

Xunzi and the Essentialist Mode of Thinking about Human Nature

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Introduction

In his essay “Philosophy of Human Nature,” Antonio Cua argues that the term “bad” in Xunzi’s statement that “Human nature is bad” is to be taken in a consequential sense. This goes against a common tendency to read the *Xunzi* in what I refer to as the essentialist mode of thinking. In this paper, I show how it is that the consequential reading of “bad” and other features that Professor Cua describes offer a significant understanding of Xunzi’s position as a non-essentialist one.

The Essentialist Mode of Thinking

Historically, Xunzi’s statement that “Human nature is bad (*ren zhi xing e* 人之性惡)” has been regarded as the opposite of Mencius’s view that “(Human) nature is good (*xing shan* 性善).”¹ It is Mencius’s considered position that human nature is inherently good. Thus, given Xunzi’s opposition to Mencius, it has seemed natural to take him to mean that human nature is inherently bad. However, it is wrong to think that if Xunzi denies an inherent goodness, he must therefore be committed to the belief in an inherent badness. The mode in which

Mencius thinks of nature or *xing* 性 remains deeply entrenched if one takes this to be Xunzi's considered view. In his criticism of Mencius, however, Xunzi targets not only the idea that *xing* is good. He also attempts to undermine what I shall refer to as the "essentialist" mode of thinking about *xing*.

It is important to spell out what this essentialist mode of thinking is and what Xunzi's position is in relation to it. In this regard, the term *qing* 情 plays a pivotal role. With reference to Mencius's use of the term *qing* in response to a question about what he means by man's *xing* being good, A.C. Graham has given the following definition: "The *qing* of X is what makes it a genuine X, what every X has and without which would not be an X."² We may break this down as follows. Take an entity called "X" (in this instance, "man"). There is some essential ("genuine") characteristic of X that makes it what it is. This characteristic is "essential" in the sense that each and every member of the class "X" necessarily possesses it. An entity that lacks this characteristic is not "X". According to Graham, in the *Mencius* and the pre-Qin philosophical texts in general, the term *qing* refers to this essential characteristic in the way just defined.³

Let us see how this essentialist mode of thinking about human nature applies to Mencius by referring to part of Xunzi's analysis of his view that human nature is good. According to Xunzi, underlying this view is a tendency to think of human nature as an original

unadorned state with a beneficial resource, in the way that eyesight belongs to the eyes (*Xunzi* 23.1d). The eyes and eyesight are inseparably linked such that without the former, there would not be the latter. In other words, the eyes are essential to the ability to see. Similarly, for Mencius, the resource of goodness is inseparably linked to each and every person at birth. The possession of this resource is inseparable from and therefore essential to what a man is.

This is indeed the way Mencius characterizes *ren* 人 or “man”. After the example of the child about to fall into a well (*Mencius* 2A:6) he enumerates each of the four sprouts of the heart-mind (compassion, shame, courtesy and modesty, right and wrong) and says that whoever is devoid of any of them is not a man (*fei ren ye* 非人也). Thus, for Mencius, the possession of each of the four sprouts is *the* distinguishing feature of each man *qua* man. As he says in 4B:19, “Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it.” We need not go into the sense in which some people are said to “lose” this distinguishing feature, and certainly there is a philosophical difficulty here for Mencius. But consistent with this way of regarding the distinguishing feature of man, Mencius would say of someone who fails to express any sign of the sprouts of goodness that he is not a *ren* or man.

We have described what I have referred to as the essentialist mode of thinking about human nature and

how Mencius's view of human nature belongs to this mode. The question to be considered is: Does Xunzi think of human nature in this mode? Elsewhere, I have argued that Xunzi's view of *xing* amounts to the second of the four positions mentioned by Mencius's disciple Gongduzi, that it has the capacity to become good or to become bad (*ke yi wei shan* 可以爲善, *ke yi wei bu shan* 可以爲不善).⁴ A.C. Graham has associated this position with a pre-Mencian figure named Shih Shih who is said to have thought that "there is both good and bad in man's nature. If we pick out what is good in man's nature and by nourishing develop it, the good grows; if we nourish and develop the bad in our nature the bad grows." According to Graham, this is "clearly a justification" of the second position mentioned by Gongduzi.⁵ If this means that both goodness and badness are inherent in the nature of each and every person *qua* man, then this amounts to the essentialist mode of thinking about human nature.

Antonio Cua and Three Features of the Xunzi

Ignoring the question of whether it would be coherent to talk of a person's nature being both *inherently* good and bad at the same time, I think that it would be a mistake to attribute this mode of thinking to Xunzi. In what follows, I shall refer to some features of Xunzi's position on human nature that would not fit the essentialist mode. These features have been clearly described by Antonio Cua in his essay, "Philosophy of Human Nature."⁶ In the

beginning of this essay, Cua says that the concept of human nature is a “fluid” notion. He is not merely reminding us of the evident fact that there are various accounts of human nature. Instead, he holds that any particular account of human nature reflects a certain moral vision, ideal or norm. This is demonstrated in his analysis of Xunzi’s thesis that “human nature is bad.” What Xunzi means, according to Cua, is that there is a motivational structure of desires and feelings that would tend toward strife and disorder if left unrestrained. This is a “quasi-empirical” claim, and it is validated by the implied moral point of view that strife and disorder are undesirable. In other words, it is the consequences of such a situation that would be bad. For Xunzi, there is nothing intrinsically bad about desires and feelings. As Cua says, “To characterize man’s nature as ‘bad’ is, in effect, a shorthand way of asserting the nature of these consequences.”⁷

To those familiar with discussions on human nature among the pre-Qin philosophers, the word “fluid” might bring to mind the analogy that Gaozi uses in his description of human nature. According to Gaozi (*Mencius* 6A:2), nature or *xing* does not distinguish between good/bad in the way that water does not distinguish between east/west. The implication is that nature is morally neutral and conceptions of nature as good or bad are imposed by individuals or communities. Cua does not refer to Gaozi here but to a similar analogy of Xunzi’s between the acquisition of ritual principles

and the molding of clay: “In a way, man’s nature, understood in terms of his basic motivational structure, is not bad in itself, but it is bad in the way he tends to actualize this basic nature, and this from the moral point of view. Xunzi, throughout, is insistent on man as a raw material for moral transformation. Man is, like a piece of clay to be molded into a proper shape, to be transformed by *li*-morality.”⁸

Hence, according to Cua, these are the three main features of Xunzi’s account of human nature: (1) His statement that “Man’s *xing* is bad” refers to the consequences of indulging its motivational structure of desires and feelings; (2) There is nothing inherently bad about man’s *xing*—it is morally neutral; and (3) Man’s *xing* consists of a basic “raw material” that can be shaped or transformed. In the rest of this paper, I shall do the following. First, I shall build upon the first two features that Cua describes through a reading of relevant passages in the *Xunzi*. Second, I shall discuss the third feature—the so-called “raw material” of nature and its transformation. This would involve a discussion of the relation between *qing* and *xing* in the text and how transformation is possible, thus leading to a fuller description of Xunzi’s non-essentialist position.

In the course of discussing the three features mentioned above, certain questions will inevitably arise. For instance, if we argue that for Xunzi nature is bad only in a consequential sense, how do we account for the fact that Xunzi constantly talks about the need for

transforming one's nature—doesn't the need for transformation assume that man's nature is essentially bad in the first place? Furthermore, what is this "raw material" that man is said to possess, even if for the sake of argument, it is granted that it is not inherently bad in the first place? Surely, this "raw material" must refer to the contents of one's nature *qua* man and this would mean that it is essentially possessed by man—how then can there be any reading of human nature in a non-essentialist mode? These questions indicate that the essentialist mode of thought is not easy to shake off and will tend to crop up throughout the discussion. Thus, discussing the features of Xunzi's position would at the same time involve unveiling essentialist assumptions. The response to the questions posed will ultimately help us to develop what I think is a proper account of Xunzi's position and to understand how there can be a non-essentialist conception of human nature.

The Meaning of "Xing is Bad"

Passage 23.1a of the *Xing E Pian* 性惡篇 of the *Xunzi* begins:

"The *xing* of man is bad (*e*). His (expressions of) goodness is (the result of) constitutive activity (*wei* 偽). The *xing* of man is such that he is born with a liking of benefit. (Should this be allowed to be) indulged in (*shun shi* 順是), strife will arise and ritualistic deference (*ci rang* 辭讓) will be lost." (My translation)

It might be held that strictly speaking, since the context of discussion is *xing* and what man is born with, Xunzi is not entitled to speak of the rules and behavior of ritualistic deference being “lost” if *xing* is indulged in. But this assumes that in this passage he has in mind a state of nature where ritualistic rules are non-existent. For in such a state of nature, rules of ritual cannot be “lost” since they are non-existent. However, Xunzi mentions the loss of the rules of ritual as a conjecture about the consequences—what would happen if people do not conduct themselves on the basis of ritual and instead allow their natural dispositions to have free rein?⁹

The above passage continues:

“(Man is) born with (the tendencies toward feelings of) envy and hate. (Should this be allowed to be) indulged in, violence and crime will arise and loyalty and trustworthiness will be lost. (Man is) born with the desires (*yu* 欲) of the ears and the eyes, having a liking for sounds and colors. (Should this be allowed to be) indulged in, dissoluteness and disorder will thus arise while ritual principles and cultural form will be lost.”
(My translation)

Although this is similar to the initial section quoted above, it adds the tendencies toward *feelings* of envy and hate and the sensory desires to the *desire* for benefit as what man is born possessing. Again, the stress is on

what would happen should the desires and feelings be given free rein—there would be disorder and the loss of ritual principles and “cultural form” (*wen li* 文理) that constitute the social order. Xunzi says next:

“Thus (wantonly) following man’s *xing* and indulging man’s *qing* will inevitably result in strife which amounts to transgression of social divisions (*fen* 分) and disorder, ultimately ending up in (a situation of) tyrannical violence.” (My translation)

We shall be discussing in detail the relation between the terms *xing* and *qing* later. But note the separate mention of *xing* and *qing* in this section of the passage. This indicates that they are not used interchangeably here. Having mentioned the wanton following of *xing*, there seems no reason for Xunzi to repeat himself by mentioning the indulgence of *qing* if it is interchangeable with *xing*. And Xunzi does not seem to be using *qing* in the sense of what is “genuine” here either. It is therefore probable that *qing* refers to the feelings or emotions (of envy and hate) that Xunzi had mentioned earlier.¹⁰ Xunzi is saying that if people are allowed to give free rein to their sensory desires (*xing*) and dispositional feelings (*qing*) this would result in the consequences mentioned. The passage 23.1a concludes:

“Therefore there must be the transformation (*hua* 化) brought about by teachers/laws and the way of ritual

principles before there can be deference, conformity to cultural form and ultimately orderly governance. From this perspective it is clear that man's *xing* is bad and (the expressions of) goodness is (the result of) constitutive activity (*wei*).” (My translation)

Xunzi is careful to say that it is “from this perspective” that *xing* is bad. What is this perspective? This must refer to what he has repeatedly stressed throughout the passage, namely, that the indulgence of the desire for benefit, the sensory desires and the disposition to feel envy and hate will result in disorder and the loss of cultural form and ritual principles. An important corollary is that the structures of cultural form and ritual principles are not inborn. Instead, they have been constituted to rein in the desires and feelings—both to control/regulate and to transform them so as to ensure social order. At the same time, as Xunzi says elsewhere, the human predicament is such that resources are scarce, and comprehensively speaking there may not be enough to satisfy the desires of everyone. Thus, the social divisions instituted by ritual principles are necessary to allocate the resources according to different familial and social rankings and other criteria (*Xunzi* 10.1, 19.1a).¹¹

The above confirms Cua's analysis—Xunzi's statement “nature is bad” in 23.1a stresses the consequences of allowing the indulgence of man's nature, “badness” being regarded from the viewpoint of the moral idealistic norm of social order.

Moral Neutrality of *Xing*

In passage 23.1b an analogy is made with the process of straightening a piece of wood. Xunzi says that man's *xing* is bad and can be "straightened" (*jiao shi* 矯飾) or made upright (*zheng* 正) through a process involving teachers/laws and ritual principles. Following the above analysis of 23.1a, we may say that the same consequential sense of "bad" applies here too. That is, *xing* needs to be "straightened" to prevent social disorder and it is from this perspective that *xing* is bad.

But we should consider an alternative reading. There is a case for saying that if *xing* needs to be "straightened" it must be inherently undesirable. Given that Xunzi repeatedly mentions the need for *xing* to be transformed, isn't this a pessimistic view of *xing* and doesn't this imply that it is inherently bad after all? At the end of 23.1b, Xunzi distinguishes between the gentleman (*junzi* 君子) and the petty person (*xiaoren* 小人). The assumption is that both share the same *xing* or *qingxing* 情性. However, the former has undergone the transformation brought about by teachers/laws and the accumulation of cultural form and ritual principles. The latter has wantonly expressed his *qingxing*, acting indiscriminately and violating ritual principles. Xunzi again concludes: "From this perspective, it is clear that man's *xing* is bad, and his (expressions of) goodness is the result of constitutive activity."

Suppose we take this last statement to mean that

xing is inherently bad. This would mean that the gentleman has, somehow, managed to break away from this *xing*. But there is a difficulty here: how is it possible to do so, given the assumption of inherent badness? Xunzi shows he is aware of the problem when he postulates the objection in 23.2a that “If man’s *xing* is bad then how are ritual principles established?” This question assumes that *xing* is inherently bad such that it would be impossible for ritual principles to be established. It also presupposes that ritual principles can be established only because man possesses an inborn goodness in the first place. We have seen how Xunzi questions this presupposition in 23.1d by relating the “so-called goodness of *xing* (*suo wei xing shan zhe* 所謂性善者)” to a tendency to think of it as an organic resource inseparable from birth just as eyesight is inseparable from the eyes. This comparison throws doubt on the existence of such an organic resource and Xunzi dismisses the idea by saying that the moment one is born, one would have moved away from any supposed unadorned state in which such a resource is said to abide. The assumption of an inherent badness and the alleged impossibility of establishing ritual principles are countered by an analogy between a sage’s establishing ritual principles and a potter’s molding a clay vessel/ in 23.2a and 23.4a. We would not assume that the vessel/dish is part of the potter’s *xing*. Similarly, we should not assume that ritual principles inhere in the sage’s *xing*. In other words, there is a structure to ritual

principles that cannot (logically speaking) be said to belong to man's *xing*. If goodness is something that is constitutively structured, then people must have the capacities that would allow for this (and it doesn't follow either that these must be inborn moral capacities).

We therefore learn that for Xunzi, *xing* is neither inherently good nor bad. For him, *xing* is a biological concept consisting of certain desires and feelings. However, for the same reason that there is nothing inherently (morally) good about these desires and feelings, there is also nothing inherently (morally) bad about them either. Xunzi argues that (the goodness of) ritual principle has a certain constitutive structure that needs to be worked upon, and it would be fallacious to assume that such a structure is inborn. As he says later in the *Xing E Pian* (*Xunzi* 23.5b), everyone has the capacity to become a sage, although for various reasons, not everyone translates this into the ability to do so.¹³ If goodness is a constitutive structure, then badness must be the undesirable consequences of failing to establish/maintain such a structure.

Xing, Qing and the Possibility of Transformation

We have so far confirmed the first two features of Xunzi's view on human nature that Cua has mentioned: (1) "Man's *xing* is bad" refers to the consequences of indulging its motivational structure of desires and feelings. (2) There is nothing inherently bad about man's

xing—it is morally neutral. We shall now proceed to discuss the third feature: (3) Man’s *xing* consists of a basic “raw material” that can be shaped or transformed. The following questions have to be answered. What is this “raw material?” In other words, what are the contents of *xing*, and in what sense can they be said to be transformed? Here, there is a tendency to think that if the contents of *xing* are *essential* to man, there must be a *prima facie* incoherence to the idea of transforming man’s nature. In order to answer these questions we shall have to clarify the terms *qing*, *xing* and the relation between them.

Xunzi often uses *qing* instead of *xing* when talking of the nature of man. There is also the binomial *qingxing*. In the above discussion of 23.1a, I maintained that *xing* and *qing* are not used interchangeably when Xunzi says: “Thus (wantonly) following man’s *xing* and indulging man’s *qing* will inevitably result in strife...” Following the mention of the desire for benefit and the sensory desires on the one hand, and the disposition to feel envy and hate on the other, I suggested that it is best to think of *qing* in this passage as referring to the feelings/emotions. Based upon this, the binomial *qingxing* can sometimes be regarded as a more inclusive reference to “emotional and sensory nature.” However, *qingxing* seems also to be interchangeable with *xing*. In the first sentence of 23.1e, for instance, after referring to the contents of *xing* as the desires (*yu*) for: food (when hungry), warmth (when

feeling cold), and rest (when feeling tired), Xunzi says: “These are man’s *qingxing*.” But it doesn’t matter very much whether we take *xing* or *qingxing* as interchangeable or not so long as we bear in mind that their contents include both the sensory desires and certain dispositional feelings/emotions.¹⁴

However, unlike Knoblock, I would hesitate to translate *xing* as “essential nature” or *qingxing* as “essential qualities inherent in his nature”.¹⁵ These translations are fine if we remember all that Xunzi has in mind when talking about *xing* or *qingxing* is that the desires and dispositional feelings are what we are born with, and that these are morally neutral. But the terms “essential” and “inherent” tend to contribute to the idea that there is something deeply unchangeable and static about *xing* or *qingxing* and generally speaking this is not the case for Xunzi.¹⁶ This is especially clear when Xunzi refers to *qing* instead of *xing*. Thus while *xing* and *qingxing* may be interchangeable, we would need to be more cautious about the relation between *qing* and *xing*.

Consider the concluding section of passage 4.10 where *qing* is referred to, but not *xing*. Before this section, Xunzi first refers to man’s being born petty, loving benefit and being concerned with satisfying appetitive desires—more or less the standard contents of *xing*. Next, he says that once they have gone beyond the barest necessities, people will not be content with anything less than what they have learned to savor.

Xunzi is not merely alluding to the fact that people desire or want luxury and wealth, but also to their capacity for refinement. Luxury and wealth are only possible through refinement. But significantly, this refinement at the same time reflects the encompassing categories of ritual principles (*ren yi zhi tong* 仁義之統).¹⁷ Referring to these, he asks: “Are they not the means by which we live together in societies, by which we protect and nurture each other, by which we hedge in our faults and refine each other, and by which together we become tranquil and secure?” Thus, people who behave like the tyrannical Jie and Robber Zhi are said to be *lou* 陋 or uncultivated, and it is the task of the humane person to transform them. Xunzi concludes:

“But when [the wise and benevolent kings] Tang and Wu lived, the world followed them and order prevailed, and when [the cruel and tyrannical kings] Jie and Zhou Xin lived, the world followed them and was chaotic. How could this be if such were contrary to the [*qing* of man] (*ren zhi qing* 人之情) because certainly it is as possible for a man to be like the one as like the other?” (Knoblock’s translation, except for the bracketed words)

This question can be paraphrased thus: “How is it possible for benevolent or tyrannical kings to influence people into being good or bad, if this were contrary to the *qing* of man?” Given what was said earlier, the term *qing* does not refer just to the contents of *xing*

(pettiness, love of benefit and basic sensory/appetitive desires) but also to other *facts* about man such as the capacity for refinement which is at the same time intimately linked to the capacity for transformation according to ritual principles. The *qing* of man is such that it is equally possible for anyone to become good (cultivated) or to become bad (uncultivated). Given the possibility of going either way, *qing* in this sense cannot be said to refer to some essential quality that is static and unchangeable. Consider also the next passage, 4.11:

“It is the [*qing* of man] that for food he desires the meat of pastured and grain-fed animals, that he desires clothing decorated with patterns and brocades, that to travel he wants a horse and carriage, and even that he wants wealth in the form of surplus money and hoards of provisions so that even in lean periods stretching over years, he will not know insufficiency. Such is the [*qing* of man].” (Knoblock’s translation except for the bracketed words)

In mentioning the *qing* of man, Xunzi refers to the desire for food, clothing and so on, and these seem to be the same as the sensory and appetitive desires of *xing*. However, this is not the case. Notice that the items mentioned are refinements that Xunzi has associated with the establishment of ritual principles. In addition, Xunzi mentions the desire for surplus not as motivated by greed but prudence. The remainder of the passage

following makes it clear that prudence is not a universal trait because there are extravagant individuals who fail to think long term and impoverish themselves as a result.¹⁸

We can now summarize the relation between *xing* and *qing* with reference to Xunzi's view of human nature. *Xing* is a biological concept in that it refers to what all men are born with. That is, it refers to the basic sensory and appetitive desires. In conjunction with these desires, Xunzi says that man is born with a love of benefit, feelings of envy and hate, and is petty. The term *qing* could, as we have seen, refer to these desires and feelings. In this regard, Xunzi might use the more inclusive *qingxing*. However, "the *qing* of man" also refers to other general facts about people: they have wants and capacities that go beyond the basic sensory and appetitive desires and feelings. That is, people want surplus items of wealth and luxury. These wants imply the need for security, and the capacities for prudence, refinement and hence for establishing ritual principles.¹⁹

The contents of *xing* are essential only because they are basic to biological life and survival. As Xunzi says in another context, without these desires we would be dead.²⁰ They are not essential in the sense of being what is distinctive about man *qua* man. This biological "raw material" can be transformed because in addition, the *qing* of man is such that people possess the capacity for refinement. However, some people do not succeed in refining and cultivating themselves because of a lack of

teachers and models, or because they do not work hard and cumulatively. Nevertheless, there is no inherent or essential badness that would prevent them from transforming themselves.

This is where Xunzi can be easily misunderstood if he is read in the essentialist mode. For instance, some writers have claimed that Xunzi is inconsistent. He is alleged to have held on the one hand that nature is bad or that people have a “lowly character” but on the other hand that people are born with “an innate moral sense (*yi* 義).”²¹ But we have seen that Xunzi’s statement that “nature is bad” is to be taken in a consequential and not an inherent sense. Although Xunzi does say that people are born with a liking for benefit, pettiness, and feelings of envy and hate, there is nothing essential about these such that a person cannot be transformed. The belief that Xunzi is being inconsistent must be based in part on the tendency to think that the “badness” and the “lowly” aspects of character must be deeply essential such that it would be inconsistent to say that anyone can be transformed. Therefore, the charge of inconsistency would stick only if the essentialist mode of thought is granted.

This charge of inconsistency is abetted by a mistaken reading of what Xunzi means by *yi* in the present context. He does not think of it as an “innate moral sense.” Instead, for Xunzi, *yi* refers to an ability that the human species has in contrast to other animals—to make social distinctions and to institute and

apply ritual principles that constitute the general structure of society and social relations.²² I shall say more about this species ability shortly. The reading of Xunzi in the essentialist mode is also evident in the argument that Xunzi would have great difficulty in explaining how it is that the sage-kings could “have created morality unless morality were already a part of their nature.”²³

A Non-Essentialist Definition of the Human

There may now be an objection that if we take Xunzi’s considered position to be that *xing* has the capacity to be good and the capacity to be bad, this would be too loose to qualify as a theory about human nature. There are at least three elements that any theory of human nature must cover. In the account of Xunzi that I have given so far, I seem to have emphasized only two. First, there must be a discussion of the biological facts about man. Second, these facts must be universal. Thus, although I have referred to the universal contents of *xing* and *qing* (remembering that certain wants and capacities may not be universally realized), a third element needs to be brought into the picture. That is, we need to consider what it is that constitutes the human.²⁴ It would be insufficient for Xunzi to talk about human nature without any mention of what it is to be human. And in fact, when I said that in referring to *yi* Xunzi is not talking about an innate moral sense but to a species ability, I have admitted that Xunzi does define what it is to be

human. Thus, it could be objected that contrary to what I have said, reference to what constitutes the essence of human nature is unavoidable after all.

My reply is that although Xunzi does define the human, there is an important philosophical sense in which this is not an essentialist definition. First, note that the definition is given independently of the concept *xing*. In the passage 5.4, Xunzi says:

“What is it that makes a man human? I say that it lies in his ability to draw boundaries (*bian* 辨). To desire food when hungry, to desire warmth when cold, to desire rest when tired, and to be fond of what is beneficial and to hate what is harmful—these characteristics man is born possessing, and he does not have to wait to develop them. They are identical in the case of a Yu and in that of a Jie. But even so, what makes a man really human lies not primarily in his being a [facially hairless] biped, but rather in his ability to draw boundaries.” (Knoblock’s translation)²⁵

Here, Xunzi denies that the biological contents of *xing* constitute the human even though they are universally shared. Even the ape has these sensory and appetitive desires as well the desire for benefit and the aversion to harm. Xunzi, like Mencius, goes on to mention a difference between human beings and other animals. However, Knoblock’s translation of *ren zhi suo yi wei ren zhe he yi ye* 人之所以爲人者何已也 as “What is it

that makes a man human?” hides an important difference. Xunzi does not ask, “What makes *a* man human?” In other words, he does not refer to that which each and every person is alleged to possess before he/she qualifies to be human. As we have seen, for Mencius, what is distinctive about each person *qua* man in this regard is the possession of the four sprouts. Lacking any of these, someone would not be entitled to be called a “man”. A more literal translation of Xunzi’s question would be “What makes man “man”? The two occurrences of “man” in this question are used in a collective sense, and there is no reference to any individual person. In other words, Xunzi is asking what characterizes the human species as a whole, as distinct from other animals.

His answer, in a word, is *bian* or the ability to “draw boundaries”. Xunzi goes on to give two examples of what he means by *bian*. First, there is the *qin* 親 between father and son. This does not just mean “natural affection” (Knoblock’s translation) but implies the relation of filial piety and the ritual behavior that constitutes, including the duties and obligations governing the relationship. Second, although animals recognize sexual differences, they lack *nan nü zhi bie* 男女之別 or the “distinction between man and woman.” In other words, for the species human being, the difference between progenitor and offspring and between the sexes is not simply biological, but socially constitutive. Xunzi also talks of this socially constitutive ability in terms of the concept of *yi*. To

repeat, this has been wrongly construed as the possession of an innate moral sense. Instead, it is the species ability to make social distinctions and to institute and apply ritual principles that constitute the general structure of society and social relations.

In one sense, this could be referred to as an “essential” characteristic because it distinguishes man from other animals. However, this species ability to make constitutive rules and to structure human relations opens up the possibility of there being different social structures, even though Xunzi himself emphasizes certain ritualistic forms. In this sense therefore, this species ability is not “essentialist”. With reference to Xunzi’s emphasis on the term *wei* as opposed to *xing*, it is appropriate to call this species ability a “constitutive” ability, or the ability for “constitutive activity”. Although the ability to constitute the general structure of society and social relations distinguishes the species man from other animals, it logically does not preclude the possibility of there being different forms of transformation and different social structures.

Conclusion

Let us conclude with a question that has disturbed many. In 23.2b, Xunzi says that “Man desires to do good because his nature is bad.” He continues:

“Those with very little think longingly about having much, the ugly about being beautiful, those in cramped

quarters about spacious surroundings, the poor about wealth, the base about eminence—indeed whatever a man lacks within himself he is sure to desire from without. Thus, those who are already rich do not wish for valuables nor do the eminent wish for high position, for indeed whatever a person has within he does not seek from without. [From this perspective man desires to do good because] his nature is [bad].” (Knoblock’s translation except for the bracketed words)

To almost every reader of the *Xunzi* this is extremely puzzling if not absurd. How can it be said that man desires to do good because his nature is bad? Xunzi bases this statement upon a comparison with the fact that “Those with very little think longingly about having much, the ugly about being beautiful...the poor about wealth...” and so on. And conversely, “those who are already rich do not wish for valuables nor the eminent wish for high position...” and so on. In his analysis of this passage, Cua has noted that these examples are plausible although not universally true. Nevertheless, Cua observes that the passage “appears to embody a conceptual point about the notion of desire independently of whether Xunzi has successfully defended his thesis that man’s nature is bad.”²⁶ Cua notes that there is a difference between the conceptual point about desire, namely, that it implies wanting something that one lacks, and the more substantive claim that man’s nature is bad. The former does not establish

the latter. This is right, and luckily, Xunzi's statement that "nature is bad" does not rest on this conceptual point alone.

Nevertheless, the idea that "man desires to do good because his nature is bad" is not absurd. It is thought to be so only because in an essentialist sense of what human nature is, this would be self-contradictory. If a man is bad in the essentialist sense he cannot intelligibly be said to desire something that goes against his nature. But if we take "bad" in the sense of the unwelcome consequences of indulging the desires and feelings (*xing*) as Cua has suggested, then the idea that (in contemplating these consequences) a man would desire to do good is intelligible. This is especially so if in addition we reflect upon what (for Xunzi) every person has in terms of his or her *qing*—the want of things that go beyond the basic sensory and appetitive desires, the need for security, and the capacities for prudence and refinement. These desires, wants and capacities provide an intelligible framework for the idea that a man desires to do good because his nature is bad. In other words, he contemplates that it would be good to maximize his wants and capacities and he realizes that this would fail if he makes no effort and instead allows the indulgence of his basic desires and feelings.

To round up the whole discussion, the following points and qualifications should be made. First, if it is agreed that Xunzi's considered position on human nature is the second listed by Gongduzi, namely, that *xing* has

the capacity to become good or to become bad (and there is evidence to affirm this), then Xunzi would entertain the possibility that the required transformative structuring might not have succeeded. In other words, there is no guarantee that a society must succeed in building a “good” structure, and also that particular individuals may fail in transforming themselves. This would be consistent with what I have referred to as his “non-essentialist” position.

Second, Xunzi refers to the cumulative efforts of earlier sage-kings in establishing ritual principles. It is, however, difficult to accept that any particular individual or individuals came up with the ritual principles. But consistently with Xunzi’s position, we can understand the constitutive establishment of ritual principles over time. There is no one set of well defined principles that can be drawn up. In the *Li Lun Pian* and in the *Yue Lun Pian*, we find an examination of different ritual practices. Xunzi talks in detail about the principles of division and harmony involved, and this includes passages where he describes the aestheticization of the feelings and emotions. Clearly, Xunzi is reading backwards. He is not saying that these are the actual principles that were first drawn up and that gave rise to an ordered society. Instead, starting from the ritual principles and the ideals that he valued, he tried to deduce what Cua has referred to as their “rationale”.²⁷

The third point I would like to raise is not a qualification but more a question for further exploration.

In addition to the regulative and supportive functions of the ritual principles or *li* 禮, Cua has also memorably referred to its “ennobling function” and he has offered us a very good explanation of what this is in his work.²⁸ Briefly, we can say that the rites transform emotions such as joy and sorrow through conceptions of what is (considered as) aesthetic and moral. In this regard, the raw emotional capacities do not themselves determine what is aesthetically appropriate or morally proper. Thus, the emotions too can be structured differently and take different forms. But are we just talking of restraining and structuring the emotions according to certain forms, or are we suggesting that an emotion can be transformed to the extent that it is no longer the “same”? The possibility of “ennobling” the feelings and emotions tends to suggest the latter, and an exploration of this question should take further what Cua has said about this function of *li*.

Endnotes

1. For the statement by Xunzi, see John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), Volume 3, Book 23, “Man’s Nature is Evil.” Li Disheng, *Xunzi Jishi* 荀子集釋 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1994), *Xing E Pian*. The statement is repeated several times throughout Book 23. For the statement of Mencius’s position, see the passage 6A:6 in the bilingual edition of D.C. Lau, *Mencius* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1984). I shall follow Knoblock’s passage numberings in the references to the *Xunzi* and Lau’s passage numberings in references to the *Mencius*.
2. A. C. Graham, “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy & Philosophical Literature* (Singapore: The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), p.33. I have substituted *qing* for *ch’ing*.
3. Graham, “The Background....” Ibid. pp.59-66, “Appendix: The Meaning of *Ch’ing*.” In an examination of the various uses of *qing* in the Pre-Qin texts, Kwong-loi Shun says: “I am inclined to agree with A.C. Graham’s interpretation of *ch’ing* in terms of what a thing is genuinely like.” However, he cautions against Graham’s translation of the term as “essence” because of its

- Aristotelian associations. See Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford University Press, 1997), pp.184-185.
4. In the chapter “Situating Xunzi” in my book, *Early Confucian Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court, forthcoming). See also my paper (in Chinese), “Xunzi and the Four Views on Human Nature,” *NCCU Philosophical Journal* 11 (December 2003): 185-210. The four positions mentioned by Gongduzi in *Mencius* 6A:6 are that (1) *xing* is neither good nor not-good, (2) *xing* has the capacity to become good or to become bad, (3) there are *xing* that are good, and there are *xing* that are bad, and (4) *xing* is good. Position (2) has to be clearly distinguished from (3). The latter states that some people are by nature good, and some by nature bad. The former states that people have the capacity to become good, and the capacity to become bad.
 5. Graham, “The Background...” Ibid. p.21.
 6. Antonio S. Cua, “Philosophy of Human Nature,” in *Human Nature, Ritual, and History—Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), pp.3-38.
 7. Ibid. p.8.
 8. Ibid. p.30.
 9. Even if Xunzi does refer to a state of nature, this could, as Cua notes, be a thought experiment about the consequences of the absence of ritual principles

and other social norms. On p.28 of his essay Cua refers to a passage in 23.3a where what Xunzi says is “reminiscent” of Hobbes’s account of the state of nature: “Now, let us try to imagine a situation where we do away with the authority of lords and superiors, do without the transforming influence of ritual and morality...In such a situation the strong would inflict harm on the weak and rob them...the perversity and rebelliousness of the whole world would quickly ensure their mutual destruction. If we consider the implications of these facts, it is plain that human nature is evil and that any good in humans is acquired by conscious exertion.” (Knoblock’s translation)

10. Cua translates *xing* as “nature” and *qing* as “feelings”. See Cua, “Philosophy of Human Nature,” p.7. Knoblock has “inborn nature” for *xing* and “natural inclinations” for *qing* in this passage. I follow Cua’s use of “feelings” for *qing*. But both confirm that *xing* and *qing* are two separate items here.
11. On p. 31 of his essay Cua notes that “Xunzi thus may be regarded as proposing a remedy for the human predicament beset by man’s basic nature.” He adds the interesting remark that “Xunzi could agree with Hume ‘that if men were supplied with everything in the same abundance, or if every one had the same affection and tender regard for everyone as for himself; justice and injustice would

- be equally unknown among mankind.”
12. In 8.7 there is also a reference to *jiao shi* or to correct one’s *qingxing*. The *qingxing* is often referred to as something that people indulge (*zong* 縱, for instance, 6.2) and that people need to restrain (*ren* 忍, for instance, 6.3).
 13. See my full discussion of this in “Xunzi’s Systematic Critique of Mencius,” *Philosophy East and West* 53:2 (2003): 215-233, and in *Early Confucian Ethics* .
 14. In 4.9 Xunzi says: “All men possess [something in common]: when hungry, they desire food; when cold, they desire to be warm; when exhausted from toil, they desire to rest; and they all desire benefit and hate harm. Such is [what man is born] possessing. They do not have to await development before they become so. It is the same in the case of a Yu and in that of a Jie.” Though the term is not mentioned we know that Xunzi is referring to *xing* because he says that all persons have something in common—the sensory and appetitive desires, and the desire for benefit and aversion to harm. He adds that these are what they are born possessing instead of something that awaits development. This is the way Xunzi defines *xing* elsewhere when he contrasts it with *wei* or what I have translated as “constitutive activity”.
 15. In a personal correspondence, Antonio Cua has noted that Knoblock’s translation of *qing* as

“essential nature” is “misleading”. He refers to Li Disheng p.46 (Knoblock 3.8). Cua would himself translate the expression found here *ren zhi qing* not as “the essential nature of humans” but as “the way humans are” and qualified by “as we know from observing human behavior” or “normal behavior” or for short, “human condition *ren zhi chang qing* 人之常情”. In 3.8, we have “that one who has just washed his body will shake out his robes and that one who has just washed his hair will dust off his cap is because of the essential nature (*qing*) of humans.” Li Disheng and Jiang et.al. regard *qing* here as *ren zhi chang qing* or “the common characteristic (behavior) of man.” In 3.10, we have “Thus, the gentleman need not leave his own house, yet the essential nature (*qing*) of all that is within the seas is established and accumulated there.” Li translates *qing* here as *qing xing* 情形 or “the circumstances” and Jiang et al. translates it as *shi qing* 事情 or “affairs”. For an earlier occurrence of *qing* in 3.10, Jiang et al. has *qing kuang* 情況 or “situation”. See Li Disheng, *Xunzi Jishi* (Taibei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1994), p.47 note 3 and p.51, note 9. Jiang Nanhua, Luo Shuqing and Yang Hanqing, eds., *Xunzi Quanyi* 荀子全譯 (Guizhou Renmin Chubanshe, 1995), p.40 and p.43. Because of the limited purpose of this essay, I have not discussed other aspects of the term *qing*. For a full discussion see Chen Zhaoying, *Rujia Meixue*

- yu Jingdian Quanshi* (Taipei: Taiwan Daxue Chuban Zhongxin, 2005), chapter 3. Chen traces the development of the term from Confucius to Mencius and Xunzi.
16. In 8.11, Xunzi says: “It is by fixing the mind on the goal, devising ways and means to realize it, and effectuating it through the habituation of custom that the inborn nature is transformed (*hua xing* 化性). By unifying all these diverse elements and permitting no duality of goals in the mind, accumulated effort is perfected. The habituation of custom modifies the direction of will and, if continued for a long time, will alter its very substance (*yi zhi* 移質).” We note from this that for Xunzi *xing* is something that can be *hua* or transformed, and the last statement states that the “substance” can be altered. But just as one should be careful about treating *xing* as “essential nature”, I think the term “substance” as a translation for *zhi* might be too strong since it implies something unchangeable. Perhaps “qualities” may be better.
 17. I argue that *ren yi* 仁義 and *li yi* 禮義 are equivalent as “ritual principles” in *Early Confucian Ethics*. “Encompassing categories” follows Li Disheng’s explanation of *ren yi zhi tong* as *li yi zhi tong lei* 禮義之統類. See Li, p.67, note 17. I thank Antonio Cua for this reference to Li.
 18. This seems to tally with what Kwong-loi Shun says in his discussion of *qing* in the pre-Qin texts, that

“sometimes the [*qing*] of X’s can be features that obtain of X’s as a class but not of each member of the class, as when the difference in the abilities of the common people is described as the [*qing*] of the common people.” See Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, p.185.

19. In some places (4.12, 11.4, 11.7b) Xunzi talks about *qing* in terms of what men desire (*yu*) in common. These go beyond the basic necessities and involve a high level of sophistication and refinement that it would be necessary to take the proper steps to secure (11.4). The list of desires or wants is much broader than what I have listed in the discussion. I would prefer to use “wants” here to distinguish them from the basic biological desires. For instance, beside wealth, this could include honor and power (4.12). Further items include wanting the existence of regulations and standards, governmental ordinances and edicts, punishment for negligent officers and rebellious states, for reputation, accomplishment and achievements, and so on (11.7b). The *qing* of man refers to wants that extend all the way to comforts and luxuries enjoyed by the king. However, to have all these, regulations are necessary.
20. See 22.5a. Xunzi says that “Having desire and having no desire, these are different categories—(the difference between) life and death,

not (the difference between) order and disorder.” This is an apparent criticism of Song Xing who held that it is the *qing* of man to have few desires (see 18.10).

21. Donald J. Munro, “A Villain in the *Xunzi*,” in Philip J. Ivanhoe, ed., *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), p.198. Munro argues that Xunzi was more concerned with the measures to prevent social chaos and his discussions about human nature were secondary. In this regard, I think that in principle Munro could agree with Cua’s analysis that “bad” for Xunzi is to be taken in a consequential sense. But I would disagree with Munro’s remark that Xunzi left his theory of human nature in “a mess.” On the contrary, I think that Xunzi was remarkably consistent in his remarks about human nature.
22. I have discussed this (and other meanings of *yi*) in more detail in the chapter on “Situating Xunzi” in my *Early Confucian Ethics*.
23. David B. Wong, “Xunzi on Moral Motivation,” in Philip J. Ivanhoe, ed., *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), p.206. Here, he is citing David Nivison, “Hsün Tzu and Chuang Tzu,” in *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, ed. Henry Rosemont (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1991),

- pp.129-42.
24. For the three elements in any discussion of human nature, see David J. Buller, *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), pp.421-422.
 25. There is a textual problem here. See the explanation in Knoblock's translation of the *Xunzi* Volume I (1988), p.297, note 54. Instead of Knoblock's "featherless biped" I have "facially hairless" to make sense of the similarity between man and ape since I find "featherless biped" rather odd.
 26. Cua, "Philosophy of Human Nature," *ibid.* pp.21-22.
 27. See Antonio S. Cua, *Ethical Argumentation: A Study in Hsün Tzu's Moral Epistemology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), p.26, where Cua explains his use of "rationale" for *li* 理 or what sinologists commonly translate as "pattern". Eric Hutton, "Moral Reasoning in Aristotle and Xunzi," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 29:3 (2002), has questioned Cua's use of "rationale". He says, for instance, that "it positively obscures important aspects of Xunzi's thought rather than illuminating them." However, I think that there are "important aspects of Xunzi's thought" where "rationale" is a most appropriate term to use. See the discussion in note 9 of the chapter on "Xunzi's Critique of

- Mencius,” in *Early Confucian Thought*, and the “Appendix” at the end of this chapter.
28. See for instance the essay, “The Ethical and the Religious Dimensions of *Li* (Propriety),” in *Human Nature, Ritual, and History*. See also “Basic Concepts of Confucian Ethics,” in Cua’s *Moral Vision and Tradition—Essays in Chinese Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998).

Chinese Glossary

- bian* 辨
ci rang 辭讓
e 惡
fei ren ye 非人也
fen 分
hua 化
hua xing 化性
jiao shi 矯飾
junzi 君子
ke yi wei bu shan 可以為不善
ke yi wei shan 可以為善
li 禮
li 理
li yi 禮義
li yi zhi tong lei 禮義之統類
lou 陋
nan nü zhi bie 男女之別

qin 親
qing 情
qing kuang 情況
qing xing 情形
qingxing 情性
ren 人
ren 忍
ren yi 仁義
ren yi zhi tong 仁義之統
ren zhi chang qing 人之常情
ren zhi qing 人之情
ren zhi suo yi wei ren zhe he yi ye 人之所以爲人者何已也
ren zhi xing e 人之性惡
shi qing 事情
shun shi 順是
suo wei xing shan zhe 所謂性善者
wei 僞
wen li 文理
xiaoren 小人
xing 性
Xing E Pian 性惡篇
xing shan 性善
Xunzi Jishi 荀子集釋
Xunzi Quan Yi 荀子全譯
yi 義
yi zhi 移質
yu 欲
zheng 正

zong 縱