

THE HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS OF RITUAL: PASCAL AND XUNZI ON FAITH, VIRTUE, AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

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Abstract. Blaise Pascal contends that ritual is not simply an expression of religious faith; it is also the means by which religious faith is cultivated. While Pascal fails to offer a plausible account of how ritual can lead to faith, the classical Confucian philosopher Xunzi's account of ritual – especially his account of how rituals shape a person's character and how one comes to “acquire a taste” for the things that rituals achieve – is a helpful resource for extending and refining Pascal's account of how ritual works to transform not just our actions but our feelings, desires, and beliefs, as well.

You want to find faith and you do not know the way? You want to cure yourself of unbelief and you ask for remedies? Learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have. They are people who know the road you want to follow and have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc.¹

Of the paths to learning, none is quicker than to like the right person, and exalting ritual comes second If you are going to take the former kings as your fount and make benevolence and righteousness your root, then rituals are exactly the highways and byways for you.²

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees and Other Writings*, trans. by Honor Levi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 155-156. Hereafter cited parenthetically with page number.

² “Xunzi”, trans. by Eric L. Hutton, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Second Edition (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2005), pp. 259-260. All subsequent translations from the *Xunzi* follow Hutton 2005 unless otherwise specified and are cited parenthetically with page number. For a complete translation, see Eric L. Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Much has been written about Pascal's *The Wager*, but most interpreters pass quickly over his discussion of the role of ritual in the development of religious faith. That this is a neglected aspect of Pascal's view is understandable, for it does not pertain directly to the heart of the wager – the contention that “If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension,” which means that “reason cannot decide anything” about God's existence (153). According to Pascal, we should “Wager that God exists, without hesitating!” because if God exists, we win everything – an eternity of life and happiness (154). If God doesn't exist, we lose nothing, because – and here Pascal writes not just as a philosopher but a mathematician – any finite number of hours, days, or years “wasted” believing in a God that doesn't exist are, in fact, “pure nothingness” compared with the prospect of infinity: “That removes all choice: wherever there is infinity and where there is no infinity of chances of losing against one of winning, there is no scope for wavering, you have to chance everything” (154).

Yet Pascal has a good deal more to say about what wagering “yes” entails, and the results of the wager in one's daily living. In this paper, I examine Pascal's contention that religious practice plays a key role in the development of belief in God. I argue that for Pascal, ritual has both an expressive and a developmental role: it is not simply an expression of religious faith; it is also the means by which religious faith is cultivated, even in those who do not believe in God. However, Pascal fails to offer a plausible account of how religious practice can lead to faith; ritual by no means has the central role in Pascal's thought that it has in the work of some other thinkers. Notable among these is the classical Confucian philosopher Xunzi, and I argue that Xunzi can serve as a helpful resource for amending, developing, and refining this dimension of Pascal's view. Specifically, I focus on Xunzi's account of how rituals serve to shape a person's character and how one comes to “acquire a taste” for the things that rituals achieve. Despite the remarkable differences between them, I show that Xunzi's view can amend and augment Pascal's account of how ritual works to transform not just our actions but our feelings, desires, and beliefs, as well. Not only does this renew Pascal as a resource for thinking through the relationship between faith and ritual; it also offers an example of how East Asian religious philosophy, as well as comparative philosophy, can contribute in significant ways to our understanding of a variety of thinkers and topics in the philosophy of religion and theology.³

I. PASCAL'S WAGER AND THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN FAITH

Pascal opens *The Wager* with a discussion of the nature of infinity: "A unit added to infinity does not increase it at all, any more than a foot added to an infinite length. The finite dissolves in the presence of the infinite and becomes pure nothingness. So it is with our mind before God ..." (152). Given the limitations of our finite minds in the face of the infinite, we cannot resolve the question of God's existence through rational argumentation, and so we must wager either that God exists or that God doesn't exist: "But here there is an infinitely happy infinity of life to be won, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you are staking is finite" (154). His account of the nature of infinity leads Pascal to argue that since we are forced to gamble,

³ There has been much written on ritual in disciplines such as anthropology, but very little in the discipline of philosophy. One of my central aims in this paper is to show how the work of philosophers can help us to better understand and appreciate the role of ritual, and thus to show how work from different disciplines can be valuable in the study of ritual. I also hope to help convince philosophers that ritual is worthy of more attention than it has received in the discipline of philosophy. My argument is certainly not that studying Pascal and Xunzi is the *only* way to appreciate these things or that they are the only thinkers who ever noted certain dimensions of ritual practice; rather, I am arguing that their work *does* help us to appreciate a range of important aspects of ritual, and that a comparative study of these two philosophers is especially helpful. While there are many different thinkers who can enlighten our understanding of ritual, including a variety of Confucian thinkers and scholars in fields such as anthropology, I have chosen to focus on Pascal and Xunzi both because these are thinkers in which I have expertise as a specialist in classical Chinese philosophy and the philosophy of religion, and because in studying and teaching these thinkers over the course of several years, I have found the comparative study of ritual in their work to be a helpful resource for thinking through the relationship between ritual and belief. For a discussion of the reasons for selecting particular thinkers as subjects for comparison in comparative philosophy, see my *Confucius, Rawls, and the Sense of Justice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 55-58. For interdisciplinary studies that put Confucian philosophers into conversation with work in ritual theory, see Robert Campamy, "Xunzi and Durkheim as Theorists of Ritual Practice", in Ronald L. Grimes (ed.), *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), pp. 86-103; Michael J. Puett, "The Haunted World of Humanity: Ritual Theory From Early China", in J. Michelle Molina and Donald K. Swearer, *Rethinking the Human* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 95-111; Michael J. Puett, "Ritual Disjunctions: Ghosts, Anthropology, and Philosophy", in V. Das, M. Jackson, A. Kleinman, and B. Singh, *The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 218-233; T. C. Kline III, "Sheltering Under the Sacred Canopy: Peter Berger and Xunzi", in T. C. Kline III and Justin Tiwald, *Ritual and Religion in the Xunzi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), pp. 159-178.

“you have to have discarded reason if you cling on to your life, rather than risk it for the infinite prize which is just as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness” (155). Now, one might be bothered by Pascal’s apparent disregard for whether or not one holds true beliefs, and the time and effort we expend as a result of holding certain beliefs, but his account is grounded in a mathematical point: no amount of time spent in this life could possibly make it worthwhile to gamble against infinity.

While we can use our reason to evaluate the stakes and wager wisely, it is important to remember why the wager is necessary in the first place: given our finitude, we are severely limited in what we can know about God. Indeed, Pascal maintains that Christians who are unable to provide a rational basis for their belief should not be criticized for that; they are simply “keeping their word” by taking seriously the contention that God is “infinitely beyond our comprehension” (153). He writes that “we know neither the existence nor the nature of God, because he has neither extent nor limits. But we know of his existence through faith” (153). For Pascal, faith is of the heart and not our reason: “It is the heart that feels God, not reason: that is what faith is. God felt by the heart, not by reason” (157). But how does faith in something that cannot be known by reason develop?

Pascal’s answer to this question, and his contention that religious practice plays a key role in leading one to faith, is presented when Pascal entertains a series of questions and objections from an interlocutor who cannot bring herself to believe in God, even though she understands that she must wager. She says, “I am made in such a way that I cannot believe. So what do you want me to do?” (155). Pascal responds by urging this person to “realize that your inability to believe, since reason urges you to do so and yet you cannot, arises from your passions. So concentrate not on convincing yourself by increasing the number of proofs of God but on diminishing your passions” (155). For Pascal, the passions are clearly distinct from and in this case opposed to reason, consisting of strong feelings or emotions that cloud our judgment, preventing us from proceeding as we should – in belief or in action – even when we have good reasons to do so. But there is another piece to the puzzle, for Pascal says to this interlocutor, “You *want* to cure yourself of unbelief,” emphasizing that this person *wants* to believe in God, but is unable to move herself to do so (155, emphasis mine). So we have a person who not only understands the reason why she should believe in God, but also *wants* to do so. Yet her passions hold her back and she cannot bring

herself to make the wager. For Pascal, then, the passions are opposed both to this individual's reason and her desire to have faith, and the way for her to address the problem is to diminish her passions.⁴

It is worth noting that the problem is complex, as Pascal paints it: this individual is not simply held back by reason or desire, and Pascal does not see religious faith as resulting solely from reason or the passions, nor does he equate the individual's desires – especially her desire to believe and to be a person of faith – with her passions. Pascal seems to understand the latter as the emotions – perhaps rooted in fears, painful memories and aversions tied to her experiences with religion – that hold her back even though her reason and her desires ought to lead her to believe. On his view, there are multiple faculties that are in tension with each other, but the passions are the ultimate barrier to faith in the case of this individual, which is what leads him to argue that she must diminish her passions. Pascal argues that the way to do this is to engage in religious practice, which “diminishes the passions, which are your great stumbling-blocks” (156). Why should we think that religious practices will effectively diminish the passions and lead one to believe in God? Pascal makes an argument from precedent here, arguing that others have been led to believe in God as a result of ritual practice:

Learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have. They are people who know the road you want to follow and have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. That will make you believe quite naturally, and according to your animal reactions (155-6).

There are a number of features of Pascal's view that should be noted here. First, Pascal rejects the view that religious rituals are simply a way of expressing one's faith, or a way for the faithful to communicate with God. It is clear that he also sees ritual as having a developmental role when it comes to faith: participation in religious rituals can lead one to have faith in God. If one sees faith as fundamentally being about

⁴ Although not all Christian thinkers have agreed about the nature of faith and how it is acquired, there has been a general tendency to view faith as consisting of three aspects or elements: belief or assent (*assensus*), trust (*fiducia*), and obedience. Some Christian theologians and philosophers have emphasized one or more of these aspects of faith over others, but very few have denied any of them altogether. For a helpful overview of this set of issues, see C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 1-15.

a relationship with God, then this is not surprising, for religious rituals provide an opportunity for a relationship to develop. Pascal states that faith is a gift from God, but his account of the role of ritual suggests that ritual plays a role in preparing us to receive this gift; if ritual practice is important, then we are not completely passive recipients.⁵ Without opening oneself up to such opportunities, one should not expect to develop a relationship or have an experience that would give rise to faith. Second, we can see Pascal's concern with those who suspend belief, and suspend themselves in between a life of belief and unbelief. On his view, not only *do* we all, in fact, wager – since even those who claim to be uncertain about God's existence either go to mass or do not – but those who claim to be uncertain typically do not do the things that would allow one to move from uncertainty to certainty.⁶ The expectation seems to be that God will do all of the work, if God exists, and that nothing is required of them in order to prepare or open themselves up to the kind of encounter that moves one to believe.⁷ Such individuals never give faith a fighting chance.

To be sure, Pascal exhibits considerable confidence in the power of religious rituals to transform our beliefs. But one difficulty with Pascal's view is seen in his claim that participating in religious rituals “will make you believe quite naturally, and according to your animal reactions.” Pascal's language here reveals an important though not unsurprising aspect of his view, historically: he accepts the Cartesian view of animals and the human body as machines. As a result, he appears to advocate a purely mechanical mode of behavior that is, as he says, characteristic of animals.⁸ Pascal sees ritual practice as diminishing the passions, which will remove the stumbling blocks that prevent this individual from

⁵ His view also seems to assume that the Church and its sacramental system is, or can be, the means that God uses to instill faith in an individual. So although Pascal was largely critical of the Church in his day, he nevertheless seems to accept this traditional Catholic view, at least in a basic form. For Pascal's remarks on faith as a gift from God, see *Pensees* 11-12 (par. 41) and 118 (par. 487). See also Michael Moriarty, “Grace and Religious Belief in Pascal” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, ed. by Nicholas Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 144.

⁶ William James defends a similar view in “The Will to Believe” (1897).

⁷ David Wetsel argues that Pascal's primary target audience is not hardened unbelievers, but dubious or tentative unbelievers. See Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), esp. pp. 366-86.

⁸ On this aspect of Pascal's view, see Moriarty, “Grace and Religious Belief in Pascal”, pp. 144 and 158 n. 1.

believing, but he says nothing about how this process works, nor does he seem to think it includes any type of reflection on what one is doing when one takes holy water or attends mass. In the absence of further explanation, it is difficult to see how these actions could diminish the passions and ignite one's belief in God. Pascal's view seems to be that we will simply grow accustomed to behaving in certain ways and will be "naturally" lulled into belief. Pascal's remarks about custom shed further light on this aspect of his view, for he presents belief as automatic, and not as a result of a gradual transformative process or as arising from experiences that engage the heart. He writes, "Custom is natural to us. Anyone who becomes accustomed to faith believes it, and can no longer not fear hell, and believes in nothing else" (156).⁹ Michael Moriarty points out that on Pascal's view, "Custom inclines the body (the 'machine') and carries the mind unreflectingly along with it. This is no doubt disastrous when the beliefs it supports are irrational. But custom also supports true beliefs ... which is why Pascal suggests that our intellectual convictions need the reinforcement it provides. If we have once seen the truth (in this case, of Christianity), we must try to stabilize our conviction, for left to itself belief ebbs and flows."¹⁰

Pascal clearly evinces an understanding of how difficult and complex it can be for individuals to have faith – even when they *want* to believe and understand the reasons why they should.¹¹ He also understands that ritual is a powerful tool in relation to religious belief, and he rightly maintains that belief doesn't develop in a vacuum or isolation from others; we are initiated into a life of faith through rituals and customs, and by being a part of a certain kind of community. But Pascal's account falls short of offering a compelling account of how ritual can transform one's faith. While he maintains that religious practices can transform us, he thinks this transformation takes place automatically, as a result of blindly practicing rituals with the body, with little if any reflective or affective engagement.¹²

⁹ Here we see a similarity with Hume, who viewed custom and experience as evidential grounds for belief (including religious belief).

¹⁰ Moriarty, "Grace and Religious Belief in Pascal", pp. 155-56.

¹¹ While it is beyond the scope of the present paper, there is a large body of literature in epistemology and the ethics of belief concerning whether belief can be willed, with the general consensus being that it cannot.

¹² Pascal does not offer a supernatural explanation for how this transformation occurs (e.g., in terms of the operation of the Holy Spirit), but this is likely an implicit feature of his

There are, however, resources in Pascal's work that will prove helpful in working to address these difficulties, one of which is his contention that faith resides in the heart. As we saw earlier, Pascal defines faith with reference to the heart: "It is the heart that feels God, not reason: that is what faith is. God felt by the heart, not by reason" (157). Having grounded belief in God in the experience of feeling God with one's heart, Pascal goes on to reject the view that reason plays a decisive role in the process: "The heart has its reasons which reason itself does not know: we know that through countless things" (158). If we take these remarks seriously, then for Pascal, faith should be closely tied to rituals because they set aside the space and time to encounter God – providing opportunities for us to feel God with the heart, for the heart to acquire its own reasons which will be unknown by reason. Here we can see clearly the realist aspect of Pascal's claim: there is something we are trying to contact and appreciate. He describes faith as highly experiential, and it is easy to see how participation in the rituals that are central to the lives of the faithful – when engaged reflectively and with sincerity and meaning – might give rise to genuine faith. The problem, of course, is that Pascal does not defend such a view. His definition of faith is not integrated with his discussion of how religious practice leads to faith, and he does not specify that rituals must be followed reflectively; to the contrary, his remarks suggest the opposite. Nevertheless, one way of amending Pascal's view of the relationship between ritual and faith is to further develop his account of how faith ultimately resides in the experience of the heart feeling God, and to offer an account of how ritual can help to facilitate this experience.

Another aspect of Pascal's view that can serve as a constructive resource in amending his account of the relationship between ritual and faith is what we might call his moral argument for participating in the life of a religious community. In addition to his contention that religious practice gives rise to faith, Pascal contends that a variety of virtues are cultivated in the process: "You will become faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend" (156). Here Pascal builds upon his contention that we should wager "yes" based on the potential for infinite gains versus finite losses, arguing that there are finite gains,

view. Traditionally, Christian theologians have tended to view God's grace as a necessary condition for faith, and while Pascal was more of an Augustinian than a Thomist (given his Jansenist theological views), he would have been familiar with the Thomistic view that faith (along with hope and love) is one of the "infused" or supernatural virtues.

as well: “I tell you that you will win thereby in this life, and that at every step you take along this path, you will see so much certainty of winning and so negligible a risk, that you will realize in the end that you have wagered on something certain and infinite, for which you have paid nothing” (156). Pascal highlights the genuine goods that come with living well and developing the virtues that are often cultivated within religious communities, and the process of moral cultivation that he describes is not an unreflective one; to the contrary, when he says that we will realize in the end that we have wagered on something certain and infinite, he is suggesting that we will reflect on the transformation that has taken place in our lives and that this will strengthen our faith. Pascal goes on to elaborate on the role that members of religious communities play in relation to the process of moral cultivation: “We owe a great deal to those who warn us of our faults, for they mortify us; they teach us that we have been held in contempt, but they do not prevent it from happening to us in the future, for we have many other faults to merit it. They prepare us for the exercise of correction, and the removal of a fault” (156). Everything that Pascal describes here involves cognitive and affective work on the part of the individual. So while he does not offer an account of how ritual practice requires reflecting and feeling in certain ways, he does seem to envision these things as part of the work of moral cultivation within religious communities. In amending Pascal’s account of ritual, these remarks might be extended and applied to his account of ritual and faith.

Although I will argue below that Pascal’s definition of faith as “God felt by the heart” and his discussion of moral cultivation within religious communities serve as helpful resources for amending his account of ritual and faith, I also contend that considerable further constructive work is needed in order to offer a plausible account of how religious rituals can diminish the passions that hold one back from faith, and lead to genuine religious belief. In the next section I turn to the work of the 3rd century BCE Confucian thinker, Xunzi, who offered a sophisticated account of how ritual serves to transform a person’s character – including not just their behavior but their desires, feelings, and beliefs, as well. Xunzi’s explanation is also broadly naturalistic, in the sense that it does not rely upon supernatural explanations of how ritual practice transforms a person’s character. I will argue that Xunzi offers us a fruitful way of amending and developing various aspects of Pascal’s view of ritual and faith in order to make it more plausible. In the process, we will come to

a deeper appreciation of the unique character of ritual, and its importance in different philosophical and religious traditions.

II. XUNZI ON RITUAL AND MORAL SELF-CULTIVATION

Like Pascal, Xunzi believed that religious rituals could shape us in significant ways. However, unlike Pascal, whose primary concern was how ritual gives rise to religious faith, Xunzi was most concerned with how ritual changes a person's character, leading them to embody the virtues that define the Confucian Way (Dao 道) and also instilling in them a genuine love of the Way.¹³ This tells us something important: Xunzi was interested not just in leading people to have certain beliefs, but in bringing about a thoroughgoing change in them, including not just their beliefs and behavior but also their desires and feelings. As we have seen, Pascal, too, contends that being a part of a religious community can help one to develop a range of virtues. But there is nevertheless an important difference here, and keeping this difference in mind will allow us to note several features of Xunzi's view that can help us to deepen and extend Pascal's account. For it is partly because of Xunzi's focus on how ritual shapes a person's character in a thoroughgoing way – as opposed to how it gives rise to religious faith – that he offers such a detailed account of precisely *how* ritual transforms us, and it is this account that will prove to be a rich resource when we return to Pascal below.

Xunzi argues that humans are born without any moral sensibilities; this leads him to claim that “Human nature is bad,” which for him means that the state humans find themselves living in prior to acquiring a proper education is a bad one. We are led exclusively by our unlimited physical desires, and possess no incipient moral inclinations or tendencies.¹⁴ As Philip J. Ivanhoe points out, the most critical aspect of Xunzi's position

¹³ Hutton offers an insightful description of Xunzi's understanding of the Way as “the proper pattern for organizing both society as a whole and the life of each individual within it. The Way is the highest normative standard in Xunzi's thought, and it is in following the Way that people come to possess the various virtues that he advocates and thereby to achieve the status of gentlemen and sages.” See Eric L. Hutton, “Xunzi and Virtue Ethics” in the *Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. by Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 114.

¹⁴ Xunzi argues explicitly against the earlier Confucian thinker Mengzi, who claimed that humans have incipient moral inclinations that can develop into virtues with the proper kind of cultivation. For an overview of Mengzi's view, see P. J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), pp. 15-28.

is that we begin life “in a state of utter moral blindness. Morally, in our natural state, we are rudderless ships. According to Xunzi, we have no innate conception of what morality is; we would not recognize it even if we were to see it plainly before us.”¹⁵ This, however, does not mean that we cannot become good. Xunzi is profoundly optimistic in this regard, for he contends that with much hard work and the proper tools, humans are not only capable of change, but thoroughgoing transformation – a process that he likens to artisans reshaping recalcitrant substances such as wood, metal, and clay:

Thus, crooked wood must await steaming and straightening on the shaping frame, and only then does it become straight. Blunt metal must await honing and grinding, and only then does it become sharp. Now since people’s nature is bad, they must await teachers and proper models, and only then do they become correct in their behavior. They must obtain ritual and the standards of righteousness, and only then do they become well ordered (298-99).

In this passage, Xunzi not only describes what the process of cultivation is like; he also mentions the essential tools that are necessary for this process, including “teachers and proper models,” and “ritual and the standards of righteousness.” Rituals have a special place in Xunzi’s account, for he argues that past sage-kings crafted them as a way of dealing with the unlimited desires of humans in their natural state:

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desires, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and the standards of righteousness in order to allot things to people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking (274).

The rituals (li 禮) that Xunzi advocates are a particular set of formal practices that “mark out” the Way: “Those who cross waters mark out the deep places, but if the markers are not clear, then people will fall in. Those who order the people mark out the Way, but if the markers are not clear, then there will be chaos. The rituals are those markers” (273). These rituals specify how one should behave across a broad range

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 32.

of circumstances, including how one should move, speak, dress, eat, etc., while also including religious rituals such as funeral rites and ancestral sacrifices. While most English speakers today separate social customs and matters of etiquette from religious rituals, Xunzi and other early Confucians saw them as unified under the category of “ritual.” They further regarded all of these things – things we would refer to as manners, as well as funerals, weddings, and forms of religious worship – as having tremendous moral significance, partly because they understood them to have both expressive and developmental functions.¹⁶ As Ivanhoe argues, early Confucian thinkers maintained that rituals “shaped the character of those who practiced them, expressed and refined the virtue of those who knew them well, and influenced those who participated in or observed a given ceremony.”¹⁷

All of this should sound somewhat familiar, for as we have seen, Pascal contends that rituals are not just an expression of religious faith, but a way of developing faith, even for those who cannot yet bring themselves to believe in God. There is a notable difference between Xunzi’s focus on the expression and development of virtue, and Pascal’s focus on the expression and development of faith. Nevertheless, Pascal, like Xunzi, recognizes that the developmental role of ritual is particularly important, for on his view ritual leads to a transformation in one’s beliefs by diminishing the passions that are a barrier to belief – something we will explore more fully below. Pascal also exhibits an awareness of the expressive role of ritual when he instructs individuals to follow the way by which those who have faith began, “by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc.” On his view, the ritual practices of believers are an expression of their faith – of “wagering all they have.”

Just as Pascal stresses that those who wish to have faith must follow the example of believers, who “have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured” (156), Xunzi argues that those who wish to develop the virtues of the sages must have teachers and follow the “proper models” seen in the example of the sages: “The learning of the

¹⁶ The other category Xunzi mentions in the above quoted passage – the standards of righteousness – refer to what Hutton describes as a specific set of higher-order social standards created by the sages for structuring society (e.g., by defining various social roles), from which the more particular directives for behavior contained in ritual are derived. (See Hutton 2005: 260, n. 12)

¹⁷ Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, p. 4.

cultivated person enters through his ears, fastens to his heart, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions. His slightest word, his subtle movement, all can serve as a model for others” (259).¹⁸ Despite their shared emphasis on following the model of others, there is a remarkable difference between Pascal’s and Xunzi’s descriptions here. Xunzi emphasizes the process of change and describes this process in detail, specifying that the sages became this way slowly, over time, through the things they heard and felt – things which “fastened” to their hearts, and were made manifest in their actions. Xunzi explicitly emphasizes the stages in the process of development here; he does not leave it at saying that they received instruction, but describes how learning *fastened* to their hearts, *spread through their four limbs*, and then manifested itself in their actions. In offering his account of this process of transformation, Xunzi repeatedly stresses that the virtue we see in such people does not stem from their nature: “One who makes use of a boat and oars has not thereby become able to swim, but he can now cross rivers and streams. The cultivated person is not different from others by birth. Rather, he is good at making use of things ...” (257).¹⁹ The cultivated person makes use of rituals and moral exemplars as tools for acquiring virtue, just as one might use a boat and oars to cross rivers and streams. Like a boat and oars, rituals are human-made implements, designed for a particular purpose, that allow us to do things we would not otherwise be able to do. Xunzi, like Pascal, contends that we need external help in order to get where we are going. However, as we can already see, Xunzi has much more to say about how and in precisely what ways those external tools operate to successfully bring about change in us, not just externally but internally as well.

According to Xunzi, rituals – and teachers to guide us in our practice and understanding of ritual – are the most important form of external help that is available to us:

Rituals are the great divisions in the proper model for things; they are the outlines of the proper classes of things. And so learning comes to

¹⁸ Translation slightly modified from Hutton 2005, with “junzi” translated as “cultivated person” here and in subsequent quotations.

¹⁹ The phrase “outside-in” is used by T. C. Kline III to describe Xunzi’s view that moral transformation begins with external practices and eventually reaches the heart, transforming our feelings and desires. This view is a contrast to Mengzi’s “inside-out” account of moral cultivation, where we begin with our innate moral feelings and those lead us to transform our behavior.

ritual and then stops, for this is called the ultimate point in pursuit of the Way and Virtue. In reverence and refinement of ritual, the balance and harmony of music, the broad content of the *Odes* and *History*, the subtleties of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, all things between Heaven and earth are complete (258-9).

Xunzi argues that rituals can bring about permanent change in people, and he expresses this view by returning to his craft metaphors: “Through steaming and bending, you can make wood straight as a plumb line into a wheel. And after its curve conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun it will not become straight again, because steaming and bending have made it a certain way” (256). It is not just that we are reshaped externally; Xunzi also contends that we come to acquire new feelings and our desires are shaped in such a way that acting in accordance with the Way comes naturally: “Thus, the person of benevolence carries out the Way without striving, and the sage carries out the Way without forcing himself” (292). Xunzi stresses that this process of transformation takes considerable time and persistence, but – drawing upon his craft metaphors once again – he stresses that “if you start carving and don’t give up, then you can engrave even metal and stone” (258).

For Xunzi, “engraving” involves shaping a person’s desires and feelings as well as their behavior, and ritual practice is the primary means by which he proposes to do this. Ritual, he argues, “is a means of nurture” (274). It is not, however, a way of eliminating the desires that create problems for us in our natural state. He is quite explicit about this: “All those who say that good order must await the elimination of desires are people who lack the means to guide desires and cannot cope with the mere having of desires. All those who say good order must await the lessening of desires are people who lack the means to restrain desire and cannot cope with abundance of desires” (296). For Xunzi, we do not need to eliminate our desires or even lessen them. Rather, we must allow ritual to “nurture” us by giving our desires an appropriate outlet and also shaping and channeling them: “In every case, ritual begins in that which must be released, reaches full development in giving it proper form, and finishes in providing it satisfaction” (276). Once again, Xunzi offers a series of vivid metaphors to describe this process:

Ritual cuts off what is too long and extends what is too short. It subtracts from what is excessive and adds to what is insufficient. It achieves proper form for love and respect, and it brings perfection to the beauty of carrying out the standards of righteousness. Thus, fine ornaments and

coarse materials, music and weeping, happiness and sorrow – these things are opposites, but ritual makes use of them all, employing them and alternating them at the appropriate time (280).

On Xunzi's account, ritual offers our desires a healthy outlet – one which channels, shapes, shortens or extends them as appropriate, but which does not seek to eliminate them. We can easily appreciate how this works by considering examples such as marriage and funerals. Marriage allows us to meet various physical and emotional needs (seen in various kinds of desires) in a way that not only gives rise to stable families (and, as a result, a more stable society) but which also prevents us from harming ourselves and others in certain ways, and which allows us to flourish more fully by experiencing the joys, challenges, and satisfaction that is uniquely found in sharing a life with someone. Similarly, funeral rituals set aside the space and time to mourn losses openly and deeply within a supportive community – a process that can help to prevent unhealthy responses to death such as denial and depression, which undermine our flourishing (and the flourishing of others in our families and communities) in clear and dramatic ways.

Xunzi contends that we must follow in the footsteps of those who have walked the path of self-cultivation: “In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person. ... if you imitate the right person in his practice of the precepts of the cultivated person, then you will come to honor these things for their comprehensiveness, and see them as encompassing the whole world” (259). The last line here is important: we come to genuinely see and appreciate things in a new way when we undergo this transformation. This is especially important to note because for Xunzi, we do not see things this way to begin with, nor do we initially take joy in following the Way – something Xunzi clarifies in the following passage:

Just as it is said that a short well rope cannot reach down to the source of a deep well, those of little knowledge cannot reach up to the words of the sages. The allotments found within the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*, and in rituals and music are such that the average person will not understand them. Therefore it is said, study them once and you will see them as worth studying again Follow and investigate them repeatedly and you will like them more.²⁰

²⁰ Xunzi Ch. 4/p. 16/lines 11-16, trans. by Eirik L. Harris, quoted in “The Role of Virtue in Xunzi's Political Philosophy”, *Dao* 12 (2013), 103-4.

Here Xunzi argues that only by studying and practicing rituals do we come to appreciate them, see them as worthwhile, and come to enjoy them. When we begin the path of self-cultivation, we do not initially enjoy ritual, nor do we appreciate its richness or meaning – at least not fully. Only through practice – only through giving ritual a chance – do we come to appreciate their meaning and take joy in their richness. The fact that Xunzi highlights both our appreciation and our enjoyment of ritual is important, for he highlights both the cognitive and affective transformation that takes place in us. On Xunzi's view, we “acquire a taste” for ritual and for the Way. The cultivated person

makes his eyes not want to see what is right, makes his ears not want to hear what is not right, makes his mouth not want to speak what is not right, and makes his heart not want to deliberate over what is not right. He comes to a point where he loves it, and then his eyes love it more than the five colors, and his ears love it more than the five tones, his mouth loves it more than the five flavors, and his heart considers it more profitable than possessing the whole world (261).

Although we cannot initially appreciate the moral dimensions of life when we embark upon the Way, as our understanding progresses we begin to take satisfaction in virtue and ritual. As Ivanhoe puts it,

The culmination of this process is a fundamental change in one's evaluative scheme. ... In the initial stages of self cultivation, knowledge of the Way will enable one to override one's errant desires. As one's understanding deepens and, with sustained and concerted practice, one shapes oneself to the moral way, one discovers new, richer, and more powerful sources of satisfaction within a newly unfolding form of life.²¹

For Xunzi, the cultivated person comes to desire and take joy in different things, but this happens partly through his own dedicated efforts to work at it: he *makes* his eyes, ears, mouth, and heart not want certain things. This should remind us of the way in which Pascal envisions one who lacks faith taking holy water and attending mass, and coming to have faith as a result of behaving as if she believed. But Xunzi stresses that if such practices are to successfully change us, we “must reflect and deliberate

²¹ Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, p. 35. Eirik L. Harris discusses the role of this aspect of Xunzi's view in his political philosophy. He offers the helpful example of how one “acquires a taste” for foods such as raw oysters, discussing how the process of “acquiring a taste” for ritual is similar in many respects. See Harris 2013: 104-5.

and seek to know [ritual and the standards of righteousness]” (301). For Xunzi is not simply a matter of doing the same things that the sages do; the way that we do them also matters; our hearts must be fully engaged in the process: “The heart must know the Way, and only then will it approve of the Way. Only after it approves of the Way will it be able to keep to the Way and reject what is not the Way” (288).

All of this shows that for Xunzi, ritual plays a central role in what Xunzi and other Confucians refer to as “self-cultivation,” meaning *the cultivation of the self*. There are two important things I want to note about Confucian accounts of self-cultivation here. First, Confucian self-cultivation should not be confused or equated with change that we as individuals bring about in ourselves, on our own. Confucians like Xunzi explicitly argue that self-cultivation always occurs in concert with and through our reliance on and trust in others. Xunzi’s remarks on the importance of having the proper teachers and models highlight this dimension of his view and its connection to his view of human nature: “If you do not concur with your teacher and the proper model but instead like to use your own judgment, then this is like relying on a blind person to distinguish colors, or like relying on a deaf person to distinguish sounds” (265). We simply cannot engage in Confucian self-cultivation by ourselves, without the help and support of others; for Xunzi this is a natural outgrowth of the moral blindness that defines our natural state, but all early Confucians affirm the importance of families, communities, and even the state in making self-cultivation possible for each of us. Second, as Ivanhoe points out, “The practices of Confucian moral self cultivation were not designed to blindly habituate people to virtue, and though their full realization would, under normal circumstances, result in a variety of both material and psychological goods, they could not successfully be cultivated solely with the aim of acquiring such goods. The pursuit ultimately must be an expression of who one is, a follower of the Way.”²²

This point is especially important because it highlights the deepest and most important difference between the views of ritual that we find in Xunzi and Pascal. Xunzi would decisively reject Pascal’s contention that ritual can mechanically habituate people to faith, and this is precisely where Xunzi’s account can help to amend and develop Pascal’s view to make it more plausible. It is to this task that I now turn.

²² Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, pp. 7-8.

III. RE-SHAPING PASCAL'S VIEW OF RITUAL AND FAITH

The most striking difference between Xunzi and Pascal is that Pascal advocates practicing rituals because it leads one to believe in God, while Xunzi advocates practicing rituals because it leads to virtue. The contrast here is not just between a personal God and the Way; the contrast is also between the goal of faith and the goal of having a certain sort of character. Now, as we have seen, Pascal *does* believe that one acquires certain virtues in the process of coming to faith. Similarly, it is not that Xunzi does not think beliefs are important; he contends that one acquires certain beliefs about the Way through the process of Confucian moral self-cultivation – seen for instance in his contention that the cultivated person “considers it more profitable than possessing the whole world.” In addition, Xunzi clearly believes that having certain beliefs about the Way is central to following it; he writes, “there has never been one who knows that nothing is as great as the Way and yet does not follow the Way” (297). However, Xunzi’s primary focus is not on how ritual transforms our beliefs but our character as a whole. As we have seen, Xunzi places a special emphasis on the way that ritual transforms our desires, which is part of the reason why it is so appropriate to speak of “acquiring a taste” for the Way.

In contrast, Pascal’s contention is *not* that rituals *shape the desires* of the individual who knows that she should believe in God and wants to believe, yet cannot bring herself to have faith. Interestingly, though, Pascal contends that the practice of ritual serves to *diminish this individual’s passions*, which are, on his view, the barrier to belief. Although he does not elaborate on the process by which the passions are diminished and belief in God ignited – except to say that ritual practice will make one believe naturally, easily, and automatically – Pascal seems to think of diminishing the passions and igniting faith as one unitary act.²³ Once this individual’s passions are diminished, the barrier to faith has been removed, and she will believe. A central question here is whether belief in this sort of case is enabled simply by removing barriers, or whether something more positive and constructive is required. For Pascal, one component of this is likely divine grace, but surely there must be other components as well.

²³ In this regard, he is similar to neo-Confucians such as Wang Yangming, who think moral action will begin to emerge spontaneously once we eliminate bad desires.

Xunzi's account of ritual can offer a way of amending Pascal's view in two primary ways in order to make it more plausible. First, Xunzi would urge Pascal not to think solely in terms of diminishing the passions but shaping them. Xunzi's account urges us to take into consideration the complex array of feelings, desires, motives, attitudes, thoughts, and actions that contribute to an individual's ability to bring herself to believe something. Applied to Pascal's account, while some passions may need to be diminished or "cut off," there are others that will need to be increased or "stretched" – something I discuss further below. Second, engaging in ritual should be understood not as a process of blindly habituating an individual into faith; rather, ritual practice should engage one's feelings and reflective capacities. For Xunzi, this is the only way that ritual can bring about genuine change in a person's character – for Xunzi's goal is not just to bring about external change in one's behavior, but in one's feelings, desires, beliefs, and attitudes. Applied to Pascal's account, only if one reflects upon one's experiences with religious rituals – including the feelings and religious experiences to which they give rise – are they likely to result in genuine belief. It is important to remember that the individual Pascal describes already knows the reasons why she should believe, and she already wants to believe. What she seems to lack is the kind of experience that leads one to believe in God.

There are good reasons to think that this type of view is consistent with other aspects of Pascal's view, and that this sort of amendment to his view would therefore result in making his overall view more consistent and coherent. So in addition to the fact that Xunzi offers considerable detail as to how ritual brings about substantial change – thus allowing Pascal to offer a more fully-developed account of how ritual might lead to faith – another reason to accept these particular amendments to Pascal's view is that they build upon other dimensions of his thought, namely his definition of faith and his account of how virtues develop within religious communities.

To be sure, faith is an affair of the heart, for Pascal; we cannot use our reason to decide whether or not God exists; that is the entire point of the wager, and that is why he defines faith as "God felt by the heart, not by reason" (157). But the fundamental issue, for one who believes in a personal deity, is how one enters into a relationship with that being, and how one comes to feel God with the heart. This relationship cannot be reduced to or equated with a path of moral self-cultivation – although

Pascal rightly believes that one ought to develop certain virtues and become a certain sort of person as a result of that relationship, a view that is firmly rooted in Christian tradition. But the relationship is the starting place, and since one cannot have a real relationship with someone without believing that she or he exists, belief in God is the first step on that journey. Simply put, rituals set aside the space and time for individuals to *encounter* God with the heart. They also specify formal practices that are designed to prepare one for such an encounter, and that have a long history of serving this function. In this way, rituals give faith a fighting chance by serving as a context that is set aside specifically for that purpose.

In addition to his view of faith, what we might call Pascal's self-cultivationist side can also be drawn out and further developed in order to support these amendments to his view. As we saw earlier, Pascal offers an account of how religious communities play a key role in helping us to develop a range of important virtues. He also argues that they lead us to "acquire a taste" for virtue: "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend. It is, of course, true; you will not take part in corrupt pleasure, in glory, in the pleasures of high living. But will you not have others?" (156) Here Pascal argues that we will come to take pleasure in different things as a result of living a life of faith within a religious community that is in part defined by its values. If we extend this line of argument to Pascal's account of ritual and faith, then we might argue that on an amended view, Pascal would maintain that one ought to "acquire a taste" for ritual – one ought to come to love and delight in religious practices because they give rise to the experiences and encounters that lead to faith – and when we experience them as such, we come to love them.

Xunzi's views concerning the expressive and developmental aspects of ritual can also help us to amend and further develop certain dimensions of Pascal's account. As we saw above, early Confucians believed that rituals not only developed the character of those who practiced them, but also refined the virtue of those who knew them well and influenced those who observed them. If we apply the basic Confucian view here to Pascal's account and consider ritual as having these functions in relation to religious faith, then it is important to note that the ritual practices of believers are not only an expression of faith (evidence that they have "wagered all they have," as Pascal contends). They also serve to further develop the faith of believers, deepening it not just as a result of repetition

or habit, as Pascal contends, but because of the experiences, feelings, and kinds of reflection to which ritual gives rise. Such a view takes seriously the dynamic and developmental dimensions of faith, which for most religious people are not simply a matter of believing or not believing, once and for all. Additionally, as Ivanhoe argues, early Confucians like Xunzi maintained that rituals can even influence those who observe a given ceremony, and this is another way in which one might be moved to faith. One need not take holy water, receive communion, or recite prayers in order to be affected by these practices. Observing others doing these things – as well as experiencing parts of rituals that do not require active participation, such as taking in the scent of incense and the sound of sacred music – can be a deeply moving experience, and can be an important part of the process of influencing one's beliefs. Both of the amendments to Pascal's view that I advocate here stress the developmental dimension of faith, and the process through which one comes to believe in God over time. This is not completely out of line with what Pascal says, for he sees ritual as habituating people to faith, and habits take time to establish. But the view I advocate here stresses the role of reflection on one's experiences and feelings in ritual settings, it does not see this process as "easy," "natural," or automatic, and it also moves away from a strict focus on the moment where one first believes in God. It is also important to note that Pascal's account of faith clearly requires the participation of a divine person, God, which is curiously absent from his discussion of how engaging in ritual practice can help one to acquire faith and develop certain virtues, as well.

CONCLUSION

My primary aim in this paper has been to show how Pascal's account of ritual and faith can be amended and developed in light of Xunzi's view, in order to overcome certain problems. However, it is important not to lose sight of the very different traditions and times in which these two thinkers are situated. Given the centrality of belief in God in Pascal's view, it is only natural to ask where Xunzi stands when it comes to religious beliefs of this sort. Does he think that rituals give rise to religious faith in the way that Pascal describes, and if so, what is the role of religious faith? Xunzi's religious outlook differs significantly from his predecessors Kongzi and Mengzi, who each express their belief in the quasi-personal entity of Tian 天 ("Heaven"), which has a plan for human

beings to flourish, occasionally acts in the world in order to help fulfill that plan, and called individuals like the former sage-kings and Kongzi to help preserve, codify, and propagate the Way that will enable humans to achieve this end.²⁴ For Xunzi, however, Tian is not an entity or force for human good, but the impersonal patterns and processes of nature. Xunzi's naturalistic understanding of Tian, not surprisingly, impacts his view of ritual. At least when it comes to certain religious rituals, Xunzi rejects the view that they have any effect on the natural order: "One performs the rain sacrifice and it rains. Why? I say: There is no special reason why. It is the same when one does not perform the rain sacrifice and it rains anyway." Why, then, should we perform such rituals? Xunzi writes, "When Heaven sends drought, one performs the rain sacrifice. One performs divination and only then decides on important affairs. But this is not for the sake of getting what one seeks, but rather to give things their proper form" (272). What does Xunzi mean by "giving things their proper form"? Xunzi believes that rituals give order and shape to our lives – not just any shape, but the proper shape – the best one, the one that will allow us to flourish most fully.

While a thorough overview of Xunzi's religious view is beyond the scope of this paper, all of this helps to make clear that Xunzi holds a very different religious outlook than Pascal. One of the virtues of the amended version of Pascal's view that I propose is that it helps Pascal fend off an obvious weakness in the view as stated, namely that if faith is just mechanical habituation and the people undergoing it are blind to the process, then it is a form of brain-washing; it can be used to get people (or oneself) to believe *anything*. Clearly, this is not what Pascal intended. My amended account of ritual as providing space and time for individuals to encounter God highlights the realist aspect of this process that is needed to avoid this implication. The process is not mechanical; it requires us to be aware and attentive and it does so confident that if we are, *we will see and feel something we currently tend to overlook*. For Xunzi, this process is not just a matter of discovery, and herein lies an important difference. While Xunzi maintains that the Way leads us to see things we miss and interpret what we see differently, he also thinks it leads us to develop

²⁴ See Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Heaven as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism", *Dao* 6 (2007), 211-220; Erin M. Cline, "Religious Thought and Practice in the Analects", in *The Dao Companion to the Analects*, ed. by Amy Olberding (New York: Springer, 2013), pp. 259-291.

sensibilities that we have the capacity for but which need to be oriented and shaped in order to become distinct and vital parts of our standing desire set. These issues are especially worth noting because given these differences, one might expect that the work of a thinker such as Xunzi would not be able to shed light on Pascal's account. One of the things that this paper shows is that it is quite possible for thinkers from very different religious traditions, with very different religious perspectives, to augment one another's views – something that should lead us to explore further the possibilities that exist for comparative work in the philosophy of religion.²⁵

²⁵ I would like to thank Philip J. Ivanhoe, Michael R. Slater and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.