**XIN, TRUST, AND CONFUCIUS’ ETHICS**

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**Introduction**

Confucius uses the term *xin* 信 in about twenty passages in the *Analects*. The frequency of his usage would suggest that *xin* has a significant place within his ethics. The main aim of this essay is to offer an account of the roles played by *xin* within the ethics of Confucius. To have a clear understanding of these roles, however, we need first to understand what is encompassed within his notion of *xin*. This essay thus begins with an attempt to delineate the Confucian conception of *xin*, as it is presented in the *Analects*. The notion of *xin* is frequently taken to be largely isomorphic with the notion of trust, and passages involving *xin* are commonly translated in terms of “trust” (and its cognates). This essay, however, will argue that Confucius’ notion of *xin* does not quite map onto the notion of trust as usually understood in contemporary Western contexts. Rather, to understand better what Confucian *xin* amounts to, we need to compare and contrast the Confucian conception of *xin* with contemporary Western accounts of trust. This will enable us to understand more precisely what *xin* is, as well as how *xin* relates to morality. With this in hand, we can delineate the roles that Confucius ascribes to *xin* in social and political contexts.

Before I commence, it would be helpful to make clear the precise scope of this essay. First, the term “trust,” as it is employed in Western contexts, is polyvalent and embraces a number of different usages. Commentators have discussed trust as it pertains to groups, procedures, institutions, law, and government. Within the context of this essay, I shall be primarily concerned with what has commonly been called interpersonal trust, that is, the trust that one person has toward another person. In claiming that “A trusts B,” we are claiming that person A stands in a particular kind of relation to person B. This essay will be concerned primarily with this kind of relation, and with how it relates to Confucian *xin*.

Second, as just mentioned, there has been considerable discussion among Western commentators about the nature of trust. As is not unexpected, there is also considerable disagreement among them as to what trust in fact involves. It would clearly be impossible for this essay to traverse the entire literature on this issue. I shall therefore attempt only to locate Confucius’ notion of *xin* relative to three plausible views on the trust relation—namely, those offered by Annette Baier, Carolyn McLeod, and Amy Mullin. Doing this should be sufficient to establish what *xin* is, and, perhaps more importantly, what it is not.

Finally, this essay will limit itself to analyzing the conception of *xin* that is found in the *Analects*. While some account has been taken of the usage of *xin* in the period contemporaneous with Confucius, I shall not be referring in this essay to the usage of
xìn outside the *Analects*. The aim is rather to uncover and reconstruct from within the *Analects* the nuances that point to Confucius’ own understanding of what xìn encompasses, and the role that xìn plays within his ethics.

*Confucius’ Use of Xin and Western Notions of Trust*

As mentioned, commentators have often taken xìn to be more or less equivalent to the Western concept of trust. A glance through the many available translations of the *Analects* into English suggests that the preferred translation of xìn is in terms of trust and its cognates.²

One significant feature of xìn, suggested by the character itself, is that xìn is primarily concerned with speech acts. The character is comprised of a radical, ren 人, linked to yan 言, speech. This suggests that the person with xìn (the “trustworthy person”) is one who does as she has said she would.

Evidence that xìn is tied to abiding by one’s speech can be found in *Analects* 15:5, where Confucius states:

> If in word you are conscientious and trustworthy (言忠信) ... then even in the lands of the barbarians you will go forward without obstruction.³

Here xìn is evidently applied to one’s word (言). Again, that xìn is tied to speech is also made clear in *Analects* 5:10:

> I used, after listening to a man’s words, to trust him to act according to them (听其言而信其行). Now, having listened to a man’s words, I go on to observe his deeds.⁴

Here, too, xìn is seen to relate specifically to following through with what one has said.

That xìn is tied to one’s speech is reinforced by the fact that commentators sometimes translate xìn as “trustworthiness in word,” even in contexts where the original Chinese does not specifically mention speech. For example, D. C. Lau translates *Analects* 7:25 thus:

> The Master instructs under four heads: culture, moral conduct, doing one’s best and being trustworthy in what one says (文，行，忠，信)

—where the last clause simply reads xìn in the actual text. Ames and Rosemont’s translation of xìn in the same context makes even more evident that it is tied to speech: they translate the same final clause as “making good on one’s word.” (Note also that Ames and Rosemont generally translate xìn as making good one’s word.) Arthur Waley similarly translates xìn in the passage above as “keeping one’s promises,” and elsewhere as “[being] true to one’s word.”⁵

There is thus considerable evidence that xìn for Confucius is primarily concerned with verbal commitments with respect to one’s deeds (or, more broadly, with commitments that have been represented specifically in some way).⁶ That is, one manifests one’s xìn when one performs as one has said one would (or, more broadly, as one has represented). Given this characterization of xìn, there are arguably

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some significant differences between xin and trust (in its contemporary Western sense).

Perhaps the most noteworthy is that the concept of xin is narrower in its application than the Western concept of trust. As mentioned, xin is concerned with speech, with abiding by one’s word. In contrast, “trust” casts a much wider net. While a considerable portion of the Western literature on trust is concerned with the forms of trust that are tied to promise-making or explicitly linguistic commitments, a number of recent writers on trust point out that trust can exist in contexts where there is no such explicit linguistic (or otherwise representative) commitment.

Annette Baier’s well-known example of the babysitter may aptly be used to illustrate this point. Baier’s example involves a situation where we hire a babysitter without a legal contract specifying her duties, and indeed without any form of signed agreement. Perhaps more significantly for our present discussion, the babysitter also offers no verbal commitment on what she specifically proposes to do while babysitting. In such a context, Baier points out that when we trust this babysitter with our children, such trust takes place against the backdrop of various social norms relating to her role as babysitter. Thus, we would, when we repose our trust in this babysitter, trust her to do what is necessary to ensure the well-being of the children. Again, we would also trust her not to undertake to paint the nursery purple while we are out. That is, in trusting her, we trust that she will conform to the expectations for her role, as they are set out by certain implicit norms.

Baier’s example shows that the relation of trust (as understood in the West) can extend to transactions that do not involve explicit verbal (or otherwise linguistic) commitment on the part of the trusted person. Indeed, although Baier accepts that one can trust—or distrust—in the context of an explicit verbal commitment, she thinks that the trust relation is most aptly applied to such nonverbal contexts. She suggests that the most obvious kind of trust is the trust that obtains between an infant or young child and her caregiver. A trusting young child expects her caregiver to do certain things, though she may be incapable of articulating this trust. Indeed, we would feel that a violation of this inarticulate trust by the child is far more reprehensible than a violation of the trust given by an adult in a verbally explicit context.

Confucius’ concept of xin, insofar as it relates to abiding by one’s explicit verbal commitments, is thus narrower in its range of application than its corresponding Western concept. The latter includes abiding by both explicit verbal (or otherwise representative) commitments and, in contexts where such commitment is absent, by the tacit social norms that obtain in these contexts.

Another difference between the two relates to the criteria that must be fulfilled in order to be a person with xin, as opposed to a person who can be trusted. One dictionary offers as its primary definition of trust “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength or truth of someone.” Recent philosophical work on trust has put some emphasis on the criteria that the trusted person, or trustee, must fulfill in order to subsist in a trust relation. Commentators have argued that for the relation “A trusts B” to obtain, various conditions must be fulfilled with respect to the character, motivations, and attitudes of the trustee.
For example, Baier argues that for this relation to obtain, the truster must believe in the trustee’s good will toward her:

What is the difference between trusting others and merely relying on them? It seems to be reliance on their goodwill toward one, as distinct from their dependable habits, or only on their dependably exhibited fear, anger, or other motives compatible with ill-will toward one, or on motives not directed on one at all.

For Baier, in order for a mother to trust the babysitter to look after her children well, she must perceive that the babysitter—in addition to having other attributes such as being responsible, capable with children, et cetera—has an attitude of good will toward her. In contrast, she can only be said to rely on the babysitter if, for example, she perceives the latter to bear her ill will but fears her too much to do anything other than look after her children well.

Carolyn McLeod disagrees with Baier that trust involves a belief by the person who trusts that the trustee has an attitude of goodwill toward her. She argues that one can trust a person who does not specifically have good will toward one. Instead, she maintains that one must take a person to have moral integrity in order to trust that person. McLeod points out that, when we place our trust in a doctor to give us an honest diagnosis on whether we have a terminal or life-threatening illness, we take him to be a person of moral integrity—that is, someone who will be fair in his treatment of his patients, and will abide by the standards of his profession. We would not typically trust a doctor who is perceived as prone to exaggeration, or vicious, or who plays favorites among his patients. In short, we trust a person insofar as we think she has “a commitment to doing what is right in the circumstances.” We only rely on a person if we expect her to act in a certain way on the basis of nonmoral dispositions.

Amy Mullin in turn disagrees with both Baier and McLeod. She holds that the trust relation involves the truster believing the trustee neither to bear her good will nor to be a person of moral integrity. Instead, she maintains that the trust relation only obtains when the truster believes the trustee is “internally committed to a particular social norm . . . and that [she] considers that social norm to be of . . . very significant importance in some domain.” Within the domain of the workplace, for example, she writes:

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\text{Trusting someone to do their job well . . . involves assuming that the one trusted is committed to being good [at that job] for reasons internal to that job.}^{14}
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Instances of reasons internal to a job would include “commitment to an ideal of professional competence or an understanding that the profession is socially necessary, in contrast to reasons directed only at what that job can allow one to achieve, such as monetary compensation and prestige” (ibid.). Thus, we would trust her doctor if we perceive that he believes in, and adheres to, the ideals of the medical profession, or if we perceive that he is dedicated to his calling as a doctor. (This trust relation continues to hold even if he is a serial womanizer outside his working life, so overall moral integrity is unnecessary to the trust relation.) In contrast, we can only be said
to rely on our doctor if we perceive that he continues in his very capable doctoring for the sake of wealth and prestige.

As the summary above will have made clear, there is considerable disagreement in the current Western corpus as to what is necessary for a relation of trust to subsist between two persons. It can be no part of this essay to engage in, or offer a resolution to, these disputes. (That would have to be the subject of another essay, if not an entire book.) Instead, as mentioned earlier, a key aim of this essay is to understand the notion of Confucian *xin* by comparing and contrasting it with these Western notions of trust. By situating Confucian *xin* relative to these accounts, I hope to able to offer a reasonable delineation of what *xin* consists in, and also of what it excludes.

What is common to all three accounts above of the trust relation (and indeed of many other accounts) is that they make an effort to distinguish between the relation of trust and the relation of reliance. But which of these relations is aptly accorded to the person who has Confucian *xin*? That is, is the person with *xin* more aptly to be seen as someone who can be trusted, or as someone who can merely be relied on? Or is it the case that *xin* cannot be reasonably mapped onto either trust or reliance? In the rest of this section, I will try to answer this question by considering various texts from the *Analects* against the backdrop of the accounts provided by Baier, McLeod, and Mullin.

We may consider first *Analects* 13:20, where Confucius discusses the character of a gentleman or *junzi*. Asked about the man who would be two grades below the gentleman, Confucius states:

> A man who insists on keeping his word (信必信) and seeing his actions through to the end can perhaps qualify to come next, even though he shows a stubborn petty-mindedness （硁硁然, 小人哉）.

This passage shows that one can be a person of *xin* without being a person of high, or well-respected, moral character. Here Confucius delineates a man who blindly and stubbornly insists on keeping his word, and who is petty-minded in doing so. According to Confucius, such a man would fall short of being a Confucian moral gentleman. Indeed, the very fact that he follows stubbornly and by rote the rule of abiding by his word would clearly indicate that he is not a Confucian moral gentleman. The latter, as various commentators have pointed out, is one who exercises moral judgment and discretion and is flexible in fitting the action to the situation (“In his dealings with the world the gentleman is not invariably for or against anything. He is on the side of what is moral”—*Analects* 4:10). The petty-minded person with *xin* would lack the wider moral perspective: he focuses only on the “small” things and follows through with a rule willy-nilly.

The deficiencies of such a person can be made clear by drawing on an example by Wittgenstein, quoted by Lon Fuller. Wittgenstein describes in this example a situation where a mother leaving to attend a matinee says to her babysitter, “While I’m gone teach my children a game.” The babysitter agrees, and in the mother’s absence then teaches her children to throw dice for money or to duel with kitchen knives.
One might aptly see this babysitter as a person of xin, who reliably follows through with what she has been tasked to do, but who lacks the moral understanding to recognize what would be appropriate in this context. This example makes clear an important aspect of appropriately keeping to one’s word—namely, that it involves some understanding of the kinds of norms that should govern one’s behavior in a given context. A “small-minded” follow-through of one’s verbal commitments without the requisite understanding of what is morally appropriate can lead one to do something silly or even dangerous.

Given these considerations, the person of xin would in McLeod’s account fail to qualify as a person who can be trusted. Her character and motivations are evidently inappropriate for McLeod’s moral person. For McLeod, the doctor who possesses moral integrity is committed to doing what is right in the circumstances, and this surely involves a moral judgment, and a sensitivity to and understanding of the circumstances and needs of her various patients. In contrast, the person who is two grades below the junzi evidently lacks all these qualities, since he is portrayed as blindly committed to following through with his word, no matter what.

One might argue, however, that this person might still fulfill the conditions for being a trusted person on Mullin’s account. For Mullin, trust is to be accorded to someone who is internally committed to a social norm and recognizes that norm to be significant in a given domain. Significantly, Mullin accepts that trust can be accorded to persons who do not possess moral integrity. For example, she argues that a mob boss can trust his gangster henchman insofar as that henchman is internally committed to a social norm (namely, the code of the Mafia) and recognizes that norm to be significant in a particular domain (namely, that of the mob).

For Mullin, of course, the social norms that a trusted person abides by may not be explicit, and such a trusted person may abide by them without explicit verbal commitment. In contrast, xin (if I am right) is narrower as it pertains to cases involving explicit verbal (or otherwise representative) commitment. Nevertheless, we can conceive of a situation where a mobster gives a verbal undertaking to his boss to “rub someone out.” For Mullin, it appears that we can appropriately say that the boss here trusts his henchman to eliminate this individual insofar as the latter is internally committed to gangland norms. To this extent, it might be argued that, in Mullin’s account of trust, xin may be equivalent to trust insofar as moral integrity or the capacity for moral judgment is not a necessary feature of the trusted person. This conclusion may receive some support from Analects 17: 6:

To love trustworthiness in word without loving learning (好信不好学) is liable to lead to harmful behavior (其蔽也贼).

This passage once again indicates, as I have argued, that xin is not sufficient for the possession of moral integrity or moral wholeness. Confucius holds that the person who has xin but lacks the learning that enables her to understand the larger moral issues can engage in harmful behavior. According to this account, the mob henchman can arguably be considered a person of xin (as well as a trusted person according to Mullin’s account) insofar as he is internally committed to the relevant norms.
He abides by his verbal undertaking to harm—indeed eliminate—the individual he proposes to “rub out.” Indeed, some commentators translate 贼 as “villainy”\(^17\) or “brutality,”\(^18\) thus allowing that the person of xin can engage in specifically villainous or brutal behavior. The mobster would certainly fit the bill here.

However, there are other textual grounds for holding that someone like the mob henchman does not qualify as a Confucian person of xin. Analects 1:13 notes:

To be trustworthy in word is close to being moral (信近于义) as it enables one’s words to be repeated. (emphasis mine)

The person of xin is close to being a moral person. That is, she is on her way to being, and very nearly is, a moral person. It would be hard to see the mob henchman who fulfills his verbal undertakings to torture or kill members of rival mobs and beat up shopkeepers who fail to pay protection money as being even close to moral. While the mob henchman is indeed internally committed to certain social norms, these norms are themselves immoral.

Again, in the passage from Analects 13:20, the person of xin who stubbornly insists on keeping his word is only one grade below “someone praised for being a good son in his clan and for being a respectful young man in the village.” He is also above the men in the public life of his time. The latter, Confucius notes, are of “such limited capacity that they hardly count” (ibid.). Thus, the persons neither above nor below the person of xin are immoral in any way. Rather, they are ranked according to the degree to which they are inadequate, when compared with the junzi.

Finally, the term 贼, used in Analects 17:6, can be applied over a large range of misbehaviors, and does not necessarily refer to extremely villainous or violent behavior. Given the other textual considerations listed above, it is perhaps more appropriate to see the person of xin as merely capable of behavior that might harm others (as in the case of the babysitter who teaches her charges to gamble) rather than of outright viciousness and villainy.

There are thus grounds for thinking that the mob henchman does not qualify as a person of xin, though he may qualify as a person who can be trusted on Mullin’s account. The Confucian account of xin thus does not quite map onto Mullin’s account of trust.\(^19\) More importantly, our comparison of the person of xin with Mullin’s account of the trusted person allows us to conclude that the person of xin cannot be immoral, but nevertheless is not yet fully moral. We may also conclude that, for Confucius, having xin sets one on the path to being moral. In what way does it do so?

To understand this, we have to understand Confucius’ position on the relation of speech to action. A number of commentators, most notably Herbert Fingarette,\(^20\) have appealed to the late J. L. Austin’s views to elucidate Confucius’ position. According to Austin (and other ordinary-language philosophers), a full understanding of the nature of language must involve more than a focus purely on the meaning or reference of statements. Instead, one should also consider the uses that language is put to. In particular, Austin examines the character of illocutionary acts, that is, cases in which the utterer performs a certain action by making a particular utterance. For instance, Austin notes that when someone says “I promise . . . ,” it is an act by which
she undertakes to do something; moreover, that undertaking is one that can only be made on her own behalf, not on another’s behalf.\textsuperscript{21}

Confucius, too, attends to this aspect of speech—that is, the ways in which a person’s speech may constitute an act by that person. This leads him to note that one needs to be careful about what one says:

In antiquity, men were loath to speak. This is because they counted it shameful if a person failed to keep up with her words. (4:22)

When one speaks, that speech may be an act committing one to a particular position and, in certain cases, to implicit promises to take certain future actions. One must therefore be careful of the words that one utters. Thus, Confucius sees the junzi as someone who “desires to be halting in speech but quick in action” (4:27).

Again, for Confucius, one’s manner and usage of speech is a reflection of one’s character. How one speaks—whether one is brash or polite, rash or circumspect—points to the nature of the inner person (see Analects 10:1–2). Moreover, how one’s speech relates to one’s subsequent deeds, the views that one verbally commits oneself to, even the topics that one discourses upon are reflections of personal character. The Analects notes, for instance, that “the topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder, and gods” (7:20).

Confucius’ account of xin can thus be understood against the wider backdrop of his overall views on the importance of appropriate speech, and how speech can reflect a person’s character. With this in mind, we may look at how a person’s possession of xin might reflect her underlying character and motivation. The person of xin is evidently careful when making a verbal undertaking. She ascertains that she is able to fulfill an undertaking before making one, and does not promise beyond what she can perform. While Confucius himself does not often invoke the notion of cheng 诚 or sincerity, one may aptly attribute cheng to the person of xin.\textsuperscript{22} That is, one can say that the person of xin is sincere in her attempts to ensure that others can rely on her to do as she says she will. In this regard, she may be said to be generally well-disposed toward others, since her underlying attitude toward them is that she should not fail them. She is also both scrupulous (insofar as she carefully thinks out whether she can fulfill a commitment before making it) and honorable (insofar as she ensures that she does not fail to honor her word).

Given the characterization above, we can see why having xin is close to being moral. The person of xin has some capacity for reflection, since she does not rashly make commitments but considers first whether she can fulfill them. She possesses a sense of what is appropriate, since she is concerned to ensure that her words are appropriate to her future actions. At its heart, xin is an expression of the care that one needs to take in one’s transactions with others, and the responsibility that one must fulfill toward others. It is clear, then, why having xin might be seen as being close to being moral. The person of xin possesses the underlying capacities and orientation toward others that are needed for moral cultivation. The capacity for reflection, the concern for what is appropriate, and the sense of responsibility and care that one has in one’s interactions with others are all basic features of the Confucian junzi.
However, the person of xin is not yet a moral person. She may still engage in harmful or inappropriate behaviors (as in the case of the babysitter who teaches the children to throw knives), because her capacity for reflection and her sense of what is appropriate may not be well developed, and may not extend to domains beyond that of keeping her word. Similarly, her stubborn and petty-minded determination to follow her word may also be traced to her inadequate reflection on the wider concerns at stake, and her incomplete understanding of what is most appropriate given the broader picture. Thus, she is two grades below the *junzi*.23

But the person of xin is also unlikely to be fully immoral or committed to immoral norms like the mob henchman. As mentioned, she is sincere in ensuring that she does not fail others in her undertakings. She is thus well-disposed toward others in that she is genuinely committed to ensuring that they can rely on her, and she is thus unlikely to become a mobster, who is committed to norms that require one to be ill-disposed toward most other persons. As mentioned, the mobster is committed to norms dictating periodic violence and killing. Again, commitment to the mobster’s norms may require treachery, pretense, and false undertakings—all of which are anathema to the person of *xin* (and also the sincere person).

Thus, the person of *xin* is to be contrasted to both McLeod’s and Mullin’s trusted person insofar as the former does not need to have moral integrity (as required by McLeod), but also cannot be immoral (as allowed by Mullin). Before we end this section, we can also helpfully contrast the person of *xin* with the trusted person in Baier’s account. Baier holds that the trusted person must be seen by the truster to have specific goodwill toward the latter. However, this does not seem to be necessary for the person of *xin*. The person of *xin* is not someone who has goodwill only toward certain specific individuals. Her “goodwill” is more general: she is in general well-disposed toward others insofar as she is concerned that she does not fail them.

I have examined three key readings of the trust relation by Western commentators, and shown that *xin* is not isomorphic with trust according to any of them. Can the person of *xin* then be seen as a reliable person, rather than a person who is trusted? This, too, seems unlikely. It is noteworthy that Baier, McLeod, and Mullin’s examples of the reliable person involve someone who can be relied upon to do something for the sake of their own benefit—they are people who act for monetary gain, prestige, fear of retribution, and so on. The sincere person with *xin*, however, does not act from personal advantage, but from an intrinsic concern that she fulfill her commitments to others. She is thus different from the (merely) reliable person.

The comparison above of *xin* with trust shows that *xin* does not map easily onto any current conceptions of trust. But this discussion has done more (I hope) than merely serve as an illustration of difficulties and pitfalls involved in translation. It establishes that *xin*, unlike trust, pertains primarily to linguistic commitments (or specific representations) rather than unspoken social norms. Again, it also highlights the relationship that *xin* has with Confucian morality—namely, (1) that the person of *xin* does not have to be moral, (2) that *xin* provides a basis or starting point for the development of morality, and (3) that having *xin* is incompatible with being vicious
or immoral. I now proceed to examine the social and political roles played by Confucian xin.

The Social and Political Roles of Xin

As mentioned earlier, having xin is not necessarily tied to being moral. Yet the person of xin is ranked just two grades below the junzi, and ranked higher than the officials of “limited capacity” of Confucius’ time. Again, Confucius invokes xin about twenty times in the Analects (and not always within contexts that clearly relate to the doings of the moral person). Why did Confucius accord xin such importance?

To understand this, it may be helpful to connect his views to various aspects of the epoch in which he lived. Perhaps the first and most obvious of these is the political and social instability of his time. Confucius lived toward the end of the turbulent Spring and Autumn period. Though a scion of the Zhou dynasty was nominally the ruler of China at that time, the various states were substantially independent, and frequently engaged with each other in wars of territorial expansion. In this climate, states that had made covenants with each other freely violated these covenants and changed sides. Within each state, too, treachery was common, and even relatives could not be trusted. Power was relentlessly usurped by such relatives and by chief ministers, and here, too, there was a frequent shifting of allegiances. Herrlee Creel aptly notes of this period:

An officer of Ch’u struck the keynote of the age when he said: “If we can gain the advantage over our enemies, we must advance without any consideration of covenants.”

The breaking of covenants and shifting of loyalties whenever it was expedient to do so was the norm.

It would be evident why Confucius held that xin, which involves abiding by one’s word, would be an important quality to cultivate given this climate. The person with xin, while not necessarily a person of high moral character or sound moral judgment, is at least behaviorally transparent. As a person with xin is sincere in giving her word and abiding by it, she would not be a treacherous person, who says one thing to one’s face and then plots to accomplish something entirely different behind one’s back. In a climate where covenants are habitually broken or allegiances renounced, the person of xin who abides by her word is someone in whom one can repose one’s confidence.

The importance of xin can be made clearer through a comparison between the state of affairs in Confucius’ time and the state of nature in the account provided by Thomas Hobbes. According to Hobbes, in this state, all humans are independently engaged in pursuing their own individual interests, and they may do this by any available means. The inevitable conflict of individuals, each out to pursue her individual interests, results in a cutthroat environment in which life is “nasty, brutish, and short.” According to Hobbes, humans avoid this situation by entering into a social contract, wherein each person agrees to cede certain liberties to a political authority, which
then institutes laws and provides order so that all can lead longer and more fruitful lives.

In the age of Confucius, conditions in China were not unlike those in the (hypothetical) Hobbesian state of nature. As Creel writes:

[T]here was almost no basis for authority and order, except for the shifting balance of brute force.  

Here, as in the state of nature, the only thing that mattered was brute force and the unrelenting advancement of one’s own individual interests. In this context, it was hardly surprising that Confucius saw xin as an important quality. The person of xin is essentially one who abides by her word. Brute force and self-aggrandizement are thus not the only things that matter to her. Just as Hobbes’ social contract creates stability because people abide by certain rules, the person of xin is a center of stability in the political vortex of Confucius’ age because she is a person who abides by the rule of keeping her word, and so observes her “verbal contract.”

Of course, neither Hobbes’ social contract nor the “verbal contract” of the person of xin is actually a contract in the legal sense. There has been some argument about the status of the former (e.g., whether it is best seen as a hypothetical contract), but it is evidently antecedent to any legal contract, as it forms the basis for any institution of positive law, and hence for legal contracts themselves. Again, the “verbal contract” of the person of xin is not a legal contract, as there are no legal penalties attaching to her failure to observe her word. Nevertheless, what is common to both is that the contractors in both cases accept their commitment as binding on themselves. It is this acceptance that creates (some) stability out of an unstable environment.

Apart from its role as a source of stability in the midst of turbulence, xin was also important to Confucius for other historical reasons. Despite the chaos of the Spring and Autumn period, historians have noted that it was marked by an expansion of commerce and frequent and important contact at an official level between states. Envoys and other dignitaries frequently were sent by one state to another.

Confucius evidently gave some thought to those who were involved in diplomatic exchange (see Analects 5:8) or who otherwise engaged in transactions abroad. In this connection, he maintained that having xin was a crucial attribute to those who journeyed to foreign places and engaged in transactions there. This can be seen in the first quotation in this essay, from Analects 15:5, which I now offer in amplified form:

Tzu-chang asked about going forward without obstruction. The Master said, “If in word you are trustworthy and conscientious (言忠信) and in deed single-minded and reverent, then even in the lands of the barbarians you will go forward without obstruction. But if you fail to be trustworthy and conscientious in word or to be single-minded and reverent in deed, then can you be sure of going forward without obstruction even in your own neighborhood?”

For Confucius, having xin is an essential attribute to proceeding smoothly in societies that may have different mores and expectations from one’s own. Together with
single-mindedness and reverence in deed, xin will enable the person of xin to survive and flourish in barbarian lands. Conversely, Confucius notes, a person without xin cannot proceed smoothly even in her own neighborhood. A person who reneges on her word will soon be recognized as insincere and unreliable no matter where she is. Thus, he notes in Analects 2:22:

I do not see how a man can be acceptable who is untrustworthy in word (无信)? When a pin is missing in the yoke-bar of a large cart or in the collar-bar of a small cart, how can the cart be expected to go?

A person who lacks xin is, for Confucius, like a cart from whom a crucial pin is missing, so that it cannot be driven and is wholly useless in any society. One cannot form any kind of relationship with such a person: lacking xin, she may engage in duplicity and treachery and is altogether liable to let one down. One never knows where one stands with such a person. Xin thus plays an important social role insofar as it is the starting point, or sine qua non, for any fruitful relationship with other persons.28

One final important feature of the Confucian epoch was that it was marked by a gradual shift in perceptions concerning the kind of person who should be accorded power and high office. Because of interstate conflict, leaders saw the need to have capable men around them. Accordingly, where the holders of high office were previously given their positions on the basis of noble birth and family connections, this period saw a shift in preference toward those who were not necessarily well-born but were capable.29 In particular, it was marked by the rise of the shi (among whom Confucius himself was numbered), who might come from minor nobility or even the peasantry.

As both shi and teacher, Confucius himself was evidently deeply concerned with government, and in particular with the questions of what was needed to be a capable ruler or a capable official. We have noted earlier his views concerning the general need to be careful about one’s utterances, and how they relate to one’s actions. For Confucius, the careful conduct of speech and action is crucial to attaining an official career:

When in your speech you make few mistakes and in your action you have few regrets, an official career will follow as a matter of course. (2:18)

The attribute of xin, wherein one ensures that speech is always commensurate with action and vice versa, is obviously important for an official, as well as for a good ruler.

Confucius also thought, however, that having xin alone was not enough. As mentioned earlier, he thought that one could have xin and abide by one’s word, but, lacking further moral understanding, would still be petty and small-minded or engage in harmful behavior. Thus, for example, someone who has xin but little moral perception might well abide stubbornly by her verbal undertaking to do something foolish (such as give her word to offer a large loan to a certified wastrel). Hence, for Confucius, there was a need for inner moral cultivation, which would enable one to give the right sorts of verbal (or otherwise representative) undertakings
before abiding by them. Such moral cultivation and the emergent moral understanding would also allow the person of *xin* to have enough flexibility to depart from her word on the rare occasion when circumstances require this. Finally, moral cultivation would engender a sound moral understanding not only of oneself, but of others: through examining and re-forming one’s own motivations, through understanding the nature of the moral character, one comes to recognize not only how one falls short of moral excellence, but also how other people might also fall short. This can help the person of *xin* to recognize, say, treachery or duplicity in others, and to steer her way through dangerous political shoals. *Xin* without such moral cultivation would be insufficient.

In this context, Confucius accepted that there is another level of *xin*, which comes about as a result of moral cultivation, and which crowns the moral development of the *junzi*:

The Master said, “The gentleman has morality as his basic stuff and by observing the rites puts it into practice, by being modest gives it expression and by being trustworthy in word brings it to completion (信以成之). Such is the gentleman indeed!” (*Analects* 15:18)

Here, Confucius writes that the gentleman who has morality as his basic stuff—that is, who is moral at the core—would put his morality into practice through the rites, and express it by being modest. The culmination of his essential morality would then manifest itself in *xin*. It was mentioned earlier that *xin* (in the not-yet-moral person) has its source in *cheng* or sincerity. In contrast, the *junzi*’s commitment to abiding by his word stems not just from *cheng* but from a wider and deeper moral understanding—such *xin* emanates effortlessly from the moral perspective he inhabits. In this sense, the *junzi* can be trusted in McLeod’s sense, as this trust does have its wellspring in his moral integrity.

This latter kind of *xin* is crucial to the ruler, as can be seen in this well-known passage in *Analects* 12:7:

Tzu-kung asked about government. The Master said, “Give them enough food, give them enough arms, and the common people will have trust in you (民信之矣).”

Tzu-kung said, “If one had to give up one of these three, which should one give up first?”

“Give up arms.”

Tzu-kung said, “If one had to give up one of the remaining two, which should one give up first?”

“Give up food. Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the common people will have nothing to stand on.”

The ideal political leader for Confucius must be one who is careful and thoughtful in both speech and action, and who matches speech to action. She is someone who abides, and abides sensitively, by the right sorts of verbal undertaking (namely, any undertaking that manifests concern for the common people and improves their lot). As a possessor of the *xin* that arises from moral integrity, her relationship to her people is very different from that of many political leaders both today and in times
past. She does not engage in political rhetoric, whitewashing, cover-up of political misdeeds, or political “spin.” Instead, she is sincere, honest, and careful in her speech and her verbal undertakings. Here, *xin* is a crucial aspect of the moral sage whom Confucius took to be the ideal ruler. According to Confucius, this leader’s thoughtful verbal undertakings, and their perceived connection to her character by her people, engender in the people a trust so crucial to her government that she should give up arms and food before sacrificing it.

**Conclusion**

While Confucian *xin* is commonly seen as isomorphic with trust, this study has argued that the notion does not map reliably onto current conceptions of trust. In particular, *xin* is concerned primarily with commitments in which verbal (or other) representations have been made, whereas trust can exist, and perhaps usually exists, against a background of unspoken social norms. Nevertheless, a detailed comparison of trust and *xin* yields useful insights into the nature of Confucius’ *xin* and its relationship with morality. The person of *xin* is not necessarily moral, but has the appropriate foundation for moral development. It is also unlikely that she will be immoral. Again, an understanding of the nature of *xin* allows us to recognize the important social and political roles that Confucius ascribed to *xin* in the context of his own troubled times. In particular, it enables an understanding of why he famously claims that the political leader should hold *xin* as paramount, giving up arms and food before losing the confidence her people have in her. For this leader, *xin* does not just form the basis for moral development. Rather, she possesses a different level of *xin*, which is the effortless culmination of all her other moral attributes.

**Notes**

I would like to thank Annette Baier and C. L. Ten for their useful comments on and suggestions for this article. I am also grateful to Sor-hoon Tan and Hui-chieh Loy for helpful discussions on various issues connected with it. I would like to thank also two anonymous referees, whose valuable comments have resulted in a number of substantive changes to my views. An earlier version of this article was read as a paper at the Conference on Chinese Philosophy and Moral Psychology held on December 17–19, 2006, at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. I thank the participants for their helpful comments. I also thank Kwong-loi Shun for a helpful subsequent discussion on *xin*.


3 – All quotations are from D. C. Lau, The Analects of Confucius. In some cases, I have found it helpful to depart somewhat from Lau’s translation. These passages are marked with an asterisk.

4 – I thank Hui-chieh Loy for pointing me to this helpful passage.

5 – See Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., trans., The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation (New York: Ballantine 1998), and Arthur Waley, trans., The Analects (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996). Chichuang Huang, in his The Analects of Confucius: A Literal Translation with an Introduction and Notes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), interestingly translates xin at various points simply as “truthful.” Following Annette Baier’s suggestion, such a reading could suggest that xin involves not just keeping to one’s word or being truthful about what one is going to do but being generally truthful. This issue is interesting but must be reserved for discussion elsewhere.

6 – While nearly all the instances of xin in the Analects can be construed as involving explicit verbal or linguistic commitment (including Analects 12:7, discussed toward the end of this essay), Kwong-loi Shun has helpfully pointed out that Analects 19:10 is an exception. There, the official with xin who works the people hard is better seen as one who is reliable in indirectly representing to them that it is for the good of the state that they do so. (I thank Shun for kindly giving me access to his paper, “‘Wholeness’ in Confucian Thought: Zhu Xi on Cheng, Zhong, Xin and Jing,” which has contributed to my understanding of xin and also of ‘wholeness’ in morality.) Such indirect representation is still a representation by an individual that something is the case. It thus differs from the Western conception of trust, which, as we shall see, involves trusting an individual acting according to a broad set of social norms without any kind of
representation on her part. In what follows, I shall, for convenience, simply
discuss the case of explicit verbal (or otherwise linguistic) commitment with
respect to xin. However, my arguments for xin will also apply to other kinds of
representation.

7 – For discussion on this aspect, see John Dunn, “Trust, Cohesion and the Social
Order,” in Giambetta, Trust: Making and Breaking Co-operative Relations, and

8 – Baier, “Trust and Anti-Trust.”

9 – While Baier does not specifically mention in her paper that the babysitter in
her example has not signed any written agreement, I have confirmed with her
via e-mail correspondence that such indeed is the intended situation in the
example.


11 – See, e.g., Calhoun, “Standing for Something”; McLeod, “Our Attitude toward
the Motivation of Those We Trust”; Walker, “Picking Up pieces: Lives, Stories
and Integrity.”

12 – McLeod, “Our Attitude toward the Motivation of Those We Trust,” p. 467.

13 – McLeod, “Our Attitude toward the Motivation of Those We Trust,” p. 473; Baier,
“Trust and Anti-Trust,” p. 234. One other feature that has often been argued to
be crucial to the presence of the relation “A trusts B” is that A sees B as someone
who entertains goodwill and exhibits concern toward her. I focus less on this
feature in this essay, as the issue of moral understanding in relation to trust
seems to be more pertinent in the Confucian context.


Chong, Sor-hoon Tan, and C. L. Ten, eds., The Moral Circle and the Self: Chi-
nese and Western Approaches (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2002); Benjamin I.
Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1985); Wang Yu Ping, “Autonomy and the Confucian Moral
Cecilia Wee, “Confucius on Li and Montaigne on Costume: A Reflection on
Customary Practices and Personal Autonomy,” in Confucian Ethics in Retros-
spect and Prospect, ed. Vincent Shen and Kwong-loi Shun (Washington: Coun-
cil for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008). See also Kwong-loi Shun and
David B. Wong, Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and

16 – Lon L. Fuller, The Morality of Law, rev. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale Uni-
versity Press 1969), p. 138. Fuller uses this example to make a different point
against H.L.A. Hart. I thank C. L. Ten for this example.

17 – See Waley, The Analects, p. 211.

19 – An anonymous referee has pointed out that according to Mullin’s account, trust is construed in role-specific terms. S/he suggests that this may be a point of similarity with Confucian *xin* in the *Analects*. That is, *xin* may find different specific expressions with respect to various roles (e.g., as a son, or as an official). This is a very interesting suggestion, but its full exploration must be reserved for another time. *Xin* is an important concept within the Confucian oeuvre, and much work remains to be done on it.


22 – I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

23 – A question may be raised as to whether *xin* could be considered a virtue, even when the possessor of *xin* falls short of moral understanding and sensitivity. This is a question that cannot be dealt with thoroughly within the ambit of this essay. However, Aristotle maintains, with plausibility, the doctrine of the unity of the virtues, which maintains that an attribute is not a virtue unless it is fully integrated with the other virtues (i.e., if it belongs to a person of moral integrity). According to this view, *xin* is not a virtue unless it belongs to such a person. That *xin* is not a virtue (except in the person of moral integrity) is also borne out by the fact that the person of *xin* can manifest *xin* in petty and harmful ways. It is hard to conceive *xin* as a genuine (Aristotelian) virtue, given that it is consonant with pettiness and harm.


25 – Ibid.

26 – One may also note that neither Hobbes’ social contract nor the person of *xin*’s verbal contract need be underpinned by moral considerations. The person of *xin*, as noted earlier, is not necessarily a moral person. In the case of Hobbes’ social contract, this contract is often supposed to bring into being morality itself. For Hobbes, morality is rooted in those rules that enable us to live together in society. (In the state of nature, no act is either moral or immoral.) The social contract thus clearly does not presuppose morality. The quasi-legality of the two kinds of “contracts” considered here is thus not founded on morality. However, both contracts are related to morality in specific ways: the person of *xin* who honors his verbal contract possesses those capacities that enable moral development; the social contract is the foundation of morality. In contrast, the relationship between actual legal contracts and morality is much murkier, and
would depend on one’s views of whether positive law is, or should be, moral. The latter issues have been the subject of much discussion and contestation. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that I examine this issue.


28 – I thank an anonymous referee for his/her helpful comment on this issue.


30 – It is at this point that *xin* can truly be said to be a moral virtue, since it belongs to a person of full moral integrity, and springs from an effortlessly moral outlook.