

## **Early Confucianism's Take on Perfectionism: Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, and their Modern Interpreters**

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There were three great sages in early Confucianism—Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi—whose thoughts disproportionately shaped Chinese Confucian political philosophy from its original conception to the present day. While the three thinkers held varied opinions on the difficulty and methodology of achieving sagehood, they nonetheless commonly acknowledged the importance of moral self-cultivation for the ruling class, and the necessity of leadership in realizing the moral status of the common people and helping them achieve a good life. In their respective texts, Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi propose their vision of a good society and the roles which shape and inhabit it.

In this article, I first present an overview of the three big philosophers' stance on perfectionism, defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as the “ethical theories that characterize the human good in terms of the development of human nature.”<sup>1</sup> Through close

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<sup>1</sup> Wall, Steven. “Perfectionism in Moral and Political Philosophy.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2021. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/perfectionism-moral/>.

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reading of primary texts, it becomes evident that Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi each distinguish between two groups in society: those who are able to reason independently about ethics while providing moral guidance to their peers, and those who are unable to do so. Variations exist in the characterization of other defining qualities between these two groups, but their important distinguishing factor lies along the moral dimension. Despite these differences, the three big philosophers generally agree that there is latent moral potential in every person, regardless of background. Moral cultivation is thus recognized as achievable in theory, if not always in practice. Furthermore, the three big philosophers' reference to moral exemplars gives strong reason to believe that there exists a moral ideal—again, the exact details differ slightly among philosophers—but these variations do not conflict with the ideal of a sage-king whose moral exemplar guides society towards self-cultivation and harmoniousness.

Next, I summarize the major interpretations of a Confucian government's ultimate aim. Specifically, I summarize 1) the mainstream interpretation which suggests that providing the people with a good life, with material and moral dimensions, is the primary aim of Confucian government, and 2) the major re-interpretation of Loubna El Amine, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, which argues that it is not moral self-cultivation but rather political stability which is the highest ideal of Confucian political philosophy. Specifically, El Amine argues that moral self-cultivation is a means-to-an-end, becoming obsolete once political order and stability is achieved.

Finally, I present counter arguments—raised by both scholarly texts and my own thinking—for El Amine's interpretation. This exercise serves to sharpen our understanding of Confucian perfectionism—the scope, limits, and nature of what it means to attain moral enlightenment—and contribute to the existing conversation on Confucian political philosophy's aim.

### **Towards a Cohesive Confucian View of Perfectionism**

The Confucian worldview is classist, insofar as it identifies a moral ruling class which provides moral guidance and instruction to the common people. Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi all place the *junzi* (君子) on a higher moral plane than the common man, based on the *junzi*'s ability to reason morally and thus independently arrive at the correct course of action. In the *Analects*, it is written “子曰：「民可使由之，不可使知之。」 // “The people may be made to follow a path of action, but they may not be made to understand it.”<sup>2</sup> It can be seen that Confucius separates two groups based on their understanding of moral action: *min* (民), who are distinguished by their inability to fully comprehend the correct course of action (although it is important to note here that not fully comprehending an action does not preclude *min* from undertaking such action), contrasted with another group, who *are* able to reason morally. Similarly, Xunzi places little faith in universal cultivation, believing that “most people will choose not to cultivate themselves despite their natural capability for self-cultivation.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, Mencius wrote that “Those who make the effort when there is a King Wen are ordinary men. Only outstanding men make the effort even without a King Wen.”<sup>4</sup> Like Confucius, Mencius identifies two groups of people: “those who make the effort” with guidance are identified as “ordinary men,” while those who “make the effort” even without guidance are “outstanding men.” The political implication of this classist position is that a ruling class, broadly defined as

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<sup>2</sup> Huang, Chichung. *The Analects of Confucius*, 8.9

<sup>3</sup> Knoblock, John. *Xunzi*, 23.5a-b.

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, Irene. *Mencius*, 7A10

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those with greater self-initiative and ability for moral reasoning, are superior to *min* in terms of their ability to actualize their moral potential, and thus deserve more power and influence.

While the three thinkers agree that distinctions exist between the ruling class and common people, Confucius and Xunzi place the ruling class as unambiguously higher than the common people based primarily on moral considerations, while Mencius identifies a more ambiguous relationship. In *Mencius* 3A3, it is written 孟子曰：「夫滕壤地褊小，将为君子焉，将为野人焉。无君子莫治野人，无野人莫养君子。请野九一而助，國中什一使自賦。」 // “Mencius said: ‘Now, while the territory of Teng is narrow and small, it has both noble men (*junzi*) and country people (*yeren*). Without noble men, there would be no one to rule the country people, and, without the country people, there would be no one to feed the noble men.’”<sup>5</sup> In Mencius’ view, everyone is born good, with the potential to attain moral enlightenment. However, practical demands necessitate that a group of country people (野人) contribute their time and energy to agriculture. While he clearly identifies two separate groups—“noble men”(君子, *junzi*) and “country people”(野人, *yeren*)—in society, Mencius illustrates a mutualistic relationship between the two groups. *Junzi* provide political and moral leadership, while *yeren* provide the material sustenance required for both groups’ survival. While the *yeren* can exist in a base state without the moral guidance of *junzi*, *junzi* are unable to subsist without *yeren*. This can be read as a proto-social contract position, where the ruling class relies on 野人 for sustenance. Poor rulers who do not advance the common people indirectly harm themselves, Mencius implies, because the ruling class relies on the common people for nourishment. In this

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<sup>5</sup> *Mencius*, 3A3

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way, the welfare of the two groups is inextricably linked, and the well-functioning of society depends on the two groups' mutual support for each another when their roles are fulfilled.

One might ask why the moral guidance of an elite is necessary for the common people to attain a good life. Surely, one might comment, without paying taxes to and having resources extracted by the ruling class for the purpose of warfare, infrastructure, and court rituals, the common people can achieve material stability and live comfortably by their own means. While the common people may in fact achieve material stability without the aid of a ruling class, producing enough material sustenance to maintain themselves and their communities, Confucian political philosophy contends the existence of a higher moral plane which exists beyond material stability. Confucianism posits that the distinguishing factor between humans and beasts is man's pursuit of moral cultivation. This factor is noted in *Mencius* with the lines “后稷教民稼穡。樹藝五穀，五穀熟而民人育。人之有道也，飽食、煖衣、逸居而無教，則近於禽獸。”// “The Minister of Agriculture taught the people to sow and reap, cultivating the five kinds of grain. When the five kinds of grain were brought to maturity, the people all obtained a subsistence. But men possess a moral nature; and if they are well fed, warmly clad, and comfortably lodged, without being taught at the same time, they become almost like the beasts.”<sup>6</sup> Achieving material stability, as when the “grain[s]” were “brought to maturity” and the people could “obtain a subsistence” is itself insufficient; it is man's “moral nature” which distinguishes civilization from savagery. Without moral guidance, the common people are no better than wild animals, considered inferior creatures under the Confucian value system.

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<sup>6</sup> *Mencius*, 4A4

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Although difficult, the moral ideal is certainly achievable in practice. Clear moral exemplars exist in the classic Confucian texts—most often Yao and Shun, the sage kings of old—but reference is also made to other figures, like King Wen and Wu. For example, Mencius writes “今也小國師大國而恥受命焉，是猶弟子而恥受命於先師也。如恥之，莫若師文王。師文王，大國五年，小國七年，必為政於天下矣。” // “Now the small States imitate the large, and yet are ashamed to receive their commands. This is like a scholar's being ashamed to receive the commands of his master. For a prince who is ashamed of this, the best plan is to imitate king Wen. Let one imitate king Wen, and in five years, if his State be large, or in seven years, if it be small, he will be sure to give laws to the kingdom.”<sup>7</sup> King Wen is identified as an exemplar for the current ruling class as an aid for achieving correct conduct.

Xunzi and Confucius match Mencius' view that human nature has potential to be developed, and that everyone is capable of some degree of development. Although Xunzi believes that human nature is born evil and that all good is artifice<sup>8</sup>—「人之性惡，其善者偽也。」—he nonetheless believes it is possible to achieve goodness. The main difference in Xunzi's thoughts on moral self-cultivation is his belief that external systems are the most effective method towards achieving self-cultivation. Xunzi writes 「不當無以養民情，不教無以理民性」 // “if you do not teach the people, you will lack the means by which to bring order to their nature.”<sup>9</sup> This quote reveals a malleable quality to a person's nature, one that is able to be shaped by teachings. Finally, the *Analects* note that 「子曰：『三年學，不至於穀，不易得

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<sup>7</sup> *Mencius*, 7A10

<sup>8</sup> *Xunzi*, 23.1A – this is Knoblock's numbering

<sup>9</sup> *Xunzi*, 27.296 – this is Hutton's numbering

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也”。 』 // “The Master said, ‘Having learned for three years without coming to be good - such a man is not easy to find.’”<sup>10</sup> Confucius has perhaps the most optimistic outlook on the common people’s moral capabilities. He believed that subject to three years of education, it is difficult for someone not to become a better person. If the state can provide such an education to all its inhabitants, its populace may achieve significant moral improvements, if not a moral ideal. This underlying belief in perfectibility motivates Confucian political actors to provide education and moral guidance to the populace.

### **Summarizing the Major Interpretations of Confucian Political Philosophy**

Since the inception of Chinese society, the order and stability of the kingdom was intrinsically linked with a good life. During periods of chaos, warfare and instability ravaged the material base of the common people, rendering their lives violent and vulnerable. Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi all wrote and taught during periods of chaos. Confucius was situated during the Spring and Autumn period, while Mencius and Xunzi formed their philosophies during the Warring states period.<sup>11</sup> Against this historical context, it is unsurprising that the great Confucian thinkers believed goodness to be inextricably linked with peace and stability.

A perfectionist conception of politics is the belief that the ultimate end-goal of politics is intertwined with the ultimate end-goal of ethics achieving a “good life” for the people.<sup>12</sup> Reformulated, the perfectionist interpretation posits that the public domain of politics is deeply intertwined with the private domain of moral cultivation, and actions taken for the advancement

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<sup>10</sup> Analects, 8.12

<sup>11</sup> “Confucianism | Meaning, History, Beliefs, & Facts | Britannica.” Accessed October 31, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Confucianism>.

<sup>12</sup> Wall, Steven. “Perfectionism in Moral and Political Philosophy.”

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of politics are associated with advances towards the private ideal. Thus, the mainstream Confucian interpretation is considered perfectionist.

Recently, Loubna El Amine has challenged the standard perfectionist interpretation. She claims that “political order, not moral edification, is the end, and that political order is an end in itself, not a means toward virtue”.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, El Amine identifies Confucian political philosophy as advancing two different moral goalposts: a more sophisticated goalpost for the ruling class, and a more basic set of moral standards for the common man. This distinction is significant, El Amine argues, because once the less stringent moral standards are achieved by the common man, Confucian philosophy de-emphasizes moral self-cultivation, having set the required moral foundation for order and stability.<sup>14</sup> El Amine challenges a central tenet of the standard Confucian interpretation, that “the ultimate aim of Confucian government” is ensuring a good life for the people, setting the foundation for not only material stability but also individual moral actualization.<sup>15</sup> The crux of El Amine’s interpretation is that Confucian political philosophy prioritizes achieving political order and stability over moral cultivation. Once order is achieved, moral cultivation becomes an add-on: nice to have, but not essential for fulfilling the aims of Confucian political philosophy.

Although it is difficult for the common man to achieve moral cultivation, El Amine does not take it as impossible. Indeed, she writes “the obstacle to the common people’s moral and intellectual cultivation arises not from their ascriptive qualities, or their pedigree at birth, but from the social demands of the material life associated with the social group into which they are

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<sup>13</sup> El Amine, Loubna. *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation*. Princeton University Press, 2015, 15.

<sup>14</sup> El Amine, Loubna. *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation*. (17-21)

<sup>15</sup> El Amine, Loubna. *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation*. (51)

born. In other words, their limitation is not inborn but socially and economically imposed”.<sup>16</sup> The potential for moral cultivation exists in everyone, but practically only the privileged are able to access the time and resources necessary for this achievement.

### Challenging El Amine Through Counterexamples

El Amine contends that a Confucian government’s ultimate aim is achieving stability. Certain passages from the classical texts, however, highlight the government’s duty of educating the people. The emphasis on moral education can be seen in *Analects* 13.9, which reads “子适卫，冉有仆。子曰：「庶矣哉！」冉有曰「即庶矣，又何加焉？」曰：「富之。」曰：「即富矣，又何加焉？」曰：「教之」。// “The Master journeyed to Wei, with Ran You driving. The Master said ‘How populous’. Ran You said: ‘Now that it is populous, what is to be done next?’ The Master said: ‘Enrich them’. Ran You said: ‘When they are rich, what is to be done next?’ The Master said: ‘instruct them.’”<sup>17</sup> Confucius identifies enrichment and instruction, in that order, as virtuous actions to be undertaken by the state. The ordering is significant—the state’s duty is not absolved once a certain degree of material enrichment is achieved. Their next duty is clearly articulated as instructing the populace. A similar sentiment can be found in *Xunzi* 27.296, where Xunzi writes “不当无以养民情，不教无以理民性 ... 立大学，设庠序，修六礼，明十教，所以道之也。《诗》曰：「饮之食之，教之诲之」王事具矣。”// “If you do not enrich the people, you will lack the means by which to nurture their dispositions. If you do not teach the people, you will lack the means by which to bring order to their nature. ...

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<sup>16</sup> El Amine, Loubna. *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation*. (48)

<sup>17</sup> *The Analects of Confucius*, 13.9

Set up Grand Academies. Establish provincial and village schools. Cultivate the six rituals. Make clear the ten teachings. This is how to guide them. The Odes says: Give to them drink. Give them food sustaining. Give to them teaching. Give to them training. In this the affairs of a true king are complete”.<sup>18</sup> Again, the education of the populace is presented as the end-goal of leadership—a necessary precondition to being considered a true king. Not only does Xunzi advise the establishment of academies and local schools, he also specifies the moral content of instruction. It can be seen that the moral education of the people is highly valued by Confucius and Xunzi, and that this obligation falls firmly in the realm of political, rather than private, purview.

Next, to address El Amine’s point that Confucianism set different standards for the ruling class and common classes. In Elton Chan’s (Professor of Philosophy at Lingnan University) response paper, “The Indispensability of Moral Cultivation in Confucian Politics,” he lays out the tenets of ideal-non ideal analysis which, applied to Confucianism, weakens El Amine’s claim that the ideal of universal moral actualization does not exist. Ideal-non ideal analysis observes that practical constraints preclude the achievement of a moral ideal, but does not detract from the ideal’s normative force.<sup>19</sup> It is commonly acknowledged by Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi that in practice, the achievement of moral cultivation is difficult and incomplete (see Section I). Thus, the degree of moral cultivation seen in the *min* does not compare with the degree commonly achieved by the ruling class—their societal roles make different demands on their time, and thus in practice the common people are not afforded as many opportunities for moral cultivation. Still, given early Confucianism’s emphasis on state-led moral education and moral exemplars, like Emperor Shun, who rose from the common class, a strong case can be made for the persistence

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<sup>18</sup> *Xunzi*, 27.296

<sup>19</sup> Chan, Elton. “The Indispensability of Moral Cultivation in Confucian Politics.” *Dao* 18, no. 2 (June 2019): 269–76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-019-09660-9>.

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of a normative ideal, despite the non-ideal circumstances. While different moral standards clearly exist, less clear is whether Confucianism advocates ceasing the common people's moral cultivation once that standard has been met, as El Amine claims.

Although it is difficult for the common person to achieve the same degree of moral cultivation as a member of the ruling elite, examples exist in the literature of common people who achieve precisely this task. Confucian thinkers like to harken back to the sage kings as moral exemplars. Of particular note is the sage-king Shun, who is widely cited and admired as a moral exemplar. Shun was treated terribly by his stepmother and half-brother, while his blind, elderly father failed to recognize his many performances of good deeds. Yet, Shun was able to remain filial to his family, rising to the position of emperor and becoming widely cited as a model of filial piety by early Confucian philosophers. Shun's full moral transformation can also be seen in the positive influence he exerted in the public sphere. Not only was Shun able to maintain a constant heart, fulfilling the ideals of filial piety (孝) and modesty (耻), he was also able to provide moral guidance to those in ruling positions. Specifically, Shun influenced the current Emperor Yao's nine "useless sons" to live productive, upright lives. Shun is also widely recognized to exemplify humanness (仁), as he whole-heartedly forgave his step-mother and half-brother when they repented for their cruel childhood treatment, many years after the fact.<sup>20</sup> It can be seen that Confucianism believes that a pathway to moral cultivation exists for everyone, even those with the most crude and impoverished background. The road is comparatively longer and more difficult, no doubt, but it is not completely blocked off. Just because it is difficult, even

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<sup>20</sup> "Shun | Legendary Emperor of China | Britannica." Accessed October 31, 2022.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shun>.

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extremely difficult, for the common people to achieve a comparable level of moral development, this difficulty is not sufficient to conclude that Confucian philosophers believe the pursuit of moral-cultivation is unworthy or should be de-emphasized upon achievement of material stability.

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