

"When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? The way that they discard their genuine hearts is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? With the respite it gets during the day or night . . . their likes and dislikes are sometimes close to those of others. But then what they do during the day again fetters and destroys it. If the fettering is repeated . . . then one is not far from an animal. Others see that he is an animal, and think that there was never any capacity there. But is this what a human is like inherently?"

"Hence, if it merely gets nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow. If it merely loses its nourishment, there is nothing that will not vanish."
(*Mengzi* 6A8)

Bad people are bad, then, not because of their nature, but because outside influences prevent their "sprouts" from developing properly or because they have failed to cultivate their natural tendencies in the proper way.

What reason do we have to believe Mencius' view, aside perhaps from a desire to take an optimistic view of ourselves and the people around us? Mencius argues that we can see our natural tendencies toward goodness in certain actions and impulses. His arguments focus mainly on benevolence, which he takes to be the most important of the four cardinal virtues. (In fact, the word we have been translating as "benevolence" in discussing Mencius is *ren*, which Confucius uses to mean "Goodness" or "comprehensive virtue." While Mencius understands *ren* much more narrowly in terms of helping others achieve what is good in life and avoid what is bad, he shares Confucius' view that the person who manifests *ren* will also manifest all of the virtues.*)

Mencius asks us to imagine a small child who is about to fall into a well. Anyone who sees this, he claims,

would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among one's

neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries.

From this we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human. . . . The feeling of compassion is the sprout of benevolence.
(*Mengzi* 2A6)

Mencius also tells a story about a ruler named King Xuan. The king witnessed an ox that was about to be sacrificed. Feeling compassion for it, the king ordered that it be spared, but allowed for a sheep to be sacrificed instead. Mencius explains to the king that his feeling sorry for the ox proves that he has a natural tendency to feel compassion. If only he could extend that compassion, not only to the sheep—which the king could sacrifice because he had not seen it—but also to his people, then he would be truly benevolent. Actions like this, Mencius is suggesting, reveal our inner capacity for goodness, and it is through the cultivation of and reflection on those feelings that we grow into virtue.

1. What is the Confucian doctrine of "differentiated love?" Why, according to Mencius, is it better than the doctrines of Mozi and Yang Zhu?
2. What does Mencius mean by "human nature?" In what sense is human nature good, according to Mencius?
3. What point is Mencius making with the allegory of Ox Mountain?
4. In your own words, restate Mencius' arguments for his claim that human nature is good.

Xunzi

The third great Confucian in ancient China was Xunzi, who takes a very different view of human nature from most of his predecessors. Whereas Gaozi argued that human nature has no tendency toward either good or evil and Mencius argued that human nature is good, Xunzi declares that "human nature is bad." The book that records Xunzi's ideas, the *Xunzi*, says,

People's nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort. Now people's nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit in them. If they follow along with this, then struggle and

*Compare Aristotle's view on the unity of the virtues. See p. 213.

contention will arise, and yielding and deference will perish therein. They are born with feelings of hate and dislike in them. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise, and loyalty and trustworthiness will perish therein. They are born with desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then lasciviousness and chaos will arise, and ritual and *yi* [righteousness], proper form and order, will perish therein. Thus, if people follow along with their inborn dispositions and obey their nature, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end up becoming violent. (*Xunzi* 23)³

People's bad nature not only leads them away from virtue and righteousness, but also undermines the stability and prosperity of society.

Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished.* (*Xunzi* 19)

Fortunately, people are not irredeemably bad. Anyone can become good, says Xunzi, through proper training by good teachers and "deliberate effort" at moral self-cultivation. In fact, he claims that

among all people, no one fails to follow that which they approve and to abandon that which they do not approve. For a person to know that there is nothing as great as the Way and yet not follow the Way—there are no such cases.† (*Xunzi* 22)

Thus, proper training and deliberate effort are both necessary and sufficient for becoming good. In this way, his view differs not only from Mencius', but also from Gaozi's view that people are morally directionless by nature and other ancient Chinese thinkers' view that some people are good by nature and others bad.

*Compare to Thomas Hobbes' view of human nature and its connection to a state of nature in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." See pp. 410–413.

†Compare to Socrates' view that anyone who knows the right thing to do will do the right thing. See pp. 99–100.

Before we turn to consider what kind of training Xunzi recommends, it is worth noting an important way in which Xunzi's view is not as diametrically opposed to Mencius' as it might appear. Mencius conceived of human nature as including that which develops naturally from certain inborn emotional tendencies. Thus, when someone learns to be good by extending their natural feelings of compassion, shame, and so on, this reveals the inherent goodness of their nature, according to Mencius. But Xunzi conceives of human nature more narrowly as including only the dispositions, desires, and abilities that people have at birth. As we saw, these include "a fondness for profit," "feelings of hate and dislike," and "desires of the eyes and ears" for "beautiful sights and sounds." Xunzi does not count anything that people have to learn or work at as part of their nature.

We might be tempted to say that Mencius and Xunzi are simply talking past each other—that they are only disagreeing about the meaning of the term "human nature" rather than about human nature itself. Xunzi does not see it this way. He takes their disagreement to be important because of his views about language, which he develops in response to the philosophical innovations of the School of Names and Zhuangzi.* He accepts Zhuangzi's insight that the meaning of a word is a matter of convention. In keeping with his knack for turning his rivals' ideas against them, however, Xunzi argued that the existing conventions had been established long ago by the sage kings and that deviating from these conventions leads to misunderstandings and chaos. He cites the chicanery of the School of Names as an example and uses his sophisticated philosophy of language to resolve the paradoxes they raised.† Within his own Confucian tradition, Xunzi alleged that Mencius had misused the term "human nature" and that this leads him to misguided prescriptions about how to cultivate virtue. In other words, it is because he misunderstands the term "human nature" that Mencius misunderstands how people become good. By attending carefully

*See pp. 80–81 and 83–86.

†See pp. 80–81.

to the proper use of words—by “rectifying names,” as Confucius puts it—we can avoid such mistakes.

There is a further reason why Mencius and Xunzi are not merely talking at cross purposes when they argue over whether “human nature is good” or “human nature is bad.” Recall that, for Mencius, part of what it means to say that “human nature is good” is that we have innate, virtuous dispositions that merely need to be given the right environment to naturally reach their full potential. In contrast, Xunzi describes our innate dispositions as almost exclusively self-interested.

If he rejects Mencius’ proposal to simply give people a healthy environment in which their moral sprouts can grow into genuine virtue, what does Xunzi propose instead? Xunzi argues that we need to transform our nature through deliberate effort. Whereas Mencius looks to nature and agriculture for metaphors for self-cultivation, Xunzi looks to crafts and industry.

Through steaming and bending, you can make wood as straight as an ink-line into a wheel. And after its curve conforms to the compass, even when parched under the sun it will not become straight again, because the steaming and bending have made it a certain way. (*Xunzi* 1)

We cannot do this on our own, according to Xunzi. Instead, we need to make use of the wisdom that people have accumulated over generations of deliberate effort.

I once spent the whole day pondering, but it was not as good as a moment’s worth of learning. I once stood on my toes to look far away, but it was not as good as the broad view from a high place. . . . One who makes use of a chariot and horses has not thereby improved his feet, but he can now go a thousand [miles]. One who makes use of a boat and oars has not thereby become able to swim, but he can now cross rivers and streams. The gentleman is exceptional not by birth, but rather by being good at making use of things. (*Xunzi* 1)

The way to learn this accumulated wisdom and develop one’s ability to put it into practice is to find good teachers and carefully adhere to the rites, which the sages of old established as the proper conventions for guiding personal conduct.

Indeed, the earliest sage kings created order out of social chaos by developing rites that would tame and correct people’s desires and dispositions. After explaining how people’s bad nature once created chaos and poverty, Xunzi says,

The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and *yi* in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose.* (*Xunzi* 19)

Ritual, according to Xunzi, accomplishes four main things. First, as Confucius taught, ritual cultivates proper desires and dispositions in people who follow it. It does this both by inculcating new dispositions and by restraining our ignoble, natural ones. For instance, ritual propriety demands that people defer to their elders and serve them, even when doing so goes against their inborn dispositions. Observing this aspect of ritual cultivates attitudes of respect and deference and restrains selfish impulses. In this way, ritual makes people virtuous.

Second, ritual regulates and guides people’s emotions in the moment, in addition to helping them develop the right attitudes over the long run. Xunzi gives a detailed example in which he explains how Confucian funerary practices elicit the proper emotions of sadness and respect for a deceased parent or ruler.

The standard practice of funeral rites is that one changes the appearance of the corpse by gradually adding more ornamentation, one moves the corpse gradually further away [during the long period of lying in state before burial], and over a long time one gradually returns to one’s regular routine. Thus, the way that death works is that if one does not ornament the dead, then one will come to feel disgust at them, and if one feels disgust, then one will not feel sad. If one keeps them close, then one will become casual with them, and if one becomes casual with them, then one will grow tired of them. If one grows tired of them, then one will forget one’s place, and if one forgets one’s place, then one will not be respectful. (*Xunzi* 19)

*Compare to Hobbes’ account of how people escape from the chaotic state of nature. See pp. 413–415.

Third, ritual gives people appropriate and publicly recognized ways of expressing their emotions and attitudes. Having publicly recognized ways of conveying these things is important to ensure proper communication between persons, and it is part of being virtuous. Thus, observing the existing conventions, as laid down by the kings of old, is as important to Xunzi as observing the conventions they established for the use of words.

"You can't be truly rude until you understand good manners."

Rita Mae Brown (b. 1944)

Last but not least, because ritual demands different things of people in different social roles, it establishes and clarifies social distinctions. Society can only function smoothly, on Xunzi's view, when each person knows his or her place and fulfills the responsibilities that come with his or her social role. Thus, by reinforcing those roles and directing people in carrying out their responsibilities, ritual promotes social stability. In this way, ritual makes society more secure and prosperous.

Thus, ritual plays an essential role in achieving the twin goals of Confucian philosophy: virtuous people and a harmonious society. Neither Mencius nor Confucius would disagree with this, even if they would not always agree with Xunzi's reasoning. In the end, despite their sharp disagreements, Mencius and Xunzi both represent developments of a single Confucian intellectual tradition—a tradition that would soon emerge as the dominant voice in the great conversation in Chinese culture.

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1. In what sense does Xunzi think that "human nature is bad"?
 2. How does Xunzi's idea of human nature differ from Mencius'?
 3. How do people become good, according to Xunzi?
 4. What role(s) does ritual play in Xunzi's ethical and political philosophy?
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The Confucians' Legacy

The Warring States period in which Mencius and Xunzi lived saw vigorous debate between rival intellectual schools. The period came to a climactic close in 221 B.C., in part through the influence of a school we have not yet discussed. This school, known as **legalism**, shared Xunzi's view that human nature is bad. Two of the most famous proponents of legalist thought, Li Si and Han Fei, are even said to have studied with Xunzi. But unlike Xunzi, legalists thought that human nature could not be reformed; people were irredeemably self-interested. Rather than place their hopes in the appearance of some virtuous ruler who could reform the people, they argued that the only recipe for social stability was a strong state with a powerful army that governed the populace under a strict, impersonal rule of law. The state of Qin adopted legalist policies during the fourth century B.C. In the late third century, when Li Si was serving as its prime minister, Qin conquered all of China, reuniting the empire for the first time in centuries. In 221 B.C., the king of Qin founded the Qin dynasty and declared himself emperor. Li Si became prime minister and extended his legalist philosophy across all of China. Thus, at the end of the Warring States period, it may have seemed that legalism had emerged triumphant.

It would not last. The Qin dynasty collapsed after just fifteen years, toppled by a popular revolt against its harsh rule. In its place rose the Han dynasty. To distance themselves from their predecessors, the Han emperors repudiated legalism and adopted a version of Confucianism. They combined the ideas of many different school of thought. Over four centuries of Han rule, Confucianism became even more deeply embedded in Chinese culture. From China, it would spread to other parts of East Asia, especially Korea and Japan. Mohism virtually disappeared with the end of the Warring States period. Philosophical Daoism diminished in prominence for centuries, though a religious strand of Daoist thinking remained popular. So, despite legalism's brief ascendancy, Confucianism would ultimately triumph in the competition among the Hundred Schools.