



Xun Zi

The third of the great Confucian philosophers of the classical period of Chinese philosophy is Xun Zi (Hsün-tzu). Xun Zi defended Confucianism from various challenges, especially Mozi and Zhuangzi; yet he is most known for his criticism of Mencius' theory of human nature. Included here is Burton Watson's introduction to his translation, as well as his translation of the famous section in which Xun Zi puts forth his theory that human nature is evil.

INTRODUCTION

What little is known of the life of Xun Zi, or Master Xun, is culled from evidence in his own writings and from the brief biography of him written by the historian Sima Qian some hundred years or so after his death, which forms part of Chapter 74 of the *Shi Ji* [*Records of the Grand Historian*]. His personal name was Kuang,¹ and he was a native of Zhao, a state situated in the central part of northern China. The date of his birth is unknown, but it was probably around 312 B.C., when his famous predecessor in the Confucian school, Mencius, was already well along in years. Nothing whatever is known of his early life; we hear of him first at the age of fifty, journeying to the court of the state of Qi to study and teach.

In 386 B.C. the Tians, who for generations had served as ministers to the royal family of Qi, usurped the throne of Qi and set themselves up as its new rulers. In order to consolidate their power and prove their fitness for so lofty a station, these new rulers of the Tian family, particularly the second major one, King Xuan (reigned 342—324 B.C.), encouraged scholars from other regions to come to the court of Qi by offering them honorary titles, stipends, living quarters, and complete leisure to pursue their studies and expound their various doctrines. Before long Qi had become the leading center of intellectual activity in China; Mencius visited the state during the reign of King Xuan and many other well known philosophers resided there permanently.

By the time Xun Zi arrived in Qi, probably around 264 B.C., the ranks of government-supported scholars attracted by King Xuan and his successors had been thinned by death, and Xun Zi was welcomed as an eminent elder and honored with titles and marks of esteem. Because of slanderous talk against him, however, he eventually left Qi and went south to the state of Chu, where the lord of Chunshen, nominally the prime minister of Chu but virtually its ruler, appointed him to the post of magistrate of Lanling, a region in southern Shandong. The Lord of Chunshen was assassinated by a court rival in 238 B.C. (the only date in Xun Zi's life that can be fixed with certainty), and Xun Zi lost his post as magistrate, but remained in Lanling the rest of his life and was buried there. The date of his death is unknown, so it is impossible to say whether he lived to witness the final unification of China under the First Emperor of the Qin, which was completed in 221 B.C.

¹He is often referred to as Xun Qing or Qing Zi, though it is not certain whether Qing is a name or an honorary title like "lord." His surname is frequently written with the character for "grandson," pronounced Sun in modern Chinese; perhaps the two characters Xun and Sun were homophones in ancient Chinese, though other explanations are offered.

The book which bears his name indicates that Xun Zi visited the state of Qin, probably during the period 266—255 B.C., and that he debated military affairs in the presence of King Xiaocheng (reigned 265—245 B.C.) of his native state of Zhao. He undoubtedly had many disciples, and it is unfortunate for his reputation as a Confucian that the two most famous of them should have been Han Fei Zi, who became the leading exponent of the Legalist school, and Li Si, the statesman who assisted the First Emperor of the Qin in the unification of the empire, both men whose names are inseparably linked with the ridicule and persecution of Confucianism.

Xun Zi's life, then, or what can be known of it, was a long and rather quiet one of teaching and study, with a minor excursion into local political administration. Later scholars have marveled that his worth, like that of Confucius and Mencius, should have been so little recognized by the political leaders of his time, and that he should have been allowed to live and die in relative obscurity. But the rulers of China, it seems, were not yet ready to give serious ear to the teachings of the Confucian school.

In Xun Zi's day China was dominated by three powerful states: Qi in the east, Chu in the south, and Qin in the west. In the northwest and northeast four or five smaller states, among them Xun Zi's native state of Zhao, maintained a precarious existence by allying themselves with one or another of the major powers. The old ruling house of Zhou, which once claimed sovereignty over all these so-called feudal states, had dwindled into utter insignificance, its territory shrunken to a tiny area in the center of China, its ancient ritual vessels and emblems of authority eyed with greed by its neighbors, and in 249 B.C. the dynasty finally passed out of existence altogether. For the first time in history, if traditional accounts are to be believed, China was left without even a nominal Son of Heaven, and no one knew where to turn his eyes in the hope of peace and unity. Known as the era of the Warring States, this period was an age of political instability and ferment, of incessant intrigue and strife.

Paradoxically, it was also an age of prosperity and cultural progress. Trade flourished, cities increased in size, men traveled freely from one state to another, and literacy and learning spread beyond the narrow confines of the ruling class. Even the art of warfare, though a melancholy index of progress, achieved a scale and complexity undreamed of in earlier days.

The rulers of the various states, roused by the fierce competition for survival, cast about for ways to improve the efficiency of their administration, win the support of their people, and enrich their domains. In response to their call, thinker after thinker came forward to offer his analysis of the problem and propound his solution. Return to the ways of antiquity, make better use of the land, lessen your desires, love the people, leave things alone!—advice swamped the rulers, and each set about assiduously applying that which took his fancy.

Xun Zi lived at the very end of this period, and therefore in his solution to the ills of the time he was able to draw upon the speculations and suggestions of his predecessors, at the same time refuting what he believed to be their errors. His thought is thus marked by eclecticism, embracing a strain of Daoist quietism, a hard-headed realism reminiscent of the Legalist writers, a concern for the correct use of terminology which he had learned from the philosophers of the school of Logic, and other borrowings which, if more of the writings of his predecessors were extant, could undoubtedly be identified with greater certainty.

Again, perhaps because of the advantage he enjoyed in being able to survey the entire range of ancient thought, Xun Zi's work represents the most complete and well-ordered philosophical system of the early period. It is so well ordered and integrated, in fact, that one scarcely knows

where to begin in describing it, since each part fits into and locks with all the others. The core of it is the ethical and political teachings of Confucius and his disciples, but around this core cluster areas of investigation and speculation that were hardly touched upon in earlier Confucian writing.

As a philosophical system, Xun Zi's thought rests upon the harsh initial thesis that man's nature is basically evil. Considering the cutthroat age he lived in, this is not a surprising conclusion, and it allows him to place tremendous emphasis upon the need for education and moral training. But it flatly contradicts the view of Mencius, who taught that man is naturally inclined to goodness, and in later centuries, when Mencius' view came to be regarded as the orthodox one, it led to an unhappy clouding of Xun Zi's entire system of thought.

To this dark initial thesis Xun Zi contraposes the almost unlimitedly bright possibilities for improvement through study and moral training. The subject of this study is to be the classical texts, the rituals and ritual principles created for man's guidance by the sages of the past and present; and the teachers are to be the sages themselves. Are we to assume, then, that these sages, the saviors of mankind from inborn evil, belong to some species apart? Absolutely not, replies Xun Zi. The sages in their basic nature and desires are exactly like all other men; only, as he explains in a strikingly modern chapter on epistemology and psychology, they have learned to employ their minds in such a way as to attain moral understanding and insight. And on the basis of this understanding they are able to define correctly the ethical relationships that govern the hierarchical order of society, the order which distinguishes man from the beasts.

The proper end of this process of education, the proper function of the sage, is to govern. Once he has become not only sage and teacher, but ruler as well, he may, as Xun Zi explains in his chapters on political science, economics and ritual, set about ordering the state on the basis of proper moral principles and insuring peace and prosperity to the world. Like so many of his predecessors and contemporaries, Xun Zi frequently harks back to the golden ages of the past—the reigns of the sage rulers Yao, Shun, Yu, King Tang of the Shang dynasty, and Kings Wen and Wu of the Zhou—as examples of such periods of ideal peace and order. But, unlike most Confucian philosophers, he also urges men to observe the examples of later rulers of virtue, who lived in the less distant past and whose ways are therefore easier to learn about and to practice. Xun Zi maintained that, although political and social conditions invariably change, human nature and basic moral principles do not, and therefore the principles that were correct and brought order in the past will, if faithfully followed, do so again. He is thus calling not for a return to the precise ways of antiquity, but for a reconstruction of the moral greatness of antiquity in terms of the present. As he states in one of the sections not translated here, if you apply these eternally valid moral principles of the sages today, “then Shun and Yu will appear again, and the reign of a true king will arise once more” (sec. 11).

Xun Zi's view of the ideal ruler and his administration is very close to that of Mencius, though Xun Zi had less patience than Mencius with the feudal system and declared that hereditary titles² should be abolished and men promoted and demoted in the social hierarchy solely on the basis of merit. And, unlike Mencius, he was willing to compromise with the frailty of his age to the extent of describing other easier and less ambitious ways of ruling than simply that of the ideal king, the ruler of perfect virtue. He thus devotes considerable space to discussions of how to become a successful *ba*—dictator or overlord—a ruler who possesses neither the virtue nor the popular

²Not to be confused with hereditary rights to government offices, which were condemned by Mencius and all late Zhou philosophers alike.

sanction of a true king, but who is nevertheless able to insure well-being and stability, if not moral guidance, to his subjects. He himself had visited the state of Qin, and he had a healthy respect for the military and economic accomplishments of its rulers, though he deplored the harsh and terroristic methods by which such gains had been won. And he was no doubt conscious that Mencius had failed to win acceptance for his ideas from the rulers of the time precisely because he refused to discuss anything but the most uncompromisingly high ideals of political morality.

Finally, like Confucius and Mencius before him, he took care to emphasize that the legitimacy and survival of the ruler rest ultimately upon the support of his people: he is a boat, they the water which may bear him up or capsize him as they choose. No claims of hereditary right or iron discipline can hold out forever in the face of popular indifference or anger; no ruling house can long survive when it has ceased to fulfill the functions for which it was called to office. This was a lesson which Mencius and Xun Zi found abundantly clear in the troubled history of their own age, and they were determined to impress it upon the minds of the rulers, to waken them to the full moral responsibilities of government. For they believed that, if the rulers did not wake to and accept these responsibilities, the day would come when the people would rise up, as the peasants of the French Revolution were to do, to ask of their leaders, in the words of Carlyle: "How have ye treated us, how have ye taught us, fed us, and led us, while we toiled for you?"

These, then, are the positive aspects of Xun Zi's philosophy, the methods and aims which he would have men adopt. But much of his writing is also concerned with the things he wishes them to reject. First of all he would have them reject all beliefs and practices that seek to put man in contact with the supernatural or to endow him with supernatural powers. Since the mind of man itself is the source of all moral order, and hence of human perfection, such attempts to venture beyond the human realm are to Xun Zi pointless and futile. Certain religious or magical practices he condemns outright, such as prayers for rain or for the cure of sickness, or physiognomy, the art of divining a man's future by the configuration of his face. Others he is willing to countenance, such as the art of divination by the tortoise shell and milfoil stalks, or, as in the case of the mourning and sacrificial rites, even willing to encourage, providing that they are interpreted, at least by men of intellect, in a purely humanistic fashion. In other words, such rites and practices should not be regarded as acts possessing any supernatural efficacy, but as purely human inventions designed to ornament the social life of man and guide him in the proper expression of his emotions. He specifically denies the existence of baleful ghosts or demons (the bugbears with which Mo Zi hoped to terrify men into good behavior); and though he occasionally uses the word *shen*, which in other writers denotes the spirits of the ancestors and of the powers of nature, he defines it as "that which is completely good and fully ordered" (Sec. 8), making it a quality of moral excellence. He is thus the most thoroughly rationalistic of the early Confucian writers, and since sections of his work, particularly those dealing with mourning and sacrificial rites, were incorporated in the *Li Ji* or *Book of Rites*, which became one of the five Confucian Classics, his rationalism has had a very great influence upon later Chinese thought.

He also called upon men to renounce all paths of inquiry that would lead them away from human moral concerns and into (in his opinion) a barren and unending search for knowledge in the realms outside the world of man. Too many of the thinkers of his time, he felt, were directing men into just such paths, or into others equally erroneous, and for this reason he frequently recorded his objections to the various philosophical schools of late Zhou times, often with considerable asperity. (Fairness and restraint in appraising each other's opinions is not a

characteristic of early Chinese philosophers, and Xun Zi is certainly no exception.)

The chief target of his attacks is Mo Zi, whose doctrines were for many reasons repugnant to him. He devotes a whole essay to answering Mo Zi's objections to music, and elsewhere he attacks the Mohist teachings on frugality, social uniformity, and meager burial rites. He criticizes Zhuang Zi for dwelling too much on the mystical workings of nature and slighting human concerns, the Legalists for their belief that precise laws can replace the personal leadership of a virtuous ruler, and two other little-known philosophers, Shen Dao and Song Jian, for their doctrines of passivity and the elimination of desire. And in an essay on the correct use of terminology, he replies to the teachings of the logicians Hui Shi and Gongsun Long, whose famous paradoxes and conundrums he felt were endangering the sane and efficient use of language.

Finally, he did not hesitate to condemn what he believed were errors in the doctrines of the Confucian school as well. I have already noted how his theory of human nature directly contradicts that of Mencius, whom he criticizes by name. In another essay (sec. 18), in which he discusses a number of popular misconceptions, he vehemently refutes the legend that the ancient sage ruler Yao selected Shun from among the common people to be his successor and ceded the throne to him. This legend is recorded in the *Book of Documents*, the *Analects*, and the *Mencius*, and was evidently widely accepted among the followers of the Confucian school. Scholars now believe that it is an invention of fairly late Zhou times, and that the passages referring to it in the *Book of Documents* ("Canon of Yao") and the *Analects* (ch. 20) are likewise of late date. Possibly it originated with the followers of the Mohist school, which may explain why Xun Zi rejects it so violently (though Mencius accepted it without question). In any event, he is unique among early Confucian writers in doing so, and his objections were completely ignored by later scholars, who unanimously accepted the legend as historical fact.³

Xun Zi's work therefore represents a critique and appraisal of late Zhou thought as a whole, at the same time presenting the fullest and most systematic exposition of the doctrines of the Confucian school as he understood them. He wrote at a time when the unification of China under a central government was almost in sight, though how clearly he realized this we cannot say. His program for the rule of a unified nation was rejected by the Qin dynasty, which preferred Legalist doctrines, and was temporarily eclipsed by the First Emperor's systematic suppression of Confucianism. But the expeditious fall of the Qin in 207 B.C. discredited the harsh policies of Legalism, and the Confucians once more came forward in an effort to gain a hearing from the leaders of the newly founded Han. Mohism, for reasons not entirely clear, had faded into the background, and Daoism, though favored by several of the prominent statesmen of the time, proved too nebulous and apolitical to serve as the philosophy of a great nation. Han Confucianism, based upon Xun Zi's thought but with numerous extraneous elements borrowed from other doctrines, eventually won the day, and toward the end of the second century B.C. was declared the official creed of the Han state.

True, the Han ignored many of Xun Zi's most admirable dicta. It granted hereditary titles, a practice he had condemned; and far worse, it followed Qin custom in enforcing the cruel "three

³It is interesting to note that in 336 B.C. the king of the state of Yan was persuaded to follow the example of Yao and the other ancient sage rulers who were said to have ceded the empire to worthy aides. He voluntarily turned over the throne of Yen to his prime minister, and in no time the state was torn by internal strife and had fallen prey to invaders. Perhaps Xun Zi had this fiasco in mind when he took up his brush to denounce the exponents of the ceding legend.

sets of relatives” penalty, by which all the close kin of a major criminal were sentenced to death along with the offender himself, though Xun Zi had denounced this barbarous practice as the mark of a degenerate age (sec. 24). Moreover, many of its thinkers, among them scholars of the Confucian school, turned their attention to the very speculations and magical practices which Xun Zi had warned them away from; where Xun Zi poked fun at rain-making ceremonies, the leading Confucian writer of the early Han, Dong Zhongshu, solemnly wrote a chapter on how to conduct them.

Nevertheless, many evidences of the healthy influence of Xun Zi’s thought are discernible in Han intellectual life. His rationalism and humanism are reflected in the work of men like the historians Sima Qian and Pan Ku, or the philosophers Yang Xiong and Wang Zhong, and his strong emphasis upon education and the study of the Classics led to the founding of a state university and government support and encouragement of classical learning. Compared to later dynasties, the Han was in many respects a bloody and barbarous age, but without Xun Zi’s humanizing influence it might well have been darker still.

We have no way of telling when or where Xun Zi wrote the various sections of his work, or what state the text was in at the time of his death. The first edition of his work was compiled by the Han court scholar Liu Xiang (77—6 B.C.), who states that he examined 322 *pian*—sections, or bundles of bamboo writing slips—and, after sorting out the duplicates and fitting together fragments, arrived at the present arrangement of the text in 32 sections. (Evidence of the fragmentary and faulty state of the text even after it had passed through Liu Xiang’s hands may be noted in the parts I have translated.) It is doubtful whether all 32 sections are by Xun Zi himself, though I see no reason to question the authenticity of the sections presented here. In addition, 10 *pian* of poems in the *fu* or rhyme prose style by Xun Zi are recorded in the “Treatise on Literature” of the *History of the Former Han* (*Han shu* 30), but except for one brief section of *fu* preserved in the *Xun Zi* itself, these seem to have been lost long ago.

While the *Analects* and *Mencius* were provided with commentaries by late Han scholars, the *Xun Zi* unfortunately did not enjoy this attention until much later. The earliest commentary is by the Tang scholar Yang Liang, and it is upon his edition, preface dated A.D. 818, that all later texts of the work are based. Further information on the texts and commentaries utilized in my translation will be found at the end of this introduction.

Finally a word should be said about the form and style of Xun Zi’s work. With the spread of literacy and the increased interest in philosophical and technical literature that marked the late years of the Zhou, the art of prose advanced remarkably in organization, clarity, and subtlety of expression. Xun Zi utilized these advances to the full. In the writings of the Mohist school he had examples of clear, well-ordered essays centered around a single theme, and it was this form which he chose for the large part of his own work, though a few sections are in anecdote form. From the Mohists, too, and from Mencius he adopted the practice of rounding off a paragraph or step in his argument with an appropriate quotation from the *Odes* or *Documents*, or some traditional saying. In the first few sections of his work the style tends to be rather choppy and aphoristic; but in others, such as those on Heaven or the nature of man, his arguments are much more carefully spelled out and closely knit, perhaps evidence that these sections were composed later in his life. Though he employs the balanced, rhythmic style common to the period, he avoids the monotony and repetitiousness that mar the Mohist writings, taking care to vary his sentence patterns and to devise new and interesting modes of expression. His work, in fact, stands second only to the *Zhuang Zi*

as a masterpiece of early Chinese expository writing. He deliberately eschewed the mystical thought of Zhuang Zi, and with it he lost much of the wit and fantasy that put the *Zhuang Zi* in a class by itself. But he substituted for these a dignity, sincerity, and orderliness of expression that are unrivaled in the ancient period. Much of the lasting influence of his thought is due not to the appeal and soundness of his ideas, but to the clarity and elegance with which they are set forth.

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MAN'S NATURE IS EVIL (SECTION 23)

Man's nature (*xing* 性) is evil; goodness is the result of conscious activity (*wei* 偽). The nature of man is such that he is born with a fondness for profit. If he indulges this fondness, it will lead him into wrangling and strife, and all sense of courtesy and humility will disappear. He is born with feelings of envy and hate, and if he indulges these, they will lead him into violence and crime, and all sense of loyalty (*zhong* 忠) and good faith (*xin* 信) will disappear. Man is born with the desires of the eyes and ears, with a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If he indulges these, they will lead him into license and wantonness, and all ritual principles and correct forms will be lost. Hence, any man who follows his nature and indulges his emotions will inevitably become involved in wrangling and strife, will violate the forms⁴ and rules of society, and will end as a criminal. Therefore, man must first be transformed by the instructions of a teacher and guided by ritual principles (*li* 禮), and only then will he be able to observe the dictates of courtesy and humility, obey the forms and rules of society, and achieve order. It is obvious from this, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

偽 wei

A warped piece of wood must wait until it has been laid against the straightening board, steamed, and forced into shape before it can become straight; a piece of blunt metal must wait until it has been whetted on a grindstone before it can become sharp. Similarly, since man's nature is evil, it must wait for the instructions of a teacher before it can become upright, and for the guidance of ritual principles before it can become orderly. If men have no teachers to instruct them, they will be inclined towards evil and not upright; and if they have no ritual principles to guide them, they will be perverse and violent and lack order. In ancient times the sage kings realized that man's nature is evil, and that therefore he inclines toward evil and violence and is not upright or orderly. Accordingly they created ritual principles and laid down certain regulations in order to reform man's emotional nature and make it upright, in order to train and transform it and guide it in the proper channels. In this way they caused all men to become orderly and to conform to the Way (*dao* 道). Hence, today any man who takes to heart the instructions of his teacher, applies himself to his studies, and abides by ritual principles may become a gentleman (*junzi* 君子), but anyone who gives free rein to his emotional nature, is content to indulge his passions, and disregards ritual principles becomes a petty man. It is obvious from this, therefore, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

⁴Reading *wen* instead of *fen*.

Mencius states that man is capable of learning because his nature is good, but I say that this is wrong. It indicates that he has not really understood man's nature nor distinguished properly between the basic nature (*xing* 性) and conscious activity (*wei* 偽). The nature is that which is given by Heaven; you cannot learn it, you cannot acquire it by effort. Ritual principles, on the other hand, are created by sages; you can learn to apply them, you can work to bring them to completion. That part of man which cannot be learned or acquired by effort is called the nature; that part of him which can be acquired by learning and brought to completion by effort is called conscious activity. This is the difference between nature and conscious activity.

It is a part of man's nature that his eyes can see and his ears can hear. But the faculty of clear sight can never exist separately from the eye, nor can the faculty of keen hearing exist separately from the ear. It is obvious, then, that you cannot acquire clear sight and keen hearing by study. Mencius states that man's nature is good, and that all evil arises because he loses his original nature. Such a view, I believe, is erroneous. It is the way with man's nature that as soon as he is born he begins to depart from his original naïveté and simplicity, and therefore he must inevitably lose what Mencius regards as his original nature.⁵ It is obvious from this, then, that the nature of man is evil.

Those who maintain that the nature is good praise and approve whatever has not departed from the original simplicity and naïveté of the child. That is, they consider that beauty belongs to the original simplicity and naïveté and goodness to the original mind in the same way that clear sight is inseparable from the eye and keen hearing from the ear. Hence, they maintain that [the nature possesses goodness] in the same way that the eye possesses clear vision or the ear keenness of hearing. Now it is the nature of man that when he is hungry he will desire satisfaction, when he is cold he will desire warmth, and when he is weary he will desire rest. This is his emotional nature. And yet a man, although he is hungry, will not dare to be the first to eat if he is in the presence of his elders, because he knows that he should yield to them, and although he is weary, he will not dare to demand rest because he knows that he should relieve others of the burden of labor. For a son to yield to his father or a younger brother to yield to his elder brother, for a son to relieve his father of work or a younger brother to relieve his elder brother—acts such as these are all contrary to man's nature and run counter to his emotions. And yet they represent the way of filial piety and the proper forms enjoined by ritual principles. Hence, if men follow their emotional nature, there will be no courtesy or humility; courtesy and humility in fact run counter to man's emotional nature. From this it is obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Someone may ask: if man's nature is evil, then where do ritual principles come from? I would reply: all ritual principles are produced by the conscious activity of the sages; essentially they are not products of man's nature. A potter molds clay and makes a vessel, but the vessel is the product of the conscious activity of the potter, not essentially a product of his human nature. A carpenter carves a piece of wood and makes a utensil, but the utensil is the product of the conscious activity of the carpenter, not essentially a product of his human nature. The sage gathers together his thoughts and ideas, experiments with various forms of conscious activity, and so produces ritual

⁵Mencius, it will be recalled, stated: "The great man is he who does not lose his child's-heart" (*Mencius* IVB, 12). If I understand Xun Zi correctly, he is arguing that this "child's heart," i.e., the simplicity and naïveté of the baby, will inevitably be lost by all men simply in the process of growing up, and therefore it cannot be regarded as the source of goodness.

principles (*li-yi* 禮義) and sets forth laws and regulations. Hence, these ritual principles and laws are the products of the conscious activity of the sage, not essentially products of his human nature.

Phenomena such as the eye's fondness for beautiful forms, the ear's fondness for beautiful sounds, the mouth's fondness for delicious flavors, the mind's fondness for profit, or the body's fondness for pleasure and ease—these are all products of the emotional nature of man. They are instinctive and spontaneous; man does not have to do anything to produce them. But that which does not come into being instinctively but must wait for some activity to bring it into being is called the product of conscious activity. These are the products of the nature and of conscious activity respectively, and the proof that they are not the same. Therefore, the sage transforms his nature and initiates conscious activity; from this conscious activity he produces ritual principles, and when they have been produced he sets up rules and regulations. Hence, ritual principles and rules are produced by the sage. In respect to human nature the sage is the same as all other men and does not surpass⁶ them; it is only in his conscious activity that he differs from and surpasses other men.

It is man's emotional nature to love profit and desire gain. Suppose now that a man has some wealth to be divided.⁷ If he indulges his emotional nature, loving profit and desiring gain, then he will quarrel and wrangle even with his own brothers over the division. But if he has been transformed by the proper forms of ritual principle, then he will be capable of yielding even to a complete stranger. Hence, to indulge the emotional nature leads to the quarreling of brothers, but to be transformed by ritual principles makes a man capable of yielding to strangers.

Every man who desires to do good does so precisely because his nature is evil. A man whose accomplishments are meager longs for greatness; an ugly man longs for beauty; a man in cramped quarters longs for spaciousness; a poor man longs for wealth; a humble man longs for eminence. Whatever a man lacks in himself he will seek outside. But if a man is already rich, he will not long for wealth, and if he is already eminent, he will not long for greater power. What a man already possesses in himself he will not bother to look for outside. From this we can see that men desire to do good precisely because their nature is evil. Ritual principles are certainly not a part of man's original nature. Therefore, he forces himself to study and to seek to possess them. An understanding of ritual principles is not a part of man's original nature, and therefore he ponders and plans and thereby seeks to understand them. Hence, man in the state in which he is born neither possesses nor understands ritual principles. If he does not possess ritual principles, his behavior will be chaotic, and if he does not understand them, he will be wild and irresponsible. In fact, therefore, man in the state in which he is born possesses this tendency towards chaos and irresponsibility. From this it is obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Mencius states that man's nature is good, but I say that this view is wrong. All men in the world, past and present, agree in defining goodness (*shan* 善) as that which is upright, reasonable, and orderly, and evil as that which is prejudiced, irresponsible, and chaotic. This is the distinction between good and evil. Now suppose that man's nature was in fact intrinsically upright, reasonable, and orderly—then what need would there be for sage kings and ritual principles? The existence of sage kings and ritual principles could certainly add nothing to the situation. But because man's

⁶Reading *guo* instead of *yi*.

⁷Omitting the words *di-xiong*, which do not seem to belong here.

nature is in fact evil, this is not so. Therefore, in ancient times the sages, realizing that man's nature is evil, that it is prejudiced and not upright, irresponsible and lacking in order, for this reason established the authority of the ruler to control it, elucidated ritual principles to transform it, set up laws and standards to correct it, and meted out strict punishments to restrain it. As a result, all the world achieved order and conformed to goodness. Such is the orderly government of the sage kings and the transforming power of ritual principles. Now let someone try doing away with the authority of the ruler, ignoring the transforming power of ritual principles, rejecting the order that comes from laws and standards, and dispensing with the restrictive power of punishments, and then watch and see how the people of the world treat each other. He will find that the powerful impose upon the weak and rob them, the many terrorize the few and extort from them, and in no time the whole world will be given up to chaos and mutual destruction. It is obvious from this, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Those who are good at discussing antiquity must demonstrate the validity of what they say in terms of modern times; those who are good at discussing Heaven (*tian* 天) must show proofs from the human world (*ren* 人). In discussions of all kinds, men value what is in accord with the facts and what can be proved to be valid. Hence if a man sits on his mat propounding some theory, he should be able to stand right up and put it into practice, and show that it can be extended over a wide area with equal validity. Now Mencius states that man's nature is good, but this is neither in accord with the facts, nor can it be proved to be valid. One may sit down and propound such a theory, but he cannot stand up and put it into practice, nor can he extend it over a wide area with any success at all. How, then, could it be anything but erroneous?

If the nature of man were good, we could dispense with sage kings and forget about ritual principles (*li-yi* 禮義). But if it is evil, then we must go along with the sage kings and honor ritual principles. The straightening board is made because of the warped wood; the plumb line is employed because things are crooked; rulers are set up and ritual principles elucidated because the nature of man is evil. From this it is obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity. A straight piece of wood does not have to wait for the straightening board to become straight; it is straight by nature. But a warped piece of wood must wait until it has been laid against the straightening board, steamed, and forced into shape before it can become straight, because by nature it is warped. Similarly, since man's nature is evil, he must wait for the ordering power of the sage kings and the transforming power of ritual principles; only then can he achieve order and conform to goodness. From this it is obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Someone may ask whether ritual principles and concerted conscious activity are not themselves a part of man's nature, so that for that reason the sage is capable of producing them. But I would answer that this is not so. A potter may mold clay and produce an earthen pot, but surely molding pots out of clay is not a part of the potter's human nature. A carpenter may carve wood and produce a utensil, but surely carving utensils out of wood is not a part of the carpenter's human nature. The sage stands in the same relation to ritual principles as the potter to the things he molds and produces. How, then, could ritual principles and concerted conscious activity be a part of man's basic human nature?

As far as human nature goes, the sages Yao and Shun possessed the same nature as the tyrant Jie or Robber Zhi, and the gentleman possesses the same nature as the petty man. Would you still maintain, then, that ritual principles and concerted conscious activity are a part of man's nature?

If you do so, then what reason is there to pay any particular honor to Yao, Yu,⁸ or the gentleman? The reason people honor Yao, Yu, and the gentleman (*junzi* 君子), is that they are able to transform their nature (*xing* 性), apply themselves to conscious activity (*wei* 偽), and produce ritual principles (*li-yi* 禮義). The sage, then, must stand in the same relation to ritual principles as the potter to the things he molds and produces. Looking at it this way, how could ritual principles and concerted conscious activity be a part of man's nature? The reason people despise Jie, Robber Zhi, or the petty man is that they give free rein to their nature, follow their emotions, and are content to indulge their passions, so that their conduct is marked by greed and contentiousness. Therefore, it is clear that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Heaven did not bestow any particular favor upon Zeng, Qian, or Yi that it withheld from other men.⁹ And yet these three men among all others proved most capable of carrying out their duties as sons and winning fame for their filial piety (*xiao* 孝). Why? Because of their thorough attention to ritual principles. Heaven has not bestowed any particular favor upon the inhabitants of Qi and Lu which it has withheld from the people of Qin. And yet when it comes to observing the duties of father and son and the separation of roles between husband and wife, the inhabitants of Qin cannot match the filial reverence and respect for proper form which marks the people of Qi and Lu.¹⁰ Why? Because the people of Qin give free rein to their emotional nature, are content to indulge their passions, and are careless of ritual principles. It is certainly not due to any difference in human nature between the two groups.

The man in the Street can become a Yu.¹¹ What does this mean? What made the sage emperor Yu a Yu, I would reply, was the fact that he practiced benevolence (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義) and abided by the proper rules and standards (*fa* 法). If this is so, then benevolence, righteousness, and proper standards must be based upon principles (*li* 理) which can be known and practiced. Any man in the street has the essential faculties needed to understand benevolence, righteousness, and proper standards, and the potential ability to put them into practice. Therefore it is clear that he can become a Yu.

Would you maintain that benevolence, righteousness, and proper standards are not based upon any principles that can be known and practiced? If so, then even a Yu could not have understood or practiced them. Or would you maintain that the man in the Street does not have the essential faculties needed to understand them or the potential ability to put them into practice? If so, then you are saying that the man in the street in his family life cannot understand the duties required of a father or a son and in public life cannot comprehend the correct relationship between ruler and subject. But in fact this is not true. Any man in the street *can* understand the duties required of a father or a son and *can* comprehend the correct relationship between ruler and subject. Therefore, it is obvious that the essential faculties needed to understand such ethical principles and the

⁸Reading *Shun* instead of *Yu* here and in the following sentence to conform to the sentence above.

⁹Qian and Zeng were disciples of Confucius famed for their filial conduct. Yi is identified by commentators as the heir apparent of Gaozong—i.e., King Wu Ding—of the Yin dynasty.

¹⁰Reading *gong* instead of *ju*, *wen* instead of *fu*, and adding the words *Qin-ren* at the beginning of the sentence. Qi and Lu were of course the main centers of Confucian learning.

¹¹This was apparently an old saying. Cf. *Mencius* VIB, 2 “Jiao of Cao asked, It is said that all men may become Yaos or Shuns. Is this so? Mencius replied, It is.”

potential ability to put them into practice must be a part of his make-up. Now if he takes these faculties and abilities and applies them to the principles of benevolence and righteousness, which we have already shown to be knowable and practicable, then it is obvious that he can become a Yu. If the man in the street applies himself to training and study, concentrates his mind and will, and considers and examines things carefully, continuing his efforts over a long period of time and accumulating good acts without stop, then he can achieve a godlike understanding and form a triad with Heaven and earth. The sage is a man who has arrived where he has through the accumulation of good acts.

You have said, someone may object, that the sage has arrived where he has through the accumulation of good acts. Why is it, then, that everyone is not able to accumulate good acts in the same way? I would reply: everyone is capable of doing so, but not everyone can be made to do so. The petty man is capable of becoming a gentleman (*junzi* 君子), yet he is not willing to do so; the gentleman is capable of becoming a petty man but he is not willing to do so. The petty man and the gentleman are perfectly capable of changing places; the fact that they do not actually do so is what I mean when I say that they are capable of doing so but they cannot be made to do so. Hence, it is correct to say that the man in the street is capable of becoming a Yu but it is not necessarily correct to say that he will in fact find it possible to do so. But although he does not find it possible to do so does not prove that he is incapable of doing so.

A person with two feet is theoretically capable of walking to every corner of the earth, although in fact no one has ever found it possible to do so. Similarly, the artisan, the carpenter, the farmer, and the merchant are theoretically capable of exchanging professions, although in actual practice they find it impossible to do so. From this we can see that, although someone may be theoretically capable of becoming something, he may not in practice find it possible to do so. But although he does not find it possible to do so, this does not prove that he is not capable of doing so. To find it practically possible or impossible to do something and to be capable or incapable of doing something are two entirely different things. It is perfectly clear, then, that a man is theoretically capable of becoming something else.

Yao asked Shun, “What are man’s emotions like?” Shun replied, “Man’s emotions are very unlovely things indeed! What need is there to ask any further? Once a man acquires a wife and children, he no longer treats his parents as a filial son should. Once he succeeds in satisfying his cravings and desires, he neglects his duty to his friends. Once he has won a high position and a good stipend, he ceases to serve his sovereign with a loyal heart. Man’s emotions, man’s emotions—they are very unlovely things indeed! What need is there to ask any further? Only the worthy man is different from this.”

There is the understanding of the sage, the understanding of the gentleman and man of breeding, the understanding of the petty man, and the understanding of the menial. He speaks many words but they are graceful and well ordered; all day he discourses on his reasons, employing a thousand different and varied modes of expression, and yet all that he says is united around a single principle: such is the understanding of the sage. He speaks little but what he says is brief and to the point, logical and clearly presented, as though laid out with a plumb line: such is the understanding of the gentleman and man of breeding. His words are all flattery, his actions irresponsible; whatever he does is shot through with error: such is the understanding of the petty man. His words are rapid and shrill but never to the point; his talents are varied and many but of no practical use; he is full of subtle distinctions and elegant turns of phrase that serve no practical purpose; he ignores right

or wrong, disdains to discuss crooked or straight, but seeks only to overpower the arguments of his opponent: such is the understanding of the menial.

There is superior valor, there is the middle type of valor, and there is inferior valor. When proper standards prevail in the world, to dare to bring your own conduct into accord with them; when the Way of the former kings prevails, to dare to follow its dictates; to refuse to bow before the ruler of a disordered age, to refuse to follow the customs of the people of a disordered age; to accept poverty and hardship if they are in the cause of benevolent action; to reject wealth and eminence if they are not consonant with benevolent action; if the world recognizes you, to share in the world's joys; if the world does not recognize you, to stand alone and without fear: this is superior valor. To be reverent in bearing and modest in intention; to value honor and make light of material goods; to dare to promote and honor the worthy, and reject and cast off the unworthy: such is the middle type of valor. To ignore your safety in the quest for wealth; to make light of danger and try to talk your way out of every difficulty; to rely on lucky escapes; to ignore right and wrong, just and unjust, and seek only to overpower the arguments of your opponents: such is inferior valor.

Fanruo and Jushu were famous bows of ancient times, but if they had not first been subjected to presses and straighteners, they would never have become true of themselves. Cong of Duke Huan of Qi, Que of Tai Gong of Qi, Lu of King Wen of the Zhou, Hu of Lord Zhuang of Zhu, and Gan Jiang, Mu Ye, Ju Que, and Bi Lu of King He Lu of Wu were all famous swords of antiquity, but if they had not been subjected to the grindstone, they would never have become sharp, and if men of strength had not wielded them, they would never have been able to cut anything. Hualiu, Qiji, Xianli, and Lu'er were famous horses of antiquity, but if they had not been subjected to the restraint of bit and bridle and the threat of the whip, and driven by a master driver like Zao Fu, they would never have succeeded in traveling a thousand *li* in one day.

In the same way a man, no matter how fine his nature or how keen his mind, must seek a worthy teacher to study under and good companions to associate with. If he studies under a worthy teacher, he will be able to hear about the ways of Yao, Shun, Yu, and Tang, and if he associates with good companions, he will be able to observe conduct that is loyal (*zhong* 忠) and respectful. Then, although he is not aware of it, he will day by day progress in the practice of benevolence (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義), for the environment he is subjected to will cause him to progress. But if a man associates with men who are not good, then he will hear only deceit and lies and will see only conduct that is marked by wantonness, evil, and greed. Then, although he is not aware of it, he himself will soon be in danger of severe punishment, for the environment he is subjected to will cause him to be in danger. An old text says, "If you do not know a man, look at his friends; if you do not know a ruler, look at his attendants." Environment is the important thing! Environment is the important thing!

* * *

Xun Zi: Basic Writings. Burton Watson, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.