

Reconceptualising Confucian Freedom: The Role of Xin in Mediation

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Abstract

In Confucian scholar Li Chenyang's "The Confucian Conception of Freedom", he conceptualised a theory of freedom that relates an individual's decision-making and self-cultivation processes with the processes of socialisation the individual goes through. His motivation behind this article is to purport a political philosophy that allows individuals in a particular society to realise the good. In his article, he argued that Confucian freedom is a form of actualised freedom whereby individuals 'choose the good'. In this essay, I will discuss several shortcomings of such a conception and attempt to shift the focus from 'choosing the good' to 'choosing' itself. I will point out that conceptualising actualised freedom as 'choosing the good' will have counterintuitive implications. Subsequently, I will argue that actualised freedom does not merely consist of an individual's choosing of the good but also his consciousness of his choosing. Such a consciousness, as I will argue, cannot be acquired without self-cultivation and meaningful socialisation. I draw passages from Mengzi and Xunzi to formulate a supplementary account to Li's conception of freedom. In doing so, I preserve the role of socialisation and cultivation in conceptualising Confucian freedom.

1. Introduction

In Confucian scholar Li Chenyang's "The Confucian Conception of Freedom", he conceptualised a theory of freedom that relates an individual's decision-making and self-cultivation processes with the processes of socialisation the individual goes through. His motivation behind this article is to purport a political philosophy that allows individuals in a particular society to realise the good. This essay discusses several shortcomings of Li's conception and subsequently proposes a supplementary conception of Confucian freedom that emphasises a phenomenological aspect of Confucian freedom. The first section discusses the current conception of Confucian freedom as purported by Li and Ni Peimin. A Confucian conception of freedom, as Li

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argues, is a form of actualised freedom, manifested by individuals choosing the good. Here, I will argue that Confucian freedom being manifested as ‘choosing the good’ is too narrow. In the next section, I argue that Confucian freedom should encompass our consciousness of *xin* (心) mediating our impulses.¹ In doing so, I steer away from the notion of ‘choosing the good’ to ‘choosing’ itself. I offer a formulation here by considering how ‘choices’ result from *xin* mediating our impulses and how freedom is actualised in choosing *itself*. Finally, I will attempt to address the dialectic between my formulation of freedom and the Confucian notion of cultivation. Specifically, one can still hold that cultivation, as a good-directed process, is possible with a conception of freedom that is not restricted to merely choosing the good.

2. Current Conception of Confucian Freedom

As recognised by Li and Ni, freedom is difficult to articulate in a Confucian context.² Nevertheless, they both defined Confucian freedom to consist of an important notion: *choice*. Choice, as Li contends, “implies freedom. Obviously, no one can choose without freedom”.³ This assertion is easily referable to the Confucian classics. For example, in the *Analects*, Confucius said that “At the age of seventy, I was able to follow the desire of my *xin*”.⁴ In the *Xunzi*, the same notion arises:

The heart [*xin*] is the lord of the body and the master of one’s spirit and intelligence. It issues orders, but it takes orders from nothing: it restrains itself, it employs itself; it lets itself go, it takes itself in hand; it makes itself proceed, it makes itself stop. Thus, the mouth can be compelled either to be silent or to speak, and the body can be compelled either to contract or to extend itself, but the heart cannot be compelled to change its thoughts. What it considers right, one accepts. What it considers wrong, one rejects. And so I say: if the heart allows its choices to be without restraint, then when it reveals its objects they will surely be broadly varying.⁵

In this long passage, *Xunzi* describes *xin* (the heart) as the “lord of the body” that “takes order from nothing”. Importantly, he alludes to the capacity of *xin* to choose between right and wrong. Indeed, Li’s assertion that choice implies freedom is well-rooted in classical Confucianism.

However, a challenge presents itself when Mengzi and *Xunzi* each made claims that arguably deny that *xin* is always free. Mengzi, for instance, is notorious for claiming one can “lose his *xin*”.⁶ Mengzi’s discussion of losing one’s *xin* points to how individuals can lose their ability to make good choices under certain circumstances.⁷

¹ *Xin* refers to 心 throughout the whole essay. It roughly translates to ‘heart’, ‘mind’, or both.

² Li 2014; Ni 2002. Li claims that because Chinese history and philosophy does not consist of theodicy that Chinese philosophy did not discuss freedom in a way Western philosophy did.

³ Li 2014, p. 909.

⁴ 七十而从心所欲。

⁵ *Xunzi* 2016, p. 229.

⁶ Mencius 2011, 6A:11, 4A:9.

⁷ His theory of *xin* includes a discussion of *qi* (气) affecting the purity of man’s initial moral conscious.

For example, Mengzi discusses whether to accept money from someone without regard to “decorum and rightness”. He concludes by saying: “What formerly I would not accept even at the risk of death, I now accept for the gratitude of poor acquaintances. Could such things not have been declined as well? This is what is called ‘losing one’s original [*xin*]’”.⁸ I read Mengzi to say that external factors seem to be influencing the capacity of *xin* to make free choices. That is, the environment we live in has a direct effect on how *xin* chooses. This view recurs multiple times in the *Mencius*. For example, Mengzi indeed said:

In years of abundance, most of the young people have the wherewithal to be good, while in years of adversity, most of them become violent. This is not a matter of a difference in the native capacities sent down by Heaven but rather of what overwhelms their [*xin*].⁹

Xunzi also seems to make similar claims about *xin*. He describes it as a “pan of water”:

If you set it straight and do not move it, the muddy and turbid parts will settle to the bottom, and the clear and bright parts will be on the top, and then one can see one’s whiskers and inspect the lines on one’s face. But if a slight breeze passes over it, the muddy and turbid parts will be stirred up from the bottom, and the clear and bright parts will be disturbed on top, and then one cannot get a correct view of even large contours.¹⁰

Here, Xunzi discusses how *xin* can turn “muddy and turbid”. The analogy of a “slight breeze” refers to how external circumstances can easily alter the initial “clear” state of *xin*. In this passage, we see that Xunzi seems to be juxtaposing *xin* as the “lord of the body” which “takes order from nothing” with it being “a pan of water” which can turn “muddy and turbid” with a “slight breeze”. He, like Mengzi, also seems to think that *xin* might not be entirely free. As when circumstances change, an individual’s *xin* can be “drawn aside”. Both thinkers seemed to suggest a movable characteristic of *xin* that is beyond its control, that *xin* is not entirely free of external coercion. Hence, Confucian freedom of choice seems to be paradoxical.

Li attempts to resolve this dichotomy by distinguishing between *actualised* freedom and *abstract* freedom. Abstract freedom refers to the freedom of choice when there are minimal or no restrictions to our choices.¹¹ Such freedom, Li contends, is “unfulfilling”. In a way, making choices without relevant societal constraints amounts to being *arbitrary*, insofar as unintelligible, choosing. Li uses his example of choosing a healthcare insurance plan in a foreign country without the relevant knowledge of the healthcare system in that country. Without any relevant knowledge of how the local healthcare works, the choices he makes are arbitrary. Actualised freedom, on the other hand, is not arbitrary (and minimally intelligible). Importantly, agent competency, Li argues, is necessary for this non-arbitrary choosing. Such competence comprises

⁸ Mencius 2011, 6A:10.

⁹ Mencius 2011, 6A:7.

¹⁰ Xunzi 2016, p. 231.

¹¹ Li 2014, p. 909.

“knowledge, aspirations, and values” of the individual.¹² All of these are derived, acquired, and cultivated by the individual, from the society he lives in.

Similarly, Ni rejects Confucian freedom as abstract freedom. Ni argues that an appropriate conception of Confucian freedom needs to account for the restraints that allow individuals to choose meaningfully. To illustrate, Ni asks: “Which one gives me more freedom, the availability of drugs that destroy myself or the knowledge and disposition to stay away from them?”¹³ Both Li and Ni will contend that “too much freedom”, i.e., abstract freedom, will mean that individual choices cannot be (socially) appropriated.¹⁴ Consequently, abstract freedom only means that individuals make arbitrary and meaningless choices.

Secondly, Li argues that a sociology has to precede and ground actualised freedom. Such a freedom, Li argues, “is not free from socialisation”. He then argues: “The relevant question here is not how persons can be free of socialisation, but rather what kind of socialisation is conducive to personal autonomy to freedom”.¹⁵ Indeed, an important difference between arbitrary choosing and knowledgeable choosing lies in learning, one which heavily relies on the kind of society in which an individual was brought up. Li argues that for an individual to make meaningful choices, consequently realising his freedom, he needs to know right from wrong.¹⁶

Now, the paradox is thus resolved if we understand Mengzi and Xunzi to be describing the distinction between *actualised* and *unactualised* freedom, and not a dialectic of *abstract* freedom. When individuals lose their *xin*, it implies that certain socialisation and cultivation processes have gone wrong in their lives insofar as they lose their sensitivity, and insofar as they lose their knowledge of right and wrong. Indeed, when Li first arrived in the United States, he had no knowledge of the local healthcare plans. He, in stricter terms, was not socialised in the States. As such, he did not know what the right or wrong insurance plan for him was. He thus had not *actualised* his freedom even though he had *abstract* freedom. Similarly, when Mengzi was discussing individuals losing their *xin*, he was referring to how changes or the degradation of social values can desensitise man to the choices he makes. Thus, even though he is *abstractly* free, social conditions can render his freedom *unactualised*.

Both Li’s and Ni’s conception of Confucian freedom is rather Hegelian. In Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, he wrote that:

We are not one-sidedly within ourselves, but willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other, even while knowing ourselves in this limitation as ourselves. In this determinacy, the human being should not feel determined;

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ni 2002, p. 131

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 131-32

¹⁵ Li 2014, p. 906. Li borrows a feminist concept of freedom in conceptualising Confucian freedom. See also pp. 905-07.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 911-12. An interesting note here is that this view seems to push Li into accepting some form of moral relativism. Since the knowledge of right and wrong is largely a social process, it would mean that right and wrong are defined within a specific social context.

on the contrary, he attains his self-awareness only by regarding the other as other.¹⁷

We can understand Hegel here to say some self-imposed limitations constitute actualised freedom. Such self-imposed limits are arguably necessary for us to realise, or actualise, freedom. Freedom without such restrictions is merely *abstract*, or negative freedom that is juxtaposed with actualised freedom. In a Confucian context, we can see this “determinacy” as a form of “self-overcoming, self-cultivation, and self-realisation”.¹⁸ In many ways, Hegel and the Confucians thought that actualised freedom always comes with limits.

Hence, it is clear that Li’s conception of Confucian freedom consists of two important ideas. First, it refers to an individual’s choice and decision-making. Second, it is predicated upon a sociology that paradoxically provides the individual constraints and the knowledge that makes his choice and decision-making process intelligible. Li’s conception thus sets a ground for a political philosophy that safeguards individual freedom. He is concerned with the social parameters that both restrict and inform people of their choices insofar as it is meaningful to them. We must credit Li for his endeavours in procuring ground for a contemporary Confucian political philosophy that safeguards individual autonomy and freedom. My contention, however, is with Li’s stronger claim that Confucian freedom is manifested in “choosing the good”, or *ze shan* (择善).¹⁹ That is, individuals only *actualise* their freedom if they are *given* a choice to do good; *actualised* freedom is manifested in choosing the good.²⁰

3. Evaluating Li’s Conception of Freedom

I now move on to critique Li’s conception of Confucian freedom as reconstructed above. First, there is an inferential leap in Li’s argument. He argued that actualising Confucian freedom relates to choices and decision-making. These choices and decision-making processes are then limited and informed by a sociology. However, these do not necessarily mean that actualised freedom is manifested in an individual’s choosing of the good. It *can* be manifested as such, but not necessarily. Second, it seems counterintuitive to limit actualised freedom to merely choosing the good. It is one thing to say that individuals *can* only actualise their freedom when equipped with the competence to choose the good and another to say that individuals only actualise their freedom when they *do* choose the good.²¹ Li seems to conflate these two notions consistently throughout his essay. For example, he writes that “freedom is realised in choosing the good” while also saying that “the process of choosing the good is key to

¹⁷ Hegel 2016, p. 182.

¹⁸ Lee 1996, p. 369.

¹⁹ Li 2014, pp. 909-10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 911-12. As Li similarly does so, I use ‘realise’ and ‘actualise’ interchangeably throughout the essay.

²¹ Li’s essay seems to conflate these two notions consistently. For example, he writes “freedom is realized in choosing the good” while also saying that “the process of choosing the good is key to understanding Confucian freedom” (Li 2014, p. 912).

understanding Confucian freedom". By delineating this ambiguity, I will show that the former has counterintuitive implications. Holding the latter does not necessarily mean that we ought to accept the former.

To justify why Confucian freedom cannot be restricted to merely choosing the good, let us consider several implications. One problematic implication with this conception is that it unnecessarily restricts our common understanding of freedom. Notice that Li and Ni are contending that freedom can *only* be actualised when one chooses the good. That is, choices that are not good, or choices that do not direct us to the good, are unfree choices.²² This idea of 'choosing the good' runs rather contrary to our intuitive understanding of how freedom is actualised. That is, they are saying freedom cannot be actualised if our choices never lead us to the good, and that we only actualise our freedom if our choices lead us to the good. To further illuminate this, let us consider a thought experiment.

The Confucian Matrix

Suppose you are living in this perfect world where you do not have to make bad choices. Referring back to Ni's example, suppose there are no drugs in this world for one to indulge in. One day, a man named Confucius comes along telling you that you are living in a virtual world: a Confucian Matrix. He then offers you two pills. The red pill will transport your mind back to reality, one less perfect and plagued with options which allow you to make bad choices. The blue pill will erase your memory, and you will remain in the virtual world.²³

If one were to accept Li's and Ni's conception of freedom, we ought to pick the blue pill. That is, we *ought* to choose to surrender genuine actualised freedom for the good. Notice that you are not more informed in one reality or the other. In both realities, you are well aware of the existence and the harms of drugs. But in the perfect reality, no one does drugs, and therefore drugs have no influence or impact in your life. In that sense, you are consistently 'choosing the good', i.e., not doing drugs. However, most of us would find this perplexing. This is because their conception of freedom compromises an everyday notion of freedom for one that necessitates choosing the good. Such a conception of freedom requires us to make a huge commonsensical concession.²⁴

Another explanation for why Li holds actualised freedom as 'choosing the good' is textual. An example is in Li's reference to texts which explicate 'choosing the good'

²² Now, Li would say that the uninformed choice is not a free choice. However, this is very different from saying that choices that are not good are not free choices. The latter is quite counterintuitive.

²³ Li pointed out that my thought experiment has an inherent bias. It is forcing us to consider a reality that we are living in and a reality that we *could* be but not living in. Indeed, Confucian philosophy rarely deals with hypotheticals and often is interested in real-world issues. This is a relevant problem that motivates future discussions. I will not be discussing this here.

²⁴ Their arguments are not without merit. Both authors intend to justify some form of curtailment in society. That is, to limit people's choices, they are in a better position to make choices which ultimately benefit themselves and others. In Li's essay, he needed this conception of freedom as the foundation to construct a Confucian concept of equality and justice. This is a rather Hegelian concept of freedom. But I attempt to accommodate their considerations with my new proposal of Confucian freedom.

and ‘holding to it’.²⁵ Specifically, he is attempting to justify the type of choices Confucians advocated in the past. For example, he quotes the *Zhongyong* – “the authentic person chooses the good and holds firmly onto it” – to justify the claim that actualised freedom is about choosing the good.²⁶ Similarly, he quotes Confucius: “I learn broadly so I can choose the good and follow it”. However, these texts are explicitly addressing how one *ought* to practice one’s freedom. Specifically, they address how one *ought* to choose *given* that they have adequate knowledge about their options. They are making normative claims of what we *ought* to do with our freedom, i.e., how we ought to make our choices insofar as they direct us to the good.²⁷ Here, Li made a subtle descriptive-normative leap in his interpretation of these texts. To say that actualised freedom is choosing with acquired competence is to make a *descriptive* claim about freedom. On the other hand, to say that freedom is choosing the good is to make a *normative* claim. Li’s initial proposal of actualised freedom is descriptive. As such, in equivocating ‘choosing with competence’ with ‘choosing the good’, he shifted from a descriptive account to a normative account.

Thus, if we are to take Confucian freedom seriously, we need to reconstruct a less radical view of freedom. In the next section, I will reconstruct Li’s stronger claim that actualised freedom necessarily manifests itself in choosing the good. I will argue for a more palatable account that actualised freedom manifests in the process of choosing itself. Particularly, I focus on the interactions of *xin* with our natural inclinations in the choosing process. In doing so, I maintain two things. First, I maintain that Li’s argument that freedom refers to one’s choosing, and that a sociology precedes such choosing. Second, I will allow that actualised freedom means choosing that which is not good. The second aspect of Confucian freedom should be less restrictive and more palatable. In doing this, I will emphasise the phenomenological aspect of choosing in conceptualising actualised freedom.

4. Freedom as a Consciousness of the Mediating *Xin*

In this section, I will argue that Confucian freedom should be understood as an experience of *xin* mediating our impulses to act.²⁸ ‘Impulse’ here could refer to desires or natural dispositions. For Xunzi, the unmediated *xin* acts purely on desires; for Mengzi, the unmediated *xin* acts purely on our natural dispositions, i.e., the four moral sprouts. Instead of understanding it as merely ‘choosing the good’, I argue that it is more palatable to see freedom as an experience *of* the choosing process. Similarly, Lee Seung-Hwan claimed that actualised freedom “can be achieved not by securing more options, but by overcoming one’s lower desires while spontaneously (as well as

²⁵ Li 2014, p. 910.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 909.

²⁷ I am not saying that freedom needs to be solely descriptive. However, we have to first establish what freedom is. And the answer to that question is descriptive.

²⁸ I use ‘mediation’ broadly here. It could mean ‘subversion’, ‘prohibition’, ‘alteration’, ‘intervention’, etc. Due to the highly debatable nature of *xin*, I try to be as general and liberal with the use of ‘mediation’ here. For example, mediation for Xunzi could mean ‘subversion’ of desires. It could also mean an ‘alteration’ of reasons-desires. Nevertheless, it should not affect the contentions I am making.

intentionally) internalising community norms".²⁹ In a way, I am attempting to explain how one actualises one's freedom even during the process of gaining competency. Consequently, I deny that actualised freedom is merely choosing the good. Rather, it is an experience which arises when we are aware that we have choices.

I first invite us to recall a time when we were aware of our freedom: a time when we were conscious of being free. Some of us would point to a time when we had to make tough decisions. Some of us will point to the present time. Perhaps right now, when I am writing this paper, I am free to give up. Nevertheless, notice that being conscious of our freedom does not necessarily entail us making a discrete decision. Instead, freedom is being conscious that amidst many impulses, say, giving up on this paper, *xin* mediates these impulses: it stops me from acting *spontaneously* or *impulsively*. As such, we do not say that a bird is *free* as humans are. This is because birds only act on impulses; they lack *xin*. Humans possess *xin*, which functions to stop us from acting impulsively, i.e., mediate our impulses. This mediation manifests itself as a *choice*, or rather, an awareness that we can *choose*. Because we do not act impulsively for most of the time, we are often conscious of *choice*. Thus, if choice implies freedom, then it logically follows that mediation leads to the experiencing of freedom. To illustrate this point further, let us consider Xunzi's and Mengzi's views of *xin*.

Xunzi viewed *xin* as capable of making choices amongst the many desires we have. In Winnie Sung's words: "there is a range of possibilities for *xin* to choose from and some possibilities are associated with *qing* [情]."³⁰ Feelings constitute the background of possible factors for the consideration of *xin*".³¹ Throughout her essay, she uses the term 'deliberate' to describe the subversive function of *xin*. Similarly, I use 'mediate' to describe this function. Sung interpreted Xunzi to say that *xin* mediates its desires by allowing or disallowing them to be the reason for our actions.³² To clarify, let us consider an example. Suppose I desire fruit juice because I crave for a sweet beverage. Upon deliberation, that is *xin*'s mediation, I choose to get it not because I crave for sweet beverages, but because I need the vitamins fruit juice has. Here, *xin* mediated my desire for sweet drinks by disallowing it to be the reason for my getting the juice. Sung highlighted an important aspect of *xin* here: the 'choice' which *xin* made here is a manifestation of its mediating function. As such, the freedom which we experience, based on Xunzi's account, is not related to *xin* making choices, but rather *xin* mediating our desires (i.e., impulses). This mediation results in a choice, because *xin* 'chose' to disallow my desire as a reason to act.

I now move on to Mengzi's views of *xin*. His views are very different from Xunzi. The challenge here is to explain what does *xin* have to mediate if Mengzi believed that one's impulses would naturally lead one to do good. My response is that Mengzi's view of mediation is one that 'pushes' our natural moral inclinations into consistent actions. The choice involved here is whether to act on these inclinations or not. Mengzi viewed *xin* to consist of natural dispositions towards the good. In 6A:6, he made his

²⁹ Lee 1996, p. 369.

³⁰ *Qing* roughly translates to emotions or feelings.

³¹ Sung 2012b, p. 375.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 376.

famous metaphysical claim that *xin* consists of the ‘four sprouts’ which are the foundation for moral goodness. Answering the question: ‘what roles does *xin* play vis-à-vis cultivating these “four sprouts”?’ will highlight how *xin* mediates our impulses. Bryan van Norden responds that “all humans have incipient virtuous dispositions which they are capable of bringing into play via ... ‘concentration’ [i.e., deliberation]”.³³ Van Norden uses ‘concentration’ to reflect what Mengzi might refer to preventing *xin* from being distracted from our desires.

Now, what is the mediation which *xin* makes here? *Xin* chooses whether to ‘concentrate’ on its innate dispositions towards the good, or to *not* ‘concentrate’ and allow itself to be distracted by our desires. In other words, *xin* has a choice to maintain its self-consciousness or to allow itself to be distracted. It is mediating itself from being distracted. As a further illustration, I refer to Mengzi’s famous story of the child falling into a well in 2A:6. When we see a child in distress, Mengzi claims that our *xin* feels compassion in response to the child’s distress.³⁴ Our choice comes in whether to act under this compassion or to subdue our actions despite having this compassion. The former is what van Norden refers to as ‘concentrate’. Notice that Mengzi attested that we only have the *capacity* to do good. Actualising it requires our *xin* to mediate, specifically to stop, itself from ‘losing itself’. Thus, the freedom we experience here, i.e., whether to save the child or not, is experiencing *xin* mediating itself from being lost. That is why most of us would hesitate to do good even though we know so clearly that it is the right thing to do. At that moment of hesitation, we experience freedom.

From the two accounts, I establish that choice is a manifestation of *xin*’s mediating our impulses. As *xin* stops or encourages us to act in a certain way, we realise that we are confronted with a choice. When we realise that we are confronted with a choice, only then do we realise our freedom.

5. Freedom in Cultivation

I should have established that actualising freedom involves being conscious of *xin*’s mediation of impulses. Both Mengzi and Xunzi have highlighted that this mediation allows us to experience choice before *xin* makes any decisive choices.³⁵ I now turn back to the initial motive of Li and Ni in arguing that Confucian freedom is choosing the good. Their motivations are to argue for a sociological groundwork for individuals to actualise freedom in choosing and doing the good. For this, individuals require competence in exercising their freedom.³⁶ Previously, I criticised Li for making a descriptive-normative leap in his argument. In this section, I attempt to remedy this leap, preserving the idea that actualised freedom consists of giving individuals the

³³ van Norden 1992, p. 173. Translation of *si*.

³⁴ Mencius 2011, 2A6.

³⁵ I am cautious of my writing here. There is a difference in saying ‘conscious of choice’ and ‘making a choice’. The former describes the experience when we are confronted with options and are compelled to make a choice. There is no discrete choice being made. The latter describes the actual choosing. We cannot possibly make a choice without first being conscious of the choices.

³⁶ This concern is raised by Ni as well, as Confucian cultivation is oftentimes seen as a means to restrict freedom (Ni 2002, pp. 130-31).

competence to choose. To do so, I offer a conception of actualised freedom that emphasises Confucian cultivation of the individual's *xin*.

With my conception of freedom, I will now argue that Mengzi's moral cultivation aims at preserving one's freedom. First, Mengzi claims that one can lose one's *xin* when there are extenuating circumstances. For example, Mengzi said:

When they have a constant livelihood, they will have constant minds, but when they lack a constant livelihood, they will lack constant minds. When they lack constant minds, there is no dissoluteness, depravity, deviance, or excess to which they will not succumb.³⁷

That is, Mengzi claims that one can lose consciousness of one's freedom when circumstances are sufficiently harsh. This is not difficult to accept. In the state of extreme poverty, man often resorts to violence to survive. In such situations, he has no 'choice' but to steal or rob. However, it would be a mistake to assume 'losing one's *xin*' is necessarily a bad thing.³⁸ Similarly, I could, for example, be brought up in a society where giving to charity is the norm. As such, I would mindlessly give to charity every day just because it is a social norm. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but no one would say I was free in giving to charity if I were merely acting off impulse. Next, Mengzi's moral cultivation is to regain and 'hold onto' one's *xin*. Now, to regain and hold onto one's *xin* is equivalent to saying that cultivation involves preserving one's consciousness of one's freedom regardless of the circumstances. That is, in extreme poverty, we are still *free* in choosing not to rob. In a mindless society, we are still *free* in choosing not to give to charity blindly, but with purpose. Thus, in Mengzi's ethics, when one is free, one will naturally be doing good.

For Mengzi, there is no problem in condoning freedom because he held that human nature is good. Thus, when left to themselves and with complete consciousness of their *xin*, man will naturally act morally. However, Xunzi sees it differently. With a similar conception of freedom, I argue that Xunzi's moral cultivation involves rectifying our freedom.

Contrary to Mengzi, Xunzi does not think that *xin* can be lost. *Xin* itself is responsible for the impulses we have. Sung argues that "*xin* is naturally attracted to the objects of *yu* [欲] and is therefore predisposed to motivate action that pursues the objects of *yu*."³⁹ It is in this sense that *yu* can influence *xin*.⁴⁰ Second, we experience freedom – as I have contended – when *xin* deliberates/mediates on the reasons which justify our impulses. However, as Sung aptly observes, "just because [*xin*] is capable of deliberating and making the right decisions, it does not mean that [*xin*] must have some ethical predisposition".⁴¹ This is not so on Mengzi's account. As such, even 'good' actions based on deliberation are not considered good by Xunzi's account; it is of

³⁷ Mencius 2011, 3A3. Sung and van Norden also make similar observations.

³⁸ This is a mistake Li and Ni made when they advocated freedom as 'choosing the good'. Because one might be blindly choosing the good without due conscious of one's choices, it would be a mistake to say that freedom is merely 'choosing the good' when some form of consciousness is necessary.

³⁹ *Yu* roughly translates to desire.

⁴⁰ Sung 2012b, p. 381.

⁴¹ Sung 2016, p. 637.

moral luck that it is good. Based on this account, freedom in Xunzi's ethics is detrimental to society, as one can be conscious of *xin*'s mediation of impulses and yet still do evil. This is where Xunzi emphasised the role of *li* [禮], i.e., ritual-propriety, in moral cultivation. *Li*, in this sense, aims to reshape the freedom of the mind, to coerce it into not only taking into account self-interests but also the interests of others. "After [*xin*] is rectified by *li-yi*", says Sung, "one's focus is shifted from what interests the self to what is in accordance with ethical standards. Such a shift of perspective entails a 'bending [*qu* (曲)]' of the perception of oneself in one's engagement with others, and yet one's commitment to adhering to ethical standards also ensures that she does not improperly abase oneself or become servile".⁴² As such, we can see that Xunzi saw that our consciousness of how *xin* mediates our impulses requires rectification. I read Sung's 'rectification' here not as restricting but broadening said consciousness. That is, *li* is not aimed at changing or distorting *xin* but rather training it to be more aware of considerations during its mediating processes. If we are left conscious of our freedom in its primitive ways, we will be doing very bad things. A caveat here is that Xunzi is not saying moral cultivation requires us to restrict our freedoms but merely to rectify how we are conscious of our impulses: we should be allowed to choose, but amidst a broader set of choices.

Thus, both Mengzi's and Xunzi's views of human nature and *xin* should have broadened the Confucian concept of freedom. As we have seen, freedom as merely 'choosing the good' is insufficient in explaining the role of freedom in either Mengzi's or Xunzi's moral cultivation. I should have demonstrated that we need to see freedom as an experience which we are conscious of *xin* mediating our impulses. The value of choices, i.e., good or bad, plays a significantly lesser role in conceptualising freedom. Rather, they are a manifestation of *xin*'s process in mediating our impulses to act in certain ways. This last section should also show that Mengzi's and Xunzi's views of freedom in their ethical theories differ so widely because of their disagreements about human nature. Mengzi's theory condones freedom since humans are innately good. Cultivation is constantly reminding oneself of one's freedom. Xunzi's theory demands rectifying freedom since humans are innately vile. Cultivation is constantly broadening the set of reasons *xin* ought to deliberate on. Both of their theories, although dialectically opposing one another, aim at allowing individuals to 'choose the good': one by condoning freedom, the other by rectifying it.

6. Conclusion

At the start, I laid out Li's conception of Confucian freedom. In formulating one, Li argues that Confucian freedom is a form of actualised freedom, one that is meaningful and fulfilling. Such a freedom is distinct from abstract freedom. Confucianism looks not at maximising options for every individual but focusses on imparting meaning to the choices individuals make. Li's contention, then, was to argue that actualised freedom manifests in individuals' choosing of the good. I then argued that such a

⁴² Sung 2012a, p. 221.

contention is too counterintuitive, as it then suggests actualising freedom means to consistently choose the good. I contended that meaningful choices need not only manifest in choosing the good but also, and more in, developing a consciousness of our choices. As such, the value of those choices would matter less significantly than said consciousness. I have also discussed how Mengzi's and Xunzi's theories of *xin*, human nature, and cultivation support my argument. Thus, Confucianism could focus its efforts in cultivating said consciousness in individuals rather than a utopic society that allows individuals to consistently choose the good.⁴³

⁴³ I would like to thank Prof. Li in guiding and critiquing my works and ideas that made this essay possible. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of four anonymous referees in commenting on my earlier draft.

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