

Primitivism in the *Zhuangzi*: An Introduction

Abstract

Books 8-10 and sections of books 11-16 of the *Zhuangzi* anthology represent an important and underappreciated contribution to Warring States ethical and political philosophy, known as “primitivism.” This article offers a general introduction to Zhuangist primitivism. It focuses on primitivism’s exploration and development of a normative conception of human nature, particularly *xing* 性, as well as primitivism’s subsequent rejection of the elaborate moral, social, political, and cultural artifices championed by their philosophical opponents, chiefly the Ruists and the Mohists. After a brief introduction to Zhuangist primitivism and the limited scholarship on them, I divide this discussion into three parts pertaining to the primitivists’ three distinct approaches to and uses of human nature, which in turn serve as the basis for primitivist ethics and political thought.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi*, Primitivism, Zhuangist primitivism, human nature, *xing*, Daoism, Warring States

Primitivism in the *Zhuangzi*: An Introduction¹

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1. Introduction

The primitivist writings of the *Zhuangzi* anthology offer important and underappreciated contributions to the ethical and political philosophy of Warring States China (circa 480-221 B.C.E.). The texts argue forcefully against all forms of cultural artifice, particularly those championed by their Ruist and Mohist contemporaries, and propose instead that people ought to live in accordance with nature and human nature, thereby returning to a “primitive” way of life.² Their writings appear throughout the Outer Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* anthology, but the core of their writings are in books 8-11a (“Webbed Toes,” “Horses’ Hooves,” “Ransacking Coffers,” “Let it Be, Leave it Alone”). Additionally, certain sections of books 12-16 (“Heaven and Earth,” “The Way of Heaven,” “The Heavenly Movements,” “Ingrained Ideas,” and “Correcting *Xing*”) contain sections clearly influenced by primitivism, if not primitivist themselves. This article provides a philosophical introduction to Zhuangist primitivism.

Many scholars recognize the radical departure “Webbed Toes” makes from the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* in terms of content, style, tone, and, some might say, philosophical quality. Nevertheless, scholarship on the primitivists is sparse. The main English Language

¹ A previous version of this discussion was presented at the 2018 Hong Kong-Macau-Singapore Symposium on Chinese Philosophy, (National University of Singapore), and I would like to thank the audience members there for their helpful feedback. I would also like to thank Chris Fraser, Eric Hutton, Jamin Asay, Tang Siufu, Loy Hui-Chieh, and an anonymous referee for additional feedback on earlier versions of this article.

² The term “primitivist” is A.C. Graham’s way of referring to the author of books 8-11a of the *Zhuangzi* on the grounds of the author’s unified stance against cultural artifice and in favour of a return to a primitive lifestyle. I will adopt this nomenclature for the sake of convention as well as for loosely thematic reasons (Graham, 1981, pp. 197-217).

discussions are by A.C. Graham, Dan Robins, Hagop Sarkissian, and Steve Coutinho. Graham (1981, pp. 197-217) offers philosophical reconstructions and translations of primitivist writings in his partial translation of the *Zhuangzi*, as well as his philosophical survey text *Disputers of the Tao* (Graham, 1989, pp. 306-311). In these two volumes, Graham points out the primitivists' general attitude towards culture and identifies their philosophical targets, namely, the Ruists, Mohists, and Yangists. Graham also highlights important philosophical details about the primitivists' project in *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang Tzu* (edited by Harold Roth), such as the terms they use in developing their ideas, such as *xing* 性 (“natural, spontaneous tendencies”) and *de* 德 (“virtuosity”). He also discusses the mechanism by which culture harms the senses, namely by means of over-stimulating them and diverting them (Graham, 2003, pp. 82-83). However, Graham also makes a number of historical claims about dating and authorship of the texts that I do not accept for reasons that scholars such as Roth (2003, pp. 197-207) point out.³ Robins' project is similar in discussing both philosophical and historical issues surrounding primitivist texts, focusing specifically on the primitivists' contributions to the Warring States debate over human nature (Robins, 2001, Chapter 4). He argues boldly that the primitivists not only contributed to the debate over human nature in Warring States China, often portrayed as having occurred exclusively between Mengzi and Xunzi, but also may have even been the philosophical catalyst for it. Sarkissian (2010) offers an article-length philosophical reconstruction and critical assessment of primitivist thought, though his presentation primarily concentrates on the few primitivist passages (mostly in book 10) that

³ Graham (1981, p. 197) believes, for example, that the Primitivist (singular) wrote within a few years of 205 B.C.E., between the fall of the Qin Dynasty and the rise of the Han Dynasty. However, as Roth (2003, p. 199-201) argues, Graham relies on ambiguous textual evidence for this conclusion. Roth further argues that there is stronger textual evidence to the contrary that places the primitivist writings in closer proximity to the court of Lu Buwei (circa 247-239 B.C.E.), which was responsible for the philosophical anthology, the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*. Additionally, primitivist texts are clearly engaged with Warring States philosophical debates predating the court of Lu Buwei, such as the debate over human nature between Mengzi and Xunzi (Robins, 2001, Chapter 4). In this way, most likely, the primitivists' texts were written and compiled over a range covering the late 4th and early-middle 3d century B.C.E.

express their most violent, radical, and implausible ideas about social reform, and so he does not discuss much of their theory of human nature in detail.

Coutinho's discussion comes in the context of a textbook on Daoist philosophies (Coutinho, 2014, pp. 128-139). After offering a brief philosophical overview of primitivism (which he refers to as Utopianism), Coutinho focuses on the normative role of the concept of *xing* in primitivist philosophy, drawing a crucial distinction between tendencies due to *xing*, on the one hand, and those due to having one's *xing* stymied, on the other, in spite of the fact that activities that harm *xing* also produce predictable results. For example, Coutinho points out the difference between a seed growing into a plant, on the one hand, and decomposing, on the other. Both are predictable, reliable dispositions, but one is due to *xing* while the other is not. Human society, according to the primitivists, harms our *xing*, rendering us unable to flourish in accordance with it, and so ought to be replaced with a more primitive way of organizing human life that instead respects people's *xing*.

Of course, there is also Chinese language scholarship on these writings. Contemporary commentaries on the *Zhuangzi* as well as scholarship attempting to organize the *Zhuangzi* chapters often identify and track thematic trends across texts in the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, primitivist thought among them. Wang Shumin (2007, p. 315), for example, considers books 8-11, 15, and 16 to be representative of a school of thought that he summarizes as, "investigating into *Dao* and *de* and rejecting benevolence and righteousness"—an accurate gloss, to be sure. Wang also has a helpful summary of historical groupings and interpretations of these writings adopted by previous commentators. Liu Xiaogan (1994) groups books 8-11a as well as 28, 29, and 31 together and labels the writings as Anarchist.⁴

⁴ The label of Anarchism is unfortunate because the primitivists clearly *do* believe that there ought to be government and a sovereign, frequently hearkening back to a golden age where there were various rulers they approve of. They just also believe that governments ought not to do much. Additionally, the inclusion of books 28, 29, and 31 is questionable. While I do not agree with Graham (1981, pp. 221-223) that we can deem books 28, 29, and 31 to be the works of a school of Yang Zhu, I do agree with him that they are sufficiently distinct from books 8-11a to not

His discussion does not go into much detail of their views, however, as the main focus of his project is on defending the thesis that Inner Chapters are the works of Zhuang Zhou himself. Additionally, Liu Rongxian (2004, pp. 315-346) offers a detailed Chinese language study of the Outer and Miscellaneous books of the *Zhuangzi*, including the primitivist writings. His findings are primarily textual, pertaining to how the primitivists' writings connect with each other and with other texts in the *Zhuangzi*.

The present article will offer a philosophical introduction to Zhuangist primitivism. The main texts I will be working with are books 8-11a, following Graham's (1981, pp. 197-199) selection, as well as sections of books 12-16, following Wang (2007, p.315) and Graham (2003, pp. 80-82).⁵ My discussion will be organized around the texts' three distinct approaches to human nature, which in turn serve as the foundation for their political and ethical thoughts.⁶ The first approach focuses on the human nature concepts of *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing* (性命之情 “the conditions of one's natural, spontaneous tendencies and allotments”).⁷ The second theme

be considered primitivist.

⁵ I only partially agree with Wang's selection in so far as I believe that there are primitivist sections of books 12-16, though I would not go so far as to say that any of those books in its entirety is primitivist. In this way, I more closely follow Graham, who also identifies sections of books 12, 14, and all of book 16 as resembling primitivist philosophy. However, because Graham is working on the assumption that the Primitivist is a single author, he does not believe that there is sufficient textual similarity to claim that the Primitivist authored these sections in addition to 8-11a (Graham, 2003, pp. 80-82). Because I reject this assumption about authorship, I utilize the looser criteria of vocabulary overlap, thematic overlap, and philosophical similarity to identify writings representative of primitivist philosophy. (Coutinho (2014, p. 129) expresses similar concerns.) My selection also differs slightly from Graham's, and includes, for example, the final section of book 12 while excluding most of book 16. For a fuller discussion of my selection of primitivist texts, see Saunders Jr (2019: 84-88).

⁶ To be sure, these divisions are not completely rigid, and there are some clear cases of overlap, such as in the beginnings of books 8 and 11. In general though, the primitivists' ideas can be loosely organized around these three approaches to human nature, which may reflect the fact that there were different groups of authors with different focal points developing, or perhaps that the primitivists changed their interests or revised their thoughts over time.

⁷ While *qing* 情 often refers more specifically to emotions, passions, or other affective features of our psychology, here I follow Fraser (1999, p. 137) in opting for a more general reading of *qing*

concerns the simplicity of the heart-mind (*xin* 心). The third theme develops a more substantive account of flourishing according to human nature using the concepts of *xing* and *de* (德 “virtuosity”). Each of these features of human nature, the primitivists hold, effectively and constantly (*chang* 常) guides human action on both the individual and the social level, while cultural artifices championed by their philosophical opponents only disrupt this natural flourishing.

2. Healthful, spontaneous flourishing: *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*

One way the primitivists develop their conception of human nature utilizes the concepts of *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*. *Xing* in Warring States writings typically refers to a living thing's spontaneous, life-preserving tendencies that encourage flourishing in a way characteristic of that thing (Robins, 2011). For inanimate objects, this may refer to their natural characteristics or movements—water flowing downward, for example (Coutinho, 2003, p. 133). People's *xing* refers to their natural, spontaneous, and healthful features and tendencies, including the functioning of their sensory and vital organs, as well as some basic affective and cognitive responses to stimuli—the sensation of feeling hungry or desiring food when your stomach is empty, for example (Robins, 2011). The primitivists' use of *xing* generally conforms to this standard usage. The concept of *xing ming zhi qing*, on the other hand, appears only in the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* outside of primitivist writings.⁸ The term is clumsy to render into English, but can be understood as “the conditions (*qing*) of one's natural, spontaneous tendencies (*xing*) and

as “conditions.” See also Saunders Jr (2019: 24-26).

⁸ It is for this reason that Roth (2003, 200-203) believes that the primitivists were writing contemporaneously with (or perhaps *in*) the court of Lu Buwei, as the occurrence of this idiosyncratic concept in both texts implies a direct connection. However, many primitivist writings do not utilize *xing ming zhi qing*, so we cannot extend this conclusion to all primitivist writings.

allotments (*ming*).⁹ I will leave it untranslated. The primitivists' main concern is that cultural artifice will cause people to lose (*shi* 失) or give up (*yi* 易) their *xing* or their *xing ming zhi qing*, and that they will be unable to be at peace (*an* 安) with these features of human nature.

One main argument focuses on the corrupting role of culture on our sensory perceptions. They argue that the five-fold categorization of the five sensory phenomena—the five colors, notes, smells, tastes, and our likes and dislikes—all cause harm to life, as they are the five ways of losing one's *xing* (12/96-98).¹⁰ This is because organizing sensory phenomena in this way is a cultural creation, and interferes with people's spontaneous, natural interactions with the world. Additionally though, there is a normative component to the fivefold categorization, and this is perhaps what the primitivists are most concerned with. It should not be a problem for the primitivists that the fivefold categorization of tastes, for example, differentiates between sweet and bitter, since our being able to do so is surely natural, having survival value.¹¹ However, the associated, culturally sanctioned preferences for artificial foods that contain excessive sweetness or bitterness may actually be harmful to our senses. For example, the taste of a strong black coffee or extremely spicy food temporarily dulls our ability to perceive other tastes. According to the primitivists, to develop a strong preference for such foods and to champion those who produce them will likely lead to our sense of taste becoming warped and perhaps dulled over time. In this way, society's broad programs of cultural (and moral) education act as corrupting forces that warp people's natural impressions of phenomena. As examples of this concern, the primitivists evoke cultural heroes famous for possessing acute sensory capabilities, such as Li Zhu, one whose eyes were so clear that he could “see the tip of an autumn hair” and Shi Guang, a legendary musician (10/22-26). Rather than celebrate these figures as paragons of cultural

⁹ It's worth mentioning that while *xing ming zhi qing* is idiosyncratic, the compound *xing ming* is more widespread, appearing frequently, for example, in the *Huainanzi*.

¹⁰ References to the *Zhuangzi* follow the Harvard-Yenching *Zhuangzi Yinde* Book/Line number format, which can be directly input at www.ctext.org/zhuangzi, maintained by Donald Sturgeon. Occasional references to the *Xunzi* will follow the same format, located at www.ctext.org/xunzi. All translations are my own.

¹¹ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for clarifying this issue.

achievement, the primitivists lament them as being deformed or deficient due to their natural sensibilities being warped and corrupted by cultural artifices.

Other worries are more socio-psychological. In book 11, for example, the primitivists worry that culturally created sensory stimuli can overwhelm their *xing* (*yin qi xing* 淫其性) and divert their virtuosity (*qian qi de* 遷其德), causing people's goals and aims to be lofty and confused, their emotional responses to circumstances to be excessive, and their competitive attitude towards others to grow, eventually leading to chaos (11/1-6; Graham, 2003, p. 82). In this way, the primitivists worry that culturally determined ways of organizing sensory phenomena, and the culturally determined exemplars, goals, stimulus responses, and attitudes that grow out of them, cause widespread anxiety throughout society, eventually leading to chaos, while a better course of action is to let people be and leave them alone (*zai you* 在宥).

The primitivist extend their criticisms to exemplars of moral and philosophical culture as well, complaining similarly that philosophical figures and moral exemplars ruin people's *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*. The worries are analogous to those about cultivation of sensory ability: moral and philosophical extravagances disrupt people's *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*, which would otherwise be able to successfully guide their action. The primitivists compare the philosophical artifices of the Yangists and the Mohists to a birdcage, and claim that if the Yangists and the Mohists really "reach fulfillment" (*de* 得), then so too does a dove in a cage (12/99-100). That is, although they may take themselves to be living fulfilling human lives, those champions of culture have corrupted themselves so much that the kind of lives they lead are similar to that of a caged bird. They are filled with their artificial desires for the gratification of their five senses, and they wear strange clothes, as though they were bound with cords, just like criminals (12/100-102). In this way, their cultural fetishes leave them blind to the harmful reality of their situation, in which their *xing* is utterly ruined, and yet they consider themselves to be flourishing.

Another exemplar discussed in similar terms is Kongzi himself. In one dialogue, Laozi asks Kongzi whether benevolence and righteousness are part of people's *xing* (13/48). Kongzi

attempts to provide a positive answer by elaborating on the concepts, claiming, for example, that benevolence and righteousness require, “in your heart, being joyful with things, caring for everyone, and being impartial,” (13/49). Laozi criticizes this answer as “long-winded” (*yu* 迂), and instead offers some examples of the regularities of Heaven and Earth, such as the processions of the sun and moon, encouraging Kongzi to follow these instead (13/51-52). He closes by wondering why Kongzi is so aggressively putting forth the ideas of benevolence and righteousness, as if he were beating a drum and seeking out a lost son (which would presumably make the son run away even more) before finally claiming that Kongzi is throwing people’s *xing* into chaos (13/52). The idea seems to be that Kongzi’s own aggressive campaign to encourage people to meet his standard of benevolence will inevitably harm people by disrupting or even destroying their *xing*, when instead the regularities they are born with, just like those in nature, are perfectly sufficient to guide us to flourishing.

According to the primitivists, each of these cultural exemplars upset people’s spontaneous, healthful flourishing, captured by the concepts of *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*. They do so by both violently injuring people—namely, by warping their senses, forcing them to strictly adhere to social norms and standards, subjecting them to coercion and punishments, and so on—and by corrupting people so that they willingly abandon their *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*, nevertheless taking themselves to be fulfilled. The result is a state of affairs in which people are deformed, confused, and shackled by their cultural trappings, unable to flourish spontaneously and be at peace with their *xing ming zhi qing*.

Compare this view of the relationship between *xing* and morality with that of Mengzi, who holds instead that benevolence and righteousness either already are or can be made to be a part of our *xing*. *Mengzi* 7A/30 claims, for example, that “Yao and Shun ‘*xing*-ed’ it,” where “it” likely refers to benevolence and righteousness (Jiao, 1987, p. 924). *Mengzi* 7A/21 has similar language, claiming that what the gentleman “*xings*” is benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom—four Ruist virtues. In both cases *xing* is used as a verb that seems to express the idea that the Ruist virtues have become part of certain exemplars’ *xing*. The primitivists might have

understood this idea in terms of exchanging or losing one's *xing*, while the Mengzians believed that people can indeed incorporate moral and cultural norms into their spontaneous flourishing.¹²

In terms of positive recommendations, the primitivists' advice is primarily ameliorative. They claim that what is truly correct, as opposed to the phony, artificial correctness championed by various cultural heroes, is not to lose your *xing ming zhi qing* (8/8). A duck's legs, for example, are short, but attempting to stretch them to make them longer will harm the duck. Instead, we ought to simply leave things alone that are the way they are due to their *xing*, thereby allowing all things to be at peace with their *xing ming zhi qing* (14/73-74).¹³ This may not seem like very robust advice, but if we think of more recent examples of rituals that leave people physically deformed, such as foot-binding or circumcision, there's really not much to say other than "stop" if the goal is to eliminate these practices' harm to *xing*.

3. The simplicity of our heart-mind (*xin* 心)

Primitivist writers also develop their ideas about human nature using the concept of the heart-mind. In early Chinese thought, the heart-mind sits at the center of human psychological life. In discussions of human nature, such as those in the *Xunzi*, it is treated as being furnished with basic attitudes of approval and disapproval from birth. For Xunzi, these include a fondness for benefit, which leads to chaos if left unchecked (*XZ* 23/26). The primitivists' writings on the heart-mind reject the idea that the heart-mind leads us to chaos, and argue instead that cultural artifice and coercive rulership causes the heart-mind to become chaotic and confused. Rather, the human heart-mind by nature is simple and will only be harmed by being subjected to cultural artifices. This use of the heart-mind also connects with one of the primitivists' most

¹² See Robins (2001, p. 134) for a discussion of these *Mengzi* passages.

¹³ Books 10 and 14 contain parallel passages that unite the concepts of losing and being at peace with one's *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*. The claim in 10/38-40 that nothing has not lost its *xing* is preceded by a description that appears in parallel form in 14/72-74.

prominent critical themes: their critique of knowledge as a value. They consider the proliferation of and search for knowledge to be the most fundamental and pernicious kind of meddling with the heart-mind, and discuss it at length.

One important theme that leads into their critique of knowledge as a value is that cultural artifice, including benevolence, righteousness, ritual, music, and eventually knowledge are mistakenly seen as a means of comforting people's heart-minds. Book 8 expresses this clearly:

The bending and snapping of ritual and music, the sayings and expressions of benevolence and righteousness—they were used to comfort the heart-minds of all under Heaven. [But] this made them lose what is constantly so, which all under Heaven has [already] (8/14-15).

According to this passage, cultural artifices were used to comfort people's heart-minds. However, they actually made the people lose "what is constantly so" (*chang ran*) of them. Presumably, this notion of what is "constantly so" is referring to the regular, successful action-guiding abilities of the heart-mind.

This use of the heart-mind serves as the foundation for the primitivists' critique of knowledge as a value. These texts express a disdain for "having a fondness for knowledge" (*hao zhi* 好知).¹⁴ This idea is pursued most clearly in the final section of book 9, which offers an analogy between cultural education and horse domestication.¹⁵ The beginning of the passage reads as follows:

Horses when dwelling in fields, eat grass, and drink water. When happy, they rub their

¹⁴ This phrase occurs once in book 9, four times in book 10, and once again in book 11. It occurs nowhere else in the *Zhuangzi*.

¹⁵ Book 9 opens with a longer, more detailed version of the horse domestication analogy, which I will discuss in Section 4. The shorter, likely older, version of the analogy coming at the end of book 9 focuses exclusively on how culture corrupts people's heart-minds by making them fond of knowledge. See Brooks (1996) for a chronology of primitivist writings suggesting that the final section of book 9 is actually earlier than the rest. Robins (2001, pp. 230-234) follows this chronology and offers further support in his analysis.

necks together. When angry, they divide themselves and kick one another. Horse knowledge stops in this (9/14-15).

The primitivists' focus on horse knowledge here invites their eventual discussion of the heart-mind because of its connection to knowledge, as the heart-mind is considered the primary cognitive organ in early Chinese thought. The main point is that when living in accordance with nature, there is not very much that the horses know how to do, but it is enough for them to flourish.

Next, the primitivists describe how Bo Le, a legendary horse trainer, domesticated the horses. The text emphasizes not only Bo Le's physical harm to the horses, but also his role in corrupting them by increasing their knowledge. When yoked and decorated, "the horses know to look slyly askance, to curve their necks, to rush viciously, trying to get the bit out of their mouths, and to filch the reins (from the driver)," (9/15-16). The process of trying to domesticate the horses actually corrupted them by forcing them to learn how to resist those who sought to control them. Through his actions, Bo Le encouraged the horses to increase their knowledge, thereby turning them into criminals, which the primitivists consider to be Bo Le's own crime (9/16).

The text then turns to the case of people, who were similarly first living in a happy state of blissful ignorance, not knowing what they were doing or where they were going (9/16-17). When the sages arrived, and the people were subjected to various cultural trappings such as ritual, music, benevolence, and righteousness, they began to display a fondness for knowledge and contend for benefit. Just as was for Bo Le, this was the sages' mistake (19/17-19). However, the purpose of promoting these cultural artifices was to comfort the *xin* of all under Heaven:

The bending and snapping of ritual and music [was used] to correct the shape of all under Heaven, the various trappings of benevolence and righteousness [were used] to comfort the *xin* of all under Heaven, and the people all began to limp about in their fondness for knowledge (9/17-18).

This analogy shows us how the primitivists see knowledge working as a corrupting force. It

domesticates people and encourages them to lust after artificial, invented ends rather than live in simple, natural satisfaction. Furthermore, it teaches people to be competitive and conflict with one another and the authorities controlling them, making criminals out of them just as domestication did to the horses. This is clearly antithetical to a primitive state of nature in which people's heart-minds were simple, their knowledge was limited, and they had no need or fondness for knowing more.

In similar fashion to the ideas surrounding *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*, the main value of their discussion of the *xin* lies in the primitivists' critical project, as the idea of preserving the simplicity of our heart-mind does not offer much in the way of normative guidance, save for an ameliorative suggestion that we abandon our obsessions with cultural ends. The next group of writings, however, does more to develop the normative content of primitivism, and help to fill out a picture of what kind of life the primitivists would have us pursue instead.

4. Human nature: *Xing* and *de*

Another strand of primitivist thought develops a vision of human nature using the concepts of *xing* and *de*. In these contexts, *xing* and *de* play a more substantive normative role in grounding the primitivists' ethical and political ideals than do *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*. The normative force of these concepts arises primarily from an extended analogy with nature. The primitivists first apply the concept of *xing* to non-human, social animals and then analogize to the case of human beings in order to demonstrate that the normative force of *xing* for both human and non-human animals should be the same.

This theme is most prevalent in book 9, which begins with a description of horses in their natural habitat, living according to their *xing*:

Horses: their hooves are able to tread on frost and snow; their hair is able to protect against wind and cold; they eat grass and drink water; they kick their feet and leap—this is the true *xing* of horses (9/1).

Xing here refers to both biological and behavioral features of horses including more than what we saw in the previously discussed uses of *xing*, particularly the complex behavioral features of horses that contribute to flourishing. They first mention the horses' physical features—their hooves and fur, before then turning to their life-preserving behaviors such as eating and drinking. These are fairly standard examples of features due to *xing*, but then the primitivists refer to horses' kicking and leaping about. These behaviors seem not to be life-preserving features or tendencies, but are nevertheless spontaneous behaviors that have some value to the horses' flourishing—perhaps as recreation. In this way, the concept of *xing* in this argumentative context has a more robust normative content than it does elsewhere in primitivist writings. This is not to say that *xing* is a different concept here. Rather, the idea is that because the role of *xing* in this argument is more constructive than critical, the primitivists offer a fuller account of *xing* to include more tendencies conducive to flourishing. So while the other uses we saw focus on how to avoid harming our *xing*, this use focuses on how to live and flourish according to *xing*.¹⁶

In the lines to follow, Bo Le arrives to domesticate the wild horses, claiming “I am good at ordering horses,” (9/2).¹⁷ The passage then records how Bo Le disfigured the horses—branding and marking them, cutting their hoofs, and keeping them in stables, leading many horses to die (9/2-3), before then offering an analogy with craftsmen who are “good at ordering clay” and “good at ordering wood,” the implication being that these individuals actually harm the objects of their crafts rather than improve them (9/4-5). It is worth noting that this criticism is not made on the grounds that “ordering” ought to be rejected. Rather, the complaint is that these individuals simply are not good at “ordering” things. Later on in book 9, the primitivists offer their own account of “good order,” which focuses on the kind of order that occurs when natural forces are allowed to guide things to flourishing (9/6-14). I say this to

¹⁶ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for clarifying this issue for me.

¹⁷ The use of Bo Le is interesting as the character also appears in the *Xunzi*, which reads, “just as Bo Le could not be deceived with respect to horses, the gentleman cannot be deceived with respect to people. This is the Way of an enlightened king,” (XZ 12/77-78).

highlight that the use of Bo Le here does not mark a radical divergence from traditional Warring States values. The primitivists do not reject social order in favor of chaos, nor do they reject government in favor of anarchism. They only reject the idea that Bo Le's methods are the best means to achieving social order under which people can flourish. The passage ends with the claim that this too is the mistake of those who order all under Heaven (9/6).

If we stop reading at the end of the horse analogy that opens "Horses' Hooves," we are left with a problem, particularly with the use of *xing*. Although *xing* is crucial to the idea that people have a naturally occurring tendency to flourish that ought not be interfered with, some of the normative work the text wants *xing* to do using the analogy with horses stretches the concept. The text wants to claim that human nature leads to flourishing in order to justifiably reject coercive and invasive government artifices and policies, but doing so requires a fuller account of human nature than *xing* can provide on its own. That is, the conception of flourishing the primitivists are promoting goes well beyond the kinds of activities that *xing* is responsible for. Even when the concept is fleshed out and given normative force as it is in these writings, it cannot on its own provide the grounds for a more substantive, thick account of natural flourishing that the primitivists need.

Some primitivists seem to have realized this, and sought to create a fuller account of natural human flourishing by utilizing the concept of *de*. They write that in an "age of utmost *de*" (*zhi de zhi shi* 至德之世), "the people had their constant *xing*: they wove and clothed themselves; they farmed and fed themselves—call this 'having the same *de*'" (9/7). In this passage, having constant *xing* and the same *de* is understood in terms of features of an agrarian lifestyle. This would have been an extreme view to have using the concept of *xing* alone, as the claim that it is people's *xing* to weave and farm goes beyond widely shared intuitions about the kinds of things it is people's *xing* to do. I suspect that the primitivists bring in the concept of *de* to make the view more plausible. *De* is a more substantive and often normative concept to which the authors could more easily attach an idealized way of life. If left to flourish uninterrupted, people's *de* will lead them to farm and weave, among other primitive activities.

That is a much easier claim to make than “the *xing* of people is to weave and farm.” In fact, it is the concept of *de* that does most of the heavy lifting as the feature of human nature that supports an ideal way of life.

The primitivists fill out their conception of “the age of utmost *de*” by describing a utopian state in which people and animals lived according to their nature, predating the arrival of the Zhou cultural heroes such as Yao and Shun exalted in Ruist and Mohist thought. In the age of utmost *de*, the people would all, “be the same in lacking knowledge, their *de* not being separate from them, and they would be the same in lacking desire—call it plainness and simplicity. With plainness and simplicity, people’s *xing* reached fulfillment,” (9/10-11). We can understand the people’s desirelessness in terms of a general satisfaction with the bare necessities, which would allow people to remain plain and simple, and live in accordance with their *xing*. Book 10 claims that people during the age of utmost *de*, “used knotted ropes, found their food tasty, thought their clothing beautiful, took joy in their vulgar customs, and were at peace in their dwellings,” (10/32).¹⁸ In this way, the ideal society for the primitivists is one in which people are wholly satisfied with having only their basic necessities met, without corruption by the sages and their cultural trappings.

The age of utmost *de* would also furnish people with naturally occurring moral virtue. We find this interestingly ethical description of people in the age of utmost *de* in book 12. In such a time when *de* was at its utmost, people exhibited a number of conventional moral virtues, but spontaneously and without acknowledging them as such. The text reads:

They were straight and upright, not knowing to take it as righteousness. They mutually cared for one another but did not know to take it as benevolence. They were genuine but did not know to call it loyalty. They were fitting but did not know to call it sincerity.

They moved about and employed one another, but did not consider it gifting (12/81-83). In this way, people’s natural, spontaneous flourishing led them to virtuous behavior, but it only did so unreflectively. That is, without moral education, an invasive ruler (though there was a

¹⁸ This line also appears in chapter 80 of the *Daodejing*.

ruler, albeit an aloof one), or a strict set of explicit norms and rituals, people conducted themselves in the very ways that moral teachers such as Kongzi explicitly promoted.

5. Conclusion

The primitivists' conceptions of human nature speak to a range of concerns about the relationship between human nature and cultural artifice that serve as the foundation of their positive ethical and political project. The primitivists utilize the concepts of *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing* to show how people have been corrupted into losing their *xing* by giving it up in favor of artificial values. Furthermore, this loss and change causes physical harm and suffering among all living things, which would be much better off living in accordance with their *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing*. Additionally, the primitivists also view the heart-mind as being simple by nature, and complain that cultural extravagances corrupt the heart-mind and create chaos. Chief among the results of this corruption is a fondness for knowledge, which leads to self-destructive behavior that can be easily taken advantage of for nefarious ends. As we saw, however, each of these human nature concepts is too thin to support a robust ethical and political philosophy, and can instead only suggest that we attempt to remove corrupting cultural forces from our lives. For the positive ethical project of primitivism, we find at bottom an analogy with non-human, social animals. The primitivists claim that just as any other animal is better off if its *xing* is able to flourish, so too are people. Additionally, the concept of *de* helps to fill in the details of the primitivists' concept of human nature necessary for their positive project. Had people been left alone, their *xing* and *xing ming zhi qing* allowed to guide action, their *xing* and *de* allowed to obtain, and their heart-minds able to remain peaceful, society would be far better off than it currently is. Although the positive suggestions of returning to a primitive life are even more impractical now than they were in Warring States China, there may be merit in their ameliorative suggestions that people view at least some cultural ends and standards with suspicion.

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