

An Exhortation to Learning

The gentleman says: Learning must never stop. Blue dye derives from the indigo plant, and yet it is bluer than the plant. Ice comes from water, and yet it is colder than water. Through steaming and bending, you can make wood as straight as an ink-line¹ into a wheel. And after its curve conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun 5 it will not become straight again, because the steaming and bending have made it a certain way. Likewise, when wood comes under the ink-line, it becomes straight, and when metal is brought to the whetstone, it becomes sharp.² The gentleman learns broadly and examines himself thrice daily,³ and then his knowledge is clear and his conduct 10 is without fault.

And so if you never climb a high mountain, you will not know the height of Heaven.⁴ If you never visit a deep ravine, you will not know the depth of the Earth. If you never hear the words passed down from the former kings,⁵ you will not know the magnificence of learning. 15 The children of the Han, Yue, Yi, and Mo⁶ peoples all cry with the same sound at birth, but when grown they have different customs, because teaching makes them thus.⁷ The *Odes* says:⁸

O harken, all ye gentlemen,
Don't always be at ease and rest! 20
Perform your office steadfastly.
Love what's correct and upright best.

¹ A carpenter's tool used for marking straight lines.

² See 23.19–22 and 23.205–7. See also Gaozi's remarks in *Mencius* 6A1.

³ See also *Analects* 1.4.

⁴ Many early Chinese treated Heaven (*tian* 天, lit. "sky") like a deity. In Xunzi's thought, however, it is less a deity and more an impersonal force, like what we might call "Nature." See the discussion of Heaven at 17.1–5.

⁵ The "former kings" were sages who, according to Xunzi, brought peace and prosperity to the world, but it is unclear exactly whom he has in mind. The set likely includes the early Zhou dynasty leaders King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou. See chapter 3, note 20.

⁶ These are the names of "barbarian" states and tribes.

⁷ See also *Analects* 17.2.

⁸ The *Odes* is a collection of poems (originally songs) that Xunzi views as a classic and quotes often. For more on the *Odes*, see appendix 1. References here are according to the arrangement in the Mao version of the *Odes*. The quote that follows is from poem 207.

The spirits will thus hear of this,
And they will make you greatly bless'd.⁹

- 25 No spirit-like state is greater than having transformed oneself with the Way.¹⁰ No blessing is superior to being without misfortunes.

I once spent the whole day pondering, but it was not as good as a moment's worth of learning.¹¹ I once stood on my toes to look far away, but it was not as good as the broad view from a high place. If you climb to a high place and wave, you have not lengthened your arms, but you can be seen from further away. If you shout from upwind, you have not made your voice stronger, but you can be heard more clearly. One who makes use of a chariot and horses has not thereby improved his feet, but he can now go a thousand *li*.¹² One who makes use of a boat and oars has not thereby become able to swim, but he can now cross rivers and streams. The gentleman is exceptional not by birth, but rather by being good at making use of things.

In the south there is a bird called the *meng jiu*.¹³ It makes its nest from feathers, weaving it together with hair, and attaches it to the slender branch of a reed. When the wind comes along, the branch snaps, the eggs break, and its young perish. This happens not because the nest itself is flawed, but rather because of what it is attached to. In the west there is a plant called the *ye gan*. Its stem is four inches long, and it grows on the top of high mountains, so that it overlooks ravines a hundred yards deep. It has this view not because its stem can grow long, but rather because of where it stands.

Likewise, when the *peng* vine grows among hemp plants, it goes up straight without being stood upright. The root of the *lan huai* plant is sweet-smelling angelica, but if you soak it in foul water then the gentleman will not draw near it, and the common people will not wear it. This happens not because the original material is not fra-

⁹ Mei (1961) notes that the words *zheng* 正 ("correct") and *zhi* 直 ("upright") in this poem also mean "straight," and hence connect with the prior images of shaping wood. The point is to urge people both to reform themselves and to value others who have done so.

¹⁰ The term *shen* 神 can mean "spirit," as in the poem, but Xunzi also frequently uses it as a kind of quality (rendered in this translation as "spirit-like"). In such cases it connotes great power that works invisibly. See 17.45–46. Xunzi often associates this power with virtue (*de* 德), because in his view virtue also has a transformative effect on others that works invisibly. See lines 82–85 below and 3.120–23.

¹¹ See *Analects* 15.31.

¹² A Chinese measurement of distance, equivalent to roughly one-third of a mile.

¹³ These remarks about the *meng jiu* 蒙鳩 may be parodying chap. 1 of the *Zhuangzi*, especially its story of the *xue jiu* 學鳩 bird. See Kjellberg (1996, pp. 17–18) for a useful discussion.

grant, but rather because of what it is soaked in. Therefore, the gentleman is sure to select carefully the village where he dwells, and he is sure to associate with well-bred men when he travels. This is how he avoids corruption and draws near to what is correct. 55

All the things and the kinds that come about
 Surely have a point from which they start out.
 Honor or disgrace that comes unto you
 Surely reflects your degree of virtue. 60
 In rotten meat bugs are generated.
 In fish that's spoiled maggots are created.
 Lazy, haughty men who forget their place
 Shall have misfortune and ruin to face.
 Rigid things get themselves used for bracing. 65
 Pliant things get themselves used for lacing.^a
 If with corruption your person is filled,
 It's this upon which hate toward you will build.

You may spread out firewood as though all of the same kind, but fire will still seek out the dry pieces.¹⁴ You may level the earth so that it appears all even, but water will still seek out the wet places. Wherever grasses and trees grow together, birds and beasts will flock. This is because each thing follows its own class. For this reason, wherever an archery target is set out, bows and arrows will follow. Wherever wood grows in abundance, axes and hatchets will go. Wherever trees create shade, flocks of birds will rest. Wherever something turns sour, flies will gather. Likewise, there are words that summon misfortune, and there is conduct that beckons disgrace, so the gentleman is careful about where he takes his stand. 70 75

If you accumulate enough earth to form a mountain, then wind and rain will arise from it. If you accumulate enough water to form a deep pool, then dragons will come to live in it. If you accumulate enough goodness to achieve virtue, then you will naturally attain to spirit-like powers and enlightenment, and the heart of a sage is complete therein. And so, 80 85

Without accumulating tiny steps,
 You have no way to go a thousand *li*.
 Without accumulating little streams,
 You have no way to form river or sea.
 Let the horse Qi Ji¹⁵ take a single leap; 90

¹⁴ Wording nearly identical to this and the next sentence also appears at 27.631–33.

¹⁵ The horse Qi Ji was famous for his ability to go a thousand *li* in a single day.

It still would go no farther than ten strides.
 Yet old nags ridden ten days equal him;
 Not giving up is where success resides.

95 If you start carving and give up, you will not be able to break even
 rotten wood, but if you start carving and do not give up, then you can
 engrave even metal and stone. The earthworm does not have sharp
 teeth and claws, nor does it have strong bones and muscles. Yet, it
 eats of the earth above, and it drinks from the Yellow Springs below,¹⁶
 because it acts with single-mindedness. In contrast, the crab has six
 100 legs and two pincers. Yet were it not for the abandoned holes of water
 snakes and eels, it would have no place to lodge, because it is frenetic-
 minded. For this reason,

If you do not first have somber intention,
 No brilliant understanding can there be.
 105 If you do not first have determined effort,
 No glorious achievements will you see.
 One walking both forks of a road goes nowhere.
 One serving two lords is not viewed welcomely.
 Eyes focused on two things at once are not sharp.
 110 Ears tuned to two things at once don't hear clearly.
 Though footless, the *teng* snake moves quick as flying,
 Yet five limbs give the *wu* rodent no safety.^b

The *Odes* says:

The *shi jiu* bird is on the mulberry.
 115 Seven is the number of its offspring.
 As for the noble man and gentleman,
 Their standard is one and unwavering.
 Their standard is one and unwavering
 Like their hearts were tied to it by binding.¹⁷

120 Thus is the gentleman bound to one thing.¹⁸

¹⁶ The Yellow Springs were thought to be deep underground and were believed to house the spirits of the dead.

¹⁷ Mao #152. The poem says that the standard of the noble man and gentleman is *yi* 一, which literally means “one.” Here I translate it as “one and unwavering” to highlight the idea of consistency, following commentators’ reading of the line in its original context. However, this is also the same word rendered as “single-mindedness” elsewhere in this chapter, and Xunzi may intend the line to be read with that sense as well (or instead).

¹⁸ I.e., the Way. See lines 209–12 below. This sentence contains the same ambiguous use of *yi* 一 (“one,” rendered here as “one thing”) discussed in the previous note.

In ancient times, Hu Ba played the lute, and the swimming fish came up to listen. Bo Ya played the zither, and the six kinds of horses all raised up their heads from grazing. There is no sound so small as not to be heard. There is no action so subtle as not to be manifest. Where there is jade in a mountain, the vegetation is lush, and where a pool begets pearls, its banks do not dry out. If you do good, will it not accumulate? How could it be that none hear of it? 125

Where does learning begin? Where does learning end? I say: Its order begins with reciting the classics, and ends with studying ritual. Its purpose begins with becoming a well-bred man, and ends with becoming a sage. If you truly accumulate effort for a long time, then you will advance. Learning proceeds until death and only then does it stop. And so, the order of learning has a stopping point, but its purpose cannot be given up for even a moment. To pursue it is to be human, to give it up is to be a beast.¹⁹ Thus: 135

The *Documents* is the record of government affairs.²⁰
 The *Odes* is the repository of balanced sound.
 Rituals are the great divisions in the model for things.
 Outlines of things' proper classes are in the rituals found.

And so, learning comes to ritual and then stops, for this is called the ultimate point in pursuit of the Way and virtue. In the reverence and refinement of ritual, the balance and harmony of music, the broad content of the *Odes* and *Documents*, the subtleties of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*,²¹ all things between Heaven and Earth are complete.^c 140

The learning of the gentleman enters through his ears, fastens to his heart, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions. His slightest word, his most subtle movement, all can serve as a model for others.²² The learning of the petty person enters through his ears and passes out his mouth. From mouth to ears is only four inches—how could it be enough to improve a whole body much larger than that? Students in ancient times learned for their own sake, but the students of today learn for the sake of impressing others.²³ Thus the learning of the gentleman is used to improve his 150

¹⁹ This remark may not be meant literally. Cf. 4.58–60 on calling others “beasts.”

²⁰ The *Documents* is a text purporting to record the speeches of ancient sage kings. Like the *Odes*, Xunzi treats it as a source of wisdom. For more on the *Documents*, see appendix 1.

²¹ The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a history of the state of Lu during the eighth to fifth centuries BCE. Like the *Odes* and *Documents*, Xunzi considers it a very important text that deserves careful study. For more on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, see appendix 1.

²² See also the use of this sentence at 13.214–15.

²³ See *Analects* 14.24.

own person, while the learning of the petty man is used like gift
 155 oxen.²⁴ To speak without being asked is what people call being presumptuous, and to speak two things when asked only one is what people call being wordy. Being presumptuous is wrong, and being wordy is wrong. The gentleman is simply like an echo.²⁵

In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the
 160 right person. Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts. The *Odes* and *Documents* contain ancient stories but no explanation of their present application. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is terse and cannot be quickly understood. However, if you imitate the right person in his practice of the precepts of the gentleman, then
 165 you will come to honor these things for their comprehensiveness, and see them as encompassing the whole world. Thus, in learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person.^d

Of the paths to learning, none is quicker than to like the right
 person, and exalting ritual comes second. If at best you cannot like
 170 the right person, and at worst you cannot exalt ritual, then you will simply be learning haphazard knowledge and focusing your intentions on blindly following the *Odes* and *Documents*. If so, then to the end of your days you cannot avoid being merely a vulgar *ru*.²⁶ If you are going to take the former kings as your fount and make *ren* and *yi*
 175 your root,²⁷ then rituals are exactly the highways and byways for you.^c It will be like the action of turning up your fur collar by simply curling your five fingers and pulling on it—it goes smoothly numberless times.^f If you do not take the regulations of ritual as your way, but instead go at it with just the *Odes* and *Documents*, then it will be like
 180 trying to measure the depth of a river with your finger, or trying to pound millet with a halberd, or trying to eat out of a pot with an awl—you simply will not succeed at it. And so if you exalt ritual, then even if you are not brilliant, you will still be a man of the proper model. If you do not exalt ritual, then even if you are an acute debater,
 185 you will be only a dissolute *ru*.

Do not answer one who asks about something improper. Do not ask questions of one who speaks on something improper. Do not listen to one who tries to persuade you of something improper. Do

²⁴ In ancient China, animals were given as gifts to superiors and honored guests. Xunzi's point is that the petty man flaunts his learning to win favor with others.

²⁵ The basis of the analogy is that there is no echo without a preceding sound, and an echo lasts only a short time. Likewise, the gentleman does not show off his learning by speaking out of place, or by droning on about matters for which a shorter discussion will suffice.

²⁶ The word *ru* 儒 originally meant something like "a cultivated person" or "a scholar." In later times, it came to mean more narrowly "a Confucian scholar." Xunzi himself does not understand it so narrowly, though there are hints of this usage in the text (see 6.219–29). See also the discussion at the beginning of chapter 8, note 9.

²⁷ *Ren* and *yi* are two central virtues in Xunzi's thought. See appendix 1 for discussion.

not debate with a person of combative demeanor. Only if people approach you in the proper way should you receive them. If they do not approach you in the proper way, then avoid them. And so, only if they follow ritual and are reverent should you discuss the methods of the Way with them. Only if their speech is calm should you discuss the pattern of the Way with them. Only if their countenance is agreeable should you discuss the culmination of the Way with them. To discuss these things with those unfit to discuss them is called being presumptuous. Not to discuss these things with those fit to discuss them is called being secretive. To discuss these things without first observing the person's manner and countenance is called being blind.²⁸ The gentleman is neither presumptuous nor secretive nor blind; he carefully acts according to the other person's character. The *Odes* says:

The gentlemen are not indolent or haughty.
Rewarded by the Son of Heaven shall they be.²⁹

This expresses my meaning.

One who misses a single shot out of a hundred does not deserve to be called good at archery. One who falls short of going a thousand *li* by the distance of even a half step does not deserve to be called good at chariot driving. One who does not fully comprehend the proper kinds and classes of things, or who is not single-minded in pursuit of *ren* and *yi*, does not deserve to be called good at learning. Learning is precisely learning to pursue them single-mindedly. To depart from it in one affair and adhere to it in another is to be such as common people. To have in oneself little that is good and much that is not good is to be such as the tyrants Jie and Zhòu and Robber Zhi.³⁰ Perfect it and complete it,³¹ and only then is one truly a learned person.

²⁸ Compare *Analects* 16.6.

²⁹ See Mao #222. The quote here differs from the Mao text. "Son of Heaven" is the title for Zhou dynasty kings. The Son of Heaven claimed authority over the whole world, and so for early Chinese the title came to represent a supreme ruler, akin to "emperor." Accordingly, in the *Xunzi*, the title "Son of Heaven" is sometimes projected backward to describe pre-Zhou rulers with supreme authority. (Later Chinese emperors considered themselves to occupy this same position, but more commonly used another title, *Huangdi* 皇帝, most often translated as "emperor" in English. That title does not appear in the *Xunzi*, but part of it, *dì* 帝, is sometimes rendered here as "emperor" to convey a similar sense.)

³⁰ Jie was the last ruler of the Xia dynasty. He was overthrown by the virtuous king Tang, who established the Shang (also called Yin) dynasty. Zhòu was the last ruler of the Shang. He was overthrown by King Wu, who established the Zhou dynasty. (To avoid confusion, the tyrant's name will be spelled as "Zhòu" to distinguish it from the name of the dynasty.)

³¹ The "it" here refers to learning and its moral content such as *ren* and *yi*.

The gentleman knows that whatever is imperfect and unrefined does not deserve praise. And so he repeatedly recites his learning in order to master it, ponders it in order to comprehend it, makes his
 220 person so as to dwell in it, and eliminates things harmful to it in order to nourish it. He makes his eyes not want to see what is not right, makes his ears not want to hear what is not right, makes his mouth not want to speak what is not right, and makes his heart not want to deliberate over what is not right.³² He comes to the point where he
 225 loves it, and then his eyes love it more than the five colors, his ears love it more than the five tones, his mouth loves it more than the five flavors, and his heart considers it more profitable than possessing the whole world.³³ For this reason, power and profit cannot sway him, the masses cannot shift him, and nothing in the world can shake him.³⁴
 230 He lives by this, and he dies by this. This is called the state in which virtue has been grasped.

When virtue has been grasped, only then can one achieve fixity. When one can achieve fixity, only then can one respond to things. To be capable both of fixity and of responding to things—this is called
 235 the perfected person. Heaven shows off its brilliance, Earth shows off its breadth, and the gentleman values his perfection.^{35,g}

³² See *Analects* 12.1.

³³ As before, the five instances of “it” here refer to the content of the gentleman’s learning, i.e., what is right.

³⁴ See *Mencius* 3B2.

³⁵ This hints at Xunzi’s conception of the “triad” formed by Heaven, Earth, and the virtuous person. See 17.33–37.