

## 2.9 XUNZI

Unlike Confucius and Mencius, who were private teachers, the last of the great Classical Confucians was a state-sponsored academic. Xunzi, who lived from the late fourth to the late third century, traveled east from his native state of Zhao to the Shandong peninsula as a young man, and studied with the masters of the Jixia Academy, which had been established by the rulers of Qi.

Jixia was the intellectual center of China during the early third century. “Wise men” of every persuasion came to it to peddle their ideas and benefit from the largess of the Qi government. Xunzi gradually rose from the ranks of promising students. He became the leading Confucian spokesman at the academy, and ultimately the senior master among all the thinkers there. It was during his years at Jixia that he and his followers compiled the essays that comprise the *Xunzi*, his collected works. In the end, the academy was dissolved in the wake of invasions of Qi by the state of Yan and encroachments by the state of Chu. Xunzi landed on his feet, however. When Chu captured the old state of Lu, Confucius's homeland, the Chu prime minister appointed Xunzi to be magistrate of a major town there, thus winning good will by patronizing Lu's “native” philosophy.

By Xunzi's time, philosophical discourse had reached a high level of sophistication, and Confucianism's faith in the personal and political efficacy of Zhou *li* was under heavy attack from a variety of schools. Xunzi was perfectly placed to understand the nature of these threats to his faith. He was also a brilliant thinker and analyst, and the book which bears his name is a tour de force defense of Confucianism from a wide variety of attacks.

The most dangerous of these threats came from the variety of emerging schools that looked to Nature in order to establish a value standard for the human world. Naturalists were particularly effective in challenging the Confucian notion that patterns of behavior designed by rulers over many centuries represented in some way mankind's ultimate destiny. For the Naturalists, *li* were non-natural, artificial forms. What people needed to guide them out of the morass of Warring States amorality were values rooted in the non-human world of Nature; eternal values that were not the products of the arbitrary movements of history.

Xunzi recognized the force of the belief that in Nature one could find constant values. He knew that Mencius had responded to this idea by building the Confucian virtues into man's natural endowment at birth, hoping to anchor ritual in moral senses as spontaneous and natural as our physical sense organs. But Xunzi believed that Mencius's strategy was an inadequate line of defense against the Naturalists. In trying to justify *li* and standards of righteousness by claiming that they were natural, Mencius implied that ultimate value lay in Nature rather than in achievements of mankind. This was, for Xunzi, far too great a concession to offer the Naturalists, who could deny the “naturalness” of ritual far more persuasively than Mencius could prove it.

Xunzi instead chose to argue that the products of Nature possessed no ethical value whatever: that Heaven's product, the natural world, could be turned towards good or evil depending upon the choices that human beings made. Xunzi pictured man's spontaneous nature as

a bundle of brutish desires that in themselves led merely towards an animal existence. People were different from the rest of Nature, Xunzi said, only because they were capable of *changing* themselves and becoming *unnatural*. Through effort, man could go beyond his nature and become ethical. The patterns of ritual behavior embroidered by the sages of the past were the guidelines to this purely human form of perfection: moral excellence.

Xunzi identified at least seven ways in which human beings were unique, each of the six forming a partial explanation of why mankind can create value out of its value-free natural endowment.

1. Human beings can acquire new abilities through repetitive practice.
2. Human beings are able to use tools.
3. The human mind is able to distinguish between sameness and difference.
4. Human beings have a natural ability to see how things “fit” into structures appropriately.
5. Human beings are able to learn the lesson of deferred gratification.
6. Human beings can appropriate the things of the world to change their environment and so nurture new species characteristics.
7. Only humans have desires that outstrip the resources of their environment, forcing man to invent social systems of resource allocation.

All of these abilities Xunzi labeled as “artifice,” a word which he selected for its tendentious challenge to Daoism and related schools of thought. The Daoists had exalted spontaneity and rejected all goal-directed action in their imperative of “non-action,” or *wuwei*. The term for goal directed action, *wei*, was written and pronounced identically with the word meaning “artifice,” which carried a negative connotation, just like the English “artificial.” By making artifice a *positive* value, Xunzi was highlighting his low valuation of Nature and his belief that it could provide mankind with no ethical guidelines.

Because Xunzi's position on human nature created a sharp contrast with Mencius, it became usual in traditional China to picture the two as adversarial approaches to the Confucian message (they are sometimes pictured as the Chinese equivalent of Plato and Aristotle). In fact, their two approaches simply reflect the differences in the intellectual environments in which they lived. Mencius came to intellectual maturity at a time when Mohism was the greatest challenge to Confucianism. Mohism attacked Confucian ethical values as too limited and demanded, in the doctrine of “Universal Love,” that people discard the graded relationships that governed the Confucian social vision in favor of an equal affective regard for all people. Mencius's portrait of human nature was designed to defeat the Mohists by showing how the Confucian ethical categories were endowed in us by Nature and could not be unnaturally stretched in the way the Mohists demanded.

Xunzi's concern was to respond to Daoism and Naturalism, which were the dominant schools at the Jixia Academy. Mencius's doctrines were poorly suited to this purpose because his picture of the innate moral senses was certainly no more compelling than the Daoist claim that our simplest biological urges, being the imperatives that Nature most clearly endows in us, should be

our guide. What Xunzi needed to do was to *grant* the position that what Nature gives us is little more than our biological endowment, but *refute* the claim that simply because it is natural to us it is therefore good. To achieve this goal, Xunzi devised many arguments to demonstrate that Nature, in fact, was extremely limited as a source of value and could provide no ethical guidelines whatever. For Xunzi, ethics and values are man-made, though Nature may serve as an inspirational model. The Confucian categories of goodness and right behavior are not grounded in Nature at all, they are grounded in history – the forging of ethical society over the centuries by generations of sage leaders.

The *Xunzi* is a large book and no single essay within it articulates all these points. The selection that follows, the “Treatise on Heaven,” is one of the most dramatic in the text. It highlights the very clear contrast that Xunzi makes between the world of Nature, which provides opportunities to man but no guidelines, and the patterns of *li*, which represent the path towards a distinctively human form of perfection.

## Xunzi: Treatise on Heaven

### The constancy of Heaven

Heaven's ways are constant. It did not prevail due to the Emperor Yao; it does not perish due to the Emperor Jie. Respond to it with order and good fortune follows; respond to it with disorder and ill fortune follows.

Strengthen the root and regulate expenditures, and Heaven cannot impoverish. Bring nurturance to completion and act only when the time is ripe, and Heaven cannot sicken. Cultivate the Dao without irresolution, and Heaven cannot devastate. Flood and drought cannot bring starvation; extremes of cold and heat cannot bring sickness; prodigies and freaks cannot bring ill fortune. Let the roots shrivel and spend extravagantly, and Heaven cannot enrich. Skimp nurturance and act contrary to the times, and Heaven cannot complete. Abandon the way and act wantonly, and Heaven cannot bring good fortune. There is starvation without flood or drought; there is sickness without extremes of cold and heat; there is ill fortune without prodigies and freaks. Though the seasons revolve as they do in ordered times, disaster and devastation arise unlike in ordered times. Heaven cannot be blamed: it is a consequence of the way chosen by man.

He who understands the distinct roles of Heaven and man may be called a perfect man.

### Keeping man and Heaven distinct

That which is accomplished without action, obtained without pursuit, that belongs to the office of Heaven. Though it be profound, man adds no thought to it; though it be great, man adds no ability to it; though it be keen, man adds no insight to it. This is called “not contesting office with Heaven.” The heavens have their seasons, earth has its riches, man has his rule: this is what is meant by “forming a trinity.” To discard the means for joining with the other two and instead to aspire to their likeness: this is delusion.

The ranks of stars revolve in procession, the sun and moon shine in turn, the seasons succeed one another, the forces of *yin* and *yang* alternate in great transformation; the winds and rains give broad nourishment, the things of the world each obtain a harmony of forces whereby they come to life; each obtains nurturance to grow to completion: the process unseen but the finished work manifest – this is called “spirit.” All know it by that which it

brings to completion, but none know its formless being – that is called “Heaven.” Only the Sage does not seek to know Heaven.

### The relation of the human person to Heaven

With the office of Heaven settled and the work of Heaven accomplished, the physical form is intact and the spirit is born. Love, hate, pleasure, anger, grief, and joy are assembled therein: these are called the “Heavenly dispositions.” The ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and body have their realms of sensual encounter without duplicative ability: these are called the “Heavenly faculties.” The heart dwells in the vacant center and thereby governs the five faculties: it is called the “Heavenly ruler.” It molds things not of its species in order to nurture its species: this is called “Heavenly nurturance.” It judges things which accord with their species to be fortunate and judges things which discord with their species to be ill fortunate: this is called “Heavenly rule.”

This is, perhaps, the most critical passage in this essay. In the course of it, Xunzi seems to suggest that human beings go beyond Nature, or Heaven, precisely because of the positive faculties that Nature endows in humans as a species. The key idea is that the human heart (or, more properly, the “heart-mind,” since ancient Chinese used a single term to bridge these two concepts) operates in a unique way, allowing members of the species to appropriate their environment in order to “nurture” their species and in this way define and alter it. In other essays of his book, Xunzi explains that humans are unique in that they have developed the tool of ritual *li*, which permits people to “nurture” and so *transform* their habits, skills, and tastes. Hence the heart-minds of the human community are able to transcend “natural” human limits through a process whereby humanity basically creates its own species norms. This is “Heavenly nurturance.” The subsequent power of the mind to determine when species members are according with these refined norms, Heavenly rule, represents the source of normative human judgments.

To darken one's Heavenly ruler, bring disorder to one's Heavenly faculties, forsake one's Heavenly nurturance, discord with one's Heavenly rule, contravene one's Heavenly dispositions, and so dissipate Heaven's work: this is called “greatest evil.” The Sage clears his Heavenly ruler, rectifies his Heavenly faculties, fulfills his Heavenly nurturance, follows his Heavenly rule, nurtures his Heavenly dispositions, and so brings completion to Heaven's work.

Thus if one understands what he is to do and is not to do, then heaven and earth will fulfill their proper functions and the things of the world will serve him. Acts fully ruled, nurturance fully realized, in life suffering no injury: this is called “knowing Heaven.” Thus the greatest craft lies in acts not taken, the greatest wisdom in thoughts not pondered.

### What man seeks from Nature

What man seeks from the heavens should merely be their manifest images by which time may be marked. What man seeks from earth should merely be that which may be appropriated from it, which may be husbanded. What man seeks from the four seasons should merely be their regular sequence, to which he can act in response. What man seeks from the forces of *yin* and *yang* should merely be their harmonies, which he may employ to create order. Functionaries keep track of Heaven; you must keep to the Dao.

### The separation of human action and Nature

Are order and disorder determined by the action of the heavens? I say: the regularities of the sun and moon, stars, planets, and constellations were identical for both Yu and Jie. Yu created order thereby; Jie created disorder. Thus, order and disorder are not determined by the heavens. Are they determined by the action of the seasons? Proliferation and growth in spring and summer, harvest and storage in autumn and winter, this too was identical for Yu and for Jie. Yu created order thereby; Jie created disorder. Thus, order and disorder are not determined by the seasons. Are they determined by the land? He who acquires land is able to live; he who loses his land will die: this too was identical for Yu and for Jie. Yu created order thereby, Jie created disorder. The *Poetry* puts it thus: “Heaven created the mountain tall, King Tai brought cultivation to it; he having done so, King Wen brought peace to it.”

Yu and Jie were, respectively, the founding sage ruler of the Xia Dynasty and its last ruler, whose evil conduct caused the dynasty’s downfall. Although it is possible that the Xia Dynasty itself was historical, dominating central China during the approximate period 2000-1600 B.C., and a list of its kings is preserved in the *Shiji*, these two royal figures were clearly legendary creations.

### The *junzi* takes Heaven's constancy as his model

Heaven does not suspend winter because people dislike cold; earth does not contract its breadth because people dislike traveling great distances; the *junzi* does not curtail his actions because of the clamor of petty people. Heaven has a constant way; earth has constant progressions; the *junzi* has constancy of person. The *junzi* takes what is constant as his way; the petty person calculates his credits. The *Poetry* says: “Undeviating in ritual and right, why be concerned what others may say?”

“Fate” is not determined by Heaven but by chance

That the king of Chu may have a retinue of a thousand chariots does not mean that he is wise. That a *junzi* may have only beans to eat and water to drink does not mean that he is stupid. These are due to the rhythms of circumstance. To be refined in purpose, rich in virtue, and clear in thought; to live in the present but be devoted to the past – these things are within one's own power. The *junzi* attends to what is within his power and does not aspire to that which is within the power of Heaven alone. The petty person defaults on what is within his power and aspires to that which is within the power of Heaven alone. Because the *junzi* attends to what is within his power and does not aspire to that which is within the power of Heaven alone, he goes forward day by day. Because the petty person defaults on what is within his power and aspires to that which is within the power of Heaven alone, he goes backward day by day. Thus the pivots of the *junzi*'s daily progress and the petty person's daily regress are at root one. The difference between the two lies in this.

Strange events in Nature have no significance

When stars fall or trees sing, the people of the state all ask in terror, “What does this mean?” I say it means nothing. These are the changes of the heavens and the earth, the transformations of *yin* and *yang*, rare events in the world of things. It is proper to wonder at them; it is wrong to fear them. Eclipses of the sun or moon, unseasonable rain or snow, the occasional appearance of strange stars: there has never been an age without them. If the ruler is enlightened and his government stable, then though these appear in series during his rule, no harm will be done. If the ruler is benighted and his government reckless, then though none of these things occur, it will be of no use. The falling of the stars, the singing of the trees, these are the changes of the heavens and the earth, the transformations of *yin* and *yang*, rare events in the world of things. It is proper to wonder at them; it is wrong to fear them.

Among events which may occur, those which should be feared are human portents. When careless ploughing causes crops to suffer and those who weed leave weeds behind, when government is reckless and loses the support of the people – the fields unkempt, the crops meager, grain sold dear and people starving, corpses lying in the road: these are what I mean by human portents. When government directives are unenlightened, the populace summoned to labor out of season, agriculture left in disorder: these are what I mean by human portents. When ritual and propriety are not cultivated, public and private affairs not properly distinguished, when male and female mix wantonly and father and son doubt one another, when superior and inferior become estranged, when banditry and invasion appear in tandem: these are what I mean by human portents. Such portents are born of chaos; if all

three types occur at once, there can be no peace for the state. The reasons are so near at hand; the catastrophe so tragic!

When labors are unseasonable, cows and horses give birth to one another's progeny and prodigies appear among the six types of livestock. It is proper to wonder at this; it is wrong to fear it. The teachings say: The prodigies of the world of things should be recorded but not explained. Analyses which have no application, investigations which do not proceed from urgency: these should be discarded and not cultivated. As for the proprieties governing ruler and minister, the affinities governing father and son, and the role distinctions governing husband and wife, these should be unceasingly refined.

### Rituals have no magic

When performance of the great rain dance is followed by rain, what does this mean? I say it means nothing. It is as though the rain dance had not been performed and it had rained. The rituals of "saving" the sun and moon when they are eclipsed, of performing the rain dance in times of drought, of divining with bone and milfoil before deciding a great matter, these are not performed as means of gaining an end; they are means of ornamenting (*wen*) action. The *junzi* understands them as ornamental, the populace understands them as spiritual. Understanding them as ornamental leads to good fortune; understanding them as spiritual leads to ill fortune.

### Ritual is the jewel of human culture

In the heavens, nothing is more brilliant than the sun and the moon. On earth, nothing is more brilliant than water and fire. Among things, nothing is more brilliant than pearls and jade. Amidst mankind, nothing is more brilliant than ritual and propriety. If the sun and moon were not high, their brilliance would not shine. If water and fire do not collect into masses, their powers to brighten and moisten will not be spread abroad. If pearl and jade are not polished then kings and dukes will not regard them as treasures. If ritual and propriety are not applied to the state, then the fame of its accomplishments will not become known. Thus it is said: The life span of a man resides with Heaven; the life span of a state lies in *li*. If he who rules men exalts *li* and honors the worthy, he will rule as king; if he lays stress on laws and values the people, he will rule as hegemon; if he loves profit and proliferates deceit, he will rule in danger; if he relies on calculating schemes, subversion and perilous secrecy, he will be totally destroyed.

Nature is to be exploited, not worshiped

Exalt Heaven and contemplate it?

Rather, husband its creatures and so regulate it!

Follow Heaven and sing hymns to it?

Rather, regulate Heaven's mandate and use it!

Look upon the seasons and await them?

Rather, respond to the seasons and exploit them!

Accept things as they are and increase them?

Rather, give rein to talents and transform them!

Contemplate things and treat them as givens?

Rather, create order among things and unfailingly seize their potential!

Long for the source from which things are born?

Rather, promote the means whereby they are brought to completion!

Hence to set aside man and contemplate Heaven is to mistake the basic nature of things.

Rituals are the guides for human success

That which abided unchanged through the reigns of the hundred kings of antiquity may serve as the linking thread of the Way. Respond to the transience of affairs with this thread; all principles will be linked without disorder. If you do not know how to link things in this way, you will not know how to respond to change. The essence of this linking thread has never ceased to be. Disorder is born of deviating from it; order exhausts its every aspect.

Hence in pursuing the goodness of the Way, follow what fully accords with it; what distorts it one must not do; to mistake it is the greatest confusion. When men wade across rivers, they mark the deep pits. If the markers are not clear, others will drown. Those who rule people must mark the Way. If the markers are not clear, there is chaos. The *li* are the markers. To reject *li* is to darken the world, and a darkened world is in greatest chaos. Thus if the Way is made thoroughly clear, if inner and outer are distinctly marked, if there is regularity in the hidden and the manifest, then the pits which drown the people will be removed.

Ritual inequality is the basis of a fair and prosperous society

The world of things is but a corner of the Way; one species of thing is but a corner of the world of things. A foolish man is but a corner of one species of thing, yet he believes he

knows the Way. He is without wisdom. The philosopher Shenzi could see the advantages of being last, but could not see the advantages of being first. The Daoist Laozi could see the advantages of being bent, but could not see the advantages of holding straight. The founder of Mohism, Mozi, saw the advantages of equality, but could not see the advantages of inequality. The philosopher Songzi saw the advantages of few desires, but could not see the advantages of many.

If all are last and none first, then there can be no gateway for the masses. If all are bent and none hold straight, then the eminent and the humble cannot be distinguished. If all are equal without inequalities then commands of government cannot be carried out. If all have few desires and none have many, then there is no means of transforming the masses. The *Documents* puts it this way: “Do not love doing any one thing; only follow the Way of the king. Do not hate doing any one thing; only follow the path of the king.”

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you characterize Xunzi's view of the relation between man and the natural, non-human world?
2. What is Xunzi's idea of Heaven? Should it be a model for us?
3. What are the main points Xunzi uses to show that his view of Heaven is correct?
4. How does Xunzi's portrait of religious ritual as ineffectual serve to support his other arguments?
5. How does Xunzi view "fate" and portentous omens that appear in Nature?
6. Why do you suppose this treatise on Heaven closes with discussions not of Heaven but of ritual – how do they fit?

## Sources and Further Readings

Given the large size and broad intellectual scope of the *Xunzi*, and the rigor of its argumentation, it is surprising that it has not widely studied in the West. The likely reason is that the great Neo-Confucian movement that was synthesized by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) during the Song Dynasty, and which dominated orthodox Confucian thought thereafter, largely rejected Xunzi in favor of the Mencian tradition, and this retarded the study of Xunzi's thought in both China and the West until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (although the *Xunzi* was never ignored to the degree that the *Mozi* was).

Two complete translations exist; the superior of these by far is John Knoblock's, *Xunzi* (Stanford: 1988-1994, 3 vols.), which includes careful scholarly introductions and annotations for each chapter. A more literary partial translation has been published by Burton Watson, *Xunzi: Basic Writings* (NY: 1963, 2003). Several studies of Xunzi's thought have been published in English during the past two decades. A very interesting study of Xunzi's ethics interpreted through comparison with a major thinker in Western tradition is Aaron Stalnaker's, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington, D.C., 2006).