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Xunzi on the Origin of Goodness:

A New Interpretation

This essay explores a seeming mystery in the philosophy of Xunzi (荀子 310-238 BCE), namely how goodness could have emerged in a world of people with only a bad human nature. I will examine existing interpretations and present a new reading of Xunzi. My purpose is to reconstruct a coherent view in Xunzi's philosophy as presented in the book of the *Xunzi* rather than defend the truth of his claims regarding human history.

In addressing the origin of goodness in human history, Xunzi faces a twofold difficulty. On the one hand, unlike theist philosophers who trace the source of goodness to the divine, Xunzi is a naturalist and, for him, there is no transcendent, supernatural source of goodness. On the other hand, unlike those who believe that humans are equipped with innate goodness, Xunzi holds that human nature is bad (*e* 惡);¹ he has to explain where and how goodness has originated. It seems harder for Xunzi to explain how humans become good than for believers in the goodness of human nature to provide an account of how humans become bad. Mencius, for example, argues that, while humans are born with the “four sprouts” in their hearts that can grow into the moral virtues of humanity, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom, people can lose their “original heart,” and when they do, they become bad.² It certainly would not make much sense had Xunzi said that, although humans are born bad, they become good simply by losing their bad

nature. Yet, as a Confucian philosopher believing in human perfectibility, Xunzi has to answer this fundamental question regarding the origin of goodness.

The question of goodness becomes complicated because it can be interpreted in different ways. One is how goodness in society originally emerged, namely how goodness was first generated in human society constituted by members with only a bad nature. This is the question of origin. Another is about social moralization, namely how humans born with egoistic tendencies become transformed to act ethically in a society regulated by rules of ritual propriety (*li* 禮). Like other Confucians, Xunzi has as his goal to make people virtuous, with a strong sense of *ren* 仁 (humanity, human excellence) and act on it habitually. How do people make this transition from being naturally bad to “deliberately” (*wei* 偽) good? This is the question of moralization. Although these questions can be related, my concern is with the first, namely, in Xunzi how goodness initially emerged in a world of people equipped with a bad nature.

I.

Xunzi scholars have long been trying to figure out what kind of answer he has provided in addressing the origin of goodness. The matter is difficult because he seems to have given different answers to this question. Which of these answers is the most plausible within the framework of Xunzi’s philosophy has been in dispute. In this section I will examine three interpretations of Xunzi, and show that they are either inadequate or contradictory to the spirit of Xunzi’s principal claim about human nature. Due to the vast amount of literature on Xunzi, I will cite only publications that are directly relevant to my discussion.

The first interpretation is given by Fung Yu-lan. According to Fung, in Xunzi goodness came originally from intelligence (*zhi* 知). Fung writes,

Humans had intelligence. They knew that they could not survive without orderly society. They also knew that there could not be society without a moral system. Therefore, the intelligent ones invented the moral system and others accepted it.

Fung emphasizes,

Xunzi says “therefore the intelligent ones made social distinctions.”

Here the term of “the intelligent ones” is worth particular attention.

It means that people established society because they had knowledge, not because they already had morals in their nature.³

Fung maintains that while Xunzi holds that human nature is bad, this does not mean there is nothing naturally good in human beings. Xunzi grants humans the natural ability to acquire knowledge, the ability to use their intelligence. Human intelligence tells them that they cannot live well without social organization, and that there cannot be any functional social organization without morality. Realizing this necessity, earliest leaders in history devised a moral system. Fung holds that, in Xunzi, the purpose of establishing orderly society is utilitarian, but the origin of social order is human intelligence. Let us call Fung’s interpretation “the intelligence account” of the origin of goodness. According to this account, judgments by human intelligence about what is morally good or bad can put into motion various deliberative and motivational mechanisms that help overcome or resist the bad human nature.⁴

Some passages in the *Xunzi* appear to support Fung's interpretation. For instance, Xunzi states,

If people live in alienation from each other and do not serve each other's needs, there will be poverty; if there are no class divisions in society, there will be contention. Poverty is a misfortune, and contention a calamity. No means are as good to remedy misfortunes and eradicate calamities as causing class divisions to be clearly defined when giving form to society... Therefore, the intelligent instituted class divisions.⁵

For Xunzi, class division is a form of ritual propriety, which divides labor and allocates resources. Since people would have to be intelligent enough to institute ritual propriety, one may presume that intelligence must have been the origin of goodness.

A close reading of this passage, however, reveals that Xunzi here is providing a reason for the necessity of ritual propriety. As a social justification, it does not tell us *how* ancient sages became motivated to establish ritual propriety. One may wonder, if the sages were born with a nature as bad as the rest of us, with just as much a self-regarding tendency as the rest of us—Xunzi maintains that they indeed were—what could have motivated them to contradict their bad nature and establish ritual propriety for the sake of goodness? If self-regarding people possess intelligence, without additional sources of motivation, why would not they use it to advance their own desires rather than promote public morality and the common good?

Intelligence is a faculty of the mind (*xin* 心) in Xunzi. Can the mind be the origin of goodness? Not in Xunzi. Although he holds that the mind is able to know the Dao 道, the Dao for Xunzi is the human Dao, not Heavenly Dao. He says that “the Dao of which I

speaking is not the Dao of Heaven or the Dao of Earth, but rather the Dao that guides the actions of the humankind and is embodied in the conduct of the morally cultivated persons.”⁶ (Knoblock, 1990, 71, modified). This human Dao for Xunzi is just ritual and moral principles, courtesy and deference, loyalty and trustworthiness, which are primary virtues established by the sages. Xunzi does not hold the view that there is Heavenly Dao prior to the institution of the human Dao. He explicitly says,

The Dao comes from oneness. What does “oneness” refer to? I say that it refers to steadfastly cleaving to the spiritual. What does “the spiritual” refer to? I say that promoting goodness to the utmost and ordering society thoroughly are described as “the spiritual.” What none of the myriad of things can deflect from its goal is called “steadfast.” A person who is both spiritual and steadfast is described as a sage. The sage is the pitch pipe of the Dao. The Dao of the world has its pitch pipe in the sage. The Dao of the Hundred Kings is the same.⁷ (Knoblock, 1990, 76, modified).

The Dao comes from the sage’s steadfast promotion of goodness and firm establishment of order in society. Such Dao is human-instituted, not a pre-existing order. For Xunzi, the human Dao is established on ritual propriety. Obviously, the mind cannot know ritual propriety until the latter has been established.

In addition, Xunzi maintains that the mind needs to be guided with principles in order to understand the Dao. Using the example of muddy water that needs to be purified, he writes, “if you lead it [the mind] with principles (*li* 理), nurture it with purity, and not allow mere things to ‘tilt’ it, then it will be adequate to determine right and wrong and to

resolve any doubtful points.”⁸ (Knoblock, 1994, 107, modified). Accordingly, only with the guidance of principles and the appropriate nurture can the mind tell right from wrong.

One may think that Xunzi contradicts himself as he also says in the same chapter that “the mind is the lord of the body and the master of spiritual intelligence. It issues commands but does not receive commands.”⁹ (Wang Xianqian, 397). But there is no contradiction here. According to Xunzi, a person’s action is ultimately determined by his mind. A desire itself does not determine an action unless it is approved (*ke* 可) by the mind. The mind’s power to approve or disapprove desired actions, however, does not imply the person is motivated to exercise that power. Xunzi says that only morally cultivated people can “withhold their mind from contemplating wrong things.”¹⁰ (ibid. 19) The uncultivated mind is led by desires. He writes,

When the mind does not yet understand the Dao, the mind cannot approve doing the right thing; instead, it approves doing what is contrary to the Dao.¹¹ (ibid. 394).

Before the sage kings established ritual propriety, the mind could not have understood the Dao. It could only have approved what was desired out of one’s nature. Therefore, intelligence itself cannot be the origin of goodness. Thus, the intelligence account fails.

The second interpretation, represented by A.C. Graham, proposes that, in Xunzi, humans possess both good and bad desires, and that human nature is bad not because it does not contain good impulses, but because the good desires (or desires for the good, e.g., “love of the right”) and bad desires (e.g., “desire for profit”) are mixed in an “anarchic” way (Graham, 248). Graham writes,

Since disordered desires frustrate one another, the intelligent man as he learns will spontaneously come to desire the order which will make it possible to satisfy them.¹² (ibid.)

On Graham's account, Xunzi holds that in human nature there are both desires for "the right" and desires for profit, which conflict with each other. The intelligent person can learn to bring himself to desire order. Such a person "can by unremitting accumulation of stern thought and effort bring his conflicting desires to orderliness (ibid.)."¹³ According to this account, it is good desires that give rise to, and serve to promote, goodness. In this process, intelligence only plays a secondary role, aiding the learning process of the intelligent person. We can call this interpretation "the mixed nature account."

Graham's interpretation sounds *prima facie* plausible. In fact, the prominent Chinese philosopher Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) proposed this reading a long time ago. Wang wrote,

Carefully studying the real intent of Xunzi, I have to say that ritual propriety comes from humans' *qing*. That is what it means by saying that "*cheng qing er li wen* 稱情而立文." Xunzi also says that "the rule of the three-year mourning period is to *cheng qing er li wen*," because that is when people suffer the highest degree of sorrow.¹⁴ (Wang Guowei, 215)

In the context of Wang's statement, Xunzi's claim that "*cheng qing er li wen*" would mean "ritual propriety is established in accordance with people's *qing*." "*Qing* 情" (feelings) for Xunzi are appetitive and aversive impulses that come with human nature,

such as like, dislike, pleasure, anger, sorrow, and happiness.¹⁵ (Wang Xianqian, 412). He occasionally also uses “*qing*” to mean “*xing* 性” (nature) as in such statements as “people’s *qing* is rather not pretty.”¹⁶ (ibid., 444). Desires (*yu* 欲) are responses to *qing*.¹⁷ (ibid., 428). The difference between *qing* and *yu* seems to be definitional; practically we cannot discuss *qing* without discussing *yu*. Here I will discuss *qing* in terms of *yu*. Xunzi uses “*xing*” and “*qing*” together in his discussion of human nature. For instance, he writes,

It is the inborn nature of man today that when hungry he desires something to eat, that when cold he wants warm clothing, and that when weary he desires rest—such are qualities inherent in his nature (*qing xing*).¹⁸ (Knoblock, 1994, 153, modified).

If ritual propriety, which embodies goodness, comes from people’s *qing*, how can Xunzi say that human nature is bad? Wang Guowei realized this difficulty and concluded,

At this point, Xunzi’s philosophy of ritual propriety cannot but contradict his theory that human nature is bad. This is all because his belief that “*cheng qing er li wen*” presupposes that humans’ *qing* is good.¹⁹ (Wang Guowei, 215).

In Xunzi, ritual propriety is the embodiment of goodness. If ritual propriety is made in accordance with the human *qing*, which is natural, then it would imply that ritual propriety is in some way founded on *qing*. Such a reading would make Xunzi hold that human nature is a mix of both good and bad feelings. On this reading, good feelings, such as that of mourning one’s deceased parents, would serve as the foundation for ritual propriety.

This interpretation, however, is inconsistent with what Xunzi says about *qing* in the same passage that Wang Guowei quoted. After stating that the mourning ritual is to “*cheng qing er li wen*,” Xunzi also points out that human *qing* is not uniform. On the one hand, there are “people whose feelings for their deceased parents will not be exhausted even till death.”²⁰ (Wang Xianqian, 373). For them, the three-year mourning period passes “as quickly as a running horse glimpsed through the crack in a wall, and if we follow their wishes, mourning will have no end at all.”²¹ (Knoblock, 1994, 70). On the other, there are people who by evening have forgotten a parent who died that morning. If we indulge them, we lower ourselves to the level of animals. Therefore, if simply following their natural feelings, people may not mourn their deceased ones properly. The purpose of establishing mourning rituals is precisely to prevent some people from following their feelings to become overwhelmed in mourning for too long and others from not mourning adequately. This is exactly what Xunzi says of the purpose of ritual propriety in relation to natural impulses:

Ritual propriety trims what is too long, stretches out what is too short, eliminates excess, remedies deficiency, and extends cultivated forms that express love and respect so that they increase and complete (*zi cheng* 滋成) the beauty of right conduct.²² (Knoblock, 1994, 65, modified).

“*Zi cheng*,” rendered by Knoblock as “increase and complete” here, literally means to “foster [a plant] by appropriately watering.” By using such an expression, Xunzi suggests that rules of ritual propriety have the effect of cultivating moral goodness in humans.

Moreover, in discussing the natural human *qing* of joy and sorrow, Xunzi writes,

Both emotions inherently have their beginnings in humans' inborn nature. If these emotions are trimmed or stretched, broadened or narrowed, diminished or increased, if they are put into their proper category and fully conveyed, if they are brought to completion and made refined, if caused in root and branch, end and beginning, to have nothing lacking obedience and if joined in a pure, unmixed, and perfect whole, then they can serve as the rule for ten thousand generations.

They have become ritual propriety.²³ (Knoblock, 1994, 66, modified).

The function of ritual propriety is to regulate what nature does not supply properly. As Xunzi says, there are people whose *qing* would make them mourn their deceased parents for life, those whose *qing* of mourning lasts less than a day, and those whose *qing* would lead them to mourn for three years. If ritual propriety is established solely to suit *qing* as Wang Guowei interpreted, which form of these three should it suit?²⁴ Therefore, even if ritual propriety is to be based on *qing*, this interpretation does not solve the problem.²⁵

Sometimes people quote the following passage to prove that Xunzi holds that human nature comprises both good and bad characteristics:

Human nature today is such that people are born with a love of profit.

Following this nature will cause its aggressiveness and greedy tendencies to grow and courtesy and deference to disappear. Humans are born with feelings of envy and hatred. Indulging these feelings causes violence and crime to develop and loyalty and trustworthiness to perish. Humans are born possessing the desires of the ears and eyes (which are fond of sounds and colors). Indulging these desires causes dissolute and wanton behavior to

result, and ritual and moral principles, precepts of good form, and regulated order (*wen li* 文理) to perish. This being the case, when each person follows his inborn nature and indulges his natural inclinations [*qing*], aggressiveness and greed are certain to develop. This is accompanied by violation of social class distinctions and throws the natural order into anarchy, resulting in cruel tyranny.²⁶ (Knoblock, 1994, 151, modified).

In the *Xunzi*, “*wen li*” can be understood as “ritualized regulations and orderly patterns.”²⁷ (see Wang Xianqian, 434). Some may argue that this passage shows that Xunzi holds that human nature has originally in it both good and bad as he says that if people follow their natural desires the good will disappear (*wang* 亡). This, however, cannot be the correct reading. First of all, Xunzi here is speaking explicitly of “human nature *today*” (*jin ren zhi xing* 今人之性). He is not referring to the pre-*li* period when people had not been affected by ritual propriety. Second, Xunzi says that following these natural tendencies results in the loss of “ritual and moral principles, precepts of good form, and regulated order.” For Xunzi, ritual and moral principles, precepts of good form, and regulated order were established by the sages. These institutions did not pre-exist in human nature. Hence, their disappearance can only occur *after* the sages had established ritual propriety in the first place. On “courtesy and deference,” Xunzi says in the same passage,

Thus it is necessary that humans become transformed through the influence and modeling of teachers and by ritual propriety and rightness. Only after this has been accomplished can they act with

courtesy and deference, comply with ritual forms and live in an orderly society.²⁸ (Wang Xianqian, 435; Cf. Knoblock, 1994, 151).

For Xunzi, “deference,” “loyalty,” and “trustworthiness” can exist only in socially accepted forms. These forms are none other than ritual propriety and there was no ritual propriety prior to its establishment by the sages. Therefore, Xunzi’s statement can refer only to what may happen after ritual propriety has been instituted by the sages.

Third, Xunzi uses a structural parallel in his statements. These other things such as “deference,” “loyalty,” and “trustworthiness,” that would “perish” when following desires without restraint, are put in a situation parallel to “ritual and moral principles, precepts of good form, and regulated order.” This fact provides an additional reason for us to believe that these other good qualities also did not exist in human nature prior to the establishment of ritual propriety by the sages. Therefore, the passage in question does not prove that Xunzi holds that human nature is a mix of both good and bad characteristics. The “mixed nature account” fails.

The third and last interpretation is that in Xunzi human nature is morally neutral. A neutral human nature presumably would not pose any resistance to the institution of ritual propriety in society whereas a bad human nature would. Let us call it “the neutral human nature account.”

This neutral human nature view can be traced to such authors as Zhou Zhicheng and Kim-Chong Chong. Zhou explicitly argues that Xunzi holds that human nature (*xing*) is “*pu* 樸,” namely plain, natural, and unadorned. He maintains that, because human nature is only natural rather than bad, nothing prevents it from becoming good.²⁹ (Zhuo,

2007). Chong's view is more elaborate and deserves careful treatment. Under a section entitled "moral neutrality of *xing*" in his fine article on Xunzi, Chong writes,

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 [*xing*] either.³⁰ (Chong, 68).

Chong argues that, in Xunzi, humans possess wants and capacities that go beyond the basic sensory and appetitive desires and feelings. "These wants at the same time imply the need for security, and the capacities for prudence, refinement and hence for establishing ritual principles."³¹ (Chong, 71). This seems to imply that ritual propriety is established out of these wants.

If that human nature is inherently bad means that it cannot be transformed, then Chong is correct; clearly Xunzi does not hold such a view. Xunzi maintains that the sages transformed their nature. I also agree with Chong that in Xunzi human desires *per se* are neither (morally) good nor bad. But Chong's reasoning appears to commit a fallacy of composition as he moves from the premise that each desire is neither good nor bad to the conclusion that *xing* is neither good nor bad. It is certainly logically possible for the whole to possess a characteristic that is not possessed by any of its components. My main objection to Chong's interpretation, however, lies with his claim that Xunzi's human nature is bad "only in a consequential sense."³² (65) This interpretation understates Xunzi's theory of human nature.

I believe Xunzi's claim that human nature is bad comprises two theses. First, humans are born with natural desires and if they act on their desires without restrictions they will fight with one another and will end up in disorder. This is the consequence thesis. Second, humans are born with a tendency to act on these desires, and therefore have a natural tendency to generate disorder, unless they are regulated by ritual propriety. This is the natural tendency thesis. The difference between these two theses is important. We can say, for example, if a violent criminal and a normal person both wrongfully kill an innocent man, consequentially they will be equally bad. However, an important difference between a violent criminal and a normal person is that one has a tendency to act violently to kill whereas the other does not. Here the tendency makes a whole world of difference. Without the natural tendency thesis, any interpretation of Xunzi's theory of human nature is incomplete. As Antonio Cua has correctly argued, for Xunzi "man's nature is bad because the characteristic tendency of his basic motivational structure leads to strife and disorder, consequences which are undesirable from the moral point of view understood in terms of *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (ritual propriety) and *yi* (rightness)."³³ (Cua, 21). Cua sees the consequences of human desires as "the outcome of the tendency of man's basic nature."³⁴ (Cua, 23). Unfortunately, when Chong summarized Cua's interpretation of Xunzi's view on human nature into a set of three features (Chong, 64),³⁵ this important point of Cua's was entirely left out.

Xunzi explicitly maintains that humans are born with a tendency to act badly and this makes human nature bad. He says that,

A straight board does not first need the press-frame to be straight; it is straight by nature. But a warped board must first await application of the press-frame,

steam to soften it, and force to bend it into shape before it can be made straight; this is because by nature it is not straight. Now, since human nature is bad, it must await the government of the sage kings and the transformation effected by ritual propriety and morality before everything develops with good order and is consistent with the good (Knoblock, 1994, 157, modified).³⁶

Xunzi's analogy suggests that human nature is in "bad shape" and not neutral. It needs to be corrected in order for people to be moral. Therefore, "the neutral human nature account" is inconsistent with Xunzi's position. It does not provide a legitimate premise to address Xunzi's theory of the origin of goodness.

II.

Now I would like to present an alternative interpretation of Xunzi's view of the origin of goodness. In my opinion, a viable account must satisfy three conditions. The first condition is that such an account does not contradict Xunzi's view that human nature is bad. This is the view that human nature does not only include various inborn desires, but also comes with a characteristic tendency to pursue them without restraint and thus to cause disorder. My reading of Xunzi on this point is based mainly on his chapter of "*Xing-E* 〈性惡〉" ("human nature is bad"), on the presumption that the author's primary position on this matter is to be found in the chapter specifically on *xing*. For if someone writes a book in which there is a chapter dedicated specifically to an issue, we have reason to think that the chapter best represents the author's position on that issue, unless there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In the thesis statement at the

outset of the “*Xing-E*” chapter, Xunzi explicitly states, and then repeatedly states throughout the chapter, that “human nature is bad and goodness is through deliberate effort (*wei*)” (Wang Xianqian, 434).³⁷

The second condition is that a viable account should draw on direct textual evidence in the book of the *Xunzi*. It should be something that Xunzi has actually said in his book. While we can always draw conclusions through inference, they are not as reliable as evidence in what Xunzi has explicitly spelt out.

The third condition is that such an account must provide a source of motivation for the sages to act toward goodness. As has been shown in my analysis of the “intelligence account,” while the mind has the power to restrain desires, people in Xunzi’s “state of nature” need to be motivated to initiate goodness.

Some may question this third condition. They may cite Xunzi’s comment on humans possessing “*yi* 義” (rightness), a moral capacity of the mind, as evidence that humans are born with an innate ability to do the right thing. Let us take a close look at Xunzi’s statement:

Fire and water possess vital energy but have no life. Plants and trees possess life, but lack awareness. Birds and beasts have awareness, but lack rightness. Humans possess vital energy, life, and awareness, and added to them rightness (Knoblock, 1990, 103-104, modified).³⁸

This passage indeed raises an interesting question. If humans are already born with rightness, then it implies that by following this innate quality people will naturally become good. However, that is not the conclusion in the *Xunzi*. I argue that a more reasonable interpretation is that “*yi*” is a potential capacity in humanity, and that until the

sages established ritual propriety this capacity had not been actualized. Animals simply do not possess such a potential and therefore can never become moral.

What reasons do I have for saying so? First, Xunzi defines “*yi*” as “the capacity to prevent people from engaging in repulsive and despicable behavior” (Wang Xianqian, 305).³⁹ Obviously, for Xunzi, until the sages established ritual propriety nothing could have prevented people from engaging in such behavior. At that time, *yi* could not have been a functional capacity.⁴⁰ Second, Xunzi often couples this word with “*li*” (ritual propriety) and uses the expression of “*li yi* 禮義,” indicating a close linkage between ritual propriety and rightness. Indeed, along his line of thinking, it is inconceivable for there to be *yi* without ritual propriety. Xunzi would not have accepted the notion that people had been acting with a sense of *yi* even prior to the establishment of ritual propriety. Third, Xunzi’s discourse implies that there had not been (functional) *yi* before the establishment of ritual propriety. For example, he says that “as far as human nature is concerned, humans neither are born with nor know *li yi*” (Wang Xianqian, 439).⁴¹ He maintains that people need to cultivate their sense of *yi* through ritual propriety.⁴²

All this evidence supports my conclusion that *yi* had not been a functional capacity prior to the establishment of ritual propriety.

Now I will present an account that satisfies these conditions. On my reading, the origin of goodness comprises two elements. The first is material source, namely natural material in human beings that can be used to establish ritual propriety. The second is efficient cause, namely the force that triggered or initiated the process of transforming material source into ritual propriety. I will argue that, in Xunzi’s view, while the origin of goodness drew material source from human *qing* (feelings), *yu* (desires), and *zhi*

(intelligence), it was the sage kings' aversion to disorder that initiated the process of establishing ritual propriety.

If the sage kings started civil society by first establishing ritual propriety as Xunzi maintains, a crucial question must be addressed: with the same bad nature as the rest of us, how could the sage kings have come to establish ritual propriety and to cultivate the rest of us morally? In order to answer this question, I will examine the *Lilun* 〈禮論〉 chapter in the *Xunzi*. In this chapter Xunzi provides not only his systematic theory regarding the meaning and efficacy, but also the origin, of ritual propriety. At the outset, Xunzi writes,

How did ritual propriety arise? I say that humans are born with desires which, if not satisfied, cannot but lead them to seek to satisfy these desires. If in seeking to satisfy their desires humans observe no measure and apportion things without limits, then it would be impossible for them not to contend over the means to satisfy their desires. Such contention leads to disorder. Disorder leads to poverty. The ancient kings disliked such disorder; so they established the regulations contained within ritual and moral principals [*li yi*] in order to apportion things, to nurture people's desires, and to supply the means for their satisfaction. They so fashioned their regulations that desires should not overextend the means for their satisfaction and material goods would not be exhausted by the desires. In this way the two of them, desires and goods, sustained each other over the course of time. This is the origin of ritual propriety (Knoblock, 1994, 55, modified).⁴³

This passage may be summarized in five claims:

(A). People are born with desires.

(B). There is a tendency for them to pursue these desires.

(C). Pursuing desires without guidance result in disorder.

(D). Sage kings disliked disorder.

(E). Sage kings established ritual propriety in order to prevent disorder by guiding people's pursuit of desires in ways compatible with the supply of material goods.

(A), (B), and (C) are common themes in Xunzi as discussed earlier. According to (D), the sage kings established ritual propriety not because they had desires toward goodness (*pace* Mencius), nor because their minds or intelligence independently directed them toward morality; it was rather because they disliked disorder. This sounds overly simplistic. But it makes perfect sense. For Xunzi, both appetitive and aversive impulses are out of humans' inborn *qing*. Desires and aversions motivate us to do or to avoid certain things. For instance, the desire for meat motivates people to hunt animals, and the aversion to heat motivates people to take cover from the mid-summer sun. Xunzi claims that the sage kings' aversion to disorder motivated them to establish ritual propriety in society.

This is a recurrent theme in the book of the *Xunzi*. For instance, in the *Yuelun* (樂論) chapter, Xunzi writes,

If the form (of joy) is not properly conducted, then it is impossible that disorder should not arise. The ancient kings disliked such disorder. Thus they instituted as regulations the sounds of the Odes and the Hymns to offer guidance (Knoblock, 1994, 80, modified).⁴⁴

And,

The ancient kings disliked such disorder; thus, they reformed their own conduct and make their music correct so the whole world became obedient (Knoblock 1994, 83, modified).⁴⁵

Again, in the *Wangzhi* 王制 chapter,

The ancient kings disliked such disorder. Thus, they instituted regulations, ritual practices, and moral principles in order to create proper social class divisions (Knoblock, 1990, 96, modified).⁴⁶

All these passages indicate that the direct motivation for the sage kings to establish ritual propriety is that they disliked disorder caused by people pursuing desires without restrictions.

A thought experiment may help us understand Xunzi's theory. In the "state of nature," there is no rule of ritual propriety, no social order, and no moral code to follow. People simply go on their ways to pursue desires. When they get in one another's way, they fight. Suppose they all desire to fetch fresh water from a well. They will do so without proceeding in any orderly fashion. They certainly will not go by the rule of "first come, first serve," as there is no such rule. When many people want to get water from the well at the same time, they will fight one another in order to get what they want before others. The process is slow, messy, and chaotic. One may be pushed away from the well by others; one may spill her water before getting out of the fighting crowd. In such a situation, people will have different reactions to it. Some people with strong muscles may like it, as they do not need to wait and can get water whenever they arrive at the well simply by pushing others away from it. Some people who are not physically strong but

smart may figure out a way to get what they want with little difficulty. For instance, they may make use of the physically strong as their path-opener toward the well just by following them. Others may loathe the situation, but feel they cannot do anything about it, believing that is just the way things are (in writing this passage, I have in mind how people fight to get onto buses in places where bussing availability is limited).

Now, imagine that one person who both dislikes the chaotic situation and is intelligent enough to think of a way to deal with it. Imagine that one day he is fed up and uses his intelligence to figure out an alternative approach. He stands up and says to the crowd, “attention everyone, if we line up in the order we arrive here, we will all get water quickly and we will avoid having to push and shove our way.” Upon reflection, this proposal makes good sense to others as well. Yes, that way they will be able to get water faster and they will not have to push and shove. So, they accept this proposal. We can further imagine that a few people with strong muscles may not like such an idea but cannot fight the large number of people over there. Or perhaps the person who has proposed this solution himself is too strong to fight with, or there are more than one person proposing it. Consequently, a rule is established. This is the first instance of ritual propriety and it can be expanded to other aspects of people’s social lives after people see the benefit of having such rules in society.⁴⁷

Of course, the process of establishing ritual propriety could not have been so simplistic and may have taken an extended period of time. As David Nivison aptly said, “(the sage) must see a need, and then must mold simple rules, or make simple adjustments in existing rules. Conceivably, this sage may not himself see the finished ‘product’ or even have intended to ‘produce’ it” (1996a, 328).⁴⁸ Moreover, the early

rulers are called “ancient kings” retrospectively. People sometimes say “when grandpa was seven-year old....” They do not mean that he was already a grandfather at seven. Presumably these “ancient kings” were not kings until after they instituted rules of ritual propriety in society.⁴⁹

It should be noted that aversion to disorder itself is not a moral sentiment. Unlike Mencius’s inborn love for others, Xunzi’s aversion to disorder itself is rather self-regarding and self-serving. Therefore, saying that the sage kings’ aversion to disorder moved them to establish ritual propriety does not imply that they did so out of a moral motivation. Such a motivation out of aversion does not contradict Xunzi’s theory that human nature is bad.

One may ask: Is disliking disorder the same as liking order? If so, isn’t that disliking disorder motivated sage kings to establish order the same as that liking order motivated them to do so? Moreover, if this is true, would that mean that it was their desire for order motivated them to establish ritual propriety? Order is, of course, good. So ultimately, it was their desire for good motivated them to establish ritual propriety. Then, doesn’t this show after all that human nature is mixed with both good and bad? How can Xunzi say that human nature is bad?

This way of thinking involves a logical confusion. Although disliking something and liking something else to its contrary may occur simultaneously, they are not conceptually the same. While we may get annoyed with something because we already like its opposite, it is also true that we may not develop a liking of something until we become annoyed by its opposite. For example, we may not feel *liking* the normal supply of oxygen in the air until we experience its shortage, and we may not feel *liking* the

quietness in the neighborhood until the place becomes noisy. In cases like these, our liking of something is the result of our unpleasant experience with its opposite; there is a causal relationship between disliking and liking, and the two are not logically equivalent. In Xunzi's scheme, the logical sequence is that sage kings' disliking of disorder caused their liking of order. They were repelled by the aversion of disorder toward order. Furthermore, in Xunzi's case, the opposite of disorder is not order per se, but two kinds of thing. The first is mere absence of disorder whereas the second is "socially instituted" (*wei* 偽) order. The sage kings resorted to "socially instituted" order because they took it to be the solution to the problem of disorder. Without disliking disorder in the first place, they may have never come to like such a thing as "socially instituted" order. Therefore, the thesis that the sage kings' disliking of disorder caused them to "socially institute" order is not the same thesis as that the sage kings' liking of order caused them to institute order.

A related question arises. Is disorder in the pre-*li* world itself bad? The answer is yes. First of all, it is naturally bad or naturally undesirable, in that it inhibits satisfying human desires. So, even if disorder is not *morally* bad in the pre-*li* society, it is still bad in an aesthetic sense.⁵⁰ Second, even though there are no moral criteria in the Xunzi's pre-*li* world, disorder still goes in a direction contrary to where sage kings eventually go. Third, with the moral standards embodied in ritual propriety established by sage kings, when we look back into the pre-*li* period, we surely can evaluate some actions as having been good and others as having been bad. In contrast to order embodied in ritual propriety, disorder is bad whenever it occurs.

Now, let us look into (E). Ritual propriety works to nurture people's desires (*yang yu* 养欲). Xunzi's attribution of this function to ritual propriety indicates that not only people's desires need to be nurtured, but also it is good to nurture them. Unlike some Song-Ming neo-Confucians, Xunzi does not say that we should eliminate or suppress desires. For Xunzi, because desires are natural and their pursuit can be justified as long as it does not get out of hand. The purpose of ritual propriety is precisely to keep such pursuits under control. The rules of ritual propriety established by the sages nurture people's desires and help people satisfy their desires properly. When people pursue desires in accordance with ritual propriety, their pursuit will be orderly and they will not abuse or exhaust material goods. The long-term goal of ritual propriety is to ensure that the pursuit of desires and the growth of resources mutually enhance one another. This association with human desires and natural resources is the hallmark of Xunzi's theory of ritual propriety. For him, on the one hand, there is no divine or transcendent foundation of ritual propriety. On the other, the sage kings did not established rules of ritual propriety arbitrarily. These rules were made so that human desires would not overextend the means for their satisfaction and material goods would not be exhausted by desires. This claim not only defines the role of ritual propriety vis-à-vis human desires and resources, but also spells out the naturalistic foundation of ritual propriety and morality. For Xunzi, philosophically there is nothing intrinsically good about being morally good except that it prevents the bad.⁵¹ The question of why we should be morally good is answered by addressing the question of why we should not be morally bad, i.e., without ritual propriety we will be unable to optimally satisfy our desires.

My reading of Xunzi may be summarized as follows. In Xunzi, people's natural sentiments themselves are neither intrinsically good nor bad. Various sentiments motivate people to do different things. This tends to result in disorder. One such sentiment, aversion to disorder, motivated sage kings to set up rules in order to prevent chaos. That motivation in itself was not yet a moral one. It was its consequence of the establishment of ritual propriety that became morally good.

My interpretation of Xunzi's theory of the origin of goodness not only has textual basis in the *Xunzi*, but is also consistent with his general philosophy. The logic of Xunzi's philosophy runs from his claim that humans' pursuit of desires have a natural tendency toward chaos, to human nature being bad, to the early rulers' detestation of disorder, and finally to the establishment of ritual propriety to prevent disorder. The focal point of Xunzi's philosophy is emphatically on ritual propriety and order. Even though Xunzi holds that the system of ritual propriety can be and should be internalized and people should aim at becoming *ren* 仁, the ultimate purpose of moral cultivation has to be manifested in the observance of ritual propriety, in order to guard against overextending people's desires that have a natural tendency to go astray.

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Endnotes

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¹ There are different views on an appropriate translation of “*xing*” and “*e*.” For the sake of minimizing distractions, I use the general expression of “bad” for “*e*” and the commonly adopted “human nature” for “*xing*,” even though they do not entirely entail the same meaning.

² Lau, D. C., *A Translation of the Mencius* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1984), 82-83.

³ Fung, Yu-lan 馮友蘭 (Feng Youlan), 《中國哲學史》 *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1961), 365.

⁴ Broadly speaking, I would also include in this category the view that the mind (*xin* 心) is the origin of goodness, and will address it shortly. David Nivison and Bryan Van Norden also appear to hold such a view. For Nivison, see his “Critique of David B. Wong ‘Xunzi on Moral Motivation’,” in *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics*, Philip J. Ivanhoe, ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 323-331, and Nivison, David S., “Hsün Tzu on ‘Human Nature’,” in *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, Bryan Van Norden, ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 203-214. For Van Norden, see his “Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency,” in *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, T.C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 103-134. “*Xin*” is often translated as

“heart-mind.” I translate it as “mind” for simplicity. In Xunzi, “*xin*” is more the mind than the heart.

⁵ Knoblock, John, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (II) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 121, modified.

⁶ Ibid. 71, modified.

⁷ Ibid. 76, modified.

⁸ Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (III) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 107, modified. “*Li* 理” can also mean reason and regulation. Nivison rendered it as “good order” (Nivison, “Hsün Tzu on Human Nature,” 208). Because Xunzi’s philosophy is established firmly on rules of ritual propriety, I translate the term as “principles” here.

⁹ Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Collected Interpretations of the Xunzi* 《荀子集解》 *Xunzi Jijie* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1988), 397.

¹⁰ Ibid. 19.

¹¹ Ibid. 394.

¹² Graham, A.C., *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argumentation in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 248.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Wang, Guowei 王國維, 《王國維文集》 第三卷 *Collected Works of Wang Guowei* (Vol. III) (Beijing: China Literature and History Press, 1997), 215.

¹⁵ Wang Xianqian, *Collected Interpretations of the Xunzi*, 412.

¹⁶ Ibid. 444.

¹⁷ Ibid. 428.

¹⁸ Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1994), 153, modified.

¹⁹ Wang Guowei, *Collected Works*, 215.

²⁰ Wang Xianqian, *Collected Interpretations of the Xunzi*, 373.

²¹ Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1994), 70.

²² Ibid. 65, modified.

²³ Ibid. 66, modified.

²⁴ One might think that the sages were those born with appropriate *qing* that served as foundation for ritual propriety. But if they were born with appropriate *qing* only in some areas (e.g., mourning) but not in other, then they could not have established ritual propriety in these other areas. If they were born with appropriate *qing* in all areas, that would imply that they were born with a good human nature, which Xunzi denies.

²⁵ In Xunzi's use, "*cheng*" can also mean "being made appropriate 當其宜" (Wang Xianqian, *Collected Interpretations of the Xunzi*, 347). A more charitable interpretation of "*cheng qing er li wen*" would be "establishing ritual propriety for the purpose of regulating *qing*," or "establishing ritual propriety in order to make *qing* appropriate." Such a reading would make the statement more consistent with the entire passage.

²⁶ Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1994), 151, modified.

²⁷ See Wang Xianqian, *Collected Interpretations of the Xunzi*, 434.

²⁸ Ibid. 435; Cf. Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1994), 151.

²⁹ Zhou, Zhicheng 周炽成, "荀子：性朴论者，非性恶论者" (Xunzi: Human Nature Is Natural, not Bad), *Guangming Daily*, March 21, 2007, page 11.

³⁰ Kim-Chong Chong, “Xunzi and the Essentialist Mode of Thinking on Human Nature,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 35, no.1 (2008): 68.

³¹ Ibid. 71.

³² Ibid. 65.

³³ Cua, Antonio, *Human Nature, Ritual, and History: Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 21.

³⁴ Ibid. 23.

³⁵ Chong, “Xunzi and the Essentialist Mode of Thinking on Human Nature,” 64.

³⁶ Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1994), 157, modified.

³⁷ Wang Xianqian, *Collected Interpretations of the Xunzi*, 434.

³⁸ Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1990), 103-104, modified.

³⁹ Wang Xianqian, *Collected Interpretations of the Xunzi*, 305.

⁴⁰ David Nivison has identified “yi” as the source of morality in Xunzi (Nivison, “Hsün Tzu on ‘Human Nature’,” 207), but he interprets it as an ability of intelligence and insists that yi does not have “any particular content” (Ibid. 210).

⁴¹ Wang Xianqian, *Collected Interpretations of the Xunzi*, 439.

⁴² Ibid. 100; Cf. Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1988), 227.

⁴³ Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1994), 55, modified.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 80, modified.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 83, modified.

⁴⁶ Knoblock, *Xunzi* (1990), 96, modified.

⁴⁷ The *Liyun* 〈禮運〉 chapter of the *Liji* 《禮記》 traces the origin of ritual propriety to regulating the eating of food, suggesting an idea similar to what is presented here.

⁴⁸ Nivison, “Critique of David B. Wong ‘Xunzi on Moral Motivation’,” 328.

⁴⁹ In order to make Xunzi’s theory relevant today, one probably would replace “sage kings” with initial leaders in primitive society. These leaders may have been more like the first victors out of the earliest Marxian class struggle than Confucian sages, empowered by social, political, and military strength rather than moral force.

⁵⁰ I thank Chris Fraser for suggesting this term to me.

⁵¹ This does not mean that, socially, we cannot take moral virtue as good in itself. Xunzi often speaks in ways suggesting that moral cultivation is a goal in itself.