

‘Public-mindedness’ (*gong* 公) as an epistemic virtue in the political philosophies of the *Shenzi* 慎子 and the *Xunzi* 荀子

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Abstract:

This article explores *gong* 公 (‘public-mindedness’) as an epistemic virtue in two Warring States Chinese philosophical texts, the *Shenzi* and the *Xunzi*. The epistemic dimension of *gong* is born from an awareness of the narrowness of one’s epistemic perspective. It represents an impartial and unbiased approach to governance. *Gong* is considered here alongside three epistemic virtues previously identified in the Chinese tradition: intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and knowledge abstinence. While there is some overlap between these and *gong*, there are important differences due in part to the political focus of the latter. There are also marked differences between its usage in the two texts. *Gong* in the *Shenzi* connotes a capacity to outsource the bases for political decisions to systems and processes external to one’s epistemic faculties. The *Xunzi*, by contrast, maintains confidence in the cultivation of mind as a basis for governance, and *gong* represents a balanced and unbiased epistemic virtue.

Keywords: *Gong* 公, public-mindedness, intellectual humility, open-mindedness, knowledge abstinence, political philosophy, Warring States

1. Introduction

This article explores *gong* 公 as an epistemic virtue in two Warring States (476–221 BCE) Chinese philosophical texts, the *Shenzi* 慎子 and the *Xunzi* 荀子. *Gong*, considered here in most instances to mean ‘public-mindedness,’ appears specifically in political philosophy.¹ Its political dimension vests in it a unique quality as an epistemic virtue, namely that although it pertains to epistemic practice—attaining knowledge, making judgements, assessing doubt and certainty, and so on—it is geared towards political rather than epistemic ends. As such, its function is not the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake but the appropriate employment of epistemic faculties to facilitate effective governance. It deals with how knowledge-related practices should be handled for the sake of attaining and maintaining political legitimacy and stability. This does not necessarily involve accrual of more, or more reliable, knowledge. It may even involve aversion to knowledge acquisition if politically desirable.

Public-mindedness is considered here alongside three other epistemic virtues previously identified in the Chinese tradition: intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and knowledge abstinence. Several scholars have noted the role of intellectual humility in a range of Confucian and Daoist texts (see, e.g., Mason, 2023; Robinson & Alfano, 2016; Singh, 2023), as well as open-mindedness, most notably in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (see, e.g., Beaney, 2023; Singh, 2023). Prior to their identification in the Chinese context, “intellectual humility” and “open-mindedness” have both undergone significant discussion in Western philosophical discourses on epistemic virtue. Both are typically considered in service of attaining reliable knowledge and broadening one’s perspective. Knowledge abstinence, which has been identified as a feature of Daoist texts of the *Zhuangzi* (Moeller, 2008) and the *Laozi* 老子 (Moeller, 2006, pp. 95–97), may be treated as an epistemic virtue insofar as it pertains to epistemic activity, but it is a *negative* epistemic virtue geared towards abstaining from, rather than attaining, knowledge. Furthermore, unlike intellectual humility or open-mindedness, knowledge abstinence has no obvious precursor in the Western philosophical tradition. Similarly, *gong*, or public-mindedness, is not a modified version of a pre-existing concept borrowed from Western discourse on epistemic virtue but emanates directly from the Chinese context.

The *Shenzi* and *Xunzi* are historically and philosophically linked. Shen Dao 慎到 (c. 359 – c.275 BCE) and *Xun Kuang* 荀况 (c. 316 – c. 236 BCE), the masters associated with these texts, are traditionally linked with the scholars ‘under the gate of Ji’ (*jixia* 稷下) at Qi 齊 (X.

Bai, 1998, pp. 138–153, 274–295).² While the *Shenzi* has ties to the Legalist and the *Xunzi* to the Confucian tradition, Daoist elements can be found in both texts.³ The *Shiji* 史記 claims that Shen Dao studied the arts of the Yellow Emperor (*huang di* 黃帝) and Laozi 老子 (Sima, 1998, p. 822), and indeed there are passages in the *Shenzi* that imply a *wuwei* 無為 (non-coercive) mode of governance reminiscent of the *Laozi* (J. Xu, 2013). Scholars have noted the Daoist features of the *Xunzi* too, especially the cultivation of the mind outlined in the ‘Jiebi’ 解蔽 (‘Resolving Obscurations’) chapter (Stalnaker, 2003; Jiang, 2021, p. 360). Despite certain shared tendencies, the *Xunzi* explicitly challenges Shen Dao in several places, and elsewhere seems to do so implicitly.⁴ The *Xunzi* clearly understands Shen Dao as devaluing cultivation, and the *Shenzi* indeed warns against reliance on the cultivation of talents and intellect as means to bring about political order (see, e.g., *Shenzi* #10–14, #43).⁵

Connotations of *gong* are wide-ranging. The term plays an important role in pre-Qin 秦 political texts including the *Shenzi* and the *Hanfeizi* (Sato, 2003, pp. 135–136; Brindley, 2013; Goldin, 2005, pp. 58–65; T. Bai, 2020, pp. 149–153; Vogelsang, 2016; Graziani, 2024, pp. 391–395). It is also an important term in the *Xunzi*, which responds to the Legalist conception of *gong* and advances it in a new direction (Q. Chen, 2013, pp. 80–86). These two texts thus provide a rich insight into different aspects of the term. Excavations thought to be from the *Shang* 商 (c. 1600–c.1046 BCE) and *Zhou* 周 (c. 1046–771 BCE) dynasties suggest that the earliest usages of *gong* referred to places and ancestors, and later to political superiors (Z. Liu, 2006, pp. 20–21). In the Warring States, *gong* had become an object of ethical-political striving, and the *Shenzi* is a key text where this usage can be found (Brindley, 2013; Sato, 2003, pp. 135–136).⁶ Interpretations by contemporary scholars of its usage in the Warring States range from denoting merely the ‘interests of the sovereign’ (Goldin, 2005, p. 61) to a ‘value concerning universal benefit and universal interest’ (Brindley, 2013, p. 23). In many texts, including the *Shenzi* and *Xunzi*, it relates to the epistemological as well as the ethical-political (Z. Liu, 2003, p. 66).

As a term that comprises both normative and epistemic elements, *gong* does not pertain only to interests—whether those of the sovereign (Goldin, 2005, p. 61; Vogelsang, 2016, p. 62) or universal interests (Z. Liu, 2006, p. 22; Brindley, 2013; Sato, 2003)—but also to how one attains knowledge and utilizes it politically. Its usage as an epistemic virtue is clearest in the *Xunzi* where, as Eric Hutton suggests, it points to a lack of bias or prejudice. Hutton explains his translations of the term:

‘Avoidance of prejudice’ translates *gong* 公, a virtue opposite to prejudice in favor of oneself (i.e., selfishness) or others (i.e., one-sidedness). Stated positively, it combines both public-spiritedness and impartiality. (Hutton, 2014, p. 15, n. 24)

Whether one is prejudiced, or partial, pertains at once to both the ethical and the epistemological. These terms describe obscurations of one’s perceptions which have ethical ramifications.⁷

The favored translation of *gong* here, when considered as an epistemic virtue, is ‘public-mindedness’ (see Harris, 2016, pp. 117, 128–129). This conveys both an absence of epistemic bias, through weighing things comprehensively and evenly, and absence of normative bias, through concern for the greater public. These aspects are interlinked given that part of treating the greater public equitably is the capacity to weigh their concerns, and their realities, evenly. As we see in the *Shenzi*, this concern may be enacted through employment of methods external to one’s mind in addition to, as in the *Xunzi*, the training of one’s mind. The capacity to refrain from making biased judgements is politically salient since it is both epistemically rewarding and confers political legitimacy on the master of this practice.

The *Shenzi* and *Xunzi* will first be considered in the context of broader discussions around epistemic virtue in the Chinese tradition, focusing on intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and knowledge abstinence. Following this, the article aims to show that *gong* as an epistemic virtue appears very differently in the two texts. The *Shenzi* promotes exercising public-mindedness by training oneself to refrain from monopolizing epistemic practices and, instead, to outsource methods that form the bases of political judgements to the greater political machine. It bears likeness to knowledge abstinence insofar as it seeks to externalize epistemic functions and thereby involves an aversion to the accrual of knowledge within oneself. *Gong* in the *Xunzi* also contains a degree of negative epistemic cultivation in that it promotes stillness of mind instead of overweening epistemic striving. However, it is characterized by a stronger faith in the human mind and represents a cultivation of impartiality and evenhanded consideration of the whole of one’s political remit. *Gong*, in both texts, shares with epistemic humility a recognition of one’s epistemic limitations. This does not lead to a strong sense of open-mindedness in either text, however, as engaging a greater number of perspectives is not found to be politically desirable in its own right.

2. Intellectual Humility, Open-Mindedness, and Knowledge Abstinence in the *Shenzi* and *Xunzi*

This section discusses the *Shenzi* and *Xunzi* against notions of intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and knowledge abstinence for two principle reasons: to contextualize the discussion of *gong*, or public-mindedness, in these texts among existing discussions of epistemic virtue in the Chinese tradition, and to provide a basis for illuminating in the latter part of the article how *gong* differs from these other epistemic virtues.

a) *Intellectual humility*

Intellectual humility can be roughly defined as being properly attentive to, and owning, one's limitations and, to a lesser degree, one's strengths (Whitcomb et al., 2017). A recognition of one's epistemic limitations may result in either a more thorough-going cultivation of epistemic virtue in the interest of deepening one's pursuit of knowledge, or an acceptance that one's epistemic capacities are deeply flawed and should not be relied upon. Intellectual humility can be detected in both the *Xunzi* and the *Shenzi*, yet it stokes further cultivation of the mind in the *Xunzi* while giving rise to a distrust of knowledge pursuit in the *Shenzi*.

Tao Jiang notes how humility is an important virtue in Shenzian philosophy (Jiang, 2021, pp. 275–282). The political ruler, as well as all others in the political framework, must refrain from overestimating the usefulness of their capacities, and this includes intellectual and epistemic capacities. The *Shenzi* encourages a recognition that 'the intelligence of the ruler is not necessarily of a higher order of excellence than that of all others' (#42; trans. Thompson, 1970, p. 529). The text goes on to state:

If the 'knowledge' (or 'wisdom'; *zhi* 智) of the lord is supposed to be the most worthy, and if care for those underneath is to be provided by a single ruler, this will be laborious; labor leads to exhaustion, exhaustion to demise, and demise leads to a return to the way of not caring.⁸ (*Shenzi* #43)

This passage emphasizes how social and political instability may arise from the ruler overestimating and overexercising their capacities, include cognitive capacities.

Intellectual humility in the *Xunzi* is evident in the reverence for great texts, sages, and rituals from which one should learn. The capacity of an individual for independent learning is seen as highly limited. One should learn through interaction with others and via cultural media. In a passage that describes the *Book of Documents* (*Shu* 書) and the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shi* 詩) as repositories of learning about governance and lyricism respectively, it is said that ‘learning comes to ritual and then stops, for this is called the ultimate point in pursuit of the Way [*dao* 道] and virtue’ (Xunzi, 1996, 1/3/10; trans. Hutton, 2014, p. 5). Not only should one learn from texts and rituals, but one requires a teacher to learn from them in the right way:

In learning there is nothing better than being close to people of learning. Rituals and music provide methods but no explanations; the *Book of Documents* and *Classic of Poetry* are ancient and not immediately applicable; the *Spring and Autumn Annals* are terse and cannot be quickly understood. If one orients oneself by means of the practices of the learned and the explanations of the superior person, then one will be venerated for being unbiased, and will have a comprehensive understanding of the world. Thus, it is said, in learning there is nothing better than being close to people of learning. (Xunzi, 1996, 1/3/20–21; trans. consulted Hutton, 2014 and Stalnaker, 2003)

Clear from this passage is that one cannot understand the classics through solitary effort (Stalnaker, 2003, p. 47). The *Xunzi* is aware of the limitations of one’s capacity for understanding and holds that it is therefore essential to have an excellent teacher and worthy friends (Xunzi, 1996, 23/117/16–18). The *Xunzi* recognizes how the cultivation of one’s intellect is only possible through connected learning. This opposition to an individualistic approach to acquiring knowledge and wisdom implies a sort of intellectual humility (Robinson & Alfano, 2016). The *Xunzi* does, however, contain several instances that suggest the ordinary, lowly person can become a great sage (Xunzi, 1996, 4/15/9–10, 8/29/14; Hutton, 2014, pp. 27, 57) and thus retains a degree of tenacious confidence in human intellectual capacity. An ordinary person can achieve sagehood through persistent cultivation, albeit this cultivation requires the help of teachers and cultural traditions.

In the *Shenzi*, we see intellectual humility manifest in a very different way. The *Shenzi* does not encourage a lowering of the estimation of one's capacities relative to others. Instead, the text recommends against holding too much reverence not only for one's own capacities but for the great sages too. The following description of Shen Dao is offered in the 'Tianxia' 天下 chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子:

...shamelessly without responsibility and yet laughing at those who are praised as worthy by all under the sky, abandoning constraints and taking no action and yet undermining the great sages of the world. (Zhuangzi, 2000, 33/99/16)

Indeed, the text does not laud even the greatest of human minds. It questions the myth that a great sage like Yao 堯 could establish political order singlehandedly (*Shenzi* #10–14). While a *Shenzian* attitude towards cognitive capacities might be perceived at the interpersonal level as arrogance, it represents an intellectual humility on the part of humankind generally.

The *Shenzi* and the *Xunzi* both recognize the limits of one's epistemic capacities. However, the approaches of the texts diverge here. As will become clear, in response to these limitations, the *Shenzi* promotes methods that externalize epistemic functions and allow them to operate among ministers and even in non-human processes. In the *Xunzi*, by contrast, the recognition of one's epistemic limits leads primarily to cultivating impartiality of mind so that it can make sound judgements.

b) *Open-mindedness*

Intellectual humility and open-mindedness are closely related epistemic virtues (Spiegel, 2012). If intellectual humility is understood as recognizing one's epistemic and cognitive limitations, then open-mindedness might be understood as a further step towards 'serious consideration of alternative ideas' (Hare, 2009, p. 37). In addition to recognizing one's own intellectual shortcomings, and perhaps in response to this realization, the open-minded person embraces openness to other perspectives.

As suggested previously, the *Shenzi* promotes intellectual humility in that it warns against a reliance on the 'knowledge' or 'wisdom' (*zhi*) of the ruler. This humility does not, however, give rise to open-mindedness. The recognition of one's epistemic constraints is

instead a key motivation for the ruler to rely on their political inferiors instead of their own capacities, as evident in the following passage:

The [ideal] Way of the lord and the ministers is that the ministers busy themselves with affairs while the lord is not occupied with affairs. The lord retreats in leisure while the ministers take responsibility for works. The ministers exercise their wisdom (*zhi*) and capabilities to the utmost to excel at their affairs while the lord does not become involved. (*Shenzi* #38)

Although the ruler delegates, and perhaps even defers, to their ministers intellectually, this does not represent open-mindedness as the ruler does not seek to learn from their perspectives. When we come to examine the role of *gong* in the *Shenzi*, we shall see that a blindness and deafness to the perspectives of the ministers is a prerequisite to being public-minded. Furthermore, the ruler may outsource to impersonal mechanisms as well as people.

The position in the *Xunzi* represents a greater degree of open-mindedness. The clearest description of Xunzi's philosophy of mind comes in the 'Jiebi' chapter (Fraser, 2022, p. 44). It outlines the cultivation of an unbiased epistemic countenance which requires attaining a stillness of mind. It states:

How does the person know the *dao*? It is said: by the heart-mind. How does the heart-mind know? It is said: through empty oneness (*yi* 壹) and stillness (*jing* 靜). (*Xunzi*, 1996, 21/103/25)

The cultivation of mind promoted in the 'Jiebi' chapter culminates in a kind of 'oneness' (*yi* 壹). This might be understood as a communion of multiple perspectives. The 'emptiness' (*xu* 虛; Xunzi, 1996, 21/103/25) of mind recommended here leaves it open to other perspectives. However, the stillness of mind means it engages in a limited way. Just like a basin of water can only reflect things evenly and clearly if it is still, the *Xunzi* tells us that the mind must be still for it to effectively perform epistemically:

A person's heart-mind is like a basin of water. To reflect clearly there must be no movement, and thus the murkiness falls to the bottom, and it is clear on the surface.

Hence it is adequate to inspect and groom one's whiskers. If even a slight breeze goes past, the murkiness is moved at the bottom, and the clearness is disturbed at the surface. Hence, one cannot even distinguish large objects. The heart-mind is like this. (Xunzi, 1996, 21/105/5–7)

This passage presents a metaphor between the mind and a mirror. The reflective pool of water illustrates a still and empty mind, void of partial judgements and intentions. An essential aspect of this metaphor is the stillness of the water (Cline, 2008). Not only is the reflective water still, but the basin provides definite limits to what is reflected. These limits imply a lack of open-mindedness in the context of the *Xunzi*.

Open-mindedness requires a high degree of engagement with others (Kwong, 2016, p. 85). The 'Jiebi' chapter engages a range of other thinkers before presenting its own views on cultivation of mind. Furthermore, the chapter argues that those thinkers were all blinded by their overestimation of some narrow concern. In this sense, there seems to be a striving for open-mindedness in the refutation of the closed-mindedness of others. The stillness inherent in the state of mind recommended in the *Xunzi*, however, prevents it from becoming overly open to other perspectives. Striving to take in too many viewpoints could lead to a disturbed mind, a resultant inability to govern effectively, and, in turn, political instability.

A feature of open-mindedness is that one should take challenges to one's own views seriously (Riggs, 2010, p. 177). The 'Jiebi' and the 'Fei shi'er zi' 非十二子 ('The Twelve Who Are Not Masters') chapters of the *Xunzi* are composed largely of brief and blunt rejections of the views of others (see Fraser, 2022, p. 44). One might conclude that the *Xunzi* does not reveal a sufficiently positive embrace of others' viewpoints for it to represent an open-minded position. Hutton's (2014) translation of *yi* 壹 as 'single-mindedness' is worthy of consideration. While single-mindedness is at odds with open-mindedness, it performs a positive role in the context of the *Xunzi*. There is a certain doggedness required in order that one's mind does not become divided:

Categories cannot consist of twoness, and thus he who knows chooses one and thereby achieves oneness. (Xunzi, 1996, 21/104/16)

The ideal mind in *the Xunzi* remains effectively closed, therefore, to potential points of view that it might encounter if it engaged more actively with others—or, in other words, if it were more open.

To summarize the role of open-mindedness in these two texts, although the *Shenzi* promotes drawing on others instead of relying on the mind of the ruler, it does not amount to open-mindedness as it does not promote learning from those other perspectives. The admission of the ruler's intellectual limitations does not represent a starting point from which to strengthen their epistemic capacity. The cultivation of an empty mind in the *Xunzi* comes closer to open-mindedness, but it is limited by the stillness of mind and the limited sphere in which it operates, and thus not being conducive to engaging with a maximal number of viewpoints.

c) *Knowledge abstinence*

Epistemic virtues are typically treated as being in the service of pursuing true knowledge (see, e.g., Bloomfield, 2000, p. 34; Roberts & Wood, 2007; Spiegel, 2012). In the Chinese context, while this may align to an extent with the Confucian love of learning (Mason 2023), it is not characteristic of the entire Chinese tradition.⁹ From a Chinese philosophical perspective, abstinence from striving for knowledge may also be considered a virtue. Wang Zheng (2022) notes how many early Chinese philosophical traditions are characterized by 'knowledge cessation' (*zhi zhi* 知止). Corrective to an indefinite striving for greater expanses of knowledge, 'cessation' in this sense implies an appropriate coming to rest. Confucians, says Wang, consider the value of epistemology to be the cultivation of virtues and the improvement of social order (Z. Wang, 2022, pp. 25–27). Daoist texts tend to emphasize, he argues, the psychosocial benefits to the person of allowing epistemic activity to come to rest, as allowing for overweening epistemic striving brings harm to a person (Z. Wang, 2022, pp. 27–29).

Wang's Confucian version of 'knowledge cessation' bears out in the *Xunzi* to a large degree. While some discussions of epistemic virtue in the *Xunzi* tend to see the cultivation of mind as a means to attain true knowledge (Tsai, 2014, p. 12; Cheung, 2022, p. 131), a difference should be recognized between the attainment of knowledge and the drawing of distinctions (*bian* 辨), especially where the drawing of distinctions takes place in the context of epistemic stillness. Chris Fraser makes the observation that, 'The central topic of [Xunzi's] most sustained epistemological discussion—'Resolving Obscuration' [Jiebi]—is not knowledge, per

se, but error’ (Fraser, 2022, p. 44). As discussed in the previous section, there are limitations to the extent to which perspectives are engaged, and knowledge is sought out, in the *Xunzi*. Maintaining stillness and emptiness is important to achieving impartiality in service of ‘correcting and improving our distinction-drawing competence’ (Fraser, 2022, p. 44). What is needed to make sound distinctions, in other words, is not an indefinite amassing of knowledge but impartiality. The thinkers that *Xunzi* criticizes in ‘Jiebi’ are, in his perspective, so bound on knowing some particular aspect of things that they lose their impartiality. Attaining stillness entails a degree of knowledge cessation which in turn lays the groundwork for the drawing of impartial distinctions.

A more radical version of knowledge cessation is the ‘knowledge abstinence’ of the Daoist sage (Moeller, 2008, p. 118). Hans-Georg Moeller notes how the Daoist sage is ‘not looking at the world in terms of good/bad or true/false’ (2008, p. 122). In this context, Moeller quotes the *Laozi* which states, ‘knowing how not to know is the highest [know how]’ (*Laozi* 71; Moeller, 2008, p. 119; see also Moeller, 2007, p. 164).¹⁰ Knowledge abstinence is a negative epistemic virtue in the sense that it promotes a mode of dealing negatively with epistemic functions. This is distinct from ‘negative epistemology’ in the sense of undesirable epistemic practices like error, ignorance, irrationality, illusions, or biases (Alfano & Sullivan, 2019; Engel, 2016, p. 198). Rather, knowledge abstinence promotes resisting fixed or overambitious epistemic positions, and thus is a ‘positively’ construed negative epistemic virtue.

The approach to political practice in the *Shenzi* reflects, to a degree, the knowledge abstinence of the Daoist sage. The *Zhuangzi* ‘Tianxia,’ quoted above, claims that Shen Dao laughs at the sages of the world—these, presumably, are not those sages who practice knowledge abstinence, as Shen Dao himself is described there as ‘eradicating knowledge and abandoning the self’ (Zhuangzi, 2000, 33/99/15).¹¹ Some authors have expressed difficulty aligning this description of Shen Dao with the *Shenzi* text (Fung, 1952, p. 159; Harris, 2016, p. 102). It is reminiscent, however, of the kind of sagehood recommended in the *Shenzi* by analogy to the sky (*tian* 天):

The sage has virtue, yet does not worry about the peril of the people. Although the sky does not worry about the darkness of the people, when the people open their doors and windows, light will certainly flood in. (*Shenzi* #1–2)

Although ‘worry’ is primarily affective rather than cognitive, there is an implication here that the sage does not exercise their mind in the service of bettering the ordinary people’s conditions. Ironically, this lack of consideration leads to the betterment of their conditions. The sky does not know anything of the strife of humans, but humans attain light by virtue of its passive existence. As we saw previously in the *Shenzi*, the ruler should allow ministers to handle affairs rather than engaging in them directly. We cannot ascribe to the *Shenzi* a fundamental position of knowledge abstinence, however, as the text still requires the control of knowledge in order to maintain social and political stability. The point is that knowledge should be dispersed across people and processes and not centralized in any one person.

Both the *Shenzi* and *Xunzi* impose limits on the ideal epistemic scope of the political leader. In this sense, both can be said to promote a degree of knowledge abstinence. It is more dominant in the *Shenzi*, where knowledge abstinence is in service of preventing epistemic and cognitive strain on the ruler, which would ultimately lead to political instability. In the *Xunzi*, it serves to limit the scope of what the political actor should know and thereby allows for a more impartial and focused attention to what is within their remit.

3. *Gong* as outsourcing epistemic activity in the *Shenzi*

From the preceding discussion on intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and knowledge abstinence, we see that the *Shenzi* recognizes epistemic and cognitive limitations and emphasizes their significance for the political ruler. The response to this in the *Shenzi* is not one of open-mindedness, that is, the ruler does not aim to improve their cognitive capacities by opening up to other perspectives. Rather, it is closer to knowledge abstinence, as the ruler can and should not be relied on as a source of knowledge or wisdom. As we shall see below, the *Shenzi* does not hold a fundamental position of knowledge abstinence; knowledge is dispersed or made ‘public’ (*gong*) rather than centralized in the ruler or any other individual.

Apart from its usage as an honorific title akin to ‘duke,’ the term *gong* appears in three passages in the short modern redaction of the *Shenzi*. In two of these passages, ‘public minded’ is a fitting translation for *gong*. One reads:

Officials who maintain their responsibilities all devote themselves to ordering [their tasks]¹² and none dare to be licentious or indolent with regard to their duties. They are public minded [*gong*] and upright [*zheng* 正] and show respect for their occupation and are harmonious and submissive in serving their superior; this is the way to achieve the ultimate in good order. (*Shenzi* #52; Harris, 2016, p. 117)

The lower officials are described as public-minded here, so we see that it is not just a virtue required of the ruler but one that should ideally pervade the whole political structure. This usage of *gong* is similar to several instances of the term in the *Xunzi*.¹³ Another passage where the term is used as an epistemic virtue does, however, fit more closely the specific connotation of *gong* within the *Shenzi*:

A proverb says,

If one's hearing is not keen and one's eyesight not clear, one cannot be a king.

If one is not blind and deaf, then one cannot be public minded. (#100; Harris, 2016, pp. 128–129)

There is a clear parallel structure between the two parts of this proverb.¹⁴ Although clear eyesight and hearing are lauded in the first case and blindness and deafness lauded in the second, this juxtaposition does not imply an accompanying contrast between the 'king' and the 'public minded.' Instead, the king and the public minded are of the same ilk, and both clear sight and hearing, on the one hand, and blindness and deafness, on the other, are required of the ideal ruler. One must be clear-sighted in order to see one's situation clearly. However, one who is in a superior political position, as evident elsewhere in the text, 'should not listen too much' (*Shenzi* #66). The latter part of this proverb shares with the English expression 'to turn a blind eye' the sense that one is deliberately blind to some activity of others (Y. Wang, 1980, p. 338; M. Liu, 2012, p. 56). However, it does not connote here, as the English phrase would, a blindness to errant activity. It implies, rather, a blindness to currying of favour, to pleas or requests from one's inferiors, which would ultimately come to harm the ruler and the stability of the polity. It denotes a kind of stillness (H. Li, 2016, p. 89) and forms part of a *wuwei* mode of governance (T. Li, 1997, p. 87).

Along similar lines, the lord is advised not to listen to words that lack the basis of administrative methods (*fa* 法):

Words that lack a basis in methods (*fa*) should not enter the ears. Work that lacks a basis in *fa* should not be treated as an accomplishment. Relatives that do not work should not be recognized as officials. Officialdom does not treat relatives partially (*si* 私); methods do not allow for special care. There are no affairs between the higher and lower; there are only methods. (*Shenzi* #67)

To pay too much heed to one's ministers would be to allow partial (*si*) considerations to encroach on the realm of governance. Partiality is the very antithesis to *gong*, and thus we see the tension in the *Shenzi* between *gong* and open-mindedness. A limiting of the perspectives that the lord takes into consideration is conducive to ensuring governance operates according to impartial methods.

Most scholarly discussion of *gong* in the *Shenzi* relates to a passage where it is placed in opposition to 'partiality' (*si*). In this passage *gong* should be translated as 'public' (Harris, 2016, p. 123) or 'common' (Thompson, 1970, p. 547) rather than 'public-minded.' It is, however, a broader rather than a disparate meaning of the term, and its implications for *gong* as public-mindedness will become clear.

Thus, milfoil and tortoise divination is the means by which a public (*gong*) consciousness is established; balances and scales are the means by which public measures are established; books and contracts are the means by which public trust is established; lengths and volumes are the means by which public criteria are established; legal policies and ritual compendia are the means by which public (*gong*) justness (*yi* 義) is established. Wherever publicness (*gong*) is established, partiality (*si*) is discarded. (*Shenzi* #73; trans. consulted Brindley, 2013, pp. 201–21)

We see from this passage the broader meaning of *gong*, connoting publicness generally rather than public-mindedness. Erica Brindley translates *gong* in this context as 'universal' where it appears as an adjective and as 'universal good' where it appears as a noun. Eirik Lang Harris translates the term here as 'publicly' (2016, p. 213) and as 'public standards' in its noun form

(2016, p. 123). P. M. Thompson uses ‘common’ to translate the term in the first instances and ‘commonality’ to render its noun form (1970, p. 547). The objective methods (*fa*) which play a central role in the *Shenzi* (Yang, 2011) are in the service of establishing public order (Bai, 2008, p. 146). This is made explicit in the text when it states, ‘Of the functions of methods (*fa*), there is none greater than preventing partiality (*si*) from determining action’ (*Shenzi* #75).

The broader meaning of *gong* in *Shenzi* #73 encompasses its connotation as an epistemic virtue, and sheds light on the distinct function of this virtue in the *Shenzi*. Thompson translates that which is established through divination as ‘a structure of knowledge shared by all in common’ (1970, p. 547). While this might be a case of over-translation, it does capture something of what the passage as a whole communicates. The ‘structure of knowledge’ is created by the process of divination whose crucial elements are external to any person’s mind (milfoil stalks and tortoise shell). The features of these natural objects that are (supposedly) not determined by a human mind in the process of divination provide a basis on which decisions can be made. The second and fourth instances of establishing publicness relate to the measuring or judging of things, and how these judgements can be shared among all the people through the use of standardized tools. The third instance relates to shared understanding of how others will act in relation to oneself—i.e., the establishment of trust. The fifth relates to establishment of ethical understanding, or about what is ‘correct’ or ‘just’ (*yi*). In all these cases, what might otherwise be determined by the wisdom of an authoritative mind is outsourced instead to methods and processes. The establishment of *gong* relies on the ruler’s capacity to abstain from treating their own epistemic capacity as the basis for judgements. Public-mindedness in the *Shenzi* thus implies the very quality of being able to outsource methods for knowing to external processes rather than relying on one’s own epistemic capacities.

It is not the case, therefore, that knowledge is dispensed with altogether, as it might be in a more radical knowledge abstinence position. From the ruler’s perspective, ‘knowledge’ or ‘wisdom’ (*zhi*) should be safely dispersed throughout those in lower positions:

Applying order where there is disorder rests on making the worthy take up positions, and not on loyalty [to the ruler]. Thus, it is said: if knowledge (*zhi*) fills all under the sky, this has great benefit to the ruler. If loyalty fills all under the sky, this has great damage to the state. (*Shenzi* #54)

While the text never questions a monocratic approach to governance, the *Shenzi* recognizes the danger that accompanies the singularity of the ruler's position. Unlike the ministers, who are many, the ruler represents an important and unique position, and thus an inherent danger to political stability. As such, it is inadvisable that loyalty should be relied upon to bring order, as loyalty is tied to the individual ruler. Instead, knowledge and wisdom about how order is maintained in the state should be dispersed throughout the state.

Furthermore, it should not be the ruler's task to determine through their own judgement who are the most worthy and wise, as this would mean that 'the most crucial elements for governing the entire state will depend on the mind of a single person' (*Shenzi* #20; trans. Harris, 2016, p. 109). The aim is, rather, to establish impersonal processes that can determine how rewards are divided (*Shenzi* #24). The outsourcing of what might be determined by the ruler's own epistemic capacity is not only to the ministers but also to impersonal processes:

Hence, horses are divided through the use of whips, fields are divided through the use of angle rules. It is not that angle rules and whips exceed human intellect; it is rather that they eradicate partiality (*si*) and prevent resentment.¹⁵ (*Shenzi* #63)

Although the specific role that whips and angle rules play here is not entirely clear, other than that they are 'thrown' (*tou* 投), it is clear that the objects provide an element of randomness that forms a basis for how the property should be divided. One might imagine an angle rule (a set square with an adjustable angle; Major, 2014, p. 156–157) being thrown and its landing position somehow determining the division of fields. Although *gong* does not appear in this passage, it is implied in the eradication of its antonym 'partiality.' Reliance on the mind of the political authority is replaced by processes that have their own determining qualities. The unpredictability of objects is preferable to the unpredictability of mind, this passage makes clear, as it is less likely to give rise to resentment.

Harris claims that the ideal Way (*dao*) of governance in the *Shenzi* is based on an understanding of 'fixed facts' concerning the underlying structure of the natural world (2016: 18). Harris also recognizes, however, that the *Shenzi* does not provide any explicit analysis of this natural order (2016, p. 18). As the text is fragmentary, it is of course possible that the descriptions of such fixed facts did not survive. I suggest, to the contrary, that the *Shenzi* would not have sought to explicate such facts, as to do so would be to engage in the very practice that

is opposed in the *Shenzi*: the localizing of important knowledge in a single mind, in this case, the receiver of the Shenzi philosophy. As we have seen above in *Shenzi* #20, the admiration of the worthy and wise is a characteristic of a wayward state that relies (dangerously) for its order on the mind of a single person. As in *Shenzi* #43, above, if the knowledge, or wisdom, of the ruler is taken to be the highest, the state becomes dangerously reliant on the ruler. Though there are several claims to natural law theory in the *Shenzi* (summarized in Yang, 2011), there is no evidence in the text that an intermediate step of extrapolating laws of nature informed the implementation of political methods. As opposed to claiming insight into natural structures, the public-mindedness of the *Shenzi* is borne from an awareness of epistemic limitations which leads immediately to a reliance on public processes.

4. *Gong* as cultivated impartiality in the *Xunzi*

Although the *Xunzi* is chronologically subsequent to the *Shenzi*, it takes up the previously held Confucian position of cultivating a sage ruler which the *Shenzi* rejects, and in this sense is logically prior to the *Shenzi*. In another sense, the *Xunzi* presents a new response to Legalist philosophy, including the *Shenzi*. It rejects the idea that the basis for political decisions can be outsourced from the ruler's mind.

Gong in the *Xunzi*, as in the *Shenzi* and elsewhere, does not pertain only to the epistemic. We saw above in *Shenzi* #73 that it can connote an established 'publicness' or 'commonality' upon which political judgements rest. There are clear connections between that usage and certain parts of the *Xunzi*, such as the following passage where it is also spoken of together with 'justness' (*yi*) in overcoming partiality:

The superior person (*junzi* 君子) can overcome partial inclinations (*si yu* 私欲) with public-mindedness and justness. (*Xunzi*, 1996, 2/8/16)

Like the *Shenzi*, this passage discusses how 'methods can overcome partiality' (*fa sheng si* 法勝私) but its focus is on controlling affective qualities of the mind, anger (*nu* 怒) and delight (*xi* 喜), rather than on establishing external mechanisms (*Xunzi* 1996: 2/8/15). While *gong* represents a response to limitations of mind in both texts, *gong* in the *Shenzi* represents the tendency to outsource what might be otherwise decided in one's mind while in the *Xunzi* it

pertains to the training of one's mind. As the text states, 'the mind should make distinctions by means of *gong*' (*yi gong xin bian* 以公心辨; Xunzi, 1996, 22/110/14–15). It may even be said that the entire philosophy of the *Xunzi* centers around the cultivation of mind (Tang, 1991, p. 132).

Several parts of the *Xunzi* constitute a rejoinder to the methods promoted in the *Shenzi*. The *Xunzi* argues that such methods as the throwing of angle rules produce a mere superficial *gong*:

Drawing lots and tossing angle rules are means to establish *gong*, but if the superior is fond of crookedness and selfishness (*si*), then the ministers below and the hundred functionaries will take advantage and seek favor. (Xunzi, 1996, 12/57/11–12; trans. consulted Hutton, 2014, p. 118)

For the *Xunzi*, outsourcing decisions to such external methods is not a way to be thoroughly *gong*. A truly robust *gong*, according to the *Xunzi*, must be established in the ruler's mind. Otherwise, no matter what methods (*fa*) are applied, the ruler's ministers will find a way to curry favor. According to the *Xunzi*, the political leader is the source of methods (Xunzi, 1996, 12/57/5). The text draws an analogy to a stream of running water: if the source is clear, then so will be the methods that flow from it; if it is murky, then so too will be the methods (Xunzi, 1996, 12/57/15). Even if methods are employed, therefore, the capacity to make balanced and unbiased judgements (i.e., to be *gong*) is an essential quality of one who is in a position of political superiority:

Public-mindedness (*gong*) and evenhandedness (*ping* 平) are one's scales in holding a position, and balance and harmoniousness are one's plumb line in judging affairs. (Xunzi, 1996, 9/35/18; trans. Hutton, 2014, p. 69, edited)

This passage in the *Xunzi* contrasts with *Shenzi* #73, above, where 'balances and scales' feature in a series of methods independent of the mind promoted as means of establishing publicness. Here in the *Xunzi*, public-mindedness (*gong*) and evenhandedness (*ping*) are qualities of the mind required to make the kinds of judgements necessary for those in governmental positions. Cases should be heard and decided in a manner that is *gong*, or, 'without prejudice' (Xunzi,

1996, 4/14/9; trans. Hutton, 2014, p. 25). In such instances, we see an overlap between the affective dimension of managing one's anger and delight and the epistemic dimension of balancing circumstances evenly in one's mind. The epistemic and ethical are intertwined also in that the range of circumstances that the ruler takes into account, and the evenhandedness or unbiasedness with which they judge the facts, are directly related to the ethical ramifications of their decisions. It is this skill, in the *Xunzi*, of 'observing impartially and considering well' (*gong cha shan si* 公察善思) that can lead to the ordering of all under the sky (Xunzi, 1996, 25/123/6–7).

This disparity between the degree of faith in the ruler's mind in the two texts leads to a divergence when it comes to the question of loyalty. As we saw above in the *Shenzi*, to suppose that people should be loyal to a great ruler gives rise to a dangerous situation. In the *Xunzi*, by contrast, the establishment of *gong* is closely linked to promoting loyalty. When the *Xunzi* considers why a better mode of governance had not been seen for the past thousand years, it suggests that:

When a ruler is not public-minded, the ministers are not loyal. The ruler, in such circumstances, distances the worthy and raises others up with partiality; the ministers, thus, grapple for position and are jealous of those who are treated as worthy. (Xunzi, 1996, 11/53/21–22; cf. Hutton, 2014, p. 109).

We see here in the *Xunzi*, in stark contrast with the *Shenzi*, that public-mindedness and loyalty depend on one another. The ruler's public-mindedness is essential to maintaining political legitimacy—if the ruler cannot balance things evenly in their mind, then they will not earn the loyalty and uprightness of their ministers.¹⁶

While the approaches to establishing *gong* are divergent in many respects, the *Xunzi* shares with the *Shenzi* the conviction that the political leader should not engage in tasks below their station, and this also has an epistemic aspect. We saw above in the *Shenzi* that tasks should be outsourced to the ministers to prevent a reliance on the ruler's wisdom, as this would lead to exhaustion. The *Xunzi* advises against the ruler engaging in menial tasks as to do so would distract their mind from achieving a broadly encompassing state of oneness essential to weighing things evenly and impartially. This is evident in the following passage from the 'Jiebi' chapter:

The farmer is expert in regard to the fields, but cannot be made Overseer of Fields. The merchant is expert in regard to the markets, but cannot be made Overseer of Merchants. The craftsman is expert in regard to vessels, but cannot be made Overseer of Vessels. There is a person who is incapable of any of their three skills, but who can be put in charge of all of these offices, namely the one who is expert in regard to the Way. One who is expert in regard to things merely measures one thing against another. One who is expert in regard to the Way measures all things together. Thus, the superior person attains oneness with regard the Way. (Xunzi, 1996, 21/104/16–105/2; trans. Hutton, 2014, p. 21, edited)

The sage who focuses on the Way is set apart from the farmer, the merchant and the craftsperson precisely because he does not focus his attention on a particular domain. Those three focus particularly on the field, market and vessel, and therefore lack the means to ‘measure all things together.’ The ruler, because he does not devote his attention singularly to any one of these, can attain the ‘oneness’ (*yi* 壹) of mind that is capable of measuring all things impartially.

Gong in the *Xunzi* represents an impartial and unbiased quality of mind. Some light is shed on how this is achieved in the ‘Jiebi’ chapter which describes the cultivation of a still and empty mind, reflective of what is placed before it and capable of attending to a broad ‘oneness’ rather than individual things. This is distinct from *gong* in the *Shenzi* where this faith in the mind of the ruler is lacking, and a capacity to outsource the basis for political decisions is demanded of them instead.

5. Conclusion

The *Shenzi* and the *Xunzi* both emphasize the epistemic and normative notion of *gong*, or ‘public-mindedness.’ In epistemic terms, *gong* implies alignment with the whole and an aversion to partial or biased viewpoints. The practice of *gong* as an epistemic virtue is manifest very differently in the two texts. While *gong* is born in both from epistemic humility, that is, a recognition of the limitations of one’s mind, the response to this recognition manifests in different approaches in the two texts. In the *Shenzi*, *gong* means ensuring that the epistemic

capacities of one's mind do not form the basis for political decisions. One must consistently outsource this basis, distributing it across a system of replaceable ministers and objective processes. The *Xunzi* argues that the mind of the ruler is inescapably a salient aspect of governance, as it is bound to be the source of any supposedly objective methods, and the ruler's mind is always potentially influenced to some party's advantage. Furthermore, the text maintains a stronger faith in the human mind as a means of effective governance. In the *Xunzi*, *gong* means allowing the mind to be still and empty, thereby reflecting what is laid before it evenly and without prejudice.

By *examining gong* as an epistemic virtue which has a specifically political focus, I hope that this research can encourage greater attention to epistemic virtue that is not purely in service of attaining reliable knowledge, but considers the practical dimension of knowledge accumulation. *Gong* emphasizes that in the realm of politics, knowledge is not merely for knowledge's sake but plays a complex role in maintaining and corrupting political legitimacy and stability. In the context of early China, the *Shenzi's* caution considers the strain on the already vulnerable ruler of a monocratic system. In a more general sense, we may interpret this as a support for knowledge and judgements to be externalized into systems—today, we might consider the role of information technology systems in governance. Countering *Shenzi's* position, the *Xunzi* emphasizes how supposedly objective systems are rooted in human actors. The text suggests that maintaining clarity of mind, conducive to sound judgement, in the face of overwhelming abundance of cognitive influences poses a significant challenge for political action. Of course, the disparity in context between early China and contemporary governance means that these philosophies cannot serve as direct blueprints for political action today. Nonetheless, observing the tension between the *Shenzi's* praise of the externalization of knowledge and judgement beyond the mind of a political superior, on the one hand, and the *Xunzi's* emphasis on the political actor's composure of mind, on the other, provides insight into the enduring divergence in emphasis on political actors versus broader systems in political theoretical outlooks.

¹ There are possible exceptions to the political nature of the term *gong*. For example, in the *Zhuangzi*, *gong* may be read without a specifically political focus (Zhao, 2021), although it can be tied there, too, to the political (Y. Chen, 2022).

² Jixia activity is often described as a fusion of various strands of pre-Qin thought (Sato, 2003, pp. 63–72). The exact form that the Jixia took, including its common description as an 'academy,' are disputed (Lewis, 1999, p. 77).

³ These categories are taken here to point to broad tendencies of thought. They are retrospectively constructed and should not be treated as existing as schools in early China (see Csikszentmihalyi & Nylan, 2003).

⁴ The *Xunzi* explicitly engages the *Shenzi* at Xunzi (1996, 6/21/22–6/22/2, 8/29/1–2, 17/83/3–4, 21/103/8–9, 25/120/14). The text seems to refer implicitly to the ideas in the *Shenzi* at instances such as Xunzi (1996, 12/57/11–12, 12/57/17).

⁵ The numbering of passages in the *Shenzi* refers to the system used by Thompson (1970, 1979) and Harris (2016).

⁶ Note there is uncertainty about whether there is a continuous etymological development between the character in the early dynasties and the philosophical meaning in the Warring States (see Vogelsang, 2016, p. 62, n. 114).

⁷ While it is possible for one to be epistemically impartial and unprejudiced yet act with partiality and prejudice, such considerations do not feature in the texts studied here.

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, translations from Chinese in this article are the author's own.

⁹ Even Confucian learning is not a mere accumulation of facts, and reflection is an affective as well as a cognitive pursuit (Ames & Rosemont, 1999, p. 60). See Rushing (2013, pp. 175–178) for consideration of this point in the context of humility.

¹⁰ The square-bracketed insertion appears in the quoted material.

¹¹ The 'Tianxia' is one of the 'Miscellaneous Chapters' of the *Zhuangzi* and is not a strong candidate for philosophical coherency with the Inner Chapters upon which Moeller makes his assessment (2008, p. 118). It is not surprising, therefore, that the opposition to Shen Dao's character is inconsistent with a lauding of knowledge abstinence.

¹² This insertion is in the quoted material.

¹³ *Gong* is used to describe lower officials in the *Xunzi* too. See, e.g., Xunzi (1996, 12/61/2) where it appears, as in *Shenzi* #52, together with 'uprightness' (*zheng*) in describing an official. See also Xunzi (1996, 3/11/20, 13/66/2).

¹⁴ The two lines rhymed in their early pronunciation (F. Xu, 2013, p. 63; Harris, 2016, pp. 128–129).

¹⁵ *Gou* 鉤, translated tentatively here as 'angle rule' (see Major, 2014, pp. 156–157), is translated, also somewhat speculatively, as 'buckles' by Thompson (1970, pp. 521–522), and as hooks by Harris (2016, p. 155).

¹⁶ See also the passage that states, 'When the superior is impartial and righteous, those below are easily made upright' (Xunzi, 1996, 18/83/14). Elsewhere, it is said of the minister who is loyal to the utmost that he also possesses the quality of *gong* and harbors no private interests or concerns (Xunzi, 1996, 13/66/2).

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