

Chapter 1

Introduction

Xunzi 荀子¹ is less colorful than most other major, ancient Chinese philosophers. He lacks Zhuangzi's brilliant, literary imagination and falls short of Mencius's rhetorical skill in providing heart-felt illustrations. It also seems that Xunzi lacks Confucius's vibrant character. His writing style is dry and repetitive, and its tone is sometimes fairly conservative. While Xunzi can be said to be very perspicacious in making his points, he does not leave much room for interpretation. In short, Xunzi neither inspires cosmic imagination, nor touches the human heart deeply.

What, then, is the reason for the recent burgeoning interest, particularly among Western philosophical scholars, in Xunzi?² The fact that, notwithstanding his apparent philosophical perspicacity, the more one explores the *Xunzi*, the more enigmatic it appears, seems to invite scholarly curiosity. As clearheaded as Xunzi appears, he makes many intriguing and even seemingly contradictory statements regarding central philosophical issues. The following paragraph by David Nivison is worth citing to show how Xunzi's seemingly inconsistent arguments puzzle Western scholars:

Xunzi argued that language, understood as names for things, is artificial, having been invented and decreed by the sage kings to satisfy human and administrative needs; yet he also thinks the language we have is right, and deplores the confusions of the sophists who treat names as merely conventional. He thought that the sage kings likewise created "rites and norms," i.e., the ordinary moral rules and standards of civilized society; and yet he also thinks that these rules and

standards are universally binding on us and are not merely conventions. And when he tries to analyze the reasons an individual has for accepting the moral order [...], he tries to show that a cool calculation will lead one from one's ordinary desires to acceptance of the moral "Way" as the best means of optimizing satisfactions. Yet when he explains how one should "cultivate oneself" [...] so as to make this acceptance effective, he portrays the cultivated gentleman as one who loves the "Way" so that he is willing to die for it, as one who has trained himself to think, see, say, do only what is right, as one who has been transformed by this "learning" so that it penetrates his entire being. And at times Xunzi bursts out in paeans of praise of the "rites" and the "gentleman" as having a place in the cosmic order coequal with heaven and earth [...].³

In short, Xunzi sometimes looks like a genuine "conventionalist" or "nominalist" regarding language and ethical systems (rites or rituals, *li* 禮). However, he also seems to hold a "realist" position about these issues. He sometimes appears to be a flexible pragmatist, and at the same time, gives the impression of being a staunch conservative critic against all other philosophical schools, even particular Confucian camps. While he appropriates a variety of different philosophical outlooks, he always maintains a distance from them.

As Nivison's analysis implies, recent Western scholars' attempts to make sense of Xunzi's philosophy often rely on Western philosophical concepts or categories such as "realism," "nominalism," or "relativism." However, their efforts seem to pay insufficient attention to the context in which Xunzi shaped his own philosophical agenda; in other words, they seem to be too preoccupied with making sense of Xunzi's philosophy according to Western philosophical categories and forget to ask what the central philosophical problem was for Xunzi himself. In my understanding, Xunzi's overriding concern was with the "naturalistic" tendencies in the philosophy of his time. A careful examination of how Xunzi developed his notion of *xin* (heart-mind, mind-heart, heart, mind 心)⁴ can offer a crucial clue to understanding Xunzi's overall philosophical structure.

Needless to say, the naturalism that Xunzi opposes is not equivalent to either pre-Socratic "naturalism," which tries to explain the world, not in terms of mythology, but in terms of natural elements such as water or fire, or the "naturalism" contemporary philosophers use when referring to the claim that every object can and should be studied by methods adopted from the natural sciences. By "naturalism," I mean an ancient Chinese philosophical orientation that seeks the source of normativity in the natural realm. In ancient China, the notion of "transcendence"—the notion of absolute deity or the conception of Platonic "Forms"—never occupied a central position in philosophical dis-

course. As a result, it seemed perfectly natural for philosophers to turn to the “naturalness,” or “spontaneity” of nature to find the source of value or guidance for a way of life. For Xunzi, however, this posed a serious problem: if we take the natural realm as the source of values and resort to the way of nature for directing our ethical life and building culture and society, why do we need to pay respect to the Confucian cultural heritage, and how can we identify the role of human agency in establishing morality and culture? If we acknowledge the spontaneous way of nature as the source of value and moral guidance, how can we follow the way of nature without assuming there are distinctive human faculties that direct us to do so?

I argue that Xunzi’s notion of *xin*, particularly as the faculty of “autonomy,”⁵ is a response to the “naturalistic trend” of his time. The notion of *xin* as the faculty of self-governance is Xunzi’s deliberate attempt to respond to the challenge of “naturalistic” philosophy by clearly identifying a human realm that cannot be confounded with the natural realm. Furthermore, the recognition that the Xunzian notion of morality, namely *li* (rituals, rites, manners 禮), is constructed by the autonomous faculties of *xin* can lead us to understand the reason why *li*-morality is both conventional and “objective” for Xunzi.

I explore the autonomous character of *xin* in Xunzi in the following six chapters. In chapter 2, I first examine the background against which Xunzi develops the notion of *xin* as the faculty of self-governance. Xunzi seems to regard Mencius and Zhuangzi as the two representatives of the naturalistic trend. Brief sketches of *xin* in both Mencius and Zhuangzi allow us to see the context in which Xunzi shapes his own notion of *xin*.

Chapter 3 examines the notions of *tian* (heaven, sky, nature 天) and *xing* (natural dispositions or tendencies, human nature 性) in Xunzi. These two notions can be considered the fundamental ground on which the naturalists establish their philosophical orientations. Through Xunzi’s interpretation of these concepts, we can see both his response to naturalism as well as the path that leads him to the notion of the autonomy of *xin*.

In chapter 4, I first trace the evolution of *xin* from its earliest stage, as the seat of emotions, desires, and intellect, to Xunzi’s autonomous, supervisory faculty. This examination shows that Xunzi’s notion of the autonomy of *xin* is a concept deliberately devised to deal with the problem of the unity of *xin* in self-cultivation. By endowing *xin* with the faculty of self-governance, Xunzi renders *xin* an active agent of self-cultivation and the seat of all psychological phenomena at the same time. We notice that *xin*, as the seat of all psychological phenomena encompassing *xing*-like dispositional tendencies, includes the sense of appropriateness (*yi* 義). This is one of the most important points in Xunzi’s moral psychology: the sense of appropriateness serves not only as the basis on which the autonomous *xin* deliberates and chooses a course of

action on a given occasion, but also as one of the crucial reasons that the Xunzian notion of morality is not merely conventional.

I divide my discussion of the autonomous aspect of *xin* in Xunzi into both cognitive and volitional aspects. The primary function of *xin* as the faculty of self-governance can be said to be “reflective or critical” thinking to assess and guide first-order desires and emotions. This implies that *xin* is able to choose between the various sets of emotions and desires against natural tendencies or inclinations inherent in humans. Xunzi calls the resultant choice or action “deliberative exertion (*wei* 偶).” Persons, for Xunzi, can transform their natural inclinations only through the accumulation of “deliberative exertion.” This “deliberative exertion” is based on knowledge gained through the combination of objective facts and subjective cognitive function. Xunzi puts equal stress on *xin*’s cognitive function of confirming empirical knowledge and on the empirical source of knowledge. What is noteworthy in Xunzi’s moral epistemology is that the categorization of things that are the same and those that are different is regarded as the most basic knowledge, and is treated as being continuous with the normative evaluation of things, namely, the distinction between what is noble and what is base.

“Deliberative exertion” posits two things: first, an agent has a volitional power that allows his or her critical thinking to be unaffected or impaired by desires and emotions. Second, the exercise of volition follows *xin*’s judgment of what is reasonable. The second assumption raises the question: Can there be an occasion on which *xin*’s judgment misleads the exercise of the volition of *xin*? Xunzi replies that there are abundant occasions on which persons misjudge things, due to *xin*’s preoccupation with partial aspects of things. The remedy for this obsession or attachment is to recover *xin*’s qualities of emptiness (*xu* 空), unity (*i* 一), and placidness (*jing* 靜), which will enable it to see things in a comprehensive, holistic way. Xunzi calls this holistic perspective *dao*.

Chapter 5 examines how *li*-morality can be deemed nonarbitrary in spite of Xunzi’s acknowledgment that it was invented by the sage-kings, and how *li*-morality can be connected to the notion of the autonomy of *xin*. For this examination, I first look at Xunzi’s contention in his theory of “the proper use of names (*zhengming* 正名):” names, though conventional artifacts, are not merely conventional. For Xunzi, just as measurement, which was created to satisfy the human need to measure the world, should reflect the world in order for it to work properly, names, though human conventions, should not be arbitrary or independent of the world in order for them to be good names. What Xunzi’s doctrine of *li* fundamentally shares with his theory of language is that the distinction between things that are the same and those that are different and the discrimination between what is noble and what is base serve as the basis on which to build both theories. Put differently, “making distinctions (*fen*

分)” is, for Xunzi, the primary function for both language and *li*. In addition, *li* touches on the “performative” aspect of language. Naming things not only reflects the world as it is, it also serves to shape the world as it should be. The most fundamental assumption in the theory of *li* is that it can bring about an orderly society. By making social distinctions explicit and having them internalized by the members of society, *li* can make society harmonious and free of conflict. Based on these similarities, we can infer how Xunzi establishes his notion of *li* as an unconventional moral theory. The sage-kings created *li* to bring order to society. However, because *li* is inseparable from the sense of appropriateness, which is directly connected to what is reasonable, it is neither arbitrary nor unreasonable.

In the final section of chapter 5, I deal with the relationship between *li* and the autonomous *xin*. Here, I suggest several reasons that it is reasonable for the autonomous *xin* to choose *li* as the best possible solution to the problem of moral self-cultivation and the establishment of an orderly society. I first point out that *li*, though created out of the need to cope with a disorderly sociopolitical situation, is firmly grounded on *xin*’s ability to comprehend what is reasonable and appropriate. Second, I mention the connection between Xunzi’s assertion that persons should transform their natural tendencies and the notion of *li* as a “practice.” That is, *li* can be deemed one of the best ways to transform first-order emotions and desires into second-order emotions and desires. I also emphasize that *li*, as the concrete embodiment of *dao*, perfectly fits the Xunzian notion of “concrete rationality,” which seeks a practical guide for cultivating a moral character that can adjust to changing circumstances without losing sight of the holistic picture. Finally, I offer a reconstructive narration of how a sage-king who initiates the creation of *li* can become a sage-king without the knowledge of *li*. Through this, I observe that, without the initiation of autonomous *xin*, *xing* can never be transformed, and that, without the deliberative capacity of *xin*, *li* can never be invented. Once people recognize that human psychological structure, as well as the structure of nature, is deeply reflected in *li*, they no longer see *li* as a merely conventional, suppressive custom or morality, but voluntarily adopt it as their best available moral guide for becoming virtuous and forming a flourishing society.

Chapter 6 compares Xunzi’s notions of the autonomy of *xin* and *li*-morality with the Kantian notions of autonomy and morality. In this comparison, it is apparent that while Xunzi’s moral philosophy can be viewed as a response to ancient Chinese naturalism, Kantian ethics can be seen as a response to the modern, mechanistic, scientific view of nature. In this respect, there are some similarities between them. Both Kant and Xunzi consider the task of their moral philosophy to be securing the ground of human morality differently from the way of nature. Both stress the importance of human agency in constructing morality. Also, both take the faculty of critical

reasoning, unimpeded by emotions and desires, to be the central constituent of the notion of autonomy. However, they are fundamentally separated by their different views of nature. While Kant does not reject a materialistic, scientific view of nature, Xunzi criticizes not the organicist view of nature that he and the naturalists share, but the way the naturalists approach the relationship between humankind and nature. Accordingly, whereas Kant builds morality on a strict ontological separation between the human ethical realm and the natural phenomenal realm, Xunzi attempts to retain the continuity between human morality and the natural world, while underscoring the significance of human constructive effort in establishing morality.

Chapter 7 explores why Xunzi has, more often than not, been neglected throughout the history of Chinese philosophy. For this examination, I borrow Li Zehou's observation that all schools of Chinese thought ascribe formidable power to the subject so that the objective natural world becomes infinitely malleable to the moral will of human agency. I call this idea "subjective volitionism." On this perspective, what I call "naturalism" is just the other side of "subjective volitionism"; it is the naturalistic characterization of the moral subject as continuous with the spontaneous way of nature that offers the cosmological ground for "subjective volitionism." In contrast to naturalism, Xunzi bases the continuity of human morality and *tian* on the recognition of the difference between the way morality should be established and the spontaneous way of the natural world. This Xunzian approach to the relationship between humankind and the natural world would have been seen as less than favorable and even threatening to the volitionistic moral subject endorsed by mainstream Confucianism as the proper model for personhood.

My study of Xunzi's notion of the autonomy of *xin* and its relation to *li*-morality is neither an exegetical exercise nor a strictly philosophical assessment of the validity of Xunzi's philosophy. Rather, it might be called a "philosophical reconstruction"⁶ that renders Xunzi's position philosophically plausible in its own terms. Put another way, I attempt, on the one hand, to situate Xunzi's philosophy in the proper historical context of Chinese philosophy, and on the other, to give the best philosophical interpretation of Xunzi's position. Accordingly, my study does not aspire to be the definitive interpretation of the text, the *Xunzi*, or an attempt to vindicate Xunzi's philosophy in a contemporary philosophical sense. Instead, I hope that my study turns out to be helpful to those who try to understand Xunzi's philosophy in its own right while gaining some fruitful philosophical insights from Xunzi's philosophy.

I use John Knoblock's translation of the *Xunzi*⁷ for the most part, and sometimes also adopt Burton Watson's rendition.⁸ However, almost all of these translations include some modifications to convey my understanding of Chinese philosophical terms. This also applies to the translations of other

Chinese texts. Following quoted passages from the *Xunzi*, I indicate the textual reference by the chapter, section, and page number of the *Concordance of Hsün Tzu* of the Harvard-Yenching Index Series⁹ and the chapter and section number of Knoblock's translation. When I use Watson's translation, I add the page number from his work. The sources for all other translations from Chinese texts are provided in footnotes.