

XUNZI'S CONFUCIAN NATURALISM

Since people's nature is bad, they must await teachers and proper models, and only then do they become correct in their behavior.

—Xunzi



Xunzi is one of the most systematic Confucian philosophers.

I. Xunzi's Context

Xunzi lived near the end of the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE) and may have seen the unification of China under the Qin dynasty. Xunzi's extensive and wide-ranging writings discuss ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of language, and psychology, and he is acknowledged today as one of the greatest ancient philosophers. He spent a significant portion of his career at the Jixia Academy, a think tank created by the ruler of Qi to bring together the greatest minds of his era to study, teach, and provide advice to the state.

At the Academy, Xunzi learned much from the views of other philosophers. Like the Mohists, Xunzi employs the expository essay style as a vehicle for philosophy and appeals to a state-of-nature argument to justify government. Like Yang Zhu, Xunzi holds that human nature is ultimately self-centered and that the Confucian Way is artificial. Like Zhuangzi, Xunzi takes the activity of craftspeople as a model for following the Way: Zhuangzi's butcher and Xunzi's sage both gradually learn to act in accordance with the pattern of the world. Above all, though, Xunzi is a Confucian. He brilliantly synthesizes elements from other philosophers into a defense of the Way of Kongzi. For Xunzi, the most important elements of Kongzi's thought are his emphases on ritual, learning, and the arduousness of transforming human motivations, like working jade: "As if cut, as if polished; / As if carved, as if ground" (*Analects* 1.15). However, Xunzi did not hesitate to criticize his fellow Confucian Mengzi, whose claim that human nature is good "does not match the test of experience" (303). The reality, Xunzi claims, is that "people's nature is bad, and their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort" (298).

II. Naturalism and Ritual

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that attempts to answer the question: What are the most fundamental types of things that exist? Naturalism is the metaphysical view that all that exists is ultimately reducible to the entities studied by natural science (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.). If we accept that definition, Xunzi cannot be classified as a naturalist, because he lived before the development of the natural sciences as we now understand them. However, Xunzi does share one of the core commitments distinctive of naturalism. He denies teleology (the view that the universe has some intentional goal): "The activities of Heaven are constant. They do not persist because of Yao. They do not perish because of Jie" (269).

Since nature is not goal directed, we must reject the appeal to omens and spiritual entities to explain phenomena:

If stars fall or trees cry out, the people of the state are filled with fear and say, "What is this?" I say: It is nothing. These are simply rarely occurring things among the changes in Heaven and earth and the transformations of *yin* and *yang*.

To marvel at them is alright, but to fear them is not. Eclipses of the sun and moon, unseasonable winds and rains, unexpected appearances of strange stars—there is no age in which such things do not occur. (*Xunzi* 17; *Readings*, pp. 271–72)

Mengzi did not express any interest in omens, but he did have a teleological view of Heaven. He saw it as guiding history so that, in the long run, those with Virtue will rule, bringing peace and prosperity to the people (*Mengzi* 2B13). Another aspect of Mengzi's teleology was his view that Heaven implants in us our virtuous nature (*Mengzi* 7A1). We'll see that Xunzi challenges this second aspect of Mengzi's thought as well.

Because the universe does not have a teleological structure, rituals cannot be instrumental to achieving their superficial goals. However, they may serve an alternative purpose:

One performs the rain sacrifice and it rains. Why? I say: There is no special reason why. It is the same as when one does not perform the rain sacrifice and it rains anyway. When the sun and moon suffer eclipse, one tries to save them. When Heaven sends drought, one performs the rain sacrifice. One performs divination and only then decides on important affairs. But this is not for the sake of getting what one seeks, but rather to give things proper form. Thus, the gentleman looks upon this as proper form, but the common people look upon it as connecting with spirits. (*Xunzi* 17; *Readings*, p. 272)

We quoted this passage in Chapter 2, where we noted that it suggests functionalism, the position developed millennia later in the West, according to which the best way to understand rituals is in terms of the social and psychological needs that they meet. Xunzi clearly sees one of the functions of ritual as providing a means for giving form to and expressing one's emotions:

When the feelings that come to him stir him greatly but are deprived of an outlet and stopped, then with regard to the refined expression of remembrance he will feel anguished and unsatisfied, and his practice of ritual and proper regulation will be lacking and incomplete. And so, the former kings accordingly established a proper form for it, and thereby was set what is righteous in venerating those esteemed and loving those intimate. Thus I say: The sacrificial rites are the refined expression of remembrance and longing. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, p. 284)

Xunzi illustrates this by explaining the expressive purpose behind certain rituals:

The standard practice of funeral rites is that one changes the appearance of the corpse by gradually adding more ornamentations, one moves the corpse

gradually further away, and over a long time one gradually returns to one's regular routine. Thus, the way that death works is that if one does not ornament the dead, then one will come to feel disgust at them, and if one feels disgust, then one will not feel sad. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, pp. 279–80)

Rituals do not just provide an outlet for emotions we already have. One of the most important functions of ritual is to reshape our motivations. Xunzi uses a state-of-nature argument to justify the importance of ritual for this purpose:

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desires, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and the standards of righteousness in order to allot things to people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose. Thus, ritual is a means of nurture. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, p. 274)

The Mohists had earlier used state-of-nature arguments, but Xunzi starts from different assumptions and therefore arrives at a different conclusion. The Mohists held that human motivations are highly malleable. For them, conflict in the state of nature results from the fact that in the absence of central authority, humans will have widely varying conceptions of righteousness.¹ In contrast, Xunzi held that we share a common human nature and that it is characterized primarily by self-interest:

As for the way that the eyes like pretty colors, the ears like beautiful sounds, the mouth likes good flavors, the heart likes what is beneficial, and the bones and flesh like what is comfortable—these are produced from people's inborn dispositions and nature. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings*, p. 300)

Because the objects of desire are always limited, each of us seeking to benefit ourselves without restraint will lead to chaos in the state of nature:

Liking what is beneficial and desiring gain are people's inborn dispositions and nature. Suppose there were brothers who had some property to divide, and that they followed the fondness for benefit and desire for gain in their inborn dispositions and nature. If they were to do so, then the brothers would conflict and contend with each other for it. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings*, p. 301)

In order to address this conflict and save the people from their own natures, the ancient sage-kings

set up the power of rulers and superiors in order to control them. They made clear ritual and the standards of righteousness in order to transform them. They set up laws and standards in order to manage them. They multiplied punishments and fines in order to restrain them. As a result, they caused all under Heaven to become well ordered and conform to the Way. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings*, p. 302)

Rituals and the standards of righteousness coordinate human desires and material goods in two ways. First, they establish rules for who is entitled to which of the limited material resources available. For example, it is traditional that the eldest brother, not a younger brother, inherits the land that belonged to his father. Similarly, kings are entitled to palaces and regal clothes, while farmers have simple huts and functional work clothes. Elders are served first and get the choicest foods, while youngsters must wait their turn. Consequently, rituals justify differential treatment and privileges. However, everyone is better off with rituals and righteousness than they would be without them, because they allow us to escape the chaotic state of nature.

The rituals do not merely set rules for entitlement, though. They are effective because they reshape human motivations. Xunzi's argument is that because humans are innately self-interested they have to be transformed via ritual or they will never successfully live in harmony. The Mohist political program will fail, Xunzi suggests, because it ignores our innate motivations and the effort required to transform them. Xunzi illustrates this with the example of music:

Music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition. So, people cannot be without music; if they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape in movement. ... So, people cannot be without joy, and their joy cannot be without shape, but if it takes shape and does not accord with the Way, then there will inevitably be chaos. (*Xunzi* 20; *Readings*, p. 285)

As we saw in Chapter 4, the Mohists condemn musical performances as wasteful and suggest eliminating them (see *Mozi* 32; *Readings*, pp. 105–10). They see no difficulty in achieving this because they assume human motivations are highly malleable. Xunzi counters that humans are recalcitrant: we cannot change the fact that humans wish to express emotions in music. But while our motivations are innate, the Way is not. Consequently, we must reshape our dispositions through ritual and particular forms of music so that we can live harmoniously together in society:

And so, if a person puts even one measure of effort into following ritual and the standards of righteousness, he will get back twice as much. If he puts even one measure of effort into following his nature and inborn dispositions, he will lose twice as much. And so, the Confucians are those who will cause people to gain twice as much, and the Mohists are those who will cause people to lose twice as much. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, p. 275)

III. History and Objectivity

If humans need to be reshaped by the rituals and standards of righteousness developed by the sages, how did the sages develop them in the first place? Xunzi frequently draws analogies between the sages and craftspeople. Let's follow out that analogy in more detail. Humans need sharp implements for hunting, butchering, and warfare. In ancient times, a craftsperson surmised that a blade made out of bronze would be superior to the flint ones in use at the time, because the bronze blades could have a larger cutting surface and would be less brittle. The craftsperson smelted the bronze, then used a hammer and anvil to forge it. The result was the beginning of the Bronze Age, which offered superior solutions to human needs.

Similarly, the ancient sages recognized a problem that humans faced: "people were deviant, dangerous, and not correct in their behavior, and they were unruly, chaotic, and not well ordered" (302). As a result of this, "the strong would harm the weak and take from them. The many would tyrannize the few and shout them down" (302). Even those who were momentarily dominant lived in fear, knowing that their position was always unstable. Using their imagination and intelligence, the sages invented a solution to save people from this problem: "They made clear ritual and the standards of righteousness in order to transform them" (302). Just as creating and using bronze blades was a better answer to the human need for a cutting implement, so was creating and using ritual and standards of righteousness a better way to live than the chaotic state of nature.

Neither the craftsperson nor the sage creates according to some innate pattern. (After all, our brain is not hardwired with the knowledge of how to smelt bronze and forge it into blades.) Their products are the result of "deliberate effort":

Thus, when the potter mixes clay and makes vessels, the vessels are produced from the deliberate efforts of the craftsman; they are not produced from people's nature. Thus, when the craftsman carves wood and makes utensils, the utensils are produced from the deliberate efforts of the craftsman; they are not produced from people's nature. ... So, ritual and standards of righteousness and proper models and measures are produced from the deliberate efforts of the sage; they are not produced from people's nature. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings*, p. 300)

Does Xunzi want us to view the invention of ritual and the standards of righteousness as something that happened all at once in the distant past, or as something that gradually accumulated over many generations? The craftsman analogy suggests the latter, since technology develops piecemeal and over time. Just within the few centuries since Kongzi, Xunzi's world had seen the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. There are some passages that indicate Xunzi had a similar view of the Way: "The sages *accumulated* reflections and deliberations and practiced deliberate efforts and reasoned activities in order to produce ritual and standards of righteousness and to establish proper models and measures."² This invites us to imagine a gradual accumulation of rituals and standards of righteousness over time. Perhaps the earliest sages recognized only that everyone would be happier and civilization would be more likely to survive if we adopted a standard of righteousness in warfare: "It is wrong to kill the children of your enemy." Over many generations, sages built upon this, adding more and more rituals and standards of righteousness, until they reached what they considered to be the ideal form.

The craftsman analogy also adopts ideas taken from Zhuangzi to construct a response to his relativistic and skeptical arguments. Zhuangzi suggests (at least sometimes) that just as "this" and "that" depend upon one's perspective, so is the Way nothing more than a matter of what one "regards as right" or "regards as wrong." However, Zhuangzi also indicates that we can learn "how to care for life" by observing the almost miraculous effectiveness of craftspeople, like the butcher who slaughters an ox. The butcher's skill results from the fact that he is able to "rely on the Heavenly patterns," the natural makeup of the ox's body, as he carves. Because of how the butcher, his blade, and the ox carcass relate to one another, there is a right way (and many wrong ways) for him to carve. And this is not simply a matter of perspective.³

Xunzi appeals to the same language of "patterns" to describe how the sage develops the Way: "benevolence, righteousness, lawfulness, and correctness have patterns that can be known and can be practiced" (304). He says of ritual in particular that "[i]n its differentiations of things, it is the utmost in patterning. In its explanations, it is the utmost in keen discernment. Those under Heaven who follow it will have good order. Those who do not follow it will have chaos" (276). So while Xunzi agrees with Zhuangzi and Yang Zhu that the Confucian Way is the result of artifice, he argues that, just as there is a best way for a butcher to carve an ox, so there is a best set of practices and institutions to regulate and transform humans so that they can live harmoniously with each other and their environment. Because he sees ritual as a pattern of such power and scope, Xunzi waxes rhapsodic about it:

By ritual, Heaven and earth harmoniously combine;
By ritual, the sun and moon radiantly shine;
By ritual, the four seasons in progression arise;

By ritual, the stars move orderly across the skies;

...

By ritual, for love and hate proper measure is made;

By ritual, on joy and anger fit limits are laid.

By ritual, compliant subordinates are created,

By ritual, enlightened leaders are generated. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, p. 276)

How does Xunzi reconcile his suggestion that ritual governs the transformations of the four seasons and the motions of the stars with his comparison of ritual to the fabrications of craftspeople? After all, the former image implies that rituals are cosmic principles that humans discover, while the latter suggests that they are invented. There does not need to be a tension between the two views, though. A bronze sword is an invention, a product of the deliberate effort of the craftsperson, but its invention is not arbitrary. It is based on the human purposes it is intended to serve and the characteristics and capacities of bronze. This is why the Bronze Age dawned in multiple civilizations independently, despite the fact that our primate brains are not hard-wired to smelt bronze. Similarly, human rituals are invented, but they are based upon the patterns of Heaven, earth, and humans. Xunzi is explicit that sages bring all three into harmony:

When the grasses and trees are flowering and abundant, then axes and hatchets are not to enter the mountains and forests, so as not to cut short their life, and not to break off their growth. When the turtles and crocodiles, fish and eels are pregnant and giving birth, then nets and poisons are not to enter the marshes, so as not to cut short their life, and not to break off their growth. Plow in the spring, weed in the summer, harvest in the fall and store in the winter. ... Cutting and nurturing are not to miss their proper times, and then the mountains and forests will not be barren, and the common people will have surplus materials. (*Xunzi* 9; *Readings*, p. 268)

Thus, we can metaphorically think of larger cosmic phenomena as extensions of the patterns of ritual. The comparison of ritual to the rules governing the motions of the stars suggests that both are eternal and unchangeable. Xunzi does seem to embrace this conclusion: "Is not ritual perfect indeed! It establishes a lofty standard that is the ultimate of its kind, and none under Heaven can add to or subtract from it" (276).

IV. Human Nature and Psychology

Xunzi sketches an account of how the sages invented the Way. But if our innate dispositions are opposed to the Way, how is it possible for anyone to learn to follow it?

Part of Xunzi's answer is that humans do not necessarily follow their own desires. He illustrates this with the example of those who sacrifice their lives for the sake of righteousness:

Life is what people most desire, and death is what people most despise. However, when people let go of life and bring about their own death, this is not because they do not desire life and instead desire death. Rather, it is because they do not approve of living under these circumstances, but do approve of dying under these circumstances. (*Xunzi* 22; *Readings*, p. 297)

What is the distinction that Xunzi wishes to draw between desire and approval? Paradigmatic desires are our largely innate cravings, especially for the objects of the senses. Approval is a kind of evaluation, so it is based on a conception of the Way.

The passage above seems to be a response to *Mengzi* 6A10, which claims that people choose to die only because they desire righteousness even more than they desire life. The centrality of desire to human motivation is not an ethical problem for Mengzi, though, because he thinks we innately desire righteousness. Our task in self-cultivation is to develop and strengthen these desires so that we act consistently in accordance with them. Xunzi regards our innate desires as self-interested, though, so Mengzi's solution is not open to him. Instead, Xunzi postulates that we are capable of overriding our desires. We do not necessarily follow our desires but instead act out of what our heart approves, which is based on our conception of the Way. Because this attributes an ethical capacity to the heart, it might seem to be equivalent to Mengzi's position. However, for Mengzi, the innate motivations of the heart have specific content: we all sometimes show disdain for shameful behavior; we all sometimes manifest compassion for the suffering of others. Xunzi's position seems to be that the approval of the heart is empty until it is given a specific content. One person might be taught by his culture that possessing wealth is identical with living well, so he will pursue wealth far beyond what is necessary for the satisfaction of his physical desires. Think of the contemporary celebrities who own a dozen mansions around the world, each with swimming pools, a garage for a dozen cars, and a score of bedrooms. It seems unlikely that anyone actually has physical desires that can only be satisfied by this level of consumption. Instead, they are motivated by their conception of how they ought to live. "When the desire is lacking but one's action surpasses it, this is because the heart compels it. If what the heart approves misses the proper patterns, then even if the desires are few, how would it stop short of chaos?" (297).

In contrast, another person might long for some fine clothes that he cannot afford to buy. But if he has learned from the Way of the sages to disapprove of stealing, he will not act on this desire. "Thus, when the desire is excessive but one's action does not match it, this is because the heart prevents it. If what the heart approves conforms to the

proper patterns, then even if one's desires are many, what harm would they be to good order?" (297).

In Xunzi's terminology, approval is a kind of "deliberation," the heart's choice among desires:

The feelings of liking and disliking, happiness and anger, and sadness and joy in one's nature are called the "dispositions." When there is a certain disposition and the heart makes a choice on its behalf, this is called "deliberation." When the heart deliberates and one's abilities act on it, this is called "deliberate effort." That which comes into being through accumulated deliberations and training of one's abilities is also called "deliberate effort." (*Xunzi* 22; *Readings*, p. 292)

If I have a desire to eat a second piece of cheesecake for dessert, this is a disposition of my nature. My heart will deliberate on this disposition and may choose to disapprove of it (if I have learned a Way that endorses moderate consumption of sweets). Forgoing the cheesecake is an example of deliberate effort, and it may prove difficult to do at first, but by repeatedly engaging in deliberate effort, I can train myself so that I am no longer tempted to have the second piece of cheesecake.

So, our physical desires are certainly part of our nature. It is not clear whether Xunzi regards the heart's *capacity* to deliberate as also part of our nature. He might acknowledge this. However, given what he says elsewhere, it is clear that the deliberate effort of the heart and its products are not part of one's nature. Through deliberate effort, we transcend our nature and establish social distinctions. Xunzi claims that these distinctions are what sets humans apart from other animals:

Thus, that by which humans are human is not that they are special in having two legs and no feathers, but that they have distinctions. The birds and beasts have fathers and sons but not the intimate relationship of father and son. They have the male sex and the female sex but no differentiation between male and female. And so among human ways, none is without distinctions. Of distinctions, none are greater than social divisions, and of social divisions, none are greater than rituals, and of rituals, none are greater than those of the sage-kings. (*Xunzi* 5; *Readings*, p. 266)

Arguably, social animals like ants and wolves *do* have recognizable social distinctions, so Xunzi may have failed to specify a characteristic unique to humans. However, what is most important is his claim that such distinctions are artificial yet essential to human life.

Xunzi's slogan to describe his position is "human nature is bad," which he formulates as a denial of Mengzi's claim that human nature is good. However, there has been

extensive debate about exactly what Xunzi means by this and whether he really disagrees with Mengzi. One thing is clear: Xunzi does not wish to assert that human nature is *evil*. Philosophers like Augustine who claim that human nature is evil hold that people are innately capable of doing evil for the sake of evil. In his *Confessions* Augustine notes that humans sometimes do wrong in order to obtain some good for themselves, like stealing to obtain expensive luxuries. Augustine argues that it is always a mistake to do wrong. Someone who steals obtains a lesser good (like the temporary admiration of one's contemporaries for one's fine clothes) at the expense of a greater good (the health of one's eternal soul). Nonetheless, motivations of greed and lust manifest a sort of limited reasonableness. We know *why* someone is doing wrong. However, Augustine argues, appealing to his own experiences, that humans sometimes do wrong even when it does not benefit them. When he was a teenager, Augustine and some of his friends stole some pears from a nearby orchard even though they were not hungry and had access to better fruit than the ones they took. They simply threw the pears away after they stole them. Thus, Augustine and his friends did not satisfy any sensual desire or benefit themselves in any way by stealing the pears. So why did they do it? They did it because it was forbidden. Augustine is aware that this youthful action was hardly a serious crime. But he is disturbed by what he thinks the action reveals: *humans can do wrong simply because it is wrong*. This is what Augustine means in claiming that human nature is evil.

Xunzi suggests nothing quite as dire as this. Part of what Xunzi means by saying that human nature is bad is that if we follow our innate dispositions, they will lead us to do wrong: if we all try to benefit ourselves and satisfy our sensual desires without any constraints, we will end up in a state of conflict and chaos.

Would Mengzi actually disagree with this? When Mengzi states that human nature is good, he means that we have innate but incipient tendencies toward virtue, but he stresses that we must cultivate these tendencies in order to achieve full virtue: "It is the way of people that if they are full of food, have warm clothes, and live in comfort, but are without instruction, then they come close to being animals" (*Mengzi* 3A4). Perhaps Xunzi misinterpreted Mengzi's stance on human nature. Further support for this hypothesis comes from consideration of the specific arguments that Xunzi directs against Mengzi:

Mengzi says: When people engage in learning, this manifests the goodness of their nature. I say: This is not so. ... In every case, the nature of a thing is the accomplishment of Heaven. It cannot be learned. It cannot be worked at. ... Now people's nature is such that their eyes can see, and their ears can hear. The keenness by which they see does not depart from their eyes, and the acuity by which they hear does not depart from their ears. Their eyes are simply keen, and their ears are simply acute; it is clear that one does not learn these things. (*Xunzi* 23; *Readings*, pp. 299–300)

Xunzi argues that human nature cannot be good, because if it were, goodness could not be something that we can get better at through ethical education. If human nature were already good, then “what use would there be for sage-kings? What use for ritual and the standards of righteousness?” (302). Notice, though, that Mengzi means something very different by “human nature.” For Mengzi, the nature of a sprout is to grow into a mature plant and produce its own sprouts. It is a *process* for the sprout to realize its nature, requiring a supportive environment, which is not something it possesses automatically. Similarly, when Mengzi states that human nature is good, he means that humans have an active potential to become good, not that they are good already.

So, in the interpretation above, the views of Mengzi and Xunzi do not directly conflict, because they mean different things by “human nature.” This is certainly part of the story. But Xunzi would disagree with Mengzi even if he had understood more clearly what he meant. It is not that Xunzi agrees about the existence of the “sprouts” of virtue but simply does not wish to refer to them as “human nature.” Xunzi denies that we have even the incipient tendencies toward virtue in our nature. Contrast Mengzi’s sprout metaphors with Xunzi’s preferred metaphors for ethical cultivation:

Through steaming and bending, you can make wood straight as a plumb line into a wheel. And after its curve conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun it will not become straight again, because 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. The gentleman learns broadly and examines himself thrice daily, and then his knowledge is clear and his conduct is without fault. (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings*, pp. 256–57)

Xunzi suggests that bringing our nature into conformity with the Way is like the forced bending of a plank of wood into a wheel. This is precisely the model that Mengzi rejects in his debate with Gaozi (*Mengzi* 6A1). Mengzi objects to its unappealing consequence, that to follow the Way we must warp our nature (just as the nature of the wood is warped when we carve it into cups and bowls). But Xunzi embraces this conclusion. Indeed, Xunzi seems to accept Gaozi’s basic claim: “The desires for food and sex are nature” (6A4).

The differences between Mengzi and Xunzi are crucial for interpreting the so-called ladder of souls passage:

Water and fire have *qi* but are without life. Grasses and trees have life but are without awareness. Birds and beasts have awareness but are without standards of righteousness. Humans have *qi* and life and awareness, and moreover they have standards of righteousness. And so they are the most precious thing under Heaven. (*Xunzi* 9; *Readings*, p. 267)

Water and fire represent two complementary kinds of *qi*: water is a paradigm of what is *yin* (dark, passive, cool, flowing downward, etc.), while fire is an exemplar of *yang* (light, active, hot, rising upward, etc.). Plants have *qi*, but are also alive; animals have *qi* and life but also awareness of their surroundings. Humans have *qi*, life, awareness but also standards of righteousness. This last phrase is a translation of the Chinese *yi*, which is usually rendered simply as “righteousness.” The translation used in *Readings* reflects the view that Mengzi and Xunzi understand righteousness very differently. For Mengzi, righteousness is an expression of our innate but incipient virtuous inclinations. For Xunzi, righteousness is an artificial construct, invented by the sages to meet the human need for society. After presenting the ladder of souls, Xunzi notes that humans

are not as strong as oxen or as fast as horses, but oxen and horses are used by them. How is this so? I say: It is because humans are able to form communities while the animals cannot. Why are humans able to form communities? I say: It is because of social divisions. How can social divisions be put into practice? I say: It is because of standards of righteousness. (*Xunzi* 9; *Readings*, p. 267)

This understanding of “righteousness” as referring to *standards* of righteousness fits what Xunzi says in other contexts, especially since he very frequently pairs ritual and righteousness. Ritual is also an external construct of the sages. However, there is an alternative interpretation. Perhaps “righteousness” in the ladder of souls passage refers to a *capacity* to learn a Way, but a *contentless* capacity, in the sense that it does not innately favor any particular Way. Xunzi’s comparison of ethical cultivation to language acquisition suggests this interpretation: “The children of the Han, Yue, Yi, and Mo peoples all cry with the same sound at birth, but when grown they have different customs, because teaching makes them be this way” (257). At birth, humans have a capacity to acquire a language, but they are not born knowing a language or even with a disposition to speak any one particular language. Similarly, Xunzi believes, we are born with a capacity to learn ritual and to guide our innate desires with it. But we are not born with a disposition toward any particular set of rituals. Xunzi may use the term “righteousness” to refer to this contentless capacity to learn ritual.

Another puzzling passage for understanding the differences between Mengzi and Xunzi occurs in the latter’s discussion of mourning rituals:

Among all the living things between Heaven and earth, those that have blood and *qi* are sure to have awareness, and of those that have awareness, none does not love its own kind. Now if one of the great birds or beasts loses its group of companions, then after a month or a season has passed, it is sure to retrace its former path and go by its old home. ... Among creatures that have blood and *qi*, none has greater awareness than man, and so man’s feeling for his parents knows no limit until the day they die. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, p. 283)

Both in this passage and in *Mengzi* 3A5, the origin of funerals or mourning is the affection of the living for the deceased; both passages suggest that these feelings are nearly universal. Xunzi seems to acknowledge here that there is more to human nature than just self-interested desires for things like food and sex. Humans innately love their parents and thus have an innate need to grieve over their loss in some way.

Is Xunzi really a Mengzian, whether he knows it or not? Xunzi's position seems different from that of Mengzi in at least one important respect. For Mengzi, our feelings of familial affection are intrinsically virtuous: they are our "best capability" and our "best knowledge" (*Mengzi* 7A15). For Xunzi, our feelings are too inchoate and unstructured to be considered virtuous. We must reshape even emotions like familial love in accordance with ritual. Some people are insufficiently cognizant of the debt that they owe their ancestors: "Those who have died that morning they forget by that evening" (283). Others are excessive in their mourning.

If one simply acquiesces in this, then mourning would continue without end. Therefore, the former kings and sages accordingly established a middle way and fixed a proper measure for it, such that once mourning is made sufficient to achieve good form and proper order, then one stops it. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, p. 283)

Thus, Xunzi has what Mengzi refers to contemptuously as a two source view of the Way. In Xunzi's view,

human nature is the original beginning and the raw material, and deliberate effort is to pattern and order it and make it exalted. If there were no human nature, then there would be nothing for deliberate effort to be applied to. If there were no deliberate effort, then human nature would not be able to beautify itself. ... For Heaven can give birth to creatures, but it cannot enforce distinctions among creatures. (*Xunzi* 19; *Readings*, pp. 281–82)

Mengzi would reply, "Heaven, in producing the things in the world, causes them to have one source" (*Mengzi* 3A5).

Fact: The English expression "gung ho," meaning "very or overly enthusiastic," is originally Chinese. True, but the story is complicated. In World War II, a U.S. officer hoped to inspire in his soldiers the same team spirit and dedication he saw among his Chinese friends, so he adopted an expression he thought meant "work together in harmony." Unfortunately, the Chinese *gōnghé* 工合 is actually an abbreviation for Association of Industrial Cooperatives.

V. Ethical Cultivation

The disagreement between Mengzi and Xunzi over human nature is reflected in their views on ethical cultivation. As we noted in Chapter 2, one of the longstanding disagreements among Confucians is over the comparative importance of learning and thinking in ethical cultivation. Because he believes that human nature is good, Mengzi emphasizes thinking: “Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them” (6A6).

In contrast, Xunzi’s conception of human nature and the importance of deliberate effort leads him to emphasize learning: “I once spent the whole day pondering, but it wasn’t as good as a moment’s worth of learning” (257). Xunzi presents an inspiring but challenging image of learning:

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 noble 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. (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings*, p. 258)

Xunzi’s methodology of learning is very teacher centered: “In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person” (259). The “right person” is a teacher who can guide your understanding of the ancient texts and rituals. This is necessary because, as Xunzi acknowledges, they are difficult to interpret and apply to contemporary situations.

Based upon one’s level of learning, Xunzi identifies a hierarchy of character types. At the bottom is the person who has no commitment to learning and remains like a “beast” (258). He is “barbaric, obtuse, perverse, vulgar, and unruly” (262). Only slightly better is the “vulgar scholar” (259). This person pursues learning but does not live up to the values embodied in what he studies; he will only “learn for the sake of impressing others.” If you become a vulgar scholar, “you will simply be learning haphazard knowledge and focusing your intentions on blindly following the *Odes* and *History*.” Xunzi no doubt has such vulgar scholars in mind when he remarks, “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?” In contrast, 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” (259).

Xunzi distinguishes among serious learners based on how deeply they have grasped the Way:

He who likes the right model and carries it out is a man of good breeding. He who focuses his intention upon it and embodies it is a gentleman. He who completely understands it and practices it without tiring is a sage. If a person lacks the proper model, then he will act recklessly [like a beast]. If he has the proper model but does not fix his intentions on its true meaning, then he will act too rigidly [like a vulgar scholar]. If he relies on the proper model and also deeply understands its categories, only then will he act with comfortable mastery of it [like a sage]. (*Xunzi* 2; *Readings*, p. 264)

It is fruitful to compare Xunzi's typology with that found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he distinguishes between the bestial person (who has no commitment to virtue), the incontinent person (who knows what is virtuous, but succumbs to temptation), the continent person (who feels temptation but acts virtuously through strength of will), and the fully virtuous person (who is no longer tempted to do wrong).

Learning is a kind of "deliberate effort" (*wěi* 偽), a term that has a positive connotation for Xunzi. It is the self-conscious activity that humans engage in to transform themselves from their natural state into someone virtuous. This puts Xunzi in sharp contrast with the view of the "Robber Zhi" dialogue (369–75), which repeatedly uses the same word to condemn Kongzi for being "artificial" (*wei*). The *Daodejing* also seems to be at odds with Xunzi, because of its frequent condemnation of self-conscious action: "Everyone knows that when the good strives to be good, it is no good" (*Daodejing* 2). The case of Zhuangzi is more complex. It took the butcher years of what was initially deliberate effort to learn how to skillfully carve oxen. The ultimate goal of the butcher's practice is to act effortlessly, but then so does Xunzi hope to produce a gentleman who effortlessly follows the Way:

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. He comes to the point where he 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. (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings*, pp. 260–61)

VI. Historical Significance

Xunzi's quasi-naturalistic Confucianism is ingenious, and many aspects of it are plausible from our contemporary perspective. However, a serious limitation of Xunzi's philosophy seems to be that it claims the sages invented the one right Way to organize society. Surely there are rituals (for funerals, weddings, birth, and other major life

events) that are just as good as those of ancient China. Furthermore, we think that some version of democracy is a better form of government than the benevolent paternalism Xunzi envisioned. However, taking Xunzi's craftsperson metaphor seriously may allow us to develop a Xunzian philosophy acceptable for the modern world. The sages developed rituals and standards of righteousness to meet human needs, just like craftspeople developed bronze tools. But as the Bronze Age succeeded the Stone Age, so did the Iron Age succeed the Bronze Age. None of the fundamental commitments of Xunzi's philosophy prevent him from acknowledging that the Way continues to develop in a similar manner. Interestingly, a much later Confucian, Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), argued explicitly that the Way evolved gradually over time in response to concrete human needs. Zhang did not see himself as following in the steps of Xunzi, but his work provides a detailed account of how we might historicize Confucianism.ⁱ

Within the Chinese tradition, Xunzi's influence has waxed and waned. His emphasis on learning became the dominant trend in Confucianism for much of its history. Particularly during the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), Confucianism was known for its almost obsessive emphasis on the study of texts and ritual. During this period, the government appointed experts to interpret each of what came to be known as the *Five Classics*. Xunzi would certainly have approved of this policy:

In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person. Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts. The *Odes* and *History* contain ancient stories but no explanations of their present application. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is terse and cannot be quickly understood. (*Xunzi* 1; *Readings*, p. 259)

The works that Xunzi cites here became three of the *Five Classics*. The other members of the *Five Classics* were the *Changes*, a work whose cosmological speculations only became important during the Han, and the *Record of Rites*.

Xunzi later came in for criticism, though, from the so-called Neo-Confucians of the Tang (618–906 CE) and Song (960–1279 CE) dynasties. Although they were very critical of Buddhism, the Neo-Confucians had been deeply influenced by the view that we all share an underlying virtuous Buddha-nature that is obscured by selfish desires. Against such an intellectual background, Mengzi's doctrine that human nature is good resonated with the Neo-Confucians. As a result, thinkers like Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE) identified Mengzi as the true inheritor of the Way of Kongzi and criticized Xunzi for his doctrine that human nature is bad. Zhu Xi also de-emphasized the *Five Classics* in ethical education, arguing that they encouraged an overly scholastic approach to learning. Some interpreters then tried to defend Xunzi by arguing that he did not really disagree with Mengzi. On this complementarian interpretation, Xunzi is simply stressing the obstacles to ethical cultivation, while Mengzi emphasizes the potential to overcome these obstacles. To use a Western metaphor, Xunzi notes that the glass is half empty,

while Mengzi observes that it is half full. We have seen that there are some passages in which Xunzi sounds like Mengzi, and these might be read as support for a complementarian reading, but overall Xunzi seems to be very clear in rejecting Mengzi's view. Still other scholars have suggested that Xunzi did not really write the essay "Human Nature Is Bad." But this essay reflects ideas found in many passages in the rest of Xunzi's writings.

Ironically, Xunzi also came under criticism because of his most brilliant pupil, Han Feizi. Han Feizi learned much from his teacher but developed a philosophy that was avowedly anti-Confucian. Han Feizi's ideas, in turn, influenced the policies of the state of Qin. He was blamed for the excesses of the Qin government, and Xunzi was faulted for producing such a student. But to know whether the criticism of Han Feizi is accurate, we need to understand the details of his philosophy. To this topic we turn in the next chapter.

Review Questions

1. What is "naturalism"? Why would we say that Xunzi cannot be a naturalist? What is an important commitment that Xunzi shares with naturalism?
2. How does Xunzi's conception of Heaven differ from that of Mengzi?
3. Consider a ritual in which we leave out offerings of food and drink for the spirits of our ancestors. How would Xunzi say a gentleman should understand this ritual?
4. Explain how Xunzi uses a state-of-nature argument to justify rituals and standards of righteousness.
5. How does Xunzi disagree with the Mohist version of the state-of-nature argument? Specifically, how do the two versions make different assumptions about innate human motivations, and how does this lead them to different conclusions?
6. Xunzi compares the actions of the sages to those of craftspeople. How does this comparison suggest that there can be a "right" Way even though it is not part of human nature?
7. Xunzi writes, "By ritual, the stars move orderly across the skies." Why does this seem to conflict with Xunzi's craftperson metaphor? How might we reconcile the two?
8. Explain the difference between desire and approval. Why is approval important in self-cultivation?
9. According to Xunzi, what is it that distinguishes humans from other animals?
10. What is the difference between Xunzi's view that human nature is bad and Augustine's view that human nature is evil?
11. What is the difference between Xunzi's definition of human nature and that assumed by Mengzi? Why might this difference lead us to think that Xunzi and Mengzi do not really disagree? Why might we still think that they do disagree?

12. Use the example of wood to illustrate the difference between Xunzi's conception of ethical cultivation and that of Mengzi.
13. Paraphrase the ladder of souls passage.
14. Xunzi notes that, of creatures "that have awareness, none does not love its kind." Why does this seem to commit Xunzi to a position on human nature much like that of Mengzi? How might the passage be interpreted to preserve the disagreement between them?
15. In the "Robber Zhi" dialogue the term *wei* is translated as "artificial," while in the *Xunzi* it is rendered "deliberate effort." How do these differing translations reflect the different attitudes of the two works toward transforming human nature?

1. *Yi* 義, rendered "norms" in the translation of *Mozi* 11; *Readings*, pp. 65–68.

2. You will find a version of this sentence on p. 300 of *Readings*, but in the translation there the subject of the sentence is singular, "the sage," and the central verbs are in the present tense, "accumulates" and "practices." Both translations are possible, because Chinese grammar does not mark number or tense. The issue is whether the sentence refers primarily to a process sages in each generation engage in to transform themselves and others, or to a gradual development that occurred over many generations, through the piecemeal accomplishments of the sages.

3. See the discussion of the butcher in Chapter 9.