Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture, Vol. 40 (August 2023): 181-202
DOI: 10.22916/jcpc.2023..40.181

Why the Military Needs Confucian Virtues

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Abstract

There are few institutions that talk about virtues as much as military organizations. These military virtues are not, however, possessed by individuals in isolation, they are inculcated and influenced by the countless ways in which values are shared, both among military members and between individuals and the military itself. Unfortunately, a normative framework that is extremely well-suited to capture this significant link between individual virtue and shared valuing, namely Confucian virtue theory, is too often underappreciated in militaries in general and in military moral education in particular. Focusing on the normative significance of ritual and decorum, I analyze this shortcoming and consider how more explicitly incorporating Confucian virtue theory into military education could provide a sturdier foundation for the essential link between individual virtue and collective valuing.

Analyzing the Confucian the virtue of principled ritual etiquette (*li* 禮), I demonstrate that while such attention to ritual might seem questionable when considering the classic rituals often used as examples, once the pervasive presence of military rituals becomes apparent such attention to principled ritual etiquette begins to seem far less anachronistic. Analyzing principled ritual etiquette in relationship to righteousness (*yi* 義) and benevolence (*ren* 仁), I argue that Confucian virtue theory provides a significant and distinct way to analyze modern military virtues, concluding with an analysis of how that framework can highlight the significance of ritualistic behavior on virtue development without promoting excessive and corrosive subservience.

Keywords: Virtue theory, military virtues, military education, righteousness (*yi* 義), principled ritual etiquette (*li* 禮)

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** I am grateful to thank Bryce Huebner, Bradford Cokelet, and P. J. Ivanhoe for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

I. Why the Military Needs Confucian Virtues

Philosophers do not always make the best officer candidates. I learned this the hard way during basic training when asking why we were required to shine our shoes. Now, I understood the importance of habitual action, how easy it is for the brain to reinforce patterns of behavior, that shining my shoes today meant that I was more likely to do so tomorrow. I understood that shining our shoes is something that connects us with military members in the past, and I understood the importance of attention to detail in countless military tasks. But I saw no need in an age of cyber-security and quantum physics to hold onto any and all connection with every military tradition. I also knew that military members were intelligent enough to distinguish between contexts; we did not, for example, iron a crease in our jeans when we went into town on a pass. [Or at least most of us did not, there were a few cowboy-boot wearing squadron-mates I fondly remember insisting on always ironing a firm crease in their Wranglers—always Wranglers—before going anywhere off base].

Nonetheless, those were the reasons given to shine our shoes: virtue, habit, tradition, and of course, the reason one hears in military training when all else fails, "Because we say so." None of those reasons ever spoke to me; or, more accurately, none of those reasons except the last one spoke to me. Yet when the desire to act is based solely on avoiding punishment, that motivation often evaporates as soon as the training—and the associated threat of punishment—is over. So, on my very first trip to the uniform store as a freshly minted Second Lieutenant, I bought a pair of glossy corfam dress shoes, not shining my shoes again for several years. I took pride in that fact as an independent thinker—or at least I did until I read *The Analects* by Confucius and I learned the real reason to shine my shoes that had so eluded me, a reason that is essential to developing a more robust understanding of the virtues needed for military officers.

Unfortunately, for many members in the military in Western nations, Confucian philosophy can often feel like a difficult theory to grasp. This is in no small part because Confucian thought has been used for a wide variety of different purposes: At different times, Confucius has been

portrayed as a teacher, an advisor, a philosopher, and a prophet—the name has even been used as shorthand code for a particular, traditional way of life. Unbeknownst to most military members even the name "Confucius" can be controversial, with many scholars preferring "Kongzi," a moniker more akin to the Mandarin original.[1]

Now there are, of course, countless confusing, even enigmatic philosophical figures that military members need not familiarize themselves with. Service members need not concern themselves with even a cursory understanding of the intricate predicate calculus of Frege, or of the complex moral criticisms of Nietzsche—even if some of them are far too quick to misapply the latter philosopher's aphorisms.[2] As I argue in this paper, however, Confucian virtue theory is different. Military officers would be well served to appreciate it as a distinct way of considering what virtue is and what it requires; or, at the very least, they ought to be able to appreciate the Confucian reasoning the undergirds the importance of ritual, righteousness, and demeanor in military service.

[1] In Mandarin, the philosopher's moniker combines a surname, Kong (孔) with the suffix fuzi (夫子), an honorific for "Master." Scholars writing in English today therefore generally refer to him as "Kongzi" or literally "Master Kong." Many are much more likely, however, to be familiar with the moniker of "Confucius," a result of the initial European translation of the Analects into Latin. In Latin, the name results from: Cong (family name) + Fu (from Master) + Us—the last syllable being a common Latin suffix (think of Marc-us Aureli-us) (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2001). The moniker "Confucius" has remained prevalent in English in no small part because of the gravitas the Latinization of the name bestows on him, a fact that is simultaneously appropriate, given the significance and wide-ranging influence of his philosophy, and a bit problematic, because the moniker brings with it the tacit suggestion that to be significant, one must be part of a traditional lineage stemming from Greece and Rome (Csikszentmihalyi 2020). In recognition of this historical dichotomy, the rest of this piece refers to the philosopher as "Kongzi" and the philosophy as "Confucian." Hopefully doing so can serve as a useful reminder of the fact that when we come to study theories outside of our own familiarity, we generally tend to frame them through a lens of understanding we already possess.

[2] "That which does not kill us makes us stronger" ([1889] 1968, maxim 8) and "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how" ([1889] 1968, maxim 12) are common examples of this phenomenon.

II. Values and Virtue, Individual and Collective

There are few institutions that talk about virtues and values as much as military organizations. West Point preaches "Duty, Honor, Country" (Ambrose 1999); The British Army specifies its values as "Loyalty, Courage, Integrity, Discipline, Respect for Others, and Selfless Commitment" (Values and Standards 2018); the U.S. Air Force has instantiated the core values of "Integrity first, Service before self, and Excellence in all we do" (Little Blue Book 1997); and the U.S. Marine motto "Semper Fidelis" ("always faithful") expresses a value as well.

Indeed, individuals in the military generally tend to value things like honesty, integrity, and courage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the possession of these values is not entirely contingent. The military stresses the significance of these values in the drilling, training, and education. These forms of valuing are set out explicitly and passed down through training and teaching, a fact that allows new recruits to rapidly and reliably acquire evaluative capacities that can play a role in coordinating behavior. Since human beings tend to act habitually in these situations, these deeply entrenched forms of evaluative cognition must be generated to sustain coordination and cooperation—even in situations involving high stress and high cognitive loads (Crockett 2013; Schwabe and Wolf 2013). Furthermore, any pre-exiting habits that would be problematic in these situations must be overwritten. Training must therefore be conducted in a way that prevents the trainees from backsliding into previously accepted forms of valuing.

These values are not, however, merely held by individuals, they are, in many significant ways held together.[3] The virtues and values typically possessed by individual members of the military, for instance, are intentionally cultivated, shaped, and entrenched through an insti-

[3] I do not intend to make a claim here about the underlying ontology of who or what values or possesses a given virtue or what structural mechanisms are required to value something together, as those distinctions are highly contested. I believe nothing I say here depends upon taking a stand on those debates, however. For a detailed analysis of all the possible ways agents could be claimed to value something together, see Hedahl and Huebner (2019).

tutional training program that is subject to group level pressures. That fact is significant as these training programs can be altered when empirical evidence indicates that members are not acting in accordance with those forms of valuing, i.e., when it becomes obvious that their individual virtues are not consistent with the collective's shared values. Consider, for example, difficulties with Iraqi Security Forces as U.S. forces have tried to transition out of that country. While the exact number of desertions, defections, and outright refusals to fight remains unclear, there are several documented cases where thousands of Iraqi Security Personnel either refused to fight or abandoned their post (e.g., in the Battle for Bashra in 2008 [Cordsmen and Mausner 2009, 24] and fights with Daesh forces in Mosul in 2014 [Fahim and Al-Salhy 2014]). Regardless of whether the problem could be traced to some deficiency of individual virtues, it would be incredibly shortsighted of leaders not to seek out the systemic conditions that made such displays of vice more likely. To be clear, the point is not that culture impacts individual virtue, although it certainly does, but rather that organizational and institutional structures, policies, and decisions will often have as great an impact on the display of individual virtue as will the particular virtues or vices of the individuals who comprise those organizations.[4] In fact, in the wake of these incidents, military leaders concluded that it is almost impossible to separate questions about the individual virtues of courage and fidelity from the collective questions about planning, training, and leadership that shape the background conditions in which those virtues can be displayed (Cordsmen and Mausner 2009, 25–26). Military values can be analyzed as robustly shared, therefore, because failures to live up to them can lead not only to a change in training but also a change in collective behavior and institutional procedures in an attempt to make such failures less frequent.

[4] For more on the impact of organizational structures and decisions on individual virtue, see Olsthoorn (2011). For more on the various ways these kinds of decisions can shape the way virtues and values are shared, see Huebner and Hedahl (2017).

III. Kongzi and Aristotle

While doing so risks some of the problems considered in the introduction, in order to argue that Kongzi's virtue theory offers a distinctly significant way for military officers to analyze the collective component of military values and virtues, it will be helpful to analyze it in relationship to another theory more commonly emphasized in military education: the ethics of Aristotle.[5] Like Aristotle, Kongzi offers a virtue theoretical account of ethics, taking a person's dispositions to act in certain ways to be more fundamental than are her deliberations about particular actions. In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle claims that just as the appearance of a single swallow does not make a spring, one right action does not make one virtuous (chap. 7).[6] Similarly, in Book 1 of *The Analects*, Kongzi considers how cultivating patterns of good behavior opens up the possibility of adhering to the most befitting modes of being and acting in the world.[7] To develop these patterns and to navigate the challenges of life well, the exemplary person studies and builds up the roots of her behavior rather than focusing on particular actions. According to Kongzi, "Once the roots are established, the appropriate way to live comes to life" (1.2).

Aristotle also offers an expansive account of the virtues, focusing on the social aspects of a life well lived. For example, in addition to the kind of virtues one might expect to see on any list—courage, temperance, pride, practical wisdom, and justice—Aristotle includes other virtues that may surprise a first-time reader. *Wit* is a key example. After some reflection, however, the inclusion of wit into the list of necessary virtues might strike us as much more reasonable, for while one would be hard pressed to imagine a great military leader never passing up a chance to display their buffoonery for a laugh, there may well be a deficit of excellence in those who could never tell a joke or lighten the mood in tense situations. A person without wit, expressed at the

[5] Or at least, Aristotle is much more commonly emphasized in the military ethical education in English-speaking countries.

[6] All citations of Aristotle are from *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Roger Crisp (2014).

[7] All citations of Kongzi are from "The Analects," translated by Edward Slingerland (Kongzi 2001).

right times, in the right manner, and for the right reasons would often fail to demonstrate other virtues. They would fail to be generous and beneficent; they would often fail in their duty to help others. Aristotle also cares deeply about the social aspects of a life well lived, famously claiming that human beings were fundamentally "*zoon politikon*," i.e., social animals (book 1, chap. 5). Moreover, Aristotle believed that a virtuous community was essential for a virtuous individual, in part because virtue is largely a product of the habits inculcated in us through education (book 1, chap. 3) and in part because a person could not lead a flourishing, fulfilling life if they did not have the good fortune of living in a flourishing, fulfilling community (book 4, chap. 1).[8]

IV. Rituals and Righteousness

Unlike Aristotle's virtue theory, Kongzi's virtue theory does not merely highlight the social elements of human excellence, it also centers on the way we are embedded within a particular social structure in order to advance a role-based morality that is deeply enhanced by the virtue of principled ritual etiquette (*li* 禮) (Rosemont and Ames 2016). In other words, Kongzi believed that a central part of virtuous behavior is tied up in the psychology of ritual, because rituals help dictate how social structures regulate individual action. For Kongzi, these rituals were not rare events; rituals are not confined to infrequent observations like wedding ceremonies and funeral rites. For Kongzi, rituals included a wide variety of everyday activities: the way a person receives guests (*Analects* 10.3), the manner in which they carry out daily prayers (*Analects* 10.8 and 15.1), even the demeanor with which they play the chimes (*Analects* 14.39). In all these cases, Kongzi stressed the psychological states the practitioner uses to perform these tasks, for the performance of ritual without reverence (*jing* 敬) is to be condemned

[8] In the *Politics*, Aristotle also gives a robust account of which social arrangements are more likely to cultivate excellence in both communities and individuals. Unlike Kongzi, however, Aristotle does not contend that analyzing one's particular role within that system is central to understanding virtue. I will have more to say on this distinction in a moment.

(*Analects* 3.26).

This kind of attention to ritual might seem outdated if we focus on some of the particular, perhaps antiquated rituals Kongzi used as examples. Once the way in which such rituals are ubiquitous to life in the military becomes apparent, however, such attention to principled ritual etiquette starts to seem much less anachronistic, for these kinds of military rituals are everywhere. *Reveille, Retreat, Taps,* salutes, callsigns, change of command ceremonies, attention on deck, the way one enters a superior's room or office, and the way one interacts with superiors, subordinates, and peers are all highly ritualized in a military setting.[9] For Kongzi, all of these daily rituals can help one to develop the attitudes and affects essential for the dispositions required to play one's part well.

To better understand the role of ritual in Kongzi's theory, it's important to contrast rituals with two other related but distinct practices: traditions and habits. Like traditions, rituals are something done repeatedly, but rituals are much more prescriptive in the manner in which they are performed. Consider as a contrast the tradition of the Herndon Climb at the U.S. Naval Academy. The first year at the Academy is formally completed when Midshipmen are able to place a uniform hat atop a 21-foot monument, a tradition going back almost a century. Although there are similar techniques used every year, there is no one prescribed way to meet the challenge; part of the assignment is to figure out the best way to accomplish the task. Contrast that tradition with the ritualistic way in which flags are lowered each day at military bases around the world. The way in which military members approach the flagpole, the music played, the speed at which the flag is lowered, and the way the flag is folded are all heavily prescribed.

A ritual like the lowing of the flag is also not a mere habit. In Aristotle's framework, for example, one becomes virtuous through habituation: doing the right action, in the right way, again and again, and developing a certain positive affective response to doing so. Consider, for example, the virtue of beneficence: Doing beneficent actions, in the

[9] Reveille is a bugle call used to awaken military personal, typically at sunrise. The name comes from the French term for "Wake Up. Taps is bugle called used in the U.S. military to signal the end of the military day and at military funerals. I have more to say about Retreat below and more to say about callsigns and attention on deck later in the paper.

way beneficent people do, doing so habitually, and developing a positive affective reaction for doing so helps to develop the virtue of beneficence, a fact that in turn makes one more likely to perform beneficence actions in the future. Compared with habits, however, rituals are both more prescriptive about the way in which actions are performed and more indirect in their aims. Aristotle's virtue of beneficence does not necessarily require, for example, a robust etiquette about the precise ways in which beneficence is to be offered. Moreover, while rituals and habituation are both meant to develop a moral psychology that leads to virtue, for rituals the purpose is more indirect; the intention of the ritual is to lead to virtues much more extensive than merely becoming excellent at ritualistic behavior.

The importance of this aspect of moral psychology can be further highlighted by considering the significance of the Confucian virtue of righteousness (*yi* 義). Righteousness requires the ability to be uncorrupted when being entrusted to act for the good of another. In such cases, the exemplary person must be able to ignore the trappings of wealth and rank such positions often bring with them, even if doing so means eating fewer fine foods, drinking only water, or sleeping with only one's bent arm as a pillow (7.16). In short, righteousness requires a lack of self-centeredness rooted in steadfastness in the face of temptation when entrusted with the ability to act for the good of another. It is the fundamental virtue of one who takes an oath to defend the public good and the public order (Csikszentmihalyi 2020).

Of course, numerous frameworks emphasize the importance of this kind of stewardship for public servants. For Kongzi, however, this virtue is central for all moral agents, not only for those who have taken an oath to serve the public good.[10] This is the element of Confucian

[10] Of course, numerous frameworks have the requirement to play one's part well (For more on the Stoics with respect to this requirement, for example, see Section III of Brennan [2007]). Unlike Confucian virtue theory, however, these are universal theories of morality that analyze one's current role as part of the circumstances that shape what would be the right thing to do for anyone in similar circumstances. These theories would not be properly analyzed as offering the kind of role morality in which one's role *itself* has a central part to play in moral deliberation, such that, for example, a lawyer and a non-lawyer might be required to act differently in the exact same circumstances, or soldiers and citizens might be required to act differently in the same exact circumstances.

virtue theory that is significant for present purposes, for this paper is not advocating that militaries ought to teach Kongzi merely because his theory includes a virtue of stewardship, but rather because of the role this particular virtue plays with his larger system. For Kongzi, the point of rituals and stewardship—both a near constant part of all our daily lives—is to reinforce within each of us the ability to play our particular role well within a larger collective endeavor, a fact that implies that the scope of actions that contribute to our virtue and vice is much broader than many may initially suspect.

Another way to highlight the significance of these virtues is to realize that for Kongzi even the virtue of benevolence (*ren* 仁), is heavily influenced by role morality. For while Kongzi sometimes equates benevolence with a general "caring for others" (*Analects* 12.22), in most of the textual passages, he is clear that benevolence requires much more specific behaviors. An agent ought to treat those she encounters on the street as important guests and she ought to attend to them as if they were attendants at a sacrifice (*Analects* 12.2). Therefore, she ought to reject the use of clever speech while helping others (*Analects* 1.3),[11] being respectful where she dwells, reverent where she works, and loyal whenever she deals with others (*Analects* 13.19). Benevolence entails a lack of self-centeredness in the Confucian system, not because an agent put the needs of others above her own, but because this virtue requires forming moral judgments from the collective perspective involving both one's self and others (Hall and Ames 1987). In other words, even benevolence for Kongzi involves *acting together*. In providing charity to another, for example, one should look at the act as connecting two people in a dyad. This perspective of beneficence requires not only that an agent giving charity should refrain from looking down on those requiring help, but she should also look to those in need with gratitude, for they are actually helping her by providing the opportunity to become a person. This kind of attitude, while perhaps less familiar to those not

Confucian virtue theory is different in this respect. For more on this distinction, see Applbaum (2000).

[11] In other words, those who uses the opportunity of helping others to demonstrate their own intelligence or their own acuity in moral perception are not, in actuality, helping others but rather merely looking for an opportunity to demonstrate their own virtue.

in uniform, is much more common in military settings, captured in countless military maxims like "leaders eat last"—the best, most virtuous leaders are often the ones who recognize that a hierarchy's true value comes from those at its lower ranks, not its higher ones (Sinek 2017).

Analyzing righteousness (*yi* 義), benevolence (*ren* 仁), and principled ritual etiquette (*li* 禮) in this way demonstrates that for Kongzi, virtue (*de* 德) requires not merely actions, dispositions, and attitudes but a particular demeanor as well. The way a person stands, the tone of her voice, the expression on her face, her general comportment, these can all influence others, either reinforcing their capacity to play their parts well or undermining their ability to do so. We can see the significance of these Confucian virtues better by considering the case of former Secretary Thomas B. Modly. On April 2, 2020 Secretary Modly fired Captain Brett Crozier from his\command of the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* after Captain Crozier had sent an email that criticized the Navy's management of a COVID-19 outbreak (Welna 2020). In order to analyze the two aspects of this case most commonly considered, whether Crozier's decision to send the original e-mail or whether Modly's choice to relieve Crozier of command were appropriate, an extensive amount of information about the conditions on the *Roosevelt*, and the previous steps taken by Captain Crozier, Secretary Modly, and countless others would be required.[12] Such information is not required, however, to consider Secretary Modly's actions on April 6, when he gave a speech over the Roosevelt's 1MC[13] in which he implied that Captain Crozier must have been either "naive or stupid" and that the crew were failing to "[keep] their sh*t together"—even acting cowardly (at one point Modly used the phrase "f@#&ing scared") (CNN 2020). Modly himself quickly recognized his error in addressing the crew in this manner, resigning his position the next day while claiming that he spoke to the crew "as if [he] was their commander, or their shipmate, rather than their Secretary" (Harkins 2020). This was a self-realized failure to embody Confucian

[12] Doing so would also take us too far afield from the purpose of this paper since it's less clear than an analysis of those aspects of the case can be distinctly benefitted from a Confucian analysis.

[13] "1MC" or "1st Main Circuit" is the name for the shipboard public address circuit on U.S. Navy and Coast Guard vessels.

virtues, virtues that require not only certain actions and dispositions but a wide-range of demeanors based on the particular roles we inhabit at different points of our lives—even different points of the day—virtues that are necessary for each of us to be able to play our particular role well within a larger collective endeavor (Harkins 2020).[14]

In short, Confucian virtue theory is both more extensively tied to everyday activity and more intimately and explicitly connected with the roles an agent plays within a larger community. The first feature makes the theory more widely accessible as a way of life. The second helps justify its normative force: We are called to behave in certain ways not only because doing so leads *our own* character development but also because it leads to the development of the shared virtue *of our community*. Both of these differences ought to resonate with those who serve in the armed forces. After all, a member of the armed forces ought to think of themselves as embodying a deeply collective way of life, a way of life that ought to be understood in distinctly moral terms.

V. Context Makes Virtues Matter More Not Less

Kongzi's virtue theory is not just helpful for understanding the role of ritual and demeanor in the military, the expansive and socially embedded nature of virtues in Confucian theory is particularly important for responding to one of the most pressing objections against virtue theory, an objection that particularly significant in military contexts: People routinely underestimate the extent to which minor situational variables influence morally significant behavior.[15] In *Stanley* Milgram's infamous studies, for example, the vast majority of subjects were willing to administer dangerous lethal shocks merely because they were told to

[14] To wonder, as many schooled in discussions about virtues in the English-speaking world are likely to do, what *particular* virtue Modly failed to display is to reveal the Aristotelian assumptions often lurking beneath the surface. The significance of Kongzi's framework for cases like these lies in the essential role of demeanor and personal comportment for virtue (*de* 德), such that one cannot be said to display virtue without those elements—*even if* one's actions would not by themselves count as contrary to a particular virtue.

[15] The next three paragraphs are inspired by Hakop Sarkissian (2010).

do so by an experimenter (1963). During Zimbardo's equally infamous Stanford prison experiment, the treatment of make-believe prison guards quickly turned sadistic, forcing the study to shut down mere days into experiment (1973).[16] In another often-cited experiment, whether seminary students were willing to help a needy bystander on their way to a lecture on the parable of the Good Samaritan hinged greatly on how pressed they felt for time (Darley and Batson 1973). How likely an agent is to behave appropriately turns out to hinge on numerous minor, ethically insignificant variations in context (Flannnagan 1991, 281). As many have argued, it's difficult to reconcile appeals to virtues with the empirical fact that our interactions with others are often considerably altered by minor, morally insignificant details.[17]

Now, the impact of minor changes in background conditions on

[16] There are, of course, numerous criticisms of the Stanford Prison Experiment and its conclusions. Some have argued that numerous participants did not conform to their role: There were prisoners who refused to conform and guards who refused to engage in the worst forms of cruelty (See, for example, Reicher and Haslam [2006]). Others have argued that the experimenters played an active role in eliciting behavior (See, for example, Gray [2013]). For example, guards were encouraged to discard their personal identity and to adopt a collective identity (See Haslam et al. [2019] for an excellent analysis of this critique). In essence, many object that the guards were playing a role that they were encouraged to adopt by those in leadership. The extent to which these criticisms undermine the significance of the Stanford Prison experiment depends to a large extent to what conclusions one is intending to draw from it, and to what extent those kinds of features of the case are replicated in the world. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, I suspect that the roles we take on even outside of these kinds of artificially constructed scenarios have a far greater influence on our behavior than many realize. When I served at various times as a guard, drill instructor, or basic trainer, for example, it was only in retrospect that I realized how much my behavior had been influenced by my preconceived idea of how those acting in those roles ought to behave.) Regardless of these general criticisms and the impact they ought to have on how the experiment ought to be presented and interpreted, however, so long as there was ethical misbehavior on someone's part—whether it was students or social scientists who behaved inappropriately—and so long as that misbehavior was atypical for them (i.e., they did not generally go around torturing or encouraging torture), then the experiment presents a situationalist challenge for virtue theory as it is generally presented.

[17] The literature on what is often referred to as the "situationist objection" is both sizable and growing. It would be far too long a list to consider it all here, but the list would have to include Doris (2002), Webber (2006), Prinz (2009), and Harman (2000). There are countless responses to this objection, but as Sarkissian (2010) adroitly notes, Kongzi's theory offers the opportunity for a particularly salient response not available to other virtue theories.

virtuous behavior may well pose a problem for any virtue theory that locates the possibility for virtuous actions less expansively than Kongzi's theory does. For if virtue can be demonstrated by refusing to obey an unjust authority, by maintaining empathy and professionalism in the face of a sadistic sub-culture, and by helping others even while focusing on more self-interested tasks, then the challenge is how to explain the ways in which minor and ethically insignificant background conditions often have such a significant impact on individual behavior. This problem becomes even more salient in military contexts, for far too often military leaders demonstrate an unwarranted faith that character will overcome context, come what may.[18] Even those who seek to criticize the military's display of virtue often do so within a larger framework that assumes that expressions of virtue and vice will likely transcend the context in which they are expressed.[19]

This problem dissolves, however, if one contends that virtue also requires focusing on the ways in which subtle differences of behavior can make *other people* more or less comfortable with morally inappropriate behavior as well as on to the ways in which even one's tone of voice could make other's virtuous behavior more or less likely.[20] Kongzi's insight is to highlight this deep interconnectedness of virtue. In Confucian virtue theory, we are inextricably implicated in the virtue of others, such that even minor modifications in our individual moral behavior—changing our facial expressions, posture, and other seemingly minor details of comportment—can lead to major modification in the moral actions of others. In other words, the actions of any one of us—even things as minor as one's tone of voice—become the background conditions for the actions of countless others (Sarkissian 2010). The fact that we routinely underestimate the way in which minor situational

[18] Much of military training follows rather closely to Aristotle's understanding of how virtues are developed, namely through repetitive practice under appropriate guidance and coaching. For more, see Skerker et al. (2019).

[19] A great example here is Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras's "Lying to Ourselves" (2015) in which they argue that the surprisingly common habit of lying about the completion of ancillary training will have detrimental impacts on the honesty of the troops in other contexts.

[20] For a much more detailed analysis of this point, see Sarkissian (2010).

cues influence moral behavior does not undermine the importance of virtues. On the contrary, Kongzi's virtue theory implies that this fact reinforces the need for an understanding of virtue that reaches into the vast majority of our daily interactions.

With this understanding of Kongzi's virtue theory, we can return to reconsider my one-time disdain for shining shoes. We can notice, for instance, that the act of shining one's shoes is first and foremost a ritual: It's an activity performed regularly that must be done in a certain way: the polish, the brush, the water, the cotton balls—each has their place and proper function. It allows us the chance to approach this perpetual task as a burden (as I once did) or as a chance for reflection on the days that have passed and the days to come. It provides the opportunity to remind us of our social placement, both as a member of the armed forces and as someone who has gone through however many iterations of our common rites and rituals. In other words, it offers the chance to cultivate humility, for the military is one of the few places in which those with great authority would be seen as in some way deficient if they viewed themselves as too important, too high-ranking, or even too busy to shine their own shoes.

These kinds of Confucian rituals thereby offer us a key insight into the ways that individuals are bound together with the different levels of society with which they interact. In the context of ritual practice, an agent is cultivating ways of monitoring herself, but she is doing so in a way that opens up the possibility of monitoring by others. By integrating social and self-monitoring, Confucian ethics helps to internalize values in ways that will extend beyond the context in which they are first inculcated. These minor changes in appearance and behavior shape how others are likely to interact with any particular service member, in a way that, in turn, has the ability to shape the behavior of other service members, either towards virtue or vice. In other words, this practice allows a routine opportunity to practice reflection, humility, principled ritual etiquette (*li* 禮), reverence (*jing* 敬), and righteousness (*yi* 義).

VI. Avoiding Subservience

Some may worry that given this focus on role and hierarchy, Confucian virtue theory necessarily requires military members to become excessively deferential—perhaps even submissive and subservient—and that military members will thereby become passive in the face of the military's many structural deficiencies, both moral and strategic.[21] That kind of concern, however, elides an oversimplistic view of rituals, customs, and curtsies in the Confucian framework. To the outsider or the poorly instructed service member (which is, unfortunately, far too many) military decorum and practice can look like nothing more than an oppressive kind of fetishism for "the way things have always been." When we consider the relationship between these practices and the larger military mission, however, they can begin to look quite different. The rituals, customs, and courtesies worth maintaining lay the foundation for a moral psychology in which proper performance of these activities is a key to reforming one's desires and beginning to develop the right kind of moral dispositions and demeanor required to play one's part well. This need not imply that *all* current practices ought to be venerated, nor that the military ought to fetishize ritual, decorum, or cleanliness.[22]

To see why, consider first those rituals clearly worth maintaining, rituals like saluting and calling attention when a commanding officer enters the room. These rituals are useful not because they reinforce subservience, but because they remind everyone of their role in the larger collective endeavor.[23] Those standing at attention are reinforcing their responsibilities to and through their commander, while their

[21] For example, see Dixon (1976, 185-207).

[22] The excessive focus on cleanliness because of the significance of rituals like polishing shoes was the primary concern of Dixon's (1976).

[23] Some may contend that the function of these activities is that they connect current members with the organization's history, but that more specific function can be also captured by the more general function considered above once it becomes evident that in order to play one's part well in any collective organization, members will often be required to view one's fellow participants not merely as limited to those currently engaged in the collective activity, but also as including those who have and will participate in that activity across time.

commanding officer is being reminded of her responsibility for and to her troops.[24] Reminding the commanding officer and those under her command of their respective roles (for the commander to constate, specify, and prioritize tasks and for those under her command to execute those priorities) need not reinforce a sense of superiority on the part of the commander, nor an attitude of subservience on the part of the subordinate. Indeed, excellent execution can be consistent with, and sometimes even require discussion, disagreement, and dissent—even disobedience in cases involving unlawful or immoral orders (Roush 1998).

Consider as well the multifaceted norms regarding *call signs*. Anyone who seen movies like *Top Gun* will recognize the uncommon monikers pilots use to refer to one another (e.g., Maverick, Goose, Ice Man, Hilts, etc.). What may be harder for the casual viewer to discern are the rich contextual conditions that dictate when a pilot ought to refer to a superior officer by their call sign (generally, when discussing the activities essential for flying) and when they ought to refer to her by rank or honorific (generally, when the superior officer is constating, specifying, or prioritizing orders). The subtilties of these norms help maintain the kind of egalitarian standing that better foster aviation excellence, without undermining the kind of command authority required for military execution.[25]

Appropriate customs, courtesies, rituals, and decorum can thereby play an important role in fostering those military members who have an almost effortless way of dealing with subordinates that is amicable and sympathetic without undermining either the significance of their rank differences or the importance of accomplishing the mission. They can also help develop those military members who approach their superiors (especially those in their chain of command) with deference without becoming anything close to docile, passive, or meek. Both of these categories of service members have a way of demonstrating what Kongzi said over two thousand years ago, that when it comes

[24] For more on why military duties are generally not analyzed as directed duties owed to a commanding officer, see Hedahl (2013).

[25] See, for example, Helmreich and Davies (2004).

to the countless ritual encounters we find ourselves in every day, it is harmonious ease which is to be valued (*Analects* 1.12). The virtuous subordinate displays righteousness (*yi* 義) when telling their superior a hard truth even if doing so could have negative consequences on her career. The virtuous leader displays righteousness when she seeks to demonstrate the kind of tough love required for improving the character of the subordinates with whom she has the most cordial of relationships, and when she seeks to acknowledge the noble features of those under her command that are most likely to cause her difficulty. We recognize a lack of this kind of righteousness when we notice the vices created from its absence: when one is too quick to kiss up the chain of command and kick down it. Thankfully, once both the underlying purpose of military rituals, customs, and courtesies and the link between these practices and the virtues of principled ritual etiquette (*li* 禮), reverence (*jing* 敬), and righteousness is better understood, military leaders can better delineate the rituals, customs, and courtesies that are worth maintaining from those that are not.

VII. Conclusion

Militaries spend so much time focusing on character traits that are on public display because those virtues are not just essential for making *each of its members* more virtuous, they are essential for making all its members more virtuous *together*. So, while some may try to reduce ethics to nothing more than "doing the right thing when no one else is looking"—something that is merely a part of a life well lived—Confucian virtue theory helps highlight that doing the right thing when everyone else is equally important, and that it is a requirement that requires much, much more of its members than many may have initially suspected.

Through its embedded practices, militaries often tacitly demonstrate the significance of the ways in which individual virtue is deeply integrated with collective values. Far too often, however, the way that military virtue is taught often downplays the significance of this relationship. The most obvious way to fix that oversight is to ensure that

Confucian virtue theory is explicitly included in more military education classes. Fortunately, those changes are already underway: Confucian virtue theory has been taught at the United States Naval Academy since 2017 and at the United States Naval Community College since 2020. I hope that this article can perhaps encourage that change to become more widely adopted. Doing so would not only offer a chance to present a distinct theoretical approach to virtue, it could challenge students to consider just how broad the scope of activities that influences their virtue may be. Moreover, this change offers the opportunity to present a distinct—and far too often unconsidered—theoretical defense of the countless norms of ritual, custom, and decorum that are central to the lives of service members. Even if that kind of virtue education is not widely embraced, my hope is that military educators and trainers will better familiarize themselves with this particular theoretical framework in order to improve the way that they talk with their students about the underlying theoretical justifications for so many of the military rituals and curtsies that those students will encounter throughout their military service.

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■ Submitted: 10 Jan. 2023
Accepted: 28 April 2023