First, Confucianism has a well-articulated conception of the good that specifies what counts as worthwhile content – namely, the knowledge, skills, and forms of understanding necessary to moral self-cultivation, such as the Six Arts and Classics. Lin Fan’s question was ‘noble’ because it pertained to what is fundamentally worthwhile: the origins and grounds of practices of moral self-cultivation. Second, the Confucian practices of questioning specify the correct performance of questions, as one might expect of a tradition with an acute sensitivity to embodied, ritualised practice. Good questions, recall, must be ‘incisive’, clear, efficient, and expressed in a manner that is ‘earnest and critical, but also affable’ (13.28). One stands to ask questions, sits down to hear the answers, and evinces a respectful demeanor, and so on. By contrast, bad questions are ones that are ill-formed, careless, or expressive of superficiality and as such were likely to elicit silence, frowns, rhetorical counter-questions, or sarcastic replies (3.22, 9.2). In the case of bad questions, we again see a role for socially textured bodily comportment in questioning practice.

The third aspect of virtuously inquisitive questioning, namely the sensitivity to context, comes through in several *Analects*. Perhaps the best example is a critics’ efforts to mock Confucius’s consistent tendency, when visiting ancestral temples, to ask questions ‘about everything that took place’:

Someone said, “Who said that this son of a man from Zou understands ritual? When he went into the Great Ancestral Temple, he had to ask questions about everything.”

When this comment was reported to the Master, his reply was, “This asking is, in fact, part of [the] ritual.” (3.15)

The unnamed critic fails to distinguish two types of reasons for asking questions. What we might call *epistemic curiosity* aims to gain knowledge or understanding that one lacks, or to improve one’s epistemic standing. Although Confucius is renowned as a distinguished ritual master, there is no reason to suppose he was superlatively competent, such that he never had cause to ask questions to elicit information. Imagine, for instance, local variations on ritual practices, of a sort only understandable through questioning or long acquaintance. It is clear, too, that even profound knowledge of tradition and philosophy might leave certain dimensions of ritual unclear. But there is also a form of *ritual curiosity*, asking questions for social and moral purposes - to show respect and to indicate interest and to politely initiate conversation or, as in this case, to participate in proper ritual conduct in a temple.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The critic failed to recognize the epistemic and ritual forms of curiosity and so his attempted mockery of Confucius fails. As a commentator, Kong Guo, explains, Confucius knew the ritual, likely in intense detail, but also recognized that asking questions might expose unknown aspects of it and also show respect, piety, and so on. It was, as Slingerland (2006: 315) explains, ‘appropriate for him to ask questions about it nonetheless – this is the height of carefulness’. Here, we see a rich example of contextually-sensitive questioning, guided by a ritualized practice informed by and embedded in the Confucian commitment to consummate conduct.

I propose that the Confucian practices of good questioning require a person to cultivate and exercise the virtue of inquisitiveness, as evidenced by its inclusion of all of the components identified by Watson. An aspiring Confucian must develop the dispositions needed to competently elicit worthwhile information by asking the right questions at the right times of the right people in the right ways. This inquisitiveness is a virtue, an excellence of character, which educational practice ought to cultivate, in the ways described in *Xueji* and *Analects*. For instance, by helping students to set the investigative agenda, form their own questions, and exemplify good questioning in a way they can emulate. The immediate aim of Confucian inquisitiveness is to improve the epistemic standing of the student, by helping them acquire the knowledge, skills, and insights they request. But the ultimate aim is, of course, moral self-cultivation and love of the Way (*dao*): those who learn for their own sake, argues Confucius, are motivated by admirable ethical values, rather than for the sake of status, power, or profit (14.24). Since transcending those desires is so difficult, love of learning is a rare, profound virtue, hence the Master’s praise of it in people with it, like Yan Hui.

Confucian inquisitiveness, on this conception, is motivated by a desire to ask questions to elicit epistemic goods that one needs to progress morally, ultimately and ideally into a *jūnzǐ*. Given the centrality of that ambition to Confucianism, the fundamental role of the virtues of inquisitiveness and curiosity to that tradition should be obvious. If so, then classical Confucianism incorporates two closely related epistemic virtues with motivational roles, which that tradition articulates in terms of love of learning and practices of good questioning—a cultivated disposition to ask ‘noble’, ‘incisive’ questions that enable one to effectively acquire morally relevant epistemic goods. Although the ultimate ends of these virtues are ethical, they are in themselves epistemic, being concerned with goods and practices, like learning and questioning. Such integration of the ethical and epistemic is, indeed, exactly what one would expect of a philosophy of life, like Confucianism.

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**Notes**

1. All references to *Analects* are to book and chapter of the Slingerland edition, and references to the commentary to ‘Slingerland 2006’. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The term *hao* refers, roughly, to learning, in the broad sense described. *Haoqi* refers to a sort of raw energy or drive for epistemic goods, which can be developed into the more defined, cultivated form the Confucians call *haoxue* (‘love of learning’). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. All references to *Xueji* are to specific sections in the Di and McEwan edition. A good discussion of this text in contemporary comparative context is Xu Di (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Confucian love of learning is related to a virtue that Roberts and Wood (2007: ch.6) call ‘love of knowledge’. Like curiosity, this is an ‘appetitive orientation’, disposing an agent to ‘thirst for and enjoy’ epistemic goods that are *significant*, *relevant*, and *worthwhile*. I suggest that what Roberts and Wood refer to is virtuous curiosity plus a rich conception of the good, namely, the Confucian ideal ‘consummate’ excellence, which serves to stipulate what is significant, relevant, and worthy—the Classics, say. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Two other examples are Jin Li (2016) on humility and Cheng-hung Tsai (2014) on Xunzi’s virtue epistemology. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I am grateful to Amy Olberding for a fascinating discussion of the complexity of 3.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)