

Reflections on Xunzi

Han-Han Yang, Emory University

Xunzi, a follower of Confucius, begins his book with the issue of education, claiming that social instruction is crucial to achieve the Way (*dao*). Counter to Mencius, another follower of Confucius, Xunzi argues that human nature serves as a major obstacle to moral advancement. However, this obstacle can be overcome through education and socialization. The validity of this theory can be observed in the minor “miracles” that happen everyday as people surmount the obstacles that human nature sets before them, such as the temptation to choose play over work.

Xunzi asserts that human nature is evil and that people depart from their natural state of innocence and simplicity as soon as they leave the womb. Because human nature is greatly defined by desires, society will fall into a state of chaos if people fail to morally cultivate themselves. Xunzi stressed the importance of social and political hierarchy, where regulations and authority are established. The result of this would be the securing of harmony and order. Through cultivation and education, one can learn to distinguish right from wrong and assume the ability to act morally. Between the two contrasting arguments of Xunzi and Mencius, I lean toward the side of Xunzi. Although I disagree with Xunzi’s claim that human nature is intrinsically evil, I do view it that people are driven by desires of self-interest.

In our present society, authority extends to almost every aspect of our lives. This ranges from the most basic unit, the family, to the United Nations, a world-wide organization established to govern most parts of the world. These people and organizations serve as aids to cultivate people to attain the Way because without these authority figures there would be no lasting order. As Xunzi states, “if the nature of man were good, we could dispense with sage kings and forget about ritual principles,” but because the nature of man is not good, societies

need these authoritative institutions to keep the people in check.¹ Sudan may serve as an example of such lack of control. Because the government proves incapable of providing the necessary means of survival, drought, overpopulation, and other problems have surfaced, creating major conflicts among the people. As Xunzi argues, human nature's instinct of self-interest plays a crucial role here; people fight for their own lives because the authority cannot provide the basic necessities. Without a competent authority, the people will abandon Way, left merely to fight one another for the gratification of their needs and desires.

Another example is found in the most fundamental social establishment: the family. Without proper guidance from parents, children would carry out their actions based on their own needs and desires with little consideration of what is right and wrong. People must be "transformed by the instructions of a teacher and guided by ritual principles, and only then will they be able to observe the dictates of courtesy and humility, obey the forms and rules of society, and achieve order."² Growing up, I was taught by my parents that stealing, killing, and lying are "immoral." Without being taught, this knowledge would be unrecognized. I would see these actions without any negative evaluations of them, viewing them as justified acts of self-defense and self-interest. This is why governments are established and why a social and political system is needed to guide or instruct us.

While some may argue that people are not completely "bad" by nature, I argue that Xunzi is correct when he says that "the sage transforms his nature and initiates conscious activity; from this he produces ritual principles, and when they have been produced he sets up rules and regulations."³ We all have seen children and babies feeling guilty when they have acted wrongly, but this is not proof that they are "good." I believe that it is by observing the regulated environment that we have set up that they learn what is good and bad, wrong and right, moral

and immoral. This learning alters and improves upon the nature with which they were originally born.

When one is first born, he or she lacks the ability of judgment; this ability is essentially molded by influences such as figures of authority or the sage whom Xunzi says demonstrates the active conscience that is “acquired by learning and brought to completion by effort.”⁴ But what is good and bad is a subjective matter, and people can argue that human beings are not born bad but that it is people who have created this idea of right and wrong. The sole reason why I believe that people are inherently “bad” rather than “good” is that they are naturally driven by self-interest, and self-interest is a far cry from virtue. But is self-interest really so bad a characteristic? Is it so appalling for people to fight for what they need and desire? Who is to say that this is “bad?” These questions typically arise when people from different cultures and different walks of life find themselves judging the same actions differently. While Mormons have considered polygamy acceptable, for example, others in Western society frown upon it. One’s judgment depends on the environment in which one has grown up. But the point here is not one social order’s standard versus another; it is that one can see the emergence of disorder when a society lacks *any* kind of establishment in the first place. This often violent or turbulent result would seem to evidence an inherently disorderly or “bad” element of basic human nature--an element in need of some form of control and improvement to promote the greater good.

If people are naturally ill-natured, though, who created this institution in the first place? Would one not need to possess some degree of righteousness already in order to create institutions that are consciously conducive to harmony and order? But we must bear in mind that when people devise and implement these peacemaking establishments they do so fundamentally for reasons of self-interest. For instance, early man began bartering as a way to gain materials

that he either could not make or lacked the time to make. This system was the result of need, desire, and the determining of an efficient means toward their fulfillment. Ultimately, then, it was a result of self-interest.

Likewise, people perform altruistic deeds not out of simple benevolence but out of self-interest. Behind these actions often lies a desire for reciprocity. When one lends his shoulder for a friend to cry on, he does so for fear that one day he will require his friend's shoulder in the same fashion. In addition, when one picks up and turns in a valuable lost object, he does so in fear of karma or the feeling of guilt that might weigh heavily upon his heart if he did otherwise. This is also very simply reflected by the basic set up of the family. One frequently feels obligated to protect, support, and care for his family, but would he still feel this obligation were it not extended to him in turn by the others? If one is betrayed by a loved one, the relationship is damaged, and this sense of obligation is either permanently destroyed or temporarily abandoned until the feeling of mutual support and aid is resuscitated. However, such reciprocity is not always the reason behind a person's unselfish behavior; there are those who perform altruistic actions simply because they are the right thing to do. These people, such as Gandhi, have cultivated themselves morally. After years of fostering this sense of altruism, they have reached a level at which self-interest loses its purpose and is finally dropped. This takes years of self-cultivation, though, and much persistence is necessary to reach such a point.

Although I agree with Xunzi that people are inherently driven by self-interest (and thus "bad"), I do not view human nature to be fundamentally *evil*. People act malignantly toward one another out of a desire for self-survival and an urge to satisfy their needs and wants; they do not do so with the primary purpose of causing harm to other people. Being *evil*, I would say, is not just being morally reprehensible but also consciously desiring to hurt others. Babies do not come

out of their mothers' wombs with a desire to kill and maim; they eventually, as Xunzi describes, move away from simplicity to a phase in life that is governed mostly by desires, and with these desires appear other malicious qualities, such as envy, egoism, and eventually the willingness and ability to visit injury upon others in order to satisfy these desires. In the end, however, because people do not naturally exhibit a longing purely to harm their fellow human beings, they are not *evil*. They only hurt their fellows for the purposes of fulfilling their desires, indicating a quality of selfishness, but not to the extent of being *evil*.

Xunzi contends that Mencius' view of human nature seems incorrect because human beings are inherently *evil*. I instead argue that evil is the outcome of a life lived without moral cultivation, a deliberate willingness to injure other people, not an innate quality of human nature. Innately, human beings are not so much *evil* as they are self-interested and in need of some manner of improvement if they are not to degenerate into a state of evil. People need to "seek a worthy teacher to study under and good companions to associate with" because through this kind of self-cultivation these malicious constraints can be successfully overcome, though never fully eradicated.⁵ But much like Xunzi suggests, if this cultivation is persistent, the thought of wanting to do good will eventually come naturally and ultimately replace self-interest, calculated reciprocity, and the urge to profit even at the expense of others.

¹ Xunzi. *Xunzi: Basic Writings*. Burton Watson, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 167.

² *Ibid.* 162.

³ *Ibid.* 165.

⁴ *Ibid.* 163.

⁵ *Ibid.* 174.