

**Xunzi: Human Nature**

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## Author's note

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I wrote this in week 7 of my very first semester. As such, it is underdeveloped and not up to a philosophy's rigorous standards. Regardless, I chose to include this on my blog because it contains my thoughts on Chinese Philosophy, despite its quality.

The in-text citations are in the following format: (Chapter.Line), e.g. (1.5) is Chapter 1, Line 5 of *Xunzi* (E.L. Hutton, Trans.).

My immediate worries as a year 1 student taking Chinese Philosophy was interpreting the texts correctly. I was overly concerned with understanding what Xunzi meant that I failed to consider the bigger questions: What is a good philosophy paper, and how do I write one?

The feedback the Teaching Assistant gave me for this particular essay was that it lacked an argument. There was a central problem identified, but my interpretation of Xunzi was wrong. Xunzi does argue what I have stated, but he also argues that non-interested citizens will recognise moral character when they see it. Thus, by setting a good example, the Sage King motivates its citizens to transform their nature from bad to good.

My final essay submission for this course performs even worse than this, because it lacks a central question.

I see my experience from this course as beneficial not only because of the content covered, but also as an opportunity to develop my writing skills as a student. Both of these aspects continue to impact me, as I journey on.

# Xunzi: Human Nature

## Part 1

Motivate a philosophical question that arises from the material we covered. Explain clearly why this question is puzzling to you.

Xunzi's interpretation of the Way has three key features: human nature, education, and transformation. I argue that Xunzi's framework for achieving the Way is incomplete. A necessary feature is missing, specifically under the transformation aspect. He argues that people can be transformed by external sources, i.e. a Sage King who can organise the country to create harmony and order (Xunzi 7.51, 7.56, 3.123). He argues that the Sage King should lead the transformation process, and is capable of transforming an individual's human nature from bad (i.e. self-interested) to good (i.e. not self-interested). He does not acknowledge that an individual's transformation process requires both external and internal forces to be achieved within his framework. To this, I ask, "How can a self-interested person be convinced to follow the Way?". Xunzi would argue that the self-interested individual need not be convinced. However, I disagree. Thus, I argue that his framework is incomplete because people need to want to be transformed in order to be transformed. A Sage King cannot force transformation on others. The individual needs to be intrinsically motivated for transformation to take place.

## Part 2

Attempt to explain how the philosopher might try to answer the question in Part 1 by drawing on textual references available.

## **Human nature is bad**

Xunzi says that human nature is bad because it is inherently self-interested (Xunzi 23.1). He justifies this position by citing the era before the Sage Kings. He notes that if left to their own devices, people will tend toward disorder (Xunzi 23.3). This is because people's innate desires are self-interested (Xunzi 4.176-179). One craves warmth when cold. One craves food when hungry. One craves profit because one naturally desires profit. As such, one will choose actions that are self-profiting, which in turn leads to chaos. One is capable of hate, therefore has the ability to act on their feelings, ultimately producing hateful actions. These actions then cause chaos, because chaos is born from hate. In short, he argued that internal feelings will create external results in line with people's internal feelings and values.

Xunzi also qualifies the distinction between what self-interest is and what is not. Xunzi argued that good and evil feelings cannot co-exist. It is either "villainy" or "trustworthiness", never both at the same time (Xunzi 23.4). As such, one cannot be a petty person and a gentleman. Both roles are mutually exclusive. As a result, the difference between a petty person and a gentleman is that the former is self-interested, while the latter is walking on the path in line with the Way (Xunzi 24.83-89).

Xunzi also qualifies the constant and unchanging characteristic of human nature. He argues that human nature is unchanging, regardless of what you do to it (Xunzi 23.58). He makes the distinction between innate things and "deliberate effort" (Xunzi 23.46). He argues that actions that are not self-interested are of deliberate effort. Thus, by being capable of non-self-interested actions, one is transformed, whether partially or fully.

## **Education**

It is erroneous to conclude that because human nature is self-interested, people are doomed to always be self-interested. Xunzi says that education is key in the transformation

process (Xunzi 1.3-4). He argues that because non-self-interested actions are of deliberate effort, one can learn to be deliberate in one's actions. He argues that people are influenced by what they surround themselves with (Xunzi 1.52-53). Non-self-interest is a consequence of learning. Non-self-interest is caused by education. He characterises education as the unification and guiding principle of the transformation process and rituals (15.194). Without education, transformation and rituals are not "ordered".

Xunzi says that education enables people to expand their capabilities (Xunzi 1.49-54). Because one can do new things with education, one can do good things even though one is bad. Thus, education enables self-interested people to do non-self-interested actions.

Xunzi says people begin their education by reading the Classics and studying rituals (Xunzi 1.299). Rituals enable self-interested people to do non-self-interested actions. This is why Xunzi argues that education is key in following the Way. One begins the transformation process by beginning one's education. The two are linked. Education necessitates transformation.

## **Transformation**

Xunzi says transformation is possible. He argues that people are capable of transforming their nature from bad to good. He argues that if one collects "enough goodness" internally, one will become good (Xunzi 1.82-83). He argues that if one "clings onto ren and yi", one will eventually internalise such values and have them within them. He says that by trying to attain something externally, one will eventually internalise it.

Xunzi argues that Sage Kings have the ability to transform others (Xunzi 7.62). Sage Kings acquire this ability because they are transformed and are on the path of the Way. Xunzi says that transformation is helmed by the leaders of society, i.e. the Sage King and the Village Elders (Xunzi 19.56). It is the role of the Sage King to understand Heaven and order the

Earth based on that knowledge (Xunzi 9.369). As such, rituals are born of the knowledge of Heaven. Xunzi also says that if a society is transformed, it means a Sage King must be in-charge (Xunzi 10.457).

Thus, the transformation process is instigated and driven by external forces. An individual under Sage King's rule is inherently self-interested. During the Sage King's rule, he arranges for the country to conform to the Way. He implements ritual propriety throughout the land, causing said individual to practise rituals because the Sage King said so. After a significant period of time, a thousand li would have been crossed. Thus, one is transformed. This is Xunzi's interpretation of the Way regarding moral and political philosophy.

### **Part 3**

Critically assess the position you attributed to the philosopher in Part 2.

However, Xunzi's interpretation is incomplete. He does not answer the core question: "How can a self-interested person be convinced to follow the Way?". He assumes that for the transformation process to occur, is it sufficient for an external force to only be required. However, this interpretation is incomplete. Both an external and internal force is required. Just because one does the ritual does not mean one will embody its principles.

Xunzi acknowledges the existence of this question but does not directly answer it because he does not believe that one needs to be convinced in order to be transformed. He acknowledges the question in the following statement: the petty person will not internalise anything, and thus will learn nothing (1.148). He also implied that one must appreciate learning before it can be effective by stating that one will not know Heaven before arriving at a mountain peak (Xunzi 1.12). With these statements, he acknowledges the question but does not answer it.

Instead, he sidesteps the question by placing explicit emphasis on the transformational power of Sage Kings and village leader figures. Xunzi says the Sage King's power alone is sufficient to transform individuals (Xunzi 9.5).

He also says one must "cling to ren" (Xunzi 19.120). This implies that ren is external. If ren is interpreted as both an internal and an external virtue, then Xunzi's interpretation is complete. As it is, his main position is that external transformational powers are sufficient, of which I say such an interpretation is incomplete.

Xunzi does not acknowledge the trap regarding self-interest. As one is self-interested, one will act according to one's innate desires. These desires are not aligned with the Way. Therefore, one will never want to follow the Way. However, it is necessary for one to want to follow the Way in order to be transformed. Thus, no Sage King will have the ability to transform self-interested individuals. This is the key concept within the question I posed.

Xunzi could strengthen his argument by answering the question I posed. He could combine his understanding of the petty person and the transformational power of the Sage King. He can argue that both an internal want and an external power are needed for the transformation process. This would strengthen his teaching and make it complete in my eyes.



### References

Xunzi (2014). *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (E.L. Hutton, Trans.). Princeton University Press.

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