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Self and Community in the *Xunzi*

Abstract This paper investigates Xunzi's ideas on self and community. According to Xunzi, the origin of Confucian rituals lies in the need to nourish human desires. However, this nourishment is more than the simple satisfaction of desire. Rather, in the development of rituals, desires are evaluated and directed according to the overall good of a person in order that the person can actively pursue fulfilment and self-realization. If human beings are controlled by momentary desires, they live like beasts and cannot act as autonomous agents. Confucian rituals constitute a normative framework for human life and desires. Following Xunzi, this normative framework is based on a cultural and collective interpretation of our own nature. Through Confucian rituals a person can not only satisfy desires properly, but can also enjoy human relationships within the community. Most importantly, it is through these Confucian rituals that a person realizes himself as an agent who can control and direct his own life.

Keywords self, community, Xunzi, rituals, Confucianism

1 Introduction

The ideal of fulfillment and self-realization could be seen as one of the central pursuits of the modern world (Anton 2001, 3). Debates and controversies over human rights and democracy, which pervade both everyday and academic life, are directly concerned with the interpretation and implementation of fulfillment and self-realization. Generally, in these conversations, the value of fulfillment and self-realization is a given; what divides the various camps are different understandings of the self and what constitutes fulfillment and realization. One way to explore the modern relevance of Confucianism is to investigate the Confucian answer to the problem of fulfillment and self-realization.

Indeed, it has been pointed out that self-fulfillment is of central importance to Confucianism (de Bary 1991, xi). Confucius makes a sharp distinction between

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the ancients who learn for their own sake and the people of his time who learn for the sake of others, hinting at his approval for learning for one's self (*Analects* 17.6). Xunzi later elaborates on Confucius' comment, pointing out that the noble man (*junzi* 君子) learns to cultivate and improve himself while the petty man (*xiaoren* 小人) learns only to impress and please others (Lau 1996, 1.3.17; Knoblock 1988–1994, 1.9).¹ Learning is of utmost importance for Confucianism, and is especially so for Xunzi. We might infer from the Confucian emphasis on learning for the sake of one's self that Confucianism considers the *purpose* of learning and cultivation to be personal fulfillment. Yet what kind of fulfillment and self-realization is aimed at by Confucianism? And in what ways can Confucian learning and cultivation bring this fulfillment and self-realization about?

On the other hand, while there has been much discussion concerning the nature of the Confucian self, there is also a general consensus that the self, as understood by Confucianism, is not independent, but rather, interdependent with other selves—that community is essential for fulfillment and self-realization. (Lai 2006; Ames 1994, 187–212; Wang 2002, 93–112). What role, then, does community play in the self's development toward fulfillment and realization?

In what follows I shall focus on an explication and reconstruction of Xunzi's ideas on self and community in the attempt to provide a plausible Confucian answer to the question about the relation between community and fulfillment and self-realization. I shall argue, that for Confucianism, community is the embodiment of a normative framework which contains norms for interpersonal relationships as well as personal behaviour and is instantiated in Confucian rituals (*li* 礼).² This normative framework also represents a cultural and collective interpretation of our own nature. Community and rituals are necessary for fulfillment and self-realization because it is through such a normative framework that a person organizes himself into a unified self that can evaluate and control his own momentary and spontaneous desires.

2 Rituals and Desires

When talking about the origin of rituals, Xunzi points out that rituals are meant

¹ The numbers of Lau (1996) refer to book number, page number and paragraph number(s) respectively. For Knoblock (1988–1994) I list chapter and section number.

² For convenience of reference I use the term “rituals” for the Chinese character *li* 礼, noting the inadequacy of the term for the complexity of meanings of the Chinese character. In general *li* might be understood as action-guiding rules for every aspect of the human life. An explication of the complex meanings of *li* can be found at Cua (2002). More recently Li Chenyang has usefully suggested an understanding of *li* as cultural grammar. As cultural grammar *li* structures one's behaviour in a cultural tradition and insocial life (see Li 2007).

to nourish people's desires:

From what did rituals arise? I say: human beings are born with desires. If what they desire is not obtained, they cannot but seek for it. If there are no measures and limits on their seeking, then they will inevitably fight with each other. Fighting leads to disorder, disorder leads to destitution. The Ancient Kings disliked such disorder, so they designed rituals and righteousness to make differentiations, so as to nurture people's desires, and to provide for their seeking. They saw to it that desires never wanted for goods and goods were never exhausted by desires. Desires and goods were sustained by each other and developed. This is the origin of rituals. Thus rituals are nourishment. (Lau 1996, 19.90.3–6; Knoblock 1988–1994, 19.1a–1.b)

People are born with desires and inevitably they seek the satisfaction of their desires. Without proper measures and limits, this seeking will lead to fighting, disorder and destitution. Rituals were instituted by the ancient kings to prevent this bleak situation. Rituals impose a structure on people's lives within which desires can safely be satisfied. It is important to note that rituals do not satisfy desires as they naturally arise. Rather, rituals nourish desires in such a way that they develop and are expressed in more cultured forms. *Yang* 养, nourishment, does not merely keep something alive, but, more importantly, helps it grow in a healthy way. Three times Xunzi uses the two characters, nourish (*yang* 养) and develop (*zhang* 长), to describe the proper way of watching over an infant (Lau 1996, 10.46.21–22, 11.55.25, 15.73.17; Knoblock 1988–1994, 10.10, 11.12, 15.5). Clearly the right way to care for an infant is to nourish him/her in such a way that the infant grows and develops properly. It is also not a coincidence that in these three passages Xunzi uses the analogy of watching over an infant to describe the way the Sage-King cares for the people. After elucidating the nature of nourishment, and immediately following the quoted passage on the origin of rituals, Xunzi lists examples of nourishment. One example is how the meat of pastured and grain-fed animals, as well as rice and millet (*chu huan dao liang* 芻豢稻粱) can nourish the mouth (Lau 1996, 19.90.6; Knoblock 1988–1994, 19.1b). At the time of Xunzi, rice, millet and the meat of pastured and grain-fed animals were regarded as high-quality foods. In another passage Xunzi contrasts high-quality foods like the meat of pastured and grain-fed animals, rice and millet with low-quality foods like beans, coarse greens, dregs and husks (*shu huo zao kang* 菽藿糟糠). Xunzi suggests that low-quality food is like the chaotic way practiced by the petty man, while high-quality food is like the rituals and the righteous way propagated by the Sage-King (Lau 1996, 4.15.14–21; Knoblock 1988–1994, 4.10). The same contrast between high and low quality foods is likely intended by Xunzi when he suggests that the meat of pastured and

grain-fed animals, rice and millet can nourish the mouth. If such an interpretation is reasonable, that is, if it matters that nourishment is of high quality, then we have a strong piece of evidence that nourishment is more than the simple satisfaction of desire. Rather, genuine nourishment can only be obtained when desire is developed and enhanced and therefore able to be satisfied in cultured forms through rituals.

Rituals arise not only from the need to satisfy desires but also from the need to prevent chaos and conflict. Xunzi points out that rituals and right behaviour enable people to live a communal life wherein they can protect and assist each other.³ In other words, rituals impose culturally approved limitations on desire so we can live a civilised life in a harmonious community. It might also be suggested that rituals are constructed through an interpretative understanding of our nature. But what is the justification for one interpretation of our nature over another? And why is the satisfaction of desire through rituals the best way to keep desire under control and allow the community based on rituals to flourish?

Xunzi asserts that co-operation is needed to sustain people's life. This is so because a person cannot be good at every skill and cannot assume all roles by himself or herself. If people do not help one another there will be destitution. While co-operation and a communal life are essential, distinctions are also required to maintain proper social order (Lau 1996, 10.42.16–7; Knoblock 1988–1994, 10.1). If we judge only from this passage, we might think that Xunzi is chiefly concerned with the problems of practical life. We might think of distinctions among individuals as simply the principle upon which the distribution of goods in a cooperative society depends. Xunzi would not deny that one important function of distinctions is to organize the distribution of resources among social members. However, it is unlikely that he would take this as the only function of distinctions. Even less would Xunzi think that the only purpose of the community is better to fulfill its members' practical needs.

Xunzi uses examples like the affection between father and son and the division between males and females as illustrations of differentiation (*bian* 辨) which pertain to distinctions and rituals. Xunzi suggests that in contrast to human beings, animals have parents and offspring, males and females, but not a corresponding differentiation. Differentiation in this human sense is not the same as natural difference. Rather, differentiation represents both the recognition of difference and the *understanding* of the significance of this difference. The community, as an assembly of people ordered by differentiation and distinctions, is not just a structured group but also a group with intrinsic meaning and significance. What does this mean?

Because our nature is originally without a normative framework and has a

³ For example, Lau (1996, 4.15.20); Knoblock (1988–1994, 4.10).

natural tendency to dominate the heart-mind, we can be led to bad judgments and bad behaviour (Lau 1996, 4.15.14–17; Knoblock 1988–1994, 4.10). Consequently our nature might be regarded as bad in a fundamental sense, a sense which goes beyond “badness” that is due to external factors such as a lack of resources. According to Xunzi, even if we have unlimited resources, we could not live a good life if our nature is not transformed. Indeed, Xunzi points out that inadequacy of resources is not the universal predicament of the world. The universal predicament comes rather from the harm brought about by chaos and disorder. Xunzi is of the opinion that the natural world does contain enough resources for all people. However, if we do not properly manage these natural resources, and manage the social world as well, we cannot have a prosperous and flourishing life (Lau 1996, 10.44.20–45.14; Knoblock 1988–1994, 10.8). The same is true of individual human beings. Xunzi once describes a person who possesses all the beautiful things of the world but has no enjoyment from them because he does not comply with proper principles and consequently cannot have an ordered life (Lau 1996, 22.112.9–16; Knoblock 1988–1994, 22.6d). Proper principles are precisely contained in Confucian rituals. Rituals transform our nature and enable us to live fully as a person. Thus, rituals are not merely a regulating mechanism like traffic regulations which are normative only conditionally and contingently. Rituals are, rather, constitutive norms that structure our life and the selves we are.

In Xunzi’s eyes, a community is an assembly of people structured by rituals. It follows, therefore, that the community is also constitutive of our life and not merely a better means to satisfy our desires. If I take the community merely as an external means by which to attain my individual ends, then, if I could better fulfill my ends independent of the community there would be no reason for me either to enter into or stay within the community. Yet the community, as an assembly with differentiation, could not be merely an external means. Xunzi would suggest that living outside the community is living without differentiation, and thus living like birds and beasts. A life outside the community, if it is possible at all, is fundamentally different from a life within the community. The community does not just better sustain the natural biological life with which we are born. The community makes possible and is also constitutive of a new kind of life, a life which is culturally meaningful and individually transformative. Certainly some people live in solitude, but very often they maintain a link, however minimal, with other people and the community. Also, these people carry within them the culture and the tradition of the community. Even though they might be physically cut off from the community, mentally and spiritually they are still nurtured by the community. What is so important about the community is then not primarily the physical assembly of people, but the embodiment of culture and tradition in the communal life. Differentiation, distinctions and rituals

represent precisely Confucian culture and tradition.

3 A Life of One's Own

Still we might inquire in what ways a Confucian cultural and communal life is good for a person. What is it like to be without Confucian rituals? Xunzi thinks that if human beings are without teachers and without standards, their heart-mind will be no different than their mouth and stomach. In other words, if we do not bring our nature under a normative framework, we will be dominated by natural desires, especially by immediate natural desires. Xunzi gives as examples of natural desires the desire for food when hungry, the desire for warmth when cold, the desire for rest when tired, and in general the liking of benefits and the disliking of harms. If we are controlled by natural desires, then our behaviour will be dictated by whatever dominant desire we have at a particular moment. For example, when we are hungry, the desire for food might be so strong that it will cause us to obtain food by whatever means, including hurting ourselves and others. A life driven by natural desires will likely be full of hazards and harms, many of which would be avoidable through planning and foresight. Yet even if with improbable luck such a life meets no great harm and manages to satisfy most of its immediate desires, it is still deficient in an important sense. It is not a life commanded and directed by a unified self. There might still be some sort of continuity in such a life, and, viewed externally, it is indeed a life lived by a particular being. However, although it is a life lived by a particular being, it is not a life that really belongs to that particular being, a life that is his or her own. When we suggest that a life could be or could not be a life of one's own, we subscribe to a certain conception of the subject of the life. We assume that such a being has a self, and is an agent who can relate to her life in a certain way. By saying that a life is someone's own, we do not describe a certain physical relation between one thing and another, such as the fact that certain leaves belong to a particular tree. Rather, we intend to highlight the active role a person plays in her life, that she actively directs her life and lives it according to her plans and projects. When a person is enslaved by another person, his life is largely determined by his owner and to a large extent he cannot live his own life. If a person is enslaved by natural desires, then to a similarly large extent he also cannot live his own life. It might be thought that being enslaved by one's desires is vastly different from being enslaved by another person. Some might even doubt whether we could be enslaved by our desires. It should be admitted that "enslavement" is used figuratively when concerning desires, but the harm it brings about is not less serious. For example, a person might have an eating disorder. He cannot control his desire for food and cannot help keeping on eating. He becomes obese, his health deteriorates, and he cannot work, sleep or

even live properly. On top of this, he hates his desire for food, his weakness, and, to a certain extent, himself. His life is ruined and worse, the integrity of the self is undermined. If we want to control, as opposed to being controlled by, our immediate desires, then necessarily we need to evaluate our desires by certain standards and regulate our actions by norms.

Xunzi actually thinks that as persons we necessarily evaluate our desires, and thus he insists that our actions must be mediated by the heart-mind's approval. As human beings we rarely live like birds and beasts. Xunzi also suggests that there is a difference between the chaotic nature we are born with and the further chaos we bring upon ourselves when we are ruled by our immediate desires.

People are originally petty men by birth; additionally they encounter disordered age and acquire disordered customs. This is to redouble pettiness by being petty, begetting disorder by being disordered. (Lau 1996, 4.15.17; Knoblock 1988–1994, 4.10)⁴

I suggest that the disordered customs (*luan su* 乱俗) mentioned in this passage are equivalent to the wrong way of “accommodating and settling” (*zhu cuo* 注错) practiced by the petty man. “Accommodating and settling” is an exemplification of artifice (*wei* 伪), and an *erroneous* artifice by the petty man brings even more disorder to his originally chaotic nature. The noble man, although born with the same chaotic nature, accumulates proper deliberation and habituates proper practice so as to form correct artifice and transform his nature. The artifice of the petty man, on the other hand, suggests Xunzi, firstly, cannot fulfill his desires and get him what he wants, and secondly, will not allow him to gain control of his own life and escape enslavement by external things.⁵ By contrast, the noble man, through rituals, not only has his desires nurtured, but also has a firm command of himself and his own life. Moreover, the noble man lives a harmonious communal life with others. Xunzi asserts that “if people concentrate on rituals and righteousness, then they will gain both [from rituals and desires]. If they concentrate on [their] nature and feelings, then they will lose both” (Lau 1996, 19.90.17–8; Knoblock 1988–1994, 19.1d). For Xunzi, feelings (*qing* 情) represent

⁴ The English translation is my own unless otherwise specified, though I have consulted translations by others, especially Knoblock (1988–1994).

⁵ In Book 20 Xunzi points out that whereas the noble man is fond of the Way, the petty man is fond of desires. Yet by forgetting about the Way because of desires, the petty man is actually unhappy and bewildered (see Lau 1996, 20.100.9–10; Knoblock 1988–1994, 20.3). I suggest that the bewilderment the petty man experiences is not merely confusion over his pursuits but more generally confusion over his life, a situation not unlike the one described by Xunzi as “making the self the servant of things” in Book 22 (Lau 1996, 22.112.9–16; Knoblock 1988–1994, 22.6d). By being the servant of things the petty man is controlled by things rather than by himself. It is in this sense that the petty man does not have a control of his own life.

the substance of our nature and desires are responses to our feelings. Thus, by the words: “concentrate on [their] nature and feelings” Xunzi is referring to those people who concentrate on desires and take the satisfaction of desire as their only goal. Xunzi asserts that in this goal they will necessarily fail. Since one function of rituals is to nurture desires, it is obvious that rituals help us to satisfy desires. However, it is not immediately clear why Xunzi stresses that by adhering to rituals and righteousness, we will gain both from rituals and from the desires themselves. We have explained before that when rituals nurture desires, rituals do not satisfy desires as they naturally are. Rather, rituals develop desires in such a way that desires are satisfied in cultured forms. Still, nourishment of desires is a kind of desire satisfaction, no matter how enhanced and civilised it is. If the only function of rituals is to nurture desires, then presumably what we gain from rituals is not fundamentally different from what we gain from desires. Xunzi’s claim that we gain in two aspects (*liang de* 两得) is then misleading. Or is Xunzi indeed justified in claiming that we gain in two aspects? How would he show that the benefit we gain from rituals is actually beyond desire satisfaction?

4 The Overall Good of a Person

Actually, in the same paragraph where Xunzi makes the above assertion, he points out:

The noble man not only obtains the nourishment [of desires], but is also fond of the differences. What is meant by “differences”? I say: these refer to the varying stations of the eminent and the humble, the disparity between the elder and the younger, and the apportionment matched with the poor and the rich, the insignificant and the significant. (Lau 1996, 19.90.10–1; Knoblock 1988–1994, 19.1c)⁶

Now it is clear that “differences” (*bie* 别) is just another term for distinctions (*fen* 分) and differentiation (*bian* 辨). Actually Xunzi uses the character “*bie*” to describe the division between males and females, which is then employed as an example for differentiation. I have already suggested that differentiation and distinctions are constitutive norms of the community. By suggesting that the noble man is fond of “differences,” Xunzi maintains that the noble man is fond of

⁶ It might be suggested that “*ji* 既” in the sentence means “already” and that the sentence should be translated as “When the noble man has already obtained the nourishment.” I am hesitant about such an interpretation, for it tends to suggest that the nourishment of desires has priority over “differences.” If a noble man has to choose, he would surely favour “differences” over desire satisfaction.

the normative framework and its embodiment in a harmonious communal life.

Xunzi stresses that by adhering to rituals and righteousness, we will gain in two aspects. It should be clear now that the two kinds of benefits refer respectively to the nourishment of desires and a harmonious communal life structured by distinctions. I have argued above that the community is not an instrumental means to better satisfy our innate desires. Rather, the community and its constitutive norms provide a superior structure for our desires and our life so that we can enjoy a *good* life. Certainly in a good life we will most fruitfully satisfy our desires, but the constitutive norms provide more than this. According to Xunzi the way of ancient kings enables us “to live together as a community, to sustain and nurture one another, to safeguard and embellish one another, and to make one another safe and secure” (Lau 1996, 4.15.20; Knoblock 1988–1994, 4.10). Also, when compared with the chaotic life lived under the Way of the tyrant Jie and the robber Zhi, the goodness of such an ideal communal life is readily recognisable. It is not just that we are safe and secure from harm and assault, or that our life is sustained and our desires nurtured. More importantly, the ideal communal life embellishes and thus transforms our nature in such a way that we become safe and secure, sustained and nurtured. That is, rituals and righteousness are necessary in order “to rectify and embellish people’s feelings and nature so as to straighten them out; to tame and transform people’s feelings and nature so as to direct them, such that they are all made to emerge into order and correspond to the Way” (Lau 1996, 23.113.11–12; Knoblock 1988–1994, 23.1b). In the end, the nourishment of desires is not independent of a harmonious communal life. That is also why Xunzi maintains that the petty man, even though he concentrates on his desires, fails, ultimately, to satisfy them.

Now, the petty man does try to satisfy his desires and at times does succeed in satisfying some immediate desires. Why then does Xunzi maintain that he nonetheless fails in desire satisfaction? Xunzi calls the satisfaction of immediate desires “the gratification of the moment” (*yi shi zhi xian* 一时之嫌) and contrasts it with “desires of a hundred years” (*bai nian zhi yu* 百年之欲). He points out that it is foolish to exchange the latter for the former (Lau 1996, 22.112.5–7; Knoblock 1988–1994, 22.6c). However, the petty man might be foolish in two different ways. On the one hand, the petty man might simply fail to recognise that “desires of a hundred years” outweighs “the gratification of the moment.” That is, his error is just an error of calculation and comparison. On the other hand, the petty man might be mistaken in taking a certain “gratification of the moment” as a good. In this case, his error is an error of evaluation. The petty man also might err in both ways. Yet if a certain “gratification of the moment” is not a good at all, then the reason why it is outweighed by “desires of a hundred years” is not because it is not as good as the latter. It is because it is not even a legitimate item for comparison. Some desires, such as the desire to take a dose of

heroin, are bad for a person. And desires are judged as good or bad from the perspective of the overall good of the person. I claim that it is precisely such a perspective that the petty man fails to adopt. Although the petty man might satisfy certain immediate desires, such “gratification of the moment” does not contribute to his overall good. Understood in this way, “desires of a hundred years” is a general term for the overall good of the person. Since the petty man does not have an understanding of his overall good, he cannot evaluate his desires properly and cannot distinguish desires of importance from desires of insignificance. Consequently, even if he might satisfy some immediate desires, he does not succeed in desire satisfaction which truly benefits the self.

Xunzi points out that if we are properly cultivated we will have slight regard for external possessions such as wealth and status. Thus the noble man “uses things” (*yi wu* 役物) while the petty man is “used by things” (*yi yu wu* 役于物) (Lau 1996, 2.6.12–3; Knoblock 1988–1994, 2.5). Elsewhere he stresses the distinction between “making the self the servant of things” (*yi ji wei wu yi* 以己为物役) and “valuing the self and making a servant of things” (*zhong ji yi wu* 重己役物) (Lau 1996, 22.112.9–21; Knoblock 1988–1994, 22.6d–e). That is, the petty man, by concentrating on desires, fails to achieve an understanding of himself and his life. Consequently he is controlled by immediate desires and loses himself in the pursuit of superficial aims. In the same passage Xunzi suggests that although the petty man intends to seek happiness, in reality his heart-mind is attacked. Elsewhere Xunzi stresses that the heart-mind is the natural lord which governs the sensory organs and the body. The heart-mind is also the master of spiritual intelligence (*shenming zhi zhu* 神明之主), which roughly means that it is the centre of consciousness (Lau 1996, 21.104.10–11, 17,80.10; Knoblock 1988–1994, 21.6a, 17.3a). Clearly, then, the heart-mind is the centre of self-control. Yet, when the heart-mind is attacked by external things or immediate desires, it cannot properly function as the natural lord. Xunzi points out that when the heart-mind is disturbed by external things it becomes “tilted (*qing* 倾)” and will not be able to recognise even apparent patterns or ideas (Lau 1996, 21.105.7–8; Knoblock 1988–1994, 21.7b). Presumably this is the reason why the petty man makes himself the servant of things. When the petty man pays too much attention to external things, his heart-mind is attacked and disturbed by these external things in such a way that it fails as the natural lord. Consequently the petty man loses control over himself and his life. On the contrary, the noble man preserves the clarity of his heart-mind and can keep a firm control over himself and his life. Since the noble man clearly recognises that the self is of greater importance than external things, he does not succumb to enslavement by external things and immediate desires but rather makes things serve him. The noble man is able to do this because he commands a clear understanding of himself and his self.

Yet how do we gain an understanding of ourselves and our life? I suggest that it is through the normative framework exemplified in the culture and tradition of the community, because the normative framework represents precisely an interpretative understanding of our nature and of human goodness. Confucian rituals constitute just such a normative framework.

5 Self-Interpretation and the Way of Humans

Desires, whether immediate desires or the total set of desires, cannot be the basis whereupon human actions and human life are evaluated. In fact, desires themselves are subject to evaluation. However, it should not be supposed that standards of evaluation must then be totally independent of desire. Rather, standards of evaluation are constructed through an interpretative understanding of ourselves and our life—an essential part of which is an understanding of our desires. I claim that such a viewpoint is precisely what Xunzi means when he maintains, on the one hand, that people's nature is bad and thus requires regulation and cultivation by artifice, and, on the other hand, that order and flourishing is only possible when people's nature is embellished by artifice.

Confucian rituals, as the normative framework for our nature, are neither discovered externally in the world nor derived directly from our nature. Confucian rituals are, rather, constructed from human actions in general, which represent our initial responses to and initial interpretations of our nature. In other words, Confucian rituals are constructed through the interplay between our actions and our nature; they are meant to capture those patterns of behaviour that best express and actualise our nature. Yet how can we know what the best expression and actualisation of our nature is? I suggest that we do not have a more fundamental basis to which we can appeal in answering this question than to our very attempt to understand our nature and ourselves. Such a reply might appear to be highly unsatisfactory, or even circular, but it could not be otherwise if the source of normativity lies not in the external world but in ourselves. I suggest that this kind of endeavour to understand ourselves and what is good for us is the sort of activity Charles Taylor calls "self-interpretation." Taylor asserts that when we encounter questions concerning the most fundamental values, the only basis we have upon which to attempt to answer these questions is our deepest inchoate sense of what is important, which we try to bring to light through interpretation (Taylor 1985b, 15–44; Taylor 1989, 3–52). I believe that we are engaged in just such self-interpretation when we try to understand our nature and structure it through rituals.

The Confucian interpretation of our nature is represented in the Way of humans as understood by Xunzi. The Way of humans, as we have seen,

consists of two related components. The Way of humans not only allows us to live harmoniously with one another in a unified community, but also enables the best nourishment of our desires. I have argued that the best nourishment of desires is neither the gratification of immediate desires nor the satisfaction of the greatest number of desires. The best nourishment of desires is rather the nourishment that is best for the person whose desires they are. That is, desires should be satisfied in such a way that they form a part of a person's best life. Yet such a formal formulation of the overall good of the person is without much content. The substantive content has to depend on a concrete understanding of the person and her life. We need to know, for example, what sort of person she is, what kind of personality she has, what her past experience is and what life projects she has. There are, however, beyond these particular considerations, certain essential conditions of a good life. First, a person's life should be such that it is a life of her own. That is, if a life is to be good for a person, it must first be a life actively directed by that person and lived according to her plans and projects. Second, the integrity of the self is essential to a person and her life. Although it is unlikely that we will be completely coherent and consistent in our thoughts and actions, and will likely change in one way or another throughout our life, or even convert to a new kind of life, nonetheless, our life should be connected in such a way that it is an intelligible whole and the person going through such a life should be recognizable as an intelligibly unified self. Third, the integrity of the self and the autonomy of one's life are only possible when the self and the life are structured by a normative framework. It is here that the best nourishment of desires is connected with the harmonious communal life.

As I have argued before, living without distinctions, that is, without norms, is to live like birds and beasts. Human beings very rarely grow up in isolation from a human community.⁷ Normally we are able to learn the language and culture of the community and thus function more or less as human persons. Still, if we do not have proper cultivation and do not adopt proper practices and habits, we will not be able to organise our life properly or live harmoniously with others. It has been well argued that the community and its embodied tradition are essential to and constitutive of human selfhood, agency and practical reasoning.⁸ Some insist that personal autonomy must be respected and that the conception of the good embodied in a tradition must not be forced onto an individual. Those who hold this position also maintain that the community and its tradition could not be

⁷ There are some rare cases where human infants were reared up by animals. Usually those children took on completely the behaviour of animals. When they were re-introduced into human society, normally they had difficulty adapting to human life (see for example, Malson and Itard 1972, 62–80; Newton 2002).

⁸ Some representative works are MacIntyre (1985, especially chapters 14 and 15), Sandel (1982) and Taylor (1985a).

the ultimate basis of evaluation and must itself be subject to critical reflection and evaluation (Kymlicka 1989, 47–73). Of course, the community and its tradition can be wrong at certain points, and significant moral and social improvements have been made through revision or abandonment of traditional views. Slavery and gender inequality are examples. However, such critical evaluation of the community and tradition could only be made by rational members of the community. The case is similar to linguistic competence. Only by being a competent user of a certain language can a person distinguish the right way of using the language from the wrong way. It is also such a competent language user who knows how to extend the current language practice and invent new linguistic uses. Thus, we must first be cultivated by tradition and culture to become a rational agent, and only then can we participate in the rational evaluation of the community and its tradition. When it comes to questions concerning human goodness, we should not, of course, suppose that we are excluded from other social communities in the same way we are excluded from foreign language communities. If we are right to believe that we are all endowed with the same basic nature, we can legitimately hope that we will find some common ground upon which to begin our discussion. Actually, even in a foreign language community, we are often able to make limited communication based on gestures and facial expressions. Exclusion, then, is never complete, but only a matter of degree. The issues of relativism and the comparison of cultures are very complicated and will not be pursued here.

Since the person can only actualise her selfhood and agency through the community and its tradition, the best nourishment of desires, which requires active human agency and a unified self, is only possible when the person is cultivated by the community. Yet a harmonious communal life is also directly constitutive of the overall good of the person. Xunzi points out that a harmonious communal life is such that “[People are] unequal yet equivalent, bent yet even, dissimilar yet uniform. This is called human relationships” (Lau 1996, 4.17.5–6; Knoblock 1988–1994, 4.12). He also suggests that “sageliness [refers to] the perfection of [human] relationships” (Lau 1996, 21.106.21; Knoblock 1988–1994, 21.9). It is clear that human relationships (*renlun* 人伦) are central features of Confucian communal life, but, as we have seen from the examples of the affection between father and son, and the division between males and females, human relationships do not here refer to factual inter-personal connections. Instead, human relationships refer to normative relationships which are structured by rituals and righteousness. It is not just that a father is the parent of his son, nor merely that a father should take care of his son, but more precisely that a father should take care of his son as guided by the virtues of a father and that a son should respect his father in properly pious ways, because human relationships are good only when they are structured by rituals. And good human

relationships are only possible through sincere participation in those relationships. If there is no love, warmth, trust, respect, faithfulness, and so on, in a marriage, it could not be good and would only bring suffering and misery. On the other hand, if two people truly love each other, and love each other in a proper way, for example not being dominating, deceitful, fearful or jealous, their love will bring them great happiness and it will likely be one of the highest goods they achieve. Also, goods in human relationships are internal goods. Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that internal goods are goods internal to specific practices—that an internal good can only be identified and enjoyed in the practice to which it pertains. (MacIntyre 1985, 181–203). The pleasure and the particular kind of skills specific to playing football could only be gained by sincere participation in the game. You might make goals by cheating, but you would then lose the pleasure of playing the game. We have seen before that the petty man is enslaved by things (*wu* 物). Xunzi would suggest that external goods such as money and status are merely things, and that the blind pursuit of these things will lead to the enslavement of the self. Internal goods, especially internal goods particular to human relationships, provide us with a more enduring satisfaction. That this is so might well be because we are beings with such a nature. Confucian rituals exemplify such an understanding of our nature, and instruct us to participate in human relationships so that we can enjoy a flourishing life.

6 Integral Self and the Autonomous Agent

If a person in the modern world were to ask Xunzi why he should follow Confucian rituals, Xunzi would probably answer that Confucian rituals constitute the normative framework through which we gain an integral self and become an autonomous agent. He would point out that autonomy as a modern ideal is possible only when we have a firm command of the self. Only when we know who we truly are and what we truly want can we act autonomously. Confucian rituals also represent an understanding of what constitutes the good for human beings, and rituals suggest that we can have a good life only by living in harmonious relationships with one another. As human beings we necessarily have a second-level evaluation of our nature, that is, we necessarily “accommodate and settle” in one way or another. Confucian rituals represent the accumulated practical knowledge of how we should best “accommodate and settle” ourselves. I have not intended here to provide a full and complete justification of Confucian rituals, but rather to show that Confucian rituals could be seen as a plausible answer to the question of what constitutes the good for a human being. Of course, it is not true that by following Confucian rituals we will never meet any harm. Xunzi points out:

Benevolence, righteousness, virtues and just acts are the methods of constant security, but there is no guarantee that it will never incur peril. Corruption, laxity, unlawful acts and robbery are the methods of constant peril, but there is no guarantee that it will never bring about security. Thus the noble man follows the way of regularity, but the petty man follows the way of exception. (Lau 1996, 4.15.4–5; Knoblock 1988–1994, 4.8)

As James Griffin brings up, as human beings we are not omnipotent. The limits of human knowledge will not allow arbitrariness and contingency ever to be eradicated from our moral life (Griffin 1996, 95–97). We choose “the way of regularity,” knowing only that things will go relatively well under normal circumstances. At one particular moment, I might be morally required to sacrifice my life. Although I accept the moral demand and am willing to make the sacrifice because it is the right thing to do, it is still natural for me to have a desire for life and have the thought that if circumstances were different it would be good to continue to live. This is probably the scenario in Xunzi’s mind when he says, “It is not that they do not desire life but desire death; it is rather that life is not approved but death approved” (Lau 1996, 22.111.8–9; Knoblock 1988–1994, 22.5a). In one sense, it is in my best interest to sacrifice my life because an amoral life would be so distorted that it would no longer be “my life,” and would not be worth living. My old, or genuine, self, in a situation like this, is “dead.”⁹ Yet in another sense, it is still a genuine sacrifice on my part because, if the world were different, I could continue to enjoy my life. Yet any kind of life involves risk, and there is no way to enjoy the benefits of one’s life without accepting the risks. Retreating whenever there is a difficult moral situation is not leading a better life, but living a fragmented life without a unified self. Notwithstanding the possibility that moral standards could demand that a person would, under certain circumstances, even have to sacrifice his or her life, an upright life might still be the best policy for human beings living in an uncertain world.

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⁹ Korsgaard suggests that if morality is ever justified in asking a sacrifice of life from us, it must be because not acting morally is as bad as or worse than death. One possibility is that we thereby lose our identity and are no longer ourselves anymore. See Korsgaard (1996, 17–18).

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