

# *On the Ancient Idea that Music Shapes Character*

**James Harold**

**Dao**

A Journal of Comparative Philosophy

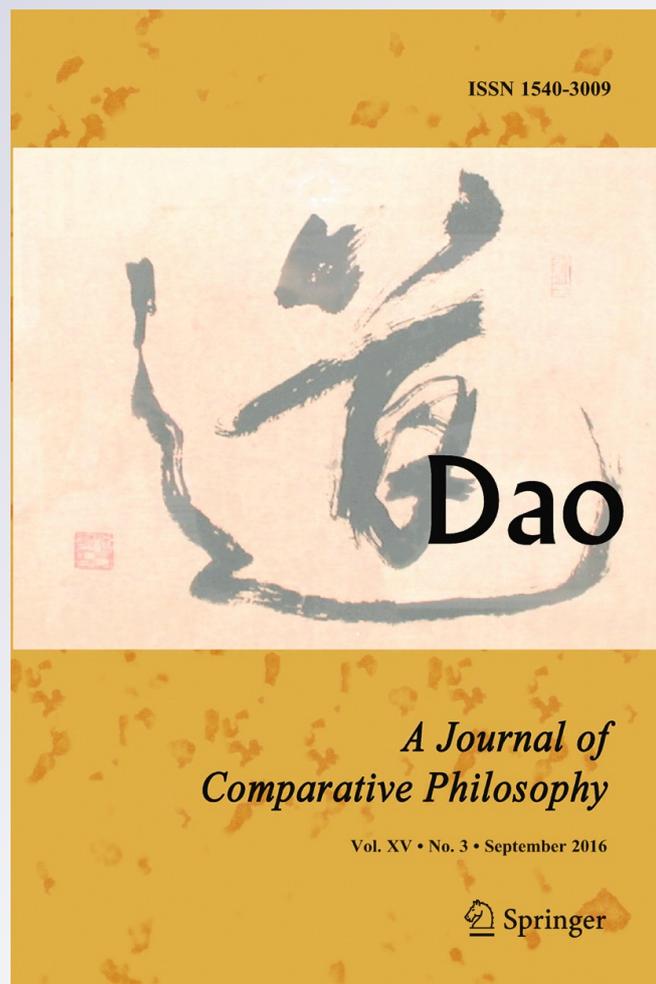
ISSN 1540-3009

Volume 15

Number 3

Dao (2016) 15:341-354

DOI 10.1007/s11712-016-9515-9



**Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Science +Business Media Dordrecht. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your article, please use the accepted manuscript version for posting on your own website. You may further deposit the accepted manuscript version in any repository, provided it is only made publicly available 12 months after official publication or later and provided acknowledgement is given to the original source of publication and a link is inserted to the published article on Springer's website. The link must be accompanied by the following text: "The final publication is available at [link.springer.com](http://link.springer.com)".**

## On the Ancient Idea that Music Shapes Character

James Harold<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 17 June 2016

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2016

**Abstract** Ancient Chinese and Greek thinkers alike were preoccupied with the moral value of music; they distinguished between good and bad music by looking at the music's effect on moral character. The idea can be understood in terms of two closely related questions. Does music have the power to affect the ethical character of either listener or performer? If it does, is it better (or worse) *as music* for doing so? I argue that an affirmative answers to both questions are more plausible than it might seem at first.

**Keywords** Greek philosophy · Virtue ethics · Character · Music · Aesthetics · Confucianism · Xunzi 荀子 · Mengzi 孟子

Music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition. So, people cannot be without music; if they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape in movement.

The way of human beings is such that changes in the motions of their nature are completely contained in these sounds and movements. So, people cannot be without joy, and their joy cannot be without shape. ...

(Xunzi 2014: 218)

In addition to this common pleasure, felt and shared in by all (for the pleasure given by music is natural, and therefore adapted to all ages and characters), may [music] not have also some influence over the character and the soul? It must have such influence if characters are affected by it. And that they are affected is proved in many ways, and not least by the power which the songs of Olympus exercise; for beyond question they inspire enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is an emotion of the ethical part of the soul. Besides, when men hear imitations, even apart from the rhythms and tunes themselves, their feelings move in sympathy.

(Aristotle 1957: 213–214)

---

✉ James Harold  
jharold@mtholyoke.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Philosophy, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA 01075, USA

## 1 Introduction

There are a number of interesting parallels between ancient Chinese thought and ancient Greek thought, but few are more striking than the discussion of music in both traditions. Ancient Chinese philosophers and ancient Greek philosophers alike were preoccupied with the social value of art, and in particular with the value of music. (“Art” is an anachronism in this context, but a harmless one.<sup>1</sup>) They were concerned to distinguish good works of each kind from bad, but the criteria that they used, and the way that they made their judgments, may seem strange to the contemporary Western reader. Ancient Chinese and Greek thinkers distinguished between good and bad music by looking at the music’s effect on a person’s character.

In this paper, I critically assess the idea that good music improves character. The idea involves two claims: (1) music has the power to affect the ethical character of the listener and the performer, and (2) those works of music that improve ethical character are better as works of music (or, more contentiously, better aesthetically); those that harm ethical character are worse as works of music. I do not intend to prove these two claims, but to do something a bit more modest. The aims of this paper are, first, to make the case that these ancient claims are worth exploring by showing that the arguments against them are weaker than they appear; and, second, to outline how a plausible argument for these two claims might go. To do both of these things, we will need to draw on ideas and arguments from ancient Greek and classical Chinese thinkers. In doing so, we can rehabilitate the ancient idea as one worth exploring today.

## 2 Historical Background

While the relationship between ethics and the arts is an important one in contemporary Anglophone philosophy, music as an art form has been largely neglected. (There are, of course, some exceptions, as we will see below.<sup>2</sup>) In contemporary philosophical discussions of ethics and the arts, the focus is normally on literature, film, and other narrative arts, with some attention being paid to painting. Music is often thought to have no real moral importance, except perhaps for the words and stories in song lyrics; what many ancients took to be the art form most relevant to ethics, we now tend to treat as the least relevant. It can be instructive, then, to try to understand why ancient thinkers thought music was so important for virtue, and, having understood them a bit better, to reassess the relationship between music and ethics.

In the 5th century BCE, the philosopher Mozi 墨子 condemned music in the harshest terms. Mozi believed that musical performances, like elaborate funerals, represented a terrible waste of limited resources: “These days, when kings, dukes, and great men put

---

<sup>1</sup> The ancient Greeks had no word corresponding to “art,” but music, poetry, painting, and sculpture were all considered imitative activities (*mimesis*), and so they were often thought of together. Similarly, ancient Chinese thinkers often discussed poetry, calligraphy, and music together.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most well-known exceptions are the arguments of Roger Scruton and Allan Bloom, both of whom saw a strong link between music and moral character, specifically concerning the allegedly corrupting influence of rock and other forms of popular music (Scruton 1997; Bloom 1987). Their views are discussed below. There are of course other contemporary discussions of the moral value of music, though not many: for example, Higgins 1991; Bicknell 2001; and Rudinow 2010.

on musical performances, they divert such vast resources that could be used to produce food and clothing for the people” (Mozi 2001: 107). While the Confucians celebrated the value of rituals, music, and poetry, Mozi condemned wastefulness and excess. His arguments were straightforwardly consequentialist: musical performances were wrong because they produced bad results. Not only did music cost material resources (the enormous traditional bells, for example, were very expensive to build), it also cost precious time.<sup>3</sup> “If women delight in musical performances and spend their time listening to them, they will not be able to rise at dawn and retire in the evening, spinning and weaving to produce hemp, silk, linen, and other types of cloth” (Mozi 2001: 109). In other words, for Mozi, the question of music’s value came down to its costs and its benefits—the latter were meager and the former great.

In responding to Mozi’s arguments, Confucians did not dispute the particular claims he made about the costs of elaborate musical performances. Nor did they argue that the benefits of music somehow outweighed these costs. Confucians such as Mengzi 孟子 and Xunzi 荀子 argued that music was to be justified not according to the benefits (*li* 利)<sup>4</sup> that music might bring, but rather by its role in shaping moral character and promoting social cohesion, qualities which they believed could not be captured in Mohist terms, that is, by counting benefits. In the 4th century BCE, the Confucian philosopher Xunzi wrote an essay entitled “Discourse on Music” (“Yue Lun 樂論”), which was specifically intended to rebut Mozi’s arguments.<sup>5</sup> In this essay, Xunzi wished to show the critical importance of music as a social and moral good. He emphasized the connections between music and virtue, and he claimed that the joy that music inspires in people is a sign of this—in Chinese, “joy” and “music” are homographs (DeWoskin 1982: 9). Xunzi argued that music both models and develops character traits in listeners: corrupt music makes us “dissolute, arrogant, vulgar, and base” while proper music makes us “harmonious and not dissolute” (Xunzi 2014: 219). Xunzi also, like Mengzi before him, believed that music was important because it unites people: through music, people come to “share the same delights” (Mengzi 2008: 17). The idea that good music develops good character is also present in earlier Confucian thought. A number of relevant remarks attributed to Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius) in the *Analects* illustrate this (e.g., see 3.23, 3.25, 7.14, 8.8, 8.15, and 15.11).

In the Greek tradition, Plato and Aristotle are ordinarily thought of as having very different views about the arts: Plato banned the poets from his ideal city, and Aristotle defended poetry’s moral value at length and in detail in his *Poetics*. However, in many ways their views on the arts overlap a great deal, particularly with regard to music. Plato is quicker to recognize the potential dangers of mimetic arts than is Aristotle, but both agree that music has a profound role in shaping character. It succeeds when it has a positive influence on character, and fails when it does not. What is more, Plato’s and Aristotle’s views on music are quite similar to Xunzi’s in many respects. Plato and Aristotle, like Xunzi, take music to be naturally pleasurable, and agree that

<sup>3</sup> Leo Tolstoy echoes these criticisms, thousands of years later, in the opening paragraphs of his *What Is Art?* (Tolstoy 1960).

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes also translated “profit,” *li* is a central idea in Mohist moral philosophy, along with impartial caring (*jian'ai* 兼愛). We are to act in ways that benefit all humanity, without preference to any person or group.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed examination of Xunzi’s arguments about the value of music, see Hutton and Harold (forthcoming).

music can exert a powerful and lasting influence on moral character, for good or ill. (See the epigraphs from Aristotle and Xunzi at the start of the paper.) Plato agrees: “Rhythm and harmony permeate the innermost elements of the soul, affect it more powerfully than anything else” (Plato 2004: 84). Aristotle adds that music directly imitates different moral qualities, such as “anger and gentleness ... courage and temperance” (Aristotle 1957: 214) and he argues that it can be used to encourage and develop these qualities.

The fact that music plays such a critical role in developing one’s character provides the basis for evaluating music. A piece of music is judged good or bad according to whether it cultivates appropriate virtues. Plato praises the Phrygian and Dorian modes because songs in these modes, he thinks, promote courage and quiet deliberation respectively. But Aristotle argues that songs in the Phrygian mode tend to promote an excessive frenzy, rather than courage, and for this reason he considers them inferior to songs in the Dorian mode (Plato 2004: 81; Aristotle 1957: 219). This disagreement, however, masks a deeper underlying agreement about the criterion to use in judging music: music is good when it aids in the growth of appropriate moral virtues. In the Confucian tradition, Xunzi uses similar criteria to critique certain songs and praise others: “Dissolute customs and the tunes of Zheng [鄭] and Wei [衛] make people’s hearts licentious. Putting on the ritual belt, robes, and cap, and dancing the Shao [韶] and singing the Wu [武] make people’s hearts invigorated” (Xunzi 2014: 220). Good music is that which brings about positive change in character; bad music is that which does the opposite.

To contemporary ears, it sounds as though all of these ancient thinkers had highly moralistic views about music. That is, it appears that they judge music according to its social use and its influence on the development of positive moral character, rather than on the basis of its purely aesthetic merits: its harmony, elegance, simplicity, and so on. Xunzi, Mengzi, Aristotle, and Plato praise music for its moral or political qualities. As a result, their ideas can appear rather simplistic or just plain wrong. Few contemporary philosophers take seriously the idea that the chief good of music is its influence on the listener’s character, in part because many doubt that it has any such moral influence in the first place, and in part because many think that musical goodness is something distinct from moral or social goodness. However, this ancient idea is more credible, and more powerful, than it might appear at first. A closer look at how the ancient Greeks and the ancient Chinese thought about music and virtue can rehabilitate the idea that music makes people good, and that music is good in virtue of this fact.

The argument to follow proceeds in three main parts. The first claim, that music affects character, is divided into two main steps: first, that music affects us, and second, that these changes are lasting and ethically significant. In Section 3, I argue that the first step is strongly supported, and in Section 4, I argue that a plausible *prima facie* case can be made for the second step. The second claim, that good music is good when it makes people good, is discussed in Section 5. Here I respond to the best-known objection to this claim and outline an argument supporting it. I conclude that the objections most often offered against the two claims of the paper fail, and that the ancient idea is plausible today.

### 3 Does Music Affect Us?

The claim that music alters moral character is different from, but consistent with, the claim that music is expressive of the musician's moral character. Kongzi (Confucius) of the *Analecets* seems to have held both views. He believed that the music of great kings expresses their greatness:

The Master said of the Shao music, "It is perfectly beautiful, and also perfectly good." He said of the Wu music, "It is perfectly beautiful, but not perfectly good." (*Analecets* 3.25; see Slingerland 2003: 28)

Shao music is the court music of the great sage-king Shun 舜, while King Wu is a lesser king who ousted the evil king Zhou 紂. The music of each court expresses the moral character of its ruler.<sup>6</sup> However, Kongzi also believed that (good) music played a critical role in becoming a virtuous gentleman: "The Master said, 'Find inspiration in the *Odes*, take your place through ritual, and achieve perfection through music'" (*Analecets* 8.8; see Slingerland 2003: 80). Presumably, for Kongzi at least, the two claims are related: music alters moral character because it is the expression of moral character.

But let us put the expressive claim aside, and focus on the question of whether or not music does have an effect (whether positive or negative) on character. To show this, we need to establish, first, that music does affect us strongly: that is, it changes how we feel and how we behave. Then, we need to show that the changes induced by music are lasting and significant. (This second step is discussed below in Section 4.) Let us start, then, with the argument for the first step: that music affects how we feel and how we act.

Kongzi, Xunzi, Aristotle, and many other ancient thinkers seemed to think that we could know that music affects listeners because we could observe its effects on others and feel the effects in ourselves. Aristotle writes:

Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance, and of all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character, which hardly fall short of the actual affectations, as we know from our own experience, for in listening to such strains our souls undergo a change. (Aristotle 1957: 214)

Aristotle takes it that his readers can feel for themselves that different types of music reliably produce different effects on listeners' moods and attitudes—not yet on character, but for Aristotle, feeling the right thing is an important step in developing permanent virtuous character traits.<sup>7</sup>

Xunzi's account of this phenomenon emphasizes a different feature of musical performance: the connection of music to dance, or at least to formalized movement.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, there is no obvious parallel to this expressive idea in Plato or Aristotle.

<sup>7</sup> One of the clearest statements of this interpretation of Aristotle's ethical theory is from Burnyeat 1980.

In proceeding according to the markings and boundaries of the dance stage and conforming to the rhythm of the accompaniment, their ranks and formations become ordered, and their advances and retreats become uniform. (Xunzi 2014: 218–219)

Xunzi suggests that in observing an orderly dance, our own movements, through imitation, are made more orderly, and that these movements and feelings are essential to building (or destroying) good character.

Xunzi's claim that music induces sympathetic movement in listeners and associated emotional or mood responses is now widely accepted. Jenefer Robinson has called it the "jazzercise effect." She writes:

... [I]t does seem to be true that music directly affects us physiologically and acts directly on the motor system, and that our subjective feelings change as a result of being influenced in these ways by the music. (Robinson 2005: 391)

This point is supported by a great deal of psychological and neuroscientific evidence (Robinson 2005). It seems even more plausible when we consider the effects on the performer, for whom repetition and close attention are essential, and who must express the feelings and ideas in the music through his performance. The performer is a listener, of course, as well, but her attention to the music will be greater both quantitatively and qualitatively than other listeners'. Further, for the performer there are also the changes brought about through the physical and intellectual exercise of learning and practicing.

Notice that the emphasis in these ancient writers tends to be on what we would now call automatic causal processes.<sup>8</sup> That is, they operate quickly and largely without conscious guidance. Of course, Aristotle and Xunzi both believed that in order to become virtuous, thought and reflection were essential.<sup>9</sup> Music is just one step in the process of becoming virtuous, and its role comes early on (Aristotle is especially focused on its role in the education of children) and is pre-reflective and automatic. Listening to and playing good music alters the feelings and body in such a way as to make one more receptive to moral instruction. However, the effect of music is not to provide that instruction itself. Aristotle writes:

The study [of music] is suited to the stage of youth, for young persons will not, if they can help, endure anything which is not sweetened by pleasure. ... There seems to be in us a sort of affinity to musical modes and rhythms, which makes some philosophers say that the soul is a tuning, others, that it possesses tuning. (Aristotle 1957: 214)

Xunzi is even more explicit: "In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near the right person. Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts" (Xunzi

<sup>8</sup> This contrasts rather starkly with the trend among contemporary philosophers who advocate using the arts to promote morality (see, e.g., Higgins 1991). Such authors emphasize the conscious, deliberative processing of music and how these processes develop moral character. I discuss and critique this trend in Harold 2005.

<sup>9</sup> For Xunzi, ritual is essential as a complement to music. He writes: "Music unites that which is the same, and ritual distinguishes that which is different. Together the combination of ritual and music governs the human heart" (Xunzi 2014: 221).

2014: 6). According to Xunzi as well as Aristotle, music cannot be sufficient by itself to bring about ethical change. Music's role in developing character is critically important, but it is centered on training the feelings and the body, not one's explicit beliefs.

In the classical Chinese tradition, ritual and music work together to train the self to become more virtuous. As noted above, Xunzi held that ritual and music had complementary roles. However, their role in moral development was still "automatic" in the relevant sense, because it worked through activity and habit, not through the conscious learning of moral principles and beliefs. It is through study that one acquires new beliefs.

In sum, the first step of the argument—that music affects our feelings and our behavior—is well-supported by evidence. The arguments of the ancients are well-supported by modern science (and, indeed, by common sense).

#### 4 Do the Changes Induced by Music Count as Changes in Character?

The second step of the argument is more contentious than the first. The claim to be established is that these emotional and behavioral changes induced by music build (or destroy) moral character. This claim is burdened by association with a recent variant: the attacks on rock and other forms of popular music by Roger Scruton and Allan Bloom (Scruton 1997; Bloom 1987).<sup>10</sup> Much of what Bloom and Scruton have to say about music is strongly influenced by Plato (and, to a lesser extent, Aristotle), but their target is very specific: rock music. They contrast Western classical music, which they think promotes good moral character, with rock or popular music, which they think inculcates weak and corrupt traits in the young people who listen to it. Bloom's claim is that rock brings on an easy ecstatic, sexual pleasure, which trains the listener to expect that such pleasure comes without effort. This, in turn, harms the imagination and the will to learn and improve.

Rock music provides premature ecstasy and, in this respect, is like the drugs with which it is allied. It artificially induces the exaltation naturally attached to the completion of the greatest endeavors—victory in a just war, consummated love, artistic creation, religious devotion, and discovery of the truth. (Bloom 1987: 80)

Scruton's argument is a bit more complicated. Like Xunzi, Scruton ties music closely to dance, but he goes further, and insists that different kinds of music are exhibited through different kinds of movement and even different ways of seeing the world. He writes:

Nobody who understands the experiences of melody, harmony, and rhythm will doubt their value. Not only are they the distillation of centuries of social life: they are also forms of knowledge, providing the competence to reach *out* of ourselves through music. Through melody, harmony, and rhythm, we enter a world where others exist besides the self, a world that is full of feeling but also ordered, disciplined but free. That is why music is a character-forming force, and the decline of musical taste a decline in morals. The *anomie* of Nirvana and REM is the *anomie* of its listeners. (Scruton 1997: 502)

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Noël Carroll for bringing this to my attention.

In Scruton's view, music affects not only our feelings, but something deeper: our conception of our relationship to the larger world. Both Bloom and Scruton have been criticized for their attacks on rock music, and it is not part of my aim here to defend them. Theodore Gracyk, for example, has taken both authors to task for their claims about what is going on in rock music, and has argued that rock is a great deal richer and more edifying than Scruton and Bloom claim (Gracyk 1996, 2008). We can distinguish between the particulars of their arguments, including their interpretations of rock music's meaning, and the form of their arguments. Just as Plato and Aristotle disagreed about which modes of music were the best, while agreeing that music is an essential part of moral education, so we can disagree with Bloom or Scruton about the effects of rock music, while agreeing with them that music of different kinds can have different effects on moral character. The idea considered in this paper does not privilege classical music over popular music, or in general any one kind of music over any other. The question here is whether any music affects character for better or for worse. The further questions of how a particular genre of music (or even a particular piece, or performance of that piece) affects character, is not addressed here. Perhaps it will turn out that Led Zeppelin builds good character, while Mozart corrupts.

So the claim is this: in affecting the feelings of the listener, music builds (or destroys) character. There are two powerful objections that this claim must overcome: first, to bring about real change in character, the feeling induced by the music must be internalized by the listener so that it becomes a habit, a part of the person's dispositions to act that is stable over time. But one may doubt that this could happen. Second, for the change to count as moral, the habits of feeling that music shapes must be constitutive of moral character, and to the extent that music does shape our longstanding dispositions and attitudes, it is not clear that the dispositions are morally good or bad.

The first challenge is difficult to meet. First, there is some skepticism about whether or not there really are such things as stable, global character traits of the kind typically discussed in virtue ethics.<sup>11</sup> (John Doris, at least, is not skeptical about what he calls "local" traits, which are stable dispositions in a carefully circumscribed situation-type.) Even if there are such things as global stable character traits, it is not easy to show whether the feelings (or, better, the dispositions to feel) that music induces persist over time, in order to create or strengthen those traits. So the challenge remains even if character-skepticism were to be refuted.

The best model for testing causal claims like these, as A. W. Eaton has argued in a different context, is an epidemiological one (Eaton 2007). The claim "music improves character" is roughly parallel to the claim that "smoking causes lung cancer." Not every person who smokes gets lung cancer, and not every person who listens to music becomes good. However, if a population-wide analysis were to show a significant, probabilistic correlation between the two, and if alternative causal connections can be ruled out, then one would have a strong reason to think that the claim is true. However, such studies have not been done, and it would not be easy to conduct them.

What we can do is something more modest. The philosophical claim would be worth exploring if there were enough evidence to make a *prima facie* case for a causal connection. If it were more or less plausible that music shapes moral character, then it

---

<sup>11</sup> The first (skeptical) contributions to this discussion are Doris 1998 and Harman 1999. The literature on this subject is now very large indeed.

would be worth asking some philosophical questions about what that would mean for how we should evaluate music, and about how we should think about the nature of moral character. So we do not need to prove a causal connection, but rather render it plausible.

One reason for thinking it plausible is that we have very good evidence for a different, but parallel, causal link between exposure to art (or entertainment) and character development. The causal link between watching violent visual media and being disposed to aggressive behavior is well-established (Hurley 2004). The data here are compelling and extensive. In particular, there is evidence for long-term as well as short-term effects, and the causal mechanism is largely automatic and unconscious. From studies of the causal links between media violence and aggressive behavior, psychologists have hypothesized a number of underlying mechanisms: for short-term effects, priming, excitation, and specific imitation; and for long-term effects, the acquisition of new social-cognitive schemas and scripts (that is, narratives) for problem solving, and the adoption of new beliefs (Huesmann 2005). It is not implausible that music could trigger some of these same systems. Affectively charged experiences, like listening to music, tend to have a stronger influence on one's behavior than other experiences (Kunda 2000).

Repetition matters, too. There is some reason to think that the repetition of experiences can at least have a moderate effect on how one makes judgments in the long-term; research on stereotypes suggests that repeated exposure to certain kinds of disconfirming experiences can mitigate the role of stereotypes in deliberation, though this effect is limited (Kunda 2000: 390–391).

Further, the discussions of music in the ancient Greeks and Chinese are not focused on assessing music taken out of its performative context. Whereas writers like Kivy focus on cases where the music lacks any words or explicit program (“absolute” music), or to put them aside where they do exist, music for Aristotle was inextricably linked to story and to poetry (Aristotle 1957: 209–210). For Xunzi and the Confucians, it was continuous with formalized dance and with ritual: “Together the combination of ritual and music governs the human heart” (Xunzi 2014: 221). In general, what contemporary Anglophone philosophers think of when they think of music only faintly resembles *mousike* or *yue* 樂. *Mousike* included words, dance, and sometimes performative elements. Similarly, *yue* included instrumental music, song, and also poetry (including the *Book of Odes*), which was ordinarily sung. In many cases, and certainly in the courtly music that Xunzi discusses, dance was included as well. The term *yue* embraced all of this and more—the performative context and social meanings were also included. So the claim that music affects character does not mean that organized sound by itself affects character; story, poetry, dance, community, and all that comes with them contribute to the effects of music.

Again, we do not have a demonstration that music really can affect character, but we have a solid *prima facie* case for the idea. This is especially true when we understand what is meant by music broadly. Let us turn, then, to the second objection. The second objection is that whatever effects that music might have on character are too diffuse or too neutral to count as changes in moral character. Music might make us better “ordered,” as Xunzi suggests, in some general sense, but being better ordered does not make us better people: we might invoke the old chestnut that Mussolini made the trains run on time.

This objection is partly sound, but it depends on a somewhat narrow conception of the moral. The ancient Greeks and the ancient Chinese had what would be for most contemporary moral philosophers a promiscuously broad sense of what counted as

moral virtue, or character: for example, Aristotle considered wit to be a moral virtue (Aristotle 1925); Xunzi (along with all Confucians) thought that appropriate dress (particularly during mourning and other major rituals) was critically important to virtue: “If your meals, clothing, dwelling, and activities accord with ritual, they will be congenial and well-regulated” (Xunzi 2014: 10). So music might influence one’s character in ways that might not strike contemporary Anglophone philosophers as particularly moral, but which were importantly relevant to good character in Aristotle’s or Xunzi’s sense. Being virtuous (having *de* 德 or *arête*) is not a fact that applies to part of one’s self, but all of it. Following Bernard Williams, who is himself following Plato and Aristotle, we can say that the concern for character is with *ethical* character, in the broad sense of what kind of person one ought to be, whereas the *moral* is a narrower notion, “a particular development of the ethical, one that has a particular significance in modern Western culture” (Williams 1985: 6) emphasizing notions of duty and the like. The ancient Greeks and Chinese may not have been concerned with moral character as modern thinkers in the West might have thought of it, but the effects that they claimed music brought about were certainly ethical in Williams’s sense.

The claim is not proved; the jury is still out on whether there is convincing evidence that music brings about lasting change in listeners. But the claim is certainly not implausible, and it is well worth investigating. Let us turn, then, to the second claim.

## 5 Does the Moral Goodness of Music Constitute Musical Goodness?

Perhaps even more controversial than the idea that music influences character is the idea that we can judge the value of music *qua* music according to whether or not it has this effect. This seems to moralize the evaluation of music, and so to refuse to appreciate music for its own sake.

However, neither the ancient Greeks nor the ancient Chinese thought of things that way. Beauty, elegance, and harmony were considered to be qualities of music, but these qualities were at the same time moral qualities; indeed, for Confucians, harmony is one of the central moral concepts. These qualities were not thought of as exclusively moral or aesthetic, because the distinction between moral and aesthetic was unfamiliar to them. The Greek word *kalon* is the closest translation to the English word “beautiful,” but it is variously translated as beautiful, noble, good, and fine, depending on the context, and it has strong moral and political connotations (Woodruff 1983). The Chinese word *mei* 美, usually translated as “beautiful,” is similarly vexed, and has had from its earliest uses moral connotations.<sup>12</sup>

What is missing from ancient discussions is any recognition of a special category of aesthetic value, because no such conception existed.<sup>13</sup> The ideas of “aesthetic value” and “aesthetic experience” developed in the 18th century in Europe. While the general

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the discussions in Zhang 2009, and Wang and Fu 2008. Although there are many areas of disagreement about *mei* and its uses in early philosophical texts, there seems to be some agreement that early uses of *mei* sometimes refer to good (*shan* 善) and sometimes refer to what is pleasing to the senses.

<sup>13</sup> Which is not to say that it could not have existed, that the very idea would have been unintelligible and untranslatable. This much stronger claim is implausible at best. The claim here is merely that the specific conception of the aesthetic as a normative category was not in regular use in ancient Greece or classical China. I am grateful to Stephen Davies for pushing me on this point.

idea preceded him slightly, the term “aesthetic” was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in 1735 (see Guyer 2009). Just as Kristeller famously argued the modern notion of “art” and “the fine arts” developed at a particular time and place, so too did the concept of aesthetic evaluation (Kristeller 1951). The idea that aesthetic evaluation was distinct from moral or political evaluation on the one hand, and mere pleasure on the other, developed out of the sense that there is a special kind of psychological or sensory faculty that is employed in the appreciation of natural scenes and artworks.

This is not to say that the ancients did not recognize the distinction between something's being pleasing to the senses rather than its being morally good. They certainly distinguished between the beautiful and the merely pleasant. For example, Mengzi writes:

No one in the world does not appreciate the handsomeness of a man like Zidu [子都]. Anyone who does not appreciate the handsomeness of Zidu has no eyes. Hence, I say that mouths have the same preferences in flavors, ears have the same preferences in sounds, eyes have the same preferences in attractiveness [*mei*]. (Mengzi 2008: 151)<sup>14</sup>

Mengzi here is not saying anything about Zidu's moral character; he is commenting on Zidu's physical attractiveness. (For another example, see *Analects* 3.25.) However, the notion of aesthetic value in the contemporary Western sense cannot be understood in terms of what is pleasing to the senses. Kant's view, for example, was that judgments of taste (aesthetic judgments) are distinct from mere judgments of agreeableness, but also from moral judgments. While Kant's specific account of the aesthetic has few contemporary supporters, the idea that aesthetic value is a distinct sort of value is almost universally accepted among contemporary Anglophone philosophers. Both moral goodness and aesthetic goodness are distinct from the merely pleasant, and each is distinct from the other. It is this assumption that neither Aristotle nor Xunzi would have shared.

It is therefore misleading to say that Xunzi, Aristotle, Mengzi, or Plato judged art using moral rather than aesthetic standards. To say as much would be to presume a modern conception of “moral” evaluation which excludes what we now consider the aesthetic. Their standards were neither moral nor aesthetic in the usual sense of those terms. The distinction between moral and aesthetic standards is a modern distinction, and we distort when we read into these thinkers divisions and distinctions that they did not recognize.

The ancients did not ask and would have had difficulty understanding a question that philosophers often ask today: how is the aesthetic worth of a musical piece related to its effects on one's moral character? So let us try to ask the question in a somewhat different way, perhaps in a way that might have made a little more sense to Aristotle or Xunzi. Is music better *as music* when it makes a person a better person?

It may seem that with respect to music in particular, there is good reason for skepticism. The idea of aesthetic value has particular power in the case of music. One of the earliest proponents of formalism—enjoyment and evaluation of music for its own sake, without regard to purpose—is Eduard Hanslick, who argued that whatever

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this passage, see Wang and Fu 2008: 86.

feelings or emotions might be commonly associated with a piece of music were completely irrelevant to proper judgments of its value (Hanslick 1986). More recent versions of formalism (such as Peter Kivy's) take a more moderate and nuanced view in which the emotive properties of music do matter, but their role is "purely structural" (Kivy 2002: 99). Furthermore, the sense in which music is said to be "sad" or "happy" has little or nothing to do with the emotions that listening to that music produces in the audience. While there are many critics of musical formalism (see Robinson 2005), it is fair to say that the idea that music has value in itself regardless of its effect is viewed as more plausible than the parallel claim about, for example, literature.

In responding to this skepticism, we should first recall, as we have noted earlier, that the ancients were certainly not talking about absolute music or music free from its performative context, as the musical formalists prefer to do. What Kivy calls "music alone" or "pure music" is "a quasi-syntactical structure of sound understandable solely in musical terms and having no semantic or representational content, no meaning, making reference to nothing beyond itself" (Kivy 1990: 202). Such music does not produce what he calls the "garden-variety emotions" in listeners at all; insofar as we ascribe qualities to such music like "sad" or "energetic," these are metaphors for musical qualities, not emotional ascriptions. While Kivy concedes that music does inspire some emotions, such as joy or awe at the craft and imagination of the composition, these are not the kinds of emotions that contribute to moral character.

If the complaint, then, is that the claim under discussion fails to address this kind of musical value, the value found in the contemplation and experience of musical structures considered by themselves, then there is no defense except to say that it does not. However, this conception of musical value is very narrow, and when we say that the musical value of a work is such-and-such, in the typical case the pure or formalist value of that work will be only one part, and perhaps a small part, of that judgment. When we understand music as an organic whole, including its meanings, stories, and performance context, then the question of musical quality is naturally bound up with ethical considerations, when they are broadly understood.

The main argument for the second claim, then, is that a broad conception of music (not just structured sound, but sound embedded in story, dance, and cultural meanings) needs a broad conception of musical goodness. When Xunzi condemns the music of Zheng and Wei, he is not just talking about their sonic qualities, but also the customs and movements that come with them. Today, most music that people listen to is popular music, which comes with cultural meanings and often with associated dances. When people condemn Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines," they are not just talking about the melody, but the lyrics (which seem to condone sexual assault) and the music video, which objectifies women's bodies. If "Blurred Lines" is bad music, it is so because the whole of the musical experience is bad for the listener, not because one element (or set of elements) has these effects. The claim that music is good or bad depending on its effects on moral character is much more plausible when we see music as embedded in culture than when we see it as pure sonic structure.

This, of course, is not decisive. There are many reasons one might give for rejecting this way of assessing musical goodness, even if one accepts a broader conception of what music is. However, I do hope to have shown that the claim is a plausible one and that the arguments about musical goodness and its relationship to ethical goodness are worth having.

## 6 Conclusion

The ancient idea involves two main claims. The first is that music can affect our character. This claim needs to be established in two steps: first, that it affects us, and second, that these effects are lasting and morally significant. I have argued that the first step is well-supported by evidence and that the ancients' arguments are good ones. The second step, I have argued, is harder to prove and depends on empirical work which has not yet been done and would not be easy to do. However, I have argued that this second step does have initial plausibility and is worth exploring. The second claim is that musical goodness is moral goodness. Here again, while this claim is left unproven, the most significant objections to it have been defeated. So the ancient idea is credible, and, I think, worthy of significant further discussion.

In this paper, I have not tried to make a decisive argument either that music makes us good, or that it is better music for doing so. (Neither have I tried to offer a systematic, side-by-side comparison of the similarities and differences between Chinese and Greek views of this question.) But I do hope to have cleared the ground so that such arguments can be made. To explore seriously the ancient claim that good music can make us better people requires a closer understanding of the context of these arguments, and I hope to have taken a first step in that direction.

**Acknowledgments** I have been working on this project for many years and different versions of this paper have been presented at a number of different venues. I am sure that I have not appropriately remembered all of those whose comments, suggestions, and objections have improved the paper, but I would like particularly to thank Stephen Angle, Noël Carroll, Stephen Davies, Eric Hutton, Philip J. Ivanhoe, and the anonymous referees for this journal. The positions expressed in the paper, and its faults, are my own.

## References

- Aristotle. 1925. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. by W. D. Ross. New York: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1957. *Politics*. In *Aristotle's Politics and Poetics*, edited by Benjamin Jowett and Thomas Twining, trans. by Benjamin Jowett. New York: The Viking Press.
- Bicknell, Jeanette. 2001. "Music, Listeners, and Moral Awareness." *Philosophy Today* 45 (Fall): 266–274.
- Bloom, Allan. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Burnyeat, M. F. 1980. "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good." In *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, edited by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- DeWoskin, Kenneth J. 1982. *A Song for One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies.
- Doris, John. 1998. "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics." *Noûs* 32.4: 504–530.
- Eaton, A. W. 2007. "A Sensible Antiporn Feminism." *Ethics* 117.4: 674–715.
- Gracyk, Theodore. 1996. *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. "Music's Worldly Uses, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Led Zeppelin." In *Arguing about Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, 3rd ed., edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley. New York: Routledge.
- Guyer, Paul. 2009. "Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics." In *A Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., edited by Stephen Davies, Kathleen Marie Higgins, Robert Hopkins, Robert Stecker, and David E. Cooper. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hanslick, Eduard. 1986. *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*. Trans. by G. Payzant. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

- Harman, Gilbert. 1999. "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99: 315–331.
- Harold, James. 2005. "Infected by Evil." *Philosophical Explorations* 8.2: 173–187.
- Higgins, Kathleen. 1991. *The Music of Our Lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Huesmann, L. Rowell. 2005. "Imitation and the Effects of Observing Media Violence on Behavior." In *Perspectives on Imitation*, volume II: *Imitation, Human Development, and Culture*, edited by Susan Hurley and Nick Chater. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hurley, Susan. 2004. "Imitation, Media Violence, and Freedom of Speech." *Philosophical Studies* 17.1–2: 165–218.
- Hutton, Eric, and James Harold. Forthcoming. "Music." In *The Dao Companion to Xunzi*, edited by Eric Hutton. New York: Springer.
- Kivy, Peter. 1990. *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kristeller, Paul. 1951. "The Modern System of the Arts." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12.4: 496–527.
- Kunda, Ziva. 2000. *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mengzi. 2008. *Mengzi: With Selections from the Traditional Commentaries*. Trans. by Bryan W. Van Norden. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Mozi. 2001. "A Condemnation of Musical Performances." In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., trans. by Philip J. Ivanhoe, edited by Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Plato. 2004. *Republic*. Trans. by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Robinson, Jenefer. 2005. *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rudinow, Joel. 2010. *Soul Music: Tracking the Spiritual Roots of Pop from Plato to Motown*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Scruton, Roger. 1997. *The Aesthetics of Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Slingerland, Edward, trans. 2003. *Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Tolstoy, Leo. 1960. *What is Art?* Trans. by Almeyer Maude. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Woodruff, Paul. 1983. "Introduction." In Plato, *Two Comic Dialogues: Ion and Hippias Major*, trans. by Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Zhang, Qian. 2009. "The Boundaries of Beauty in Pre-Qin Confucian Aesthetics." *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 4.1: 52–63.
- Wang, Yi, and FU Xiaowei. 2008. "An Exegetic Study of the So-Called Proposition of Confucian Aesthetics." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42.1: 80–89.
- Xunzi. 2014. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. Trans. by Eric Hutton. Princeton: Princeton University Press.