

10 Xunzi: Rational Interpretation of Nature and the Rejection of the Belief in Spirits (ca. 3rd Century BCE)

Introduced by Hubert Seiwert

Introduction

The Book *Xunzi* 荀子 (“Master Xun”) contains the teachings of Xun Kuang 荀况, who lived at the end of the Warring States period, in the third century BCE. Xunzi was one of the most influential scholars of his time, being familiar with, and critical of, the teachings of numerous philosophical schools.

His own teachings are attributed to the Confucian school. However, his view that human beings were inherently evil was subsequently criticised by the neo-Confucians of the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), because it was contrary to the preferred teaching of Mencius (fourth century BCE), that human nature was inherently good.

Xunzi’s thesis that people are naturally selfish, seeking only their own advantage, can be understood as a rational conclusion in the face of widespread violence and ruthlessness. The idea of a natural morality seemed to him as erroneous as the belief in the existence of supernatural powers that reward and punish according to people’s behaviour. Xunzi advocated a rational naturalism that had no place for the workings of gods and spirits. His understanding of *tian* 天 is symptomatic of this. The word can be used and understood in different senses, with its meaning ranging from the sky and celestial phenomena to Heaven, understood as a personal god. While for Mozi *tian* was the supreme deity of Heaven who supervises people’s moral behaviour and responds to offerings, Xunzi interpreted *tian* as the world of natural phenomena. In Xunzi’s view, natural phenomena follow constant laws that are not affected by human behaviour. Xunzi’s naturalism can thus be described as a ‘secular’ understanding of the world, because *tian* is understood as nature disenchanted from any supernatural meaning. This can be seen in his chapter *Tian Lun* (“Discourse on *Tian*”), excerpts of which are presented here, translated by John Knoblock, under the title “Discourse on Nature.”

Seemingly contradicting his rational naturalism, Xunzi attaches central importance to rituals, including sacrificial rites, in line with the Confucian tradition. However, Xunzi’s interpretation of the meaning of rites is consistent with his view that humans are inherently selfish and uncivilised. Conflict-free coexistence is only made possible through civilisation, a prerequisite for which is the learning and observance

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of cultivated manners. Rituals (*li* 禮) comprise the totality of this civilised behaviour. Sacrificial rites are also seen as part of the cultural tradition, but Xunzi does not see them as a service to gods or spirits. Instead, in the various rituals, the ancestors are only treated *as if* they were alive, although they have no spiritual existence. Sacrifices are thus stripped of any religious significance. Xunzi explains his understanding in the chapter *Li Lun* (“Discourse on Ritual Principles”), which had a lasting influence on the Confucian interpretation of rituals. Excerpts of John Knoblock’s translation are reprinted below.

Bibliographical Information

Xunzi jijie 荀子集解 (*Xunzi With Collected Explanations*). Edited by Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (Taipei: Wenguang tushu gongsi, 1971); 205–11, 231–33, 245–51.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

The translation adopted here can be found in:

Xunzi. “Discourse on Nature,” and “Discourse on Ritual Principles.” In *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works, Volume III, Books 17–32*, edited and translated by John Knoblock, 14–22, and 55–73. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994; 14–15, 17–20, 55, 58, 72–73.

The translator’s philological notes are omitted.

Translation Adopted from John Knoblock

Discourse on Nature (*Tian Lun* 天論)

The course of Nature^I is constant: it does not survive because of the actions of a Yao; it does not perish because of the actions of a Jie.^{II} If you respond to the constancy of

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I HS: The expression *tian xing* 天行, which is translated here as “the course of nature,” could also be translated as “the course of Heaven,” or “the course of the celestial bodies.” For the meaning of *tian*, see the introduction above. In this chapter, Xunzi plays with the double meaning of *tian*, to invalidate the understanding of *tian* as a divine moral actor.

II HS: Yao 堯 is a legendary Chinese ruler of high antiquity, renowned for his virtue and intelligence. Jie 桀, the last ruler of the Xia dynasty (twentieth to sixteenth century BCE), was a tyrant. Yao and Jie symbolise the contrast between good and bad government. According to traditional beliefs, *tian* (understood as Heaven) was supposed to respond to the moral behaviour of the rulers. However, Xunzi maintains that the course of *tian* (understood as the course of the celestial bodies or of Nature) is not changed by human behaviour, but is instead constant.

Nature's course with good government, there will be good fortune; if you respond to it with disorder, there will be misfortune. If you strengthen the basic undertakings and moderate expenditures, Nature cannot impoverish you. If your nourishment is complete and your movements accord with the season, then Nature cannot afflict you with illness. If you conform to the Way and are not of two minds, then Nature cannot bring about calamity. Accordingly, flood and drought cannot cause famine, cold and heat cannot cause sickness, and inauspicious and freak events cannot cause misfortune.

If you ignore the basic undertakings and spend extravagantly, then Nature cannot enrich you. If your nourishment lacks essential elements and your movements accord with rare events, then Nature cannot make you whole. If you turn your back on the Way and behave with foolish recklessness, then Nature cannot bring good fortune. Accordingly, there will be famine when neither flood nor drought has come, there will be sickness when neither heat nor cold has reached you, and there will be misfortune even though inauspicious and freak events have not occurred. Although the seasons are received just the same as in an orderly age, the catastrophes and calamities will be of a different order [of magnitude] from those of an orderly age; yet you can have no cause to curse Nature, for these things are the consequences of the way that you have followed. Accordingly, if you understand the division between Nature and mankind, then you can properly be called a 'Perfect Man.' [. . . p. 205–207 . . .]

What is the relation of order and chaos to Heaven? I say: the revolutions of the sun and moon and the stars and celestial points that mark off the divisions of time by which the calendar is calculated were the same in the time of Yu^{III} as in the time of Jie. Since Yu achieved order and Jie brought chaos, order and chaos are not due to Heaven.

What about the Seasons? I say that crops germinate and grow to maturity in the course of spring and summer [p. 207/208] and are harvested and gathered for storage during autumn and winter. This also was the same in the time of Yu and in the time of Jie. Since Yu achieved order and Jie brought chaos, order and chaos are not due to the seasons.

What about Earth? I say that if something obtains land on which to grow it will live and if it loses that land then it will die, and that this as well was the same for both Yu and Jie. Since Yu achieved order and Jie brought chaos, order and chaos are not due to Earth. [. . . p. 208/209 . . .]

When stars fall or trees groan, the whole state is terrified. They ask what caused this to happen. I reply that there was no specific reason. When there is a modification of the relation of Heaven and Earth or a transmutation of the Yin and Yang, such unusual events occur. We may marvel at them, but we should not fear them. As for the sun and moon being eclipsed, winds and rain occurring unseasonably, and the sudden appearance of a marvelous new star, there has been no age that has not occasion-

III HS: Yu is considered the founder of the Xia Dynasty, and an exemplary ruler.

ally had them. If the ruler is enlightened and his governmental regulations equitable, then although all these should occur within a generation, it would cause no harm. If the superior is benighted and his governmental regulations harsh, then although not one of them occurs, it would be of no advantage. For indeed the falling of stars and the groaning of trees – these are unusual events that occur because of a modification of the relation of Heaven and Earth or a transmutation of the Yin and Yang. We may marvel at them, but we should not fear them.

Among the things that have occurred, the most fearful are monstrosities among men. {Someone asks what are called monstrosities among men? I say:}^{IV} Plowing so badly done that the grain crop is damaged; weeding so poorly carried out that the harvest is lost; governmental regulations so unfair that the people are lost; fields so overgrown with weeds that the grain crops are bad; and grain so expensive and the people so hungry that the bodies of the dead lie along the roads – these are called monstrosities among men. [. . . p. 209–211 . . .]

If you pray for rain and there is rain, what of that? I say there is no special relationship – as when you do not pray for rain and there is rain. When the sun and moon are eclipsed, we attempt to save them; when Heaven sends drought, we pray for rain; and before we decide any important undertaking, we divine with bone and milfoil. We do these things not because we believe that such ceremonies will produce the results we seek, but because we want to embellish such occasions with ceremony. Thus, the gentleman considers such ceremonies as embellishments, but the Hundred Clans consider them supernatural.^V To consider them embellishments is fortunate; to consider them supernatural is unfortunate.

Discourse on Ritual Principles (*Li lun* 禮論)

How did ritual principles arise? I say that men are born with desires which, if not satisfied, cannot but lead men to seek to satisfy them. If in seeking to satisfy their desires men 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 abhorred such disorder; so they established the regulations contained within ritual and moral principles in order to apportion things, to nurture the desires of men, and to supply the means for their satisfaction. They so fashioned their regulations that desires should

IV HS: The passage in curly brackets has been inserted by the translator based on a parallel edition of the Chinese text.

V HS: Here, Xunzi presents his understanding of rituals as cultural practices (*wen* 文), which is translated here as “embellishments.” This understanding is contrasted with the common view that these rituals are religious practices (*shen* 神), referring to supernatural things, which Xunzi regards as an incorrect belief. From a modern perspective, the contrast between *wen* and *shen* is similar to the contrast between secular and religious interpretations of ritual practices.

not want for the things which satisfy them and 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 principles. [. . . p. 231–233 . . .]

Ritual principles have three roots. Heaven and Earth are the root of life. Forebears are the root of kinship. Lords and teachers are the root of order. Were there no Heaven and no Earth, how could there be life? Were there no forebears, how could there be issue? Were there no lords and no teachers, how could there be order? Were even one of these three lost, there would be no peace and security for man. Thus, rituals serve Heaven above and Earth below, pay honor to one's forebears, and exalt rulers and teachers, for these are the three roots of ritual principles. [. . . p. 233–249 . . .]

Sacrifice originates in the emotions stirred by remembrance and recollection of the dead and by thinking of and longing for the departed. There inevitably are occasions in everyone's life when he is seized by an unexpected change of mood, when feelings of disquietude and melancholy cause him to sigh involuntarily or to feel that his breath is short from deep emotion. Thus, even in the midst of enjoying himself with congenial company, the loyal minister and the filial son are sometimes overcome with such changes of mood. When they do come, they are profoundly [p. 249/250] moving. If they are repressed, the emotions stirred by remembrance of the dead will be frustrated and remain unexpressed, and the rituals in dealing with such matters will seem lacking and incomplete. Thus, the Ancient Kings acted to establish proper forms wherein men could express the full measure of their obligation to pay honor to those deserving honor and to show affection to those whom they cherished.

Hence, I say that sacrifice originates in the emotions stirred by remembrance and recollection of the dead and by thinking of and longing for the departed, expresses the highest loyalty, faithfulness, love, and reverence, and is the fulfillment of ritual observances and formal bearing. If it were not for the sages, no one would be capable of understanding the meaning of sacrifice. The sage clearly understands ritual, the scholar and gentleman find comfort in carrying it out, officials of government have as their task preserving it, and the Hundred Clans incorporate it into their customs. For the gentleman, ritual observances are considered to be part of the Way of Man. Among the Hundred Clans, they are thought to be a matter of serving the ghosts of the departed.^{VI} [. . .]

One divines with the tortoise shell and milfoil, determines auspicious days, purifies oneself and fasts, repairs and sweeps the temple, lays out the low tables and bamboo mats, presents the ceremonial offerings, and informs the invocator as though someone were really going to enjoy the sacrifice. One takes up the offerings and presents each of them as though someone were really going to taste them. The chief waiter does not lift up the wine cup, [p. 250/251] but the chief sacrificer himself has

VI HS: Here, a contrast is made between “the Way of Man” (*ren dao* 人道) and “serving the ghosts” (*gui shi* 鬼事), which could also be translated as “ghostly (or spiritual) matters”. This distinction resembles the one between ‘cultural practice’ (*wen* 文) and ‘religious practices’ (*shen* 神) mentioned in the previous note.

that honor, as though someone were really going to drink from it. When the guests leave, the chief sacrificer bows and escorts them out, returns and changes his clothing, resumes his place, and weeps as though someone had really departed with the guests. How full of grief, how reverent this is! One serves the dead as one serves the living, those who have perished as those who survive, just as though one were giving visible shape to what is without shape or shadow, and in so doing one perfects proper form!^{VII}

VII HS: The paragraph describes a Confucian understanding of sacrificial rituals, which are performed *as if* there were spirits consuming the offerings and enjoying being treated as honoured guests. This understanding had already been expressed by Confucius: “He sacrificed to the dead, as if they were present. He sacrificed to the spirits, as if the spirits were present.” (*Lunyu*, *Bayi* 論語, 八佾. Trans. James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* [Taipei: Wenshi zhexue chubanshe, 1971], I:159).