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Xunzi and Naturalistic Ethics

Sor-hoon Tan

The ascendency of science in modern times makes it commonplace to accept that science presents the only true and correct image of reality. This has led to naturalization attempts in various domains, from epistemology, metaphysics, to philosophy of mind, and ethics. Naturalistic ethics may mean different things depending on what we consider natural. David Copp equates it with the empirical – emphasizing the relevance of empirical evidence to justification – while admitting that what is empirical is itself problematic.[1] One might count as empirical that which can be observed by our physical senses, or more narrowly that which can be studied by the natural sciences. Modern scientific naturalism limits the natural to what can be successfully explained by science but a more liberal naturalism may define as natural whatever does not contradict the laws of nature without necessarily being accountable by science.[2] Naturalistic ethics that accept modern scientific naturalism differ according to how broadly each conceives the scope of science, for example, whether it is equated with physics, or admits of other natural sciences without reducing them to physics, or even more broadly, includes human sciences understood as methodologically and ontologically irreducible to the natural sciences. Ethical naturalism has both metaphysical and epistemological stakes: 1) ethics is only possible if grounded in natural facts, since claims about the supernatural are false or empty given that only the natural has a place in reality; 2) ethical knowledge is acquired in ways similar to other knowledge, through scientific/empirical methods of inquiry that acknowledge the relevance of facts as evidence in human reasoning – mystical intuitions and divine revelations, for

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[1] David Copp, *Morality in a Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 254.

[2] Mario De Caro and Alberto Voltolini, "Is Liberal Naturalism Possible?" in Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (eds.), *Naturalism and Normativity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 69–86.

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example, are not sources of ethical knowledge or authority. This second order ethical discourse may or may not affect any particular normative ethics, depending on whether the latter's content can be specified without reference to supernatural entities and what is the accepted authority that guarantees its truth or validity. Normative ethics that predate the naturalistic trend in metaethics or even those originating in (retrospectively) anti-naturalistic contexts may be naturalized by interpreting or reconstructing them to be compatible with naturalism at the meta-ethical level, while preserving the first order normative claims about what should be done or how one should live.

Donald Munro suggests naturalizing Confucian ethics based on ancient texts dating back more than two millennia by providing it with modern scientific basis.[3] He argues that the findings of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology today support early Confucian insights into human nature and development: common human nature consisting in universal traits coexisting with human malleability; love and sympathy is among our universal traits; altruism is reciprocal; ethical concepts owe more to innate social emotions than traditionally recognized by Western psychologists or ethicists emphasizing reason opposed to emotion; human beings are innately predisposed to learn through imitation.[4] For Munro, what will survive of the early Confucian text, the *Mencius*, is a naturalistic ethics based on a biological-psychological theory of human nature that can be empirically tested.[5] Some would reject Munro's approach on the grounds that early Confucian discussions of *xing* 性 were not about human nature as understood in contemporary naturalistic ethics, nor did the ancient Chinese share our modern concept of nature. Philip Ivanhoe argues that the *Mencius* offers a religious ethics by viewing *tian* 天 (heaven) as "an impersonal yet concerned agent and a force for human Good" that is a source of ethical warrant, even though the broad semantic range of the concept of *tian* at that time included natural phenomena.[6] Instead of assuming the desirability of naturalization and seeking naturalistic support for their normative ethics, I shall explore the discussion of the possibility and nature of ethics, and whether it relates natural properties to ethical properties so as to justify or defy naturalization, in an early Confucian text, the *Xunzi*.

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[3] Donald Munro, *A Chinese Ethics for the New Century* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005), pp. 47–48.

[4] *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

[5] *Ibid.*, chapter 5. Mencius lived during the fourth century BCE and is considered the second most important thinker in Confucianism after Confucius. Recent publications in Chinese philosophy that adopt such naturalizing approach include a special issue on "Ethics, Reasoning, and Empirical Science," *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* 9 (2011), and Edward Slingerland, "Metaphor and Meaning in Early China," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10 (2011): 1–30.

[6] Philip J. Ivanhoe, "*Tian* as a Source for Ethical Warrant in Early Confucianism," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 6 (2007): 211–220, p. 213. Perkins argues that Mencius uses *tian* as "a way of discussing the natural order of things." Franklin Perkins, "Reproaching Heaven: The Problem of Evil in Mengzi," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 5 (2006): 293–312, p. 296.

1 Xunzi and Naturalism

Disagreement about the basis and nature of ethics dates back to the early days of Confucianism. Mencius' arch rival, Xunzi (ca. 310–220 BCE), dismissed as self-defeating his attempt to defend Confucius' normative teachings by grounding ethical goodness in characteristics humans are born with. Instead, Xunzi maintained that human nature is bad and ethical life is possible only because of what humans created via their artificial activities and products, most important of which being the social institutions of ritual (*li* 禮). This disagreement resonates with an older naturalism debate in ancient Greece over whether morality arises from nature or from conventions. In contemporary ethical discussions, ethics grounded in conventions is considered naturalistic, and ethics grounded in human nature would not be naturalistic if human nature is received from a supernatural source, such as endowed by *tian* (heaven conceived religiously), if humanity is more than or other than a natural species. If one is interested in finding naturalistic support for the normative claims of Confucian ethics in today's psychological and other empirical investigation into characteristics humans share at birth, human capacity and behavior, and their social consequences, for example, Xunzi would seem a more likely candidate than Mencius given that his conception of *tian*, in its indifference to human plight and ethical quest, bears more resemblance to the concept of nature in today's scientific worldview.

The ancient Chinese did not have a single term with the same meanings and references as the English "nature," or the ancient Greek "*phusis*." Instead, a cluster of terms in ancient Chinese texts overlap with them in meanings and references: *tian* 天 (sky/heaven) or *tiandi* 天地 (heaven and earth), *xing* 性 ([human] nature), *dao* 道 (way), *li* 理 (pattern/coherence), *ziran* 自然 (self-so/spontaneity), and *wanwu* 萬物 (myriad things).[7] The *Xunzi* has a chapter titled "*Tianlun* 天論," which John Knoblock translates as "Discourse on Nature," wherein *tian* or *tiandi* (heaven and earth) refers to natural phenomena, "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," the seasons, spring and summer, autumn and winter (17.4), the phenomena of flood and drought, cold and heat (17.1), wind and rain (17.2b).[8] Edward Machle warns that translating *tian* as "nature" introduces systematic distortions that lead to misunderstandings of *Xunzi*; Janghee Lee accepts that *tian*

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[7] It should be noted that the concept of nature (and its equivalent in other European languages) also has many different meanings since ancient times. Han Ulrich Vogel and Günter Dux (eds.), *Concepts of Nature: A Chinese-European Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 16–19. See also Geoffrey E.R. Lloyd, "Greek Antiquity: The Invention of Nature," in John Torrance (ed.), *The Concept of Nature* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 6 and p. 13; Gerard Naddaf, *The Greek Concept of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Peter Coates, *Nature: Western Attitudes since Ancient Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); and Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd edition (London: Fontana, 1983), pp. 219–220.

[8] In-text citations of the *Xunzi* will give book and section numbers from John Knoblock's translation, or only page numbers from Burton Watson's translation. John Knoblock (trans.), *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 Vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, 1990, 1994). Burton Watson (trans.), *Hsün Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

refers to objective natural phenomena or conditions, which are however not viewed as "mechanical, value-free, and exploitable," implicitly rejecting a view of disenchanted nature often attributed to modern science.[9] Xunzi's reference to "constancy in the course of *tian*" (17.1) has been compared with laws of nature.[10] Xunzi rejected any suggestion that rituals performed during droughts and eclipses, and divinations conducted before some important undertakings, could produce results by some supernatural forces. Only the vulgar masses would believe in such forces, an exemplary person recognizes that ritual performances are ceremonies "to embellish such occasions" (17.8). Xunzi also explained mourning rituals and their forms in terms of their symbolic meaning and impact on the emotions and ethical life of the mourners, and on social order – explanations that do not require the participation of supernatural beings such as ghosts or spirits, the existence of which he (19.11; 21.8) explicitly denied. Xunzi's philosophy may be considered naturalistic in rejecting belief in the supernatural, "the invocation of an agent or force that somehow stands outside the familiar natural world and whose doings cannot be understood as part of it".[11]

Xunzi seemed to share contemporary philosophers' naturalistic view that "there is no cosmic plan which aims at man's survival or at achieving his ideals, for to his lot the universe is morally indifferent."[12] In the *tianlun*, *tian* has neither intentions nor purposes. It does not desire or act like human beings. It is equally unresponsive to sages and villains: "The course of Nature is constant: it does not survive because of a Yao; it does not perish because of a Jie" (17.1).[13] This contrasts with other ancient Chinese views of *tian* as normative agent or force intervening in human affairs while aligning well with the modern disenchanted view of nature. A problem that arises for contemporary naturalistic ethical theories that view this disenchanted nature as the sum total of reality is the place of ethical values. While Xunzi did not

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[9] Edward J. Machle, *Nature and Heaven in the Xunzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 2 and p. 13; Janghee Lee, *Xunzi and Early Chinese Naturalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 22. See also Homer H. Dubs, *Hsüntse, the Moulder of Ancient Confucianism* (London: Probsthain, 1927), pp. 62–63; Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), chapter 6.

[10] For discussion of whether the concept of natural laws or laws of nature exists in pre-modern Chinese see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China: History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), Vol. 2, pp. 518–583; Derk Bodde, "Evidence for 'Laws of Nature' in Chinese Thought," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20 (1957): 709–727, and "Chinese 'Laws of Nature': A Reconsideration," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39 (1979): 139–155; Christoph Harbsmeier, "Towards a Conceptual History of Some Concepts of Nature in Classical Chinese: *Zi Ran* and *Zi Ran Zhi Li*," in Vogel and Dux, op. cit, 220–254.

[11] Barry Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," in De Caro and Macarthur, op. cit.; Nicholas L. Sturgeon, "Ethical Naturalism," in David Copp (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 91–121.

[12] Ernest Nagel, *Logic Without Metaphysics* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1956), p. 50.

[13] Xunzi is not alone in viewing nature as non-purposive, non-intentional, and in some cases non-normative; this could even be considered a dominant trend in third century (BCE) China. Angus Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Arguments in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), p. 235; Eno, op. cit., p. 132; Schwartz, Benjamin, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap, Harvard University of Press, 1985), p. 309; Heiner Roetz, "On Nature and Culture in Zhou China," in Vogel and Dux, op. cit., 198–219, pp. 204–209.

directly address the problem of normativity that is at the center of contemporary discussions of ethical naturalism, his ethical discussions implicitly relate ethical properties to natural properties. In the following sections, I shall consider whether these relations could be reconstructed today so that identification, explanation, and justification of ethical properties are based on the methods of science, or at least must take into account empirical evidence, before concluding with some remarks on the extent to which Xunzi's own views about the basis of ethics and the place of human beings in the cosmos constrain how far one should go with the naturalistic approach if one shares Xunzi's desire to defend Confucian ethics as a contemporary option.

2 Naturalizing Ethical Properties of Agents

What makes human beings ethical? Naturalists seek answers to this question in the natural properties of humans, including human nature – common traits humans are born with. The Chinese term, *xing* 性, in the *Xunzi* has been translated into "human nature." Xunzi famously claimed that "human nature is bad" against Mencius' claim that "human nature is good." Whereas Mencius believed that humans are born with the beginnings of virtues that naturally develop and issue in ethical conduct, Xunzi maintained that ethical norms and conduct are the products of human actions, "conscious exertion/activity (*wei* 偽)" (23.1a). For Xunzi, human nature as part of nature, "the consequence of *tian*" (22.5b; 23.1c), comprises of physical desires and feelings that, left to themselves, would result in unethical behavior. These desires common to all human beings include the desire for food, warmth, rest, things that delight the taste buds and other senses, sight, hearing, smell, and touch; they extend to desires for profit and worldly status. Trying to satisfy them leads to competition that arouses emotions of envy and hatred, and causes violence and crime, and "wanton and dissolute behavior" (23.1a). Xunzi (4.10) went so far as to claim that all humans are born petty persons (*xiaoren* 小人) who are the opposite of exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子). He insisted that conscious activity and not human nature is the basis of ethical good because ethical norms, encompassed by the concept of "ritual and propriety (*liyi* 禮義)" – which tells us what to choose, how to act, and how to live (1.8) – were created by ancient sage-kings (19.1a; 23.3a) and ethical conduct continues to be possible only through human effort at learning, with human intervention and use of various social devices, such as texts, models, and *liyi* (23.1a). Without conscious exertion to restrain and transform their bad nature, people are similarly unethical; with conscious exertion, some will become ethical while others who refuse to learn, or are unfortunate in the company they keep or the government that rules them, may remain bad or become even worse than human beings naturally are (4.10).

Although Xunzi did not employ any term that directly translates "empirical evidence," such evidence understood as the results of observation, study, and thought is relevant to his identification of the traits of human nature, his description of ethical agents and conduct, and the process of ethical learning; they are also present in Xunzi's reasoning and justification of Confucian ethical norms. In

becoming ethical, a person acquires ethical properties through a natural process involving other persons and human creations such as texts and *liyi*. In the context of contemporary naturalism, human beings are a natural species and products of human mental activity and actions are natural facts insofar as they are accountable by science or more broadly empirical.[14] However, before we conclude that the ethical properties of human agents in the *Xunzi* are natural properties because they are identified empirically and produced by a process that we can construe as natural, we need to push the question further back and ask how it is possible for sages to create the ethical norms, *liyi*. Does that process of originating goodness – not how individual humans born with bad nature acquire ethical properties but how anything ethical first occur in human society – involve anything supernatural?

Some interpreters see a contradiction between Xunzi's account of the origin of goodness and his own claim that "human nature is bad." They attribute to Xunzi the implicit view that the origin of goodness lies in humans sorting out the chaotic mix of good and bad elements that are both found in human nature, which is inconsistent with his explicit claim that human nature is bad.[15] Other interpretors see human nature in the *Xunzi* as neutral but leading to bad consequences – this may be more charitable than the first view if one argues that "bad" only means "undesirable, less than ideal," without being ethically bad.[16] Chenyang Li avoids making Xunzi inconsistent by interpreting his claim that human nature is bad not only because natural desires have unethical consequences, but also because it includes a natural tendency to act on these desires which amounts to "a tendency to generate disorder" – this second aspect of human nature is itself ethically bad.[17]

Li prefers an account that has Xunzi drawing "material source from human *qing* 情 (feelings), *yu* 欲 (desires), and *zhi* 知 (intelligence)," but identifies as "efficient cause" of goodness the "sage-king's aversion to disorder (*wu qiluan* 惡其亂)."[18] While the text mentions that aversion to explain why the sage-kings created *liyi*, Li's interpretation implies that this aversion is distinct from feelings and desires that make up human nature. If the aversion to disorder is reduced to desire for order, which is arguably an ethical desire, then his interpretation would collapse into that of attributing both good and bad elements to human nature in the *Xunzi*. Even if one grants Li the conceptual distinction between dislike for disorder and desire for order, Xunzi explicitly includes aversion/dislike (*wu* 惡) among feelings – "The feelings of liking and disliking, of delight and anger, and of sorrow and joy that are inborn in our nature are called 'emotions' [*qing*]" (22.1b; see also 20.3) – Li himself cites this passage. Unless there is some way of distinguishing aversion to disorder

[14] Sturgeon, op. cit., p. 92.

[15] Graham, op. cit., p. 248. Chenyang Li points out that this view had been suggested earlier by Chinese scholar Wang Guowei (1877–1927). Chenyang Li, "Xunzi on the Origin of Goodness: A New Interpretation," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38 (2011): 46–63, p. 50.

[16] Kim-Chong Chong, "Xunzi and the Essentialist Mode of Thinking on Human Nature," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35 (2008): 63–78. Those who understand *e* 惡 as crude or unadorned include Rokuro Kodama, *Xunzi's Thought* (Tokyo: Kozama Shobo, 1992).

[17] Li, op. cit., p. 54; see also Antonio S. Cua, *Human Nature, Ritual, and History: Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 21.

[18] Li, op. cit., p. 56.

from the disliking that falls under human nature, it would not provide an origin of goodness that is consistent with Xunzi's insistence that goodness does not come from human nature.[19]

The chaotic state of nature described by Xunzi, with everyone pursuing their natural desires and consequently fighting over scarce resources and getting in one another's way, would certainly give rise to feelings of aversion. However, such aversion, insofar as they are not yet a moral sentiment but purely self-regarding and self-serving, would be aversion to the frustration of more basic desires, which will only motivate actions aimed at winning the fight in this chaos and will not produce the ethically good. Li offers a thought experiment to explain how goodness might be produced from such a state of nature when some who dislike the chaos of that situation were "intelligent enough to think of a way to do something about it."[20] What started out as prudential solutions to satisfy nature acquired authority over time so that might (of higher problem solving accomplishments) becomes right (ethically exemplary practices and rules). While highly plausible, this is not Xunzi's story. Furthermore, this story still locates the origin of goodness in a combination of nature and intelligence, and intelligence seems to be more of an efficient cause than the aversion to disorder. More important, it does not exclude aversion to disorder, *qua* feeling, from human nature as Li wishes to. Xunzi's own definition of *xing* (human nature) provides a clue for excluding from this concept the sage-king's aversion to disorder that produces goodness in the form of *liyi*:

> That which is as it is from the time of birth is called the nature of man [*xing*].
> That which is harmonious from birth, which is capable of perceiving through
> the senses and of responding to stimulus spontaneously and without effort, is
> also called the nature. (p. 139)

The spontaneous dislike of having one's natural desires frustrated becomes an "aversion to *disorder*" only with a normative judgment that takes into account the macro picture of the world beyond the focus on satisfying one's own desires. Normative judgment involves more than sense perception and spontaneous, effortless response to stimuli that are natural endowments; it involves thinking and knowledge that, by Xunzi's definition, are not part of inborn nature, but an instance of conscious activity requiring deliberate effort.

The origin of goodness, as the introduction of ethical normativity into the world, involves deliberate human action that cannot be attributed as a part or purely a product of what Xunzi defined as human nature. The aversion to disorder which motivated the sage-kings to create *liyi*, *qua* feeling, may be part of nature, but it is the normative judgment of the disliked situation as disorder that produces the normative norms of *liyi*. Furthermore, Xunzi explicitly related the origin of orderly society to *yi* 義, which distinguishes humanity from natural phenomena and animals, and *yi* has been understood as a capacity for normative judgment:

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Fire and water possesses vital breath but have no life. Plants and trees possess life, but lack awareness. Birds and beasts have awareness, but lack *yi* 義. Humans possess vital breath, life, and awareness, and add to them *yi*. It is for this reason that they are the noblest beings in the world. … Thus, that they put the four seasons in their proper sequence and control the myriad things, universally benefitting the whole world, is due to no other cause than that they make social distinctions (*fen* 分) with *yi* (9.16a).[21]

Making of social distinctions with *yi* established the norms of *liyi* – rules and practices that govern the division of labor and responsibilities, allocation of resources, assign ranks that determine precedence and privileges, justify and express respect or contempt.

John Knoblock translates *yi* into "sense of morality and justice," and Burton Watson (p. 45) "sense of duty." Indeed, the term in Confucian discourse is often used with ethical meaning, as rightness or appropriateness. In the *Mencius*, it refers to one of the Confucian virtues for which there is a natural beginning. Li rejects understanding *yi* in the *Xunzi* (9.16a) as a full-blown ethical property on the grounds that being born with a sense of rightness implies that human beings will naturally become good, in fact is already good at birth, which is contrary to Xunzi's insistence that human nature is bad. However, this confuses two distinct meanings of human nature.[22] The passage did not actually claim that human beings are born with *yi*, only that it distinguishes human beings from natural phenomena and other living things. Although we sometimes mean by human nature what distinguishes human beings from other species, this meaning is distinct from the meaning of common traits human beings are born with, even though contingently one trait/characteristic/property may belong to both types. Only the latter but not the former meaning figures in Xunzi's explicit definition of human nature (22.1b). Li interprets the above passage (9.16a) to mean that *yi* is a "potential capacity in humanity" only actualized with the creation of *liyi* and that *yi* therefore cannot explain the origin of goodness since it is itself either the result of or coexists with *liyi*. I agree with Li that *yi* is not an innate capacity human beings are born with; Xunzi did not claim that it is and actually implied that it is not. For Xunzi (9.16a), "from birth all men are capable of forming society," but such associations are chaotic without social distinctions, which requires *yi*. From the account that follows, of how society becomes orderly through making social distinctions, it is clear that *liyi* is the product of making social distinctions with *yi*. Contrary to Li's interpretation, *yi* must exist *before* the creation of *liyi* even though it clearly continues to exist as part of *liyi* after its creation. It would be consistent with the passage to understand *yi* as a capacity that evolves in human interaction and therefore is a product of what Xunzi calls "conscious exertion/activity" – this would not stop it from being a unique distinguishing property of humanity that explains the creation of *liyi*, including ethical norms.

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[21] Translation modified from Knoblock's: "…developed social classes from their sense of morality and justice."

[22] Li, op. cit., p. 55.

The above passage also rules out the view that goodness originates in *zhi* 知, which Knoblock translates as "awareness," but it also means knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom.[23] Xunzi did not believe that knowledge or the ability to acquire it, which he attributed also to birds and beasts, is what enables human beings to create ethical norms. Li cites a different passage from the chapter on "Enriching the State" (10.1) that gives some credence to Fung Yu-lan's view by ending an argument for instituting social distinctions with "the wise instituted class divisions."[24] Li rejects this view because for him intelligence or wisdom (*zhi*) alone cannot motivate the sage-king's creation of *liyi* – but one could find the required motivation in the desire for economic prosperity. It needs to be pointed out that this chapter is among Xunzi's attempts to render Confucian ethics realistic, in this case by arguing for its economic rationality. From this perspective, social distinctions and by extension ethical practice and social order are being promoted as the way for a country to become rich, in other words, only intelligence is needed to grasp this solution to the economic problem. One could provide further support for the view that "goodness originates in intelligence" by considering *yi* itself (in 9.16a) as a particular or superior kind of knowing or intelligence so that the normative judgment required to dislike disorder is still explained by the natural property of intelligence.[25] We can then tell an evolutionary story to explain the difference between birds and beasts, with *zhi* but no *yi*, and human beings with *zhi* and *yi*. David Nivison considered and eventually rejected this reading in favor of understanding *yi* as a "sense of duty" because he believed Xunzi held a deontological view of morality – attributing intrinsic value to ethical norms, which are to be chosen for its own sake – even when he offered consequentialist arguments for it.[26]

Whether *yi* and intelligence are similar in kind, it is clear that both moral sense and intelligence interpretations of *yi* place it in the domain of the mind (*xin* 心) as they both involve thought, which separates but also relates nature (*xing*) to conscious exertion/activity (*wei*) in the *Xunzi*.

> The likes and dislikes, delights and angers, griefs and joys of the nature are called emotions. When the emotions are aroused and the mind makes a choice from among them, this is called thought. When the mind conceives a thought and the body puts it into action, this is called conscious activity. When thoughts have accumulated sufficiently, the body is well-trained, and then the action is carried to completion, this is also called conscious activity. (pp. 139–140)

Xunzi explicitly explained the sage-king's creation of *liyi*, despite sharing human beings' bad nature, in terms of conscious exertion involving thought that goes beyond spontaneous response of natural desires and feelings.

[23] Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (中國哲學史) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1961), p. 365.

[24] Li, op. cit., p. 48.

[25] Lee H. Yearley, "Hsün Tzu on the Mind: His Attempted Synthesis of Confucianism and Taoism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (1980): 465–480, p. 477.

[26] David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, in Bryan Van Norden (ed.) (La Salle: Open Court, 1996), p. 207, pp. 209–120.

Someone may ask: "If man's nature is bad, how then are *liyi* created?" … The sage accumulates his thoughts and ideas. He masters through practice the artificial skills [*xiwei* 習偽] in order to produce ritual and appropriateness, set up models and standards." (23.2a)[27]

It is the mind's intervention with thought – disrupting the spontaneous response of human nature, which as such is no different from birds' and beasts' behavior – that produces conscious activity or deliberate action that can have ethical properties.

The desire itself, which arises before one knows whether or not it can be satisfied, comes from the nature received at birth, while the search to satisfy it as best one can is directed by the mind. Thus a single desire which has sprung from the inborn nature may be directed and controlled in many ways by the mind, until it becomes difficult to identify it with the original desire. There is nothing a man desires more than life and nothing he hates more than death. And yet he may turn his back on life and choose death, not because he desires death and does not desire life, but because he cannot see his way clear to live, but only to die. Therefore, though a man's desires are excessive, his actions need not be so, because the mind will stop them short. If the dictates of the mind are in accord with just principles [*li* 理], then, although the desires are manifold, what harm will this be to good government? Conversely, even though there is a deficiency of desire, one's action can still come up to the proper standard because the mind directs them.[28]

An ethical person is one whose mind directs her actions in a certain way. Is the mind a natural faculty? It would be too hasty to conclude that because thought, unlike desires and feelings, are not part of human nature (*xing*), the mind must therefore be considered a supernatural faculty in Xunzi's philosophy. The "Discourse on Nature" describes the mind governing the five senses of eye, ear, nose, mouth, body, which are "*tian*-faculties (*tianguan* 天官)" (17.3a). If we understand the five senses as natural faculties, as all humans are born with those senses, then it seems to follow that the mind, as "the lord provided by nature/natural lord (*tianjun* 天君)," also must be natural. Does interpreting the mind as natural, as the context of this chapter urges the reader, coupled with the normative function of the mind, generates an inconsistency with Xunzi's claim that goodness does not come from human nature? Although human nature comes from nature (*tian*), this does not necessarily imply that everything that is part of human beings and comes from *tian* is human nature as Xunzi defines it. Robert Eno argues that the mind as a ruling faculty comes not from *tian* as disenchanted nature, but from *tian* understood as having ethical significance.[29] Even though the text probably uses *tian* with different meanings, I

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[27] Cf. Watson's (p. 160) translation: "The sage gathers his thoughts and ideas, experiments with various forms of conscious activity, and so produces ritual principles and sets forth laws and regulations."

[28] Watson's translation, p. 151; see also p. 152, "While all human beings have desires by nature, it is the function of the intellect (*zhi*) to guide the search for satisfaction."

[29] Eno, op. cit., pp. 158–163. Goldin compares Xunzi to the Deists, for whom reason is the faculty given to human beings by God to discover his will, which means perceiving the laws of nature. Paul Rakita Goldin, *Rituals of the Way* (La Salle: Open Court, 1999), pp. 51–54.

wish to pursue the meaning of *tian* as disenchanted nature to see if one could naturalize Xunzi's ethics without contradicting his insistence that human nature is bad.

The distinction the text makes between the mind as a ruling faculty and the physical senses is important in understanding why Xunzi did not include it as human nature, which however will not prevent us from retrospectively construing it as a natural faculty with normative functions but without adopting any normative conception of nature. The responses of the physical senses to the natural environment give rise to spontaneous desires and feelings, and Xunzi believed that these senses need no training/learning to function (4.9) – therefore they are part of human nature by Xunzi's standards. These natural faculties are not aware of ethical norms and pandering to them often leads to bad consequences (11.4). When he discussed the mind together with the physical senses, which suggests that it also comes from nature, the mind is as prone to ethical error as the physical senses (11.7b; 23.2a). The mind is "like the mouth and stomach" if a person "lacks a teacher and model" (4.10) – that is, without learning and personal cultivation, the mind in its natural state would be as oblivious of ethical norms as the physical senses. This is why thought does not always result in ethical actions; not all conscious exertions of human beings are ethical.

The mind, according to Xunzi, can be darkened or purified. Darkening the mind "destroys the achievement of nature" while purifying the mind "completes nature's achievement" (17.3a). This suggests that even if the mind is a natural faculty in the sense that all humans have minds from birth, it only functions as a *normative* faculty after particular human practice – reflection and reasoning, studying, learning – purifies rather than darkens it. The early chapter on learning takes an extreme view of learning as independent of human natural abilities, comparing learning to the use of horses and vehicles for transport that does not improve one's natural characteristics or give us new abilities (1.3). However, this completely external view of learning is qualified in "The Teachings of the *Ru*," which offers a more considered and certainly more plausible view that combines the roles of natural abilities and human effort in the process of learning and becoming ethical. Rather than being completely separate, nature provides the raw material for human effort, and learning transforms bad human nature (8.11; 19.6). Purification of the mind is part of this transformation process. Xunzi did not include the mind as part of human nature even though human beings are born with minds because the normative function of the mind, which comes about only with human practice, is more important than its natural genesis in understanding human beings and their important difference from all other existents. In the contemporary context, one could reconstruct this account by understanding the mind as a both natural and normative faculty where the normative functions come from human practices which are natural processes or products. Ethical properties of human agents are therefore natural properties, or at least could be identified and explained without bringing in anything supernatural.

There is a tension between Xunzi's emphasis on the importance of external aids – ritual and appropriateness, standards and models – in the process that transforms human beings born with bad *xing* to exemplary persons who act ethically on the one

hand, and on the other hand, his explanation of those external aids as being created by sages, who surely also started out as human beings with bad *xing*. How were sages able to disrupt the spontaneous response of human nature without the learning facilitated by ritual and appropriateness, which had yet to be created?[30] Xunzi's account indicates that the sages learned by reflecting on experience and, through practical experience, developed skills that eventually enabled them to create norms and standards that have aided future generations to become ethical. What accounts for the difference between sages who created ritual and appropriateness and other human beings who become ethical only with the aid of these creations? Xunzi could be implying that, even though all are born with bad *xing*, human beings are not born equal with regard to the purity of their minds or other mental capacities he did not include in human nature. The sages were born with pure (or less darkened) minds, or greater reflective and other mental capacities, than ordinary human beings. Xunzi's teachings were aimed at the average human being. He was being realistic in not assuming that everyone can be a sage (as Mencius claimed) and consequently preferred to rely on the inherited creations of past sages for continued edification of naturally bad human beings.

I prefer a different interpretation of the sages' creation of *liyi* and its significance for ethics. Although most ordinary human beings require external aids to become ethical, it is not the only (human) way. Learning through experience, combining practice and reflection, could also achieve the ethical in the absence of external aids such as inherited norms, whether in individual action or in more enduring forms of new ethical norms. This means that although the kind of ethical achievements represented by the sages' creation of ritual and appropriateness are rare, they could still occur and would occur when historical circumstances of chaos demand such innovation. The origin of goodness is not the extraordinary capacities of the sages but contingent reflective experiences of ordinary human beings who started with bad human nature but through their efforts (and some luck) can become extraordinary initiators of ethical traditions.

3 Naturalizing Ethical Properties of Beliefs and Actions

Confucian ethics has been interpreted as a kind of virtue ethics because of its concern with agents' character and the question, "What kind of person should one become?" This contrasts with the question, "What should one do?" in ethical theories emphasizing moral principles or consequences of action.[31] Xunzi's ethics is agent-centric in its preoccupation with personal cultivation and the crucial ethical roles given to sages and exemplary persons: learning's "real purpose is to create a scholar and in the end to create a sage" (1.8; 19.2d). The text often distinguishes ethical from unethical ways – courses of actions, patterns of conduct – by attributing them to ethical exemplars and their opposites. If this focus on agents and their characters implies that the ethical properties of beliefs and actions are completely

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[30] I thank the anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

[31] Roger Crisp, *Virtue Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 623.

derived from the ethical properties of agents – a belief or an action is ethical if and only if it is the belief or the action of an ethical person – then naturalizing the ethical properties of agents will be sufficient to naturalize Xunzi's ethics. However, this may be too hasty and a closer scrutiny of his discussions of the ethical properties of beliefs and actions is needed.

Ordinary individuals starting out with bad human nature acquire their ethical properties with external help by acting in accordance with the ethical standards of *liyi* or a teacher – the ethical properties of actions that contribute to their personal cultivation are not derived from themselves as agents, but one could nevertheless argue that they are derived from some other agents, sages and teachers, with ethical properties. However, in Xunzi's account of the origin of goodness in human practice, insofar as *yi* is not part of human nature and first arose in human interaction, it is arguably a property of actions – a particular way of social interaction, of organizing society – before it became a property of beliefs and agents. It is only after certain practices making social distinctions came to be adopted by many who acknowledge their contributions to better lives for all that these social distinctions became ethical standards and agents who initiated these social distinctions were then identified as having *yi* as a normative sense. The ethical properties of the creators of *liyi* who first introduced normativity into human experience seem to have been derived from some particular practices that first purified their minds so that they could distinguish between better and worse ways of interacting. It seems that ethical properties of the first ethical agents come from ethical actions rather than the other way round.

It is questionable if the ethical properties of *liyi* are entirely derived from the ethical properties of their creators. Sage-kings probably were *recognized* as having the ethical properties of sages only in retrospect, *after* particular practices and rules they initiated had proven efficacious and became accepted as authoritative over time. From this perspective, one could argue that the ethical properties of sages were attributed based on their creation of *liyi*, and therefore derived from (recognition of) the ethical properties of practices that became *liyi* rather than the other way round. The ethical property of sageliness may consist of nothing more than the creation of *liyi* – they became sages because certain practices they initiated through reflective experience became authoritative norms as *liyi* and not the other way round. Nevertheless, Xunzi often justified *liyi* with the authority of the sage-kings and other ethical exemplars. From a contemporary perspective, one would ask how does one know exemplars from their opposites, and the answers would probably cite actions that distinguish their characters from others, bringing the discussion back to ethical properties of actions. This interprets the authority or wisdom of sage-kings and other ethical exemplars as resting on their having invented or upholding ethical norms that had worked. Such authority and wisdom are sustained by the continued efficacy of the norms; if the norms start to fail, then the authority and wisdom of the sage kings cannot be cited to justify continuing with them. This means that ethical beliefs and actions have pragmatic bases independent of the ethical properties of their creators or agents. Despite Xunzi's own strong traditionalist inclinations, a contemporary reconstruction of his ethics need not dogmatically accept the authority of ancient sages because there are alternative

justifications for ethical norms in the text. Instead of a dogmatic traditionalism defending whatever norms have been attributed to the sage-kings, Xunzi's ethics will be more relevant today if its traditionalism is limited to a belief that there are often good reasons why certain norms have worked for a long time, and these should not be carelessly abandoned unless really warranted by relevant change in circumstances.

A better contemporary reconstruction is possible with Xunzi's consequentialist justifications of *liyi* in terms of ending disorder and maintaining harmony in society, in which ethical properties of norms, rules, and actions depend not solely on agents but also on external circumstances and courses of events. Xunzi himself emphasized the interaction between human agents and what Xunzi identified as nature (*tian*). Ethical actions have better consequences because they are more appropriate responses to natural phenomena, which have no ethical properties but need to be taken into account in human practice as they affect the outcome of actions. Nature (including bad human nature) can be taken into account because it has constancy (*chang* 常, 17.1). Although nature does not give human practice its ethical properties, its constancy can explain why ethical norms, the way (*dao*) that ethical conduct follows, can be constant (17.5). Xunzi seemed to think that very little changes about the pattern or course of *tian*, and human nature will always be bad before the intervention of human practice, but whether this constancy is contingent and relative, or absolute and a priori, whether the way is enduring or timeless (*changjiu* 長久, 10.10), comprehensive or universal (*tong* 通, 21.4), is a matter of debate between constructivist interpretations, such as Hagen's and those he calls realist interpretations, which view Xunzi as advocating an ethics of unique, universal, and objective standards or principles based on a determinate order in ultimate reality.[32]

David Nivison detected in the *Xunzi* a tendency to consider the way of the sages "final and perfect," which "can be thought of as (we might say) an overflowing into the human social order of the necessity of the order of the universe as a whole."[33] In Philip Ivanhoe's interpretation of Xunzi, the sages show us "the one and only way to a happy flourishing world" and only "Confucian rituals provide a way to realize an orderly design inherent in the world."[34] Sage-kings were wise and able to govern well because they "mark out the way" with rituals for others to follow (17.11). According to Chad Hansen, Xunzi provided "an absolutist account of discovery of the single correct *dao*."[35] "The world does not have two Ways, and the sage is not of two minds" (21.1). Bryan Van Norden sees Xunzi as an "intellectualist" for whom "knowledge guarantees right action."[36]

[32] Kurtis Hagen, *The Philosophy of Xunzi: A Reconstruction* (La Salle: Open Court, 2007), pp. 17–23.

[33] David S. Nivison, "Replies and Comments," in P.J. Ivanhoe (ed.), *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 267–341, p. 331; *The Ways of Confucianism*, p. 48.

[34] Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Human Nature and Moral Understanding in the Xunzi," in T.C. III Kline and Philip J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), p. 240 and p. 248.

[35] Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 342.

[36] Bryan Van Norden, "Introduction," in Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*," 1–13, p. 3.

> Only when the mind knows the way can it approve the way. And only after it approves the way can it abide by the way and exclude what is contrary to it. (21.5c)

In realist interpretations, what makes beliefs and actions ethical is correspondence to real objective standards that may be immanent or transcendent; such objective standards could be naturalistic. The orderly design may be no different from the laws of nature that scientists discover; the *dao* may be uniquely correct because it is the only way that takes full account of the regularity of natural phenomena and provides the best outcome. However, to naturalize the ethical properties of beliefs and actions by grounding them in objective standards inherent in nature contradicts Xunzi's insistence that his teachings pertain to normative human ways (*rendao* 人道) that bring order to the world through human practice, in contrast to the ways of nature.[37] "The way of which I speak is not the way of heaven or the way of earth, but rather the way that guides the actions of mankind and is embodied in the conduct of the exemplary person" (8.3).

Anti-naturalistic interpretations are often premised on Xunzi continuing the tradition of conceiving *tian* as Heaven that has normative properties or even moral agency.[38] Eno argues that Xunzi used *tian* as a normative term both in the normative components of human psychology (the mind as *tianjun*) and as a prescriptive model for emulation.[39] Human beings are able to create ethical norms because they have faculties endowed by nature that could follow or replicate an objective determinate order found in nature.[40] The exemplary person emulates the constancy of *tian* (17.5). Key relationships, of ruler and minister, of father and son, and of husband and wife, "share with Heaven and Earth the same orderly pattern" (9.15). The distinction between "superior and inferior" is compared with, and seems implicitly justified by, the distinction between heaven and earth (9.3). One to whom the world would willingly submit because of his great ethical excellence "is as complete as Heaven and Earth" (6.10; see also 10.2). The sage is often associated with heaven and with the greatness of heaven and earth (3.9c; 8.11; 16.2; 19.2d). Some may dismiss these as mere metaphors, or surviving remnants of an older understanding of *tian* as moral force or judge that Xunzi carelessly included, or might have used for rhetorical purpose. To Eno, such normative usages express the idea that the sage, the exemplary person, and man "form a trinity" (Knoblock: "triadic partner") with heaven and earth, which amounts to striving to be *tian*'s equal by aspiring to the grandeur and perfection of *tian* with one's ethical achievements.[41] I interpret that triadic partnership as indicating that humanity could aspire to be the equal of nature

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[37] For references to *rendao*, see 16.2; 19.2d; 19.4a; 19.9c; 20.1; 21.9.

[38] Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 264; Machle, op. cit.; Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming our Evil: Human nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), pp. 70–71.

[39] Eno, op. cit., pp. 158–165.

[40] Cf. Goldin's comparison of Xunzi to the Deists, for whom reason is the faculty given to human beings by God to discover his will, which means perceiving the laws of nature, op. cit. pp. 51–54.

[41] Eno, op. cit., p. 165. This "triad" (*shen* 参) of heaven, earth, and human mentioned in 3.5; 8.11; 9.15; 13.9; 17.2a; 23.5a.

in the ability to create ethical norms. Rather than normativity, value, or order being inherent in nature and providing the objective basis for human creation of ethical norms, if there is any value in nature, then it is the result of human creativity.

In the "Regulations of a King," the description of the exemplary person as the "triadic partner of Heaven and Earth" is preceded by a claim that "Heaven and Earth gives birth to the exemplary person, and the exemplary person brings orderly pattern (*li* 理) to Heaven and Earth," and the exemplary person is able to accomplish this because he "acts with ritual and appropriateness," which are "the beginning of order."[42] Rituals not only govern social interactions, but also ensure that all agricultural, fishing, and hunting activities are carried out in the proper seasons, and the use of the myriad things produced by heaven and earth follows an orderly pattern. A sage king "scrutinizes Heaven above and establishes on Earth below; he fills up and puts in order all that is between Heaven and Earth; and he adds his works to the myriad things" (9.16c). Human beings become the equal of nature when they are able to interact with nature in orderly ways that prevent them from becoming mere victims of natural phenomena, and give them some measure of control over their relations with nature, so that the relationship between humanity and nature is interdependent rather than dependent, and results in order rather than chaos from the human perspective. This seems to indicate that, instead of discerning any order inherent in nature and emulating it, humans create order in their relations with nature and thereby bring order to nature. Human beings respond to their natural environment with certain practices. Some of these practices establish valuable norms over time. These norms are valuable because of their perceived positive effects on the interaction among human beings, and between them and their natural environment. These positive effects are summarized as "bringing order to heaven and earth," that is, eliminating various problems that natural phenomena – from violent weather to scarcity of resources – pose for human existence. Nature does not provide bases or prescriptive models for ethical norms. Instead, ethical norms invented through human practice enable humans to interact positively with their natural environment. No mysterious supernatural or metaphysical relationship between heaven/nature on the one hand and human beings and their ethical norms on the other is necessary to make sense of the otherwise obscure idea of triadic partnership with heaven and earth. Although its normativity is not part of nature, ethical norms as human inventions are still natural in the contemporary sense.

Xunzi recommended a wide range of beliefs and actions as the ways of ethical exemplars, including ancient kings (4.11; 10.10; 16.3; 19.4b; 20.1; 23.7; 24.5; 28.3), true kings (9.9; 17.2; 20.5); sage kings (11.5b; 24.2), sages (8.7; 19.7b), an intelligent ruler (12.8c), exemplary persons (8.13; 19.4a), and filial sons (23.1e; 27.82).[43] These are contrasted with the ways of negative examples, such as

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[42] 9.15. Knoblock translate "*li*" into "provides the organizing principle for"; cf. Sato's "appreciates the principle (i.e. order)." Masayuki Sato, *The Confucian Quest for Order: The Origin and Formation of the Political Thought of Xunzi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 320.

[43] Some exemplars whose ways are held up for emulation are named: Fuxi (25.13), Yao, Shun, Yu, and Tang, often considered sage kings of ancient times (18.2; 23.8), King Wen (12.9; 25.13) and King Wu (18.2; 25.13) of Zhou dynasty, and Chun Shen (314–238 BCE), a patron of Xunzi whom the text compared to Confucius and described as a "great *Ru* (Confucian)" (25.11).

avaricious rulers (9.5), degenerates/bad people (*jianren* 奸人, 19.4a; 19.5b); despicable men (32.2); and "hirelings and menials who hawk and sell their labors by day" (15.1d; 15.5). The respective ethical and unethical ways of exemplars and negative examples are elaborated in terms of specific actions that people can and should perform or avoid. Xunzi's recommendations pertaining to the ways (*dao*) of fulfilling various responsibilities, achieving various purposes, or solving various problems are specific actions that people can perform. Even when *dao* is used without specific qualifications – for example, "when the way is lost, the state is lost" (12.6); "follow the way not the ruler" (13.2; 29.1); "when the world possesses the way" (18.7) – we can make good sense of the text by understanding *dao* as specific ethical ways of human practice. Rather than referring to some metaphysical absolute, supernatural or transcendent entity, Xunzi was interested primarily in ways that humans can walk, follow, cultivate, put into practice, abide by, maintain, attain, perfect or make complete, ways that one can employ to guide, lead, and transform others.

Instead of understanding the comprehensive way (*tongdao* 通道) as including all ways that bring order in various circumstances, some interpreters maintain that the apparently natural, contingent, and relative ways all draw their normativity from the singular, transcendent, universal way that is "the balance that enables the mind to avoid obsessions in order to achieve sagely wisdom" (21.5b) and "the classical standard and rational principle (*jingli* 經理) of order" (22.3f).[44] Such interpretations assume that, in order to defend the Confucian way as the only true and correct way, Xunzi must presuppose the source of normativity to be beyond the diverse changing natural (including social) circumstances and courses of human actions: the Confucian way corresponds with a singular, absolute, and transcendent way. Do these interpretations pose insurmountable obstacles to the project of naturalizing Xunzi's ethics? Lee Yearley suggests that we read passages in the text that seem to present Confucian moral views as universal truths corresponding to some higher absolute reality as Xunzi's exoteric teachings intended for the ethically less advanced general audience who were better off accepting Confucian teachings as absolute. In contrast, his more subtle esoteric teachings for the ethically more advanced acknowledge that whether value judgments are right or wrong depends on particular circumstances.[45] Rather than knowing some transcendent *dao* as a supernatural object, the balance that prevents the mind from becoming "obsessed by a small corner of truth" requires acknowledging the contingent and relative nature of all value judgments; misapprehending them as universal truths with transcendent source of normativity would engender the very obsession Xunzi wanted to dispel. Yearley admits that an ethics of contingent and relative value judgments gives Xunzi no grounds to advocate the Confucian way as "the one eternally true way," but "his most basic reason for asking people to become Confucians remains intact: if

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[44] I would translate *jingli* 經理 as "the guides and patterns." Cf. "the guides (*jing*) for order are rituals and punishments" and "The classical standards of order are rituals associated with punishments" in 25.18.

[45] Yearley, op. cit., p. 469 and p. 477.

you become a Confucian you will become – or stand a good chance of becoming – an admirable person."[46] Instead of knock-down arguments or philosophical proofs that Confucianism is uniquely true and correct – which may not motivate people to *practice* the Confucian way – Confucians persuade people to change with exemplars of life worth living, by showing them which actions lead to order, harmony, and peace in the world.[47]

4 *Xunzi's* Anthropocentrism: Limits of Naturalization

A contemporary reconstruction of Xunzi's ethics into a naturalistic ethics is possible wherein normativity is created in human practice, in response to natural phenomena and social circumstances. It takes value judgments to be ultimately relative and contingent; but some judgments may for practical purposes be considered universal due to the extensive regularity in natural phenomena and common human traits. Such a naturalistic Xunzian ethics posits a continuity between disenchanted nature and human experience, practice, and products; however, contemporary ethical naturalism contrasts sharply with Xunzi's own stark division between nature and humanity.[48] Is Xunzi's division of *xing* and *wei* no more than what Nivison called arbitrary linguistic legislation that even Confucians can legitimately ignore today?[49] Or the distinction might be a specific response to the philosophical debates of ancient times that are irrelevant to contemporary ethical discussions. For Xunzi, how we use language has important implications for how we view the world and live our lives. His *xing-wei* distinction is central to his philosophy and a contemporary reconstruction has to take it seriously if it wishes to lay claim to continuity with Xunzi's own philosophy, let alone any stronger claim of being the right interpretation. In the current context, reflecting on the significance of that division for his ethics cautions us against narrow scientistic naturalism. Scientific naturalism becomes scientistic when it is reductionistic, reducing social and human sciences to natural sciences.

Xunzi's philosophy is anthropocentric. Like all other Confucians, he sees humankind as occupying a special place in the cosmos, contrary to contemporary naturalistic philosophers for whom "man occupies no central position in the flux of events."[50] The contemporary naturalistic perspective on human beings treats human beings, human psychological activities, actions, practices, and conventions as natural facts. Distinct from the objective view of thus seeing ourselves as just one

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[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 477–479.

[47] For the role and importance of moral exemplars in the *Analects*, read as moral theory, see Amy Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects* (New York: Routledge, 2012). See also Sor-hoon Tan, "Imagining Confucius: Paradigmatic Characters and Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32 (2005): 409–426.

[48] This contrast between natural and artificial, between nature and humanity, is not unique to Xunzi but is fundamental to the most common sense of "nature" in many discourses of nature. Soper, op. cit., p. 15; Coates, op. cit., p. 3.

[49] Nivison, *Ways of Confucianism*, p. 212.

[50] Nagel, op. cit., p. 50.

thing in the world like any other, we also adopt the subjective view of ourselves experiencing the world as external to us. While Xunzi himself did not address the puzzle of our place in the world in terms of this dual perspective, the sharp division he drew between *tian* and humans, and between our natural endowments (*xing*) and conscious activity (*wei*), suggests that he would resist seeking answers to the possibility and nature of ethics in the view of human beings as merely one natural entity. He would be against studying human beings, their mental activity, actions, practices, and conventions with methods similar to those used to study natural phenomena that belong to the domains of physics, chemistry, or biology. In contrast to the modern faith in science and its ability to expand our knowledge indefinitely, Xunzi approaches the study of nature entirely from the perspective of human needs and purposes (17.3b).[51] Moreover, knowledge of nature is of secondary importance compared to learning how to live which, being matters of conscious activity (*wei*), is pursued from what moderns would call the subjective view, although Xunzi's approach would extend the subjective to intersubjective, rather than oppose it to the objective view.[52]

A naturalistic reconstruction faithful to the spirit of Xunzi's ethics would eschew narrow scientistic naturalism that reduces all sciences to natural sciences, or worse to physics. It is compatible with social and human sciences as empirical studies, including experimental inquiries, provided these are ontologically and methodologically irreducible to natural sciences, and takes seriously the subjective view of human experience. Its understanding of the empirical would not be limited to phenomena accountable with concepts permitted in the natural and social sciences, but would include more broadly all human experience that can be communicated, discussed, and investigated with some sharable and determinate, but open-ended vocabulary. While firmly opposed to belief in anything supernatural, in occult explanations or justifications, its respect for empirical evidence will nevertheless be tentative about supposedly proven truths and remains open to the possibility that some natural properties of human experience may not be accountable by science.

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[51] Ivanhoe argues that Xunzi's anthropocentrism need not prevent his ethics from being environmentally friendly. Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Early Confucianism and Environmental Ethics," in Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (eds.), *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions Publications, 1998); cf. Chenyang Li, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, *Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 156–159.

[52] Xunzi cautioned his audience against spending too much time and effort on knowledge about nature because such pursuit has no end (21.9) and presumably would distract one from more important ethical pursuits focused on conscious activities.