

*Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.9, No.1 (June 2019):16-32

# The ‘Subjective Attraction’ and ‘Objective Attractiveness’ of the Practice of the Rites in the *Xunzi*

Angel On Ki Ting\*

## Abstract

Xunzi is well-known for his claim that “human nature is evil (e 惡)” and that the rites (li 禮) are established to bring order to a society. Most research on Xunzi has thus focused on how the transformation of human nature (hua xing qi wei 化性起偽) is possible and the role of the rites in the development of a moral agent. However, what has not been explored is the extent to which the practice of the rites contributes to a meaningful life that is comparable to some Western conceptions of meaningfulness. Through surveying the conception of meaningfulness given by Susan Wolf, this paper aims to show that the practice of the rites in the Xunzi has both objective and subjective values that are necessary for rendering a life meaningful. Furthermore, the practice of the rites resolves the tension that arises in contemporary Western discussions of meaningfulness regarding the choice between being moral and satisfying self-interest, thus leading one to live a flourishing life.

## 1. Introduction

Albert Camus starts his *Myth of Sisyphus* dealing with what he thinks is the most urgent of all philosophical problems—suicide, for if one judges life to have no significance, then nothing else matters.<sup>1</sup> In response to this urgency, contemporary philosophers have come up with various approaches to address the issue of meaning in life, including both supernaturalism and naturalism.<sup>2</sup> While supernaturalism rests the meaning of life on a supernatural being such as God, naturalism suggests that human beings can have a meaningful life without assuming the existence of any supernatural entity. The naturalist approach can be further divided into two main branches, subjectivism and objectivism, which are mainly distinguished based on the issue of whether an objective standard, rather than one’s subjective desires, is necessary for a life to be meaningful. During such discussions, there arises a tension between living a moral life and satisfying one’s

---

\* Lecturer, Hong Kong Baptist University, Shek Mun Campus. Email: [tingonki.angel\[a\]gmail.com](mailto:tingonki.angel[a]gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> Camus (2005), p. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed survey on different approaches addressing the meaning of life suggested by contemporary philosophers, see Metz (2001, 2002, 2015).

self-interests; as such, Susan Wolf puts forward an approach that combines both subjective and objective values. The quest for a meaningful life in the contemporary Western tradition, as suggested by Thaddeus Metz, is a quest for “a significant existence”—not only does this quest of meaningfulness seek the value of life, but the solution to this quest also suggests how people should live in this world, in contrast to living a happy and moral life.<sup>3</sup>

Although early Confucians (Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi) lacked a systematic analysis of the conception of meaningful life, it is undeniable that they were concerned with how one should orient oneself in a chaotic world in order to live a good life. Richard Kim and Joshua W. Seachris suggest that Confucius’s emphasis on rituals [the rites] (*li* 禮) and the value of family allows one to live a meaningful life with purpose and significance.<sup>4</sup> Apart from encouraging a sense of purpose and significance, I suggest that the practice of the rites and the value of family as expressed in the *Xunzi* also provides people guidance as to how one should live in this world, and it is in this sense that the practice of the rites contributes meaning to one’s life. Xunzi is of particular interest in this paper because of his views towards human nature (*xing* 性). On the one hand, he contends that human beings are born with various desires and are driven to satisfy their own interests, without regard for public interest. On the other hand, he argues that everyone is capable of becoming a moral agent living harmoniously in society through learning and practicing the rites. This seemingly contrasting view towards human nature can be viewed as representing the contrasting views of subjectivism and objectivism. With the help of the conception of meaningfulness given by Susan Wolf, this paper aims to show that the practice of the rites in the *Xunzi* may shed some light on how to reconcile the tensions between morality and self-interest, and allow one to live a meaningful life.

## **2. Susan Wolf on “Subjective Attraction” and “Objective Attractiveness”**

Although the subjectivist and objectivist approaches are prominent in Western contemporary discussions of the meaning of (and in) life, Susan Wolf finds both of them inadequate. The subjectivist approach focuses on the satisfaction of self-interest, and claims that one’s life is meaningful provided that

---

<sup>3</sup> Metz (2001), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Kim and Seachris (2018), p. 1-9.

one is pursuing what interests them; as Metz puts it, “subjectivism maintains that what is meaningful for a given person is a function of that toward which she (or her group) has (or would have) a certain pro-attitude”.<sup>5</sup> This conception of meaningfulness is well represented by a picture of the passionate Sisyphus suggested by Richard Taylor. According to the myth of Sisyphus, Sisyphus was punished by God and forced to roll a boulder up to the top of a hill. When he had almost finished the job, the stone would roll down, and Sisyphus had to start rolling the boulder up from the bottom of the hill again and again, for all eternity, without any aim. Many would agree with Taylor that Sisyphus’s toil is a paradigm of an objectively meaningless life—a picture of “endless pointlessness”.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, if this picture of Sisyphus represents the condition of human existence, is it possible for human beings to find subjective value in their existence? Taylor concludes that if Sisyphus found “inflicted on him the irrational desire to be doing just what he found himself doing,” then his life would be meaningful, despite the fact he is not going to achieve anything with objective value.<sup>7</sup> Taylor dismisses the need for objective value in a meaningful life, for pursuing goals with objective value would result in the “Paradox of the End,” as illustrated by Iddo Landau:

We set ourselves ends and strive to achieve them. We hope that their attainment will improve our condition. The closer we get to our goals, the happier we feel. Paradoxically, however, when we finally do achieve them our joy is sometimes diminished. We have a sense of insignificance and emptiness, and we feel that in attaining our goal we have lost the meaningfulness and balance we experienced while we were striving towards it. In some ways, it seems to us, the struggle is more gratifying than the achievement of the end.<sup>8</sup>

Even if the goals that Sisyphus pursues have objective value, if he pursues one goal after another, it would be no different from his punishment as he is still endlessly and aimlessly pursuing different goals. If we are to find meaning in the life of a Sisyphus who is keen on pursuing goals, it will be in his will to pursue his

---

<sup>5</sup> Metz (2001), p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor (2000), p. 325.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>8</sup> Landau (1995), p. 555.

goals and his struggle to achieve something significant, rather than the significance of the goals themselves. In other words, it is his pro-attitude that makes his life meaningful, rather than the objective value.

Wolf finds it indisputable that having passion, or finding fulfilment in what one is doing, is necessary for a life to be meaningful. It is not difficult to find people who do not enjoy their life and thus conclude that life is meaningless, such as the alienated housewives mentioned by Peter Singer in his book *How Are We to Live?*<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Wolf points out that Taylor's view on meaningfulness would lead to an absurd consequence. What if someone finds passion in "counting or recounting the number of tiles on the bathroom floor"?<sup>10</sup> According to Taylor's conception, that person would have a meaningful life as long as they find the activity fulfilling; however, this does not seem to fit our common conception of meaningfulness. In fact, Wolf suggests that that person may be mistaken in their belief in what counts as meaningful.

However, a life dedicated to pursuing only objective value, and moral value in particular, may be undesirable as well. In her article entitled "Moral Saints," Wolf argues that the life of moral saints, whether deontological or utilitarian, are unattractive. These people would devote themselves to categorical duties or maximizing happiness while neglecting their own interests. They may not be able to enjoy non-moral interests (such as reading and playing violin), nor could they develop their non-moral talents (such as athletic talents and musical talents), for practical reasons. Given their dominating moral characters, they would require themselves to be fully dedicated to their moral duties and thereby disregard any non-moral characters and activities. Even if they allowed themselves to enjoy those activities, such pursuits would only be seen as instrumental in achieving their moral duties. More significantly, these non-moral interests, talents and characters are essential components of our identity, and suppressing them may result in the loss of personal self.<sup>11</sup> In sum, the life of moral saints would be "strangely barren".<sup>12</sup>

Although Wolf argues that an objective value is necessary (unlike other scholars such as Peter Singer, who defines objective value as something "larger than the self"),<sup>13</sup> she nonetheless leaves its definition opaque. Singer argues that it

---

<sup>9</sup> Wolf (2013), p. 306.

<sup>10</sup> Wolf (1997), p. 218-219.

<sup>11</sup> Wolf (1982), p. 420-424.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 421.

<sup>13</sup> Singer (1995), p. 213.

is only through living for purposes larger than oneself that one can avoid the undesirable results that arise from living with only subjective value—emptiness and dissatisfaction. For those who live with only subjective value, the validation of value always comes from within oneself, so one could never know whether one is doing something significant. Eventually, one would come to doubt why one wanted to pursue any activity in the first place and find oneself trapped in a vicious circle. It is through participating in something with objective value that one can avoid begging the question and find justification for continuing to engage in their activities.<sup>14</sup>

However, despite the fact that objective value could help to break the vicious circle, and no matter how significant one's impact is in this world, the existence of human beings is still insignificant from the perspective of the universe. Sooner or later, the universe will be destroyed and no conscious beings will be left to appreciate the significance of human existence. Singer's view thus exposes a problem in discussions of the meaning of life, where a life that is (ethically) objectively meaningful may still be objectively meaningless from the perspective of the universe.<sup>15</sup>

In this respect, the opaque meaning of objective value given by Susan Wolf helps to solve this problem. Wolf believes it is of importance to include objectivity in the conception of a meaningful life as a solution for reconciling the discrepancy between the perspective of the universe and that of individuals. If one believes that one's interests are the only important things within one's life and strives only for one's own satisfaction, one would be devastated to learn the fact that the universe is indifferent to one's interests, and that there is no point in striving towards any achievement since we will all die one day. As it is one's solipsistic attitude that causes this discordance when one is confronted with the perspective of the universe, Wolf thus emphasises the importance of harmonising these perspectives. To adopt an objective value is to recognise the fact that there exist other perspectives beyond one's own. More importantly, these other perspectives are as equally important as one's own and might be “indifferent to whether one exists at all”.<sup>16</sup> Through acknowledging the existence of these perspectives, one realises “the fact that one is not the center of the universe”,<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.206-213.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed explanation of different perspectives of meaningfulness, see Benatar (2017).

<sup>16</sup> Wolf (2013), p. 312.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

which aligns with the perspective of the universe and enables one to carry on with one's life. To Wolf, this facet of an objective value in the conception of meaningfulness means more to an individual than leaving an impact on the world.

If we emphasise the perspective of the universe in discussing the meaning of life, we eventually come to the conclusion that all activities are equally meaningful as long as it is one's will to pursue them, for nothing really matters to the universe. This subjectivist interpretation of meaningfulness is so broad that it would include lives that are generally regarded as meaningless, such as the lives of people who are passionate about doing crossword puzzles, or counting the number of tiles on the bathroom floor.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, if we give priority to objective value, one's self-interest in living a good life may be neglected. Wolf's conception of meaningfulness is of significance in that it allows us to live a good life, while at the same time reminding us of the importance of objectivity. It is the synthesis of both subjectivist and objectivist points of view. The implication is that the kinds of activities one engages in are not important unless they cultivate a sense of objectivity, such that people are prevented from being self-centred. As such, meaningful lives can involve individuals living harmoniously with others within a community, and activities that render lives meaningful can be those that cultivate the virtues necessary for a person to successfully engage in social relationships. With this conception of meaningfulness, I will look into the practice of the rites advocated by Xunzi, and show that participating in the practice of the rites contributes to a meaningful life.

### **3. An Account of Meaningful Life in the *Xunzi***

Instead of asking why human beings exist in this world, Xunzi was more concerned with how one ought to live in this world, a concern that aligns with the conception of meaningfulness from the perspective of individuals. For Xunzi, this question amounts to how to be a virtuous person and establish a harmonious society in response to the human condition. Xunzi contends that there are certain facts about human beings and that we must respond to them in order to flourish. First and foremost, human beings are social animals that must live within a society. Furthermore, they are born with various desires and are driven to satisfy them. However, if human beings are allowed to pursue their desires to satisfaction

---

<sup>18</sup> Wolf (1997), p. 218.

without limit, neither their desires nor the society's resources can be sustained. Moreover, Xunzi asserts that although human beings are born with the *potential* to learn to be moral, they are not born with incipient moral capacities and thus they must learn to become moral agents—human nature can be beautified. In response to these facts, social conventions (known as the rites) are thus established to ensure the proper allocation of resources and to guide human beings to become virtuous. It is only when a harmonious society is established and human nature is refined through joyous practice of the rites that human beings are able to flourish. The “objective attractiveness” of practicing the rites thus lies in its contribution to the organization of a functional, wealthy and harmonious society, as well as the beautification of human nature. Through the practice, one is not only attending to one's own interests, but also at the same time orienting oneself to perspectives that are as equally important as one's own. At the same time, its “subjective attraction” lies in the joy found in performing the rites.

One way to establish a functional, wealthy and harmonious society is to install a hierarchical social institution through assigning proper stations to people according to their capacities and abilities. Xunzi asserts that all human beings, whether they are noble or not, are born with various desires and are driven to satisfy them.<sup>19</sup> For instance, people desire food when hungry, warmth when cold, and rest when tired. They also desire not to be harmed, and seek out profit or self-interests (Knoblock, 4.9).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, they are distinguished from other animals in that they are able to form societies and utilise myriad things. Nonetheless, once they start to live together, they fight each other over limited resources, and disorder results (Knoblock, 9.16a; 10.1; 10.4; 19.1a; 23.1a). The rites are thus established in response to these facts about humanity and prescribe a hierarchical system within a society. As Xunzi notes, it is impossible for every person within the same society to be equal in power and influence, otherwise the society would not be functional. If everyone was the ruler, then there would be no officials to carry out their commands. By the same token, it is impossible for everyone to work in the same profession (Knoblock, 4.12; 9.3; 9.15; 10.4). A person who is fit to be a farmer may not do well as the director of the fields, and the same is true for other positions (Knoblock, 21.6b). It is thus of importance to divide people into different professions and social classes according to their

---

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that the word “noble” here refers to people who are virtuous, rather than a social class. The Chinese term for “noble person” is 君子 (*junzi*).

<sup>20</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all citations of Xunzi are taken from Knoblock (1988).

abilities, age and virtues.

This hierarchical system also defines the responsibilities of each position to ensure that each person performs their duties accordingly, where the lord acts as a lord, and farmers act as farmers (Knoblock, 4.12; 9.15). Once a social hierarchy has been established, resources can be allocated according to the various positions and emoluments. Lower officials should only use resources that are assigned to their positions, and they should not desire that which is not assigned to their positions, nor should they desire more than prescribed by their social status—otherwise, chaos would result and society could not prosper (Knoblock, 10.1). In this sense, the rites also prescribe the proper objects of desire (Knoblock, 19.1b). To summarise, through assigning proper stations to each person within a society and allocating resources accordingly, the rites lay down the foundation for a functional and affluent society. More importantly, people with different talents are able to flourish within this society. Through practicing the rites, one is not only able to satisfy their own interests, but also contribute to the moral order within a society that enables others to flourish.<sup>21</sup>

Once a society is formed, human beings engage in various relations, such as the relations between lord and minister, parents and children, husbands and wives, and amongst siblings and friends. As long as a person is engaged in a human relation, one assumes the duties specified by that relation (Knoblock, 9.15). At the same time, one is required to possess certain virtues in order to perform these duties properly. For instance, being a minister is to serve one's lord, which requires respect and loyalty; being a child is to carry out filial obligations as required by the parent-child relation, of which filial piety is necessary. It is through the practice of the rites that the virtues of respect, loyalty and filial piety as such are cultivated.

Take the general principles of mourning as an example. First and foremost,

---

<sup>21</sup> The social hierarchical system thus established is a just system, though not in the sense of the Rawlsian conception of justice as fairness, where everyone should be allowed to have equal opportunities despite the social positions they are born in. The aim of this hierarchical system is instead to sustain both the production of resources and the satisfaction of desires through securing a division of labour within a society. The inauguration of social classes is not arbitrary, but must be done using the capacity of righteousness (*I* 義), which is unique to human beings. According to Xunzi, if the classes are divided with the capacity of righteousness, a harmonious society can be achieved and resources can be utilised properly (Knoblock, 9.16a). Furthermore, as Antonio Cua (2003) points out, Xunzi is well aware of two different kinds of “honors”—the honor gained because of the virtues one possesses, and the honor gained by virtue of the social class one is born in (147–202). It is the honor gained through being a virtuous person that is of significance, and positions of higher officials should be held by virtuous persons.



the mourning rites define various human relationships. In the case of the extreme pain and grief that results from the death of one's lord or parents, the mourning period is extended to three years so as to ensure enough time is given for the mourner to express their pain and grief. In contrast, the periods of mourning for other relations last no more than nine months. Through the distinction in the mourning period among various relations, the obligations accompanying the relations are thus defined (Knoblock, 19.5b, 19.9a; 19.9c; 19.10). Mourning in accordance with the rites is to perform one last duty to the deceased, so that one's respect to one's lord or one's honour to one's parent is expressed without reservation, which in turn requires the demonstration of virtues (the minister's loyalty to the lord and the child's filial piety to their parent) (Knoblock, 19.4a). Virtues such as loyalty, faithfulness, love and reverence are cultivated and expressed to the highest through the sacrifices employed in the mourning rites (Knoblock, 19.11). The funeral also brings together the feudal lords and government officials (in the case of the emperor) and distant relatives (in the case of an ordinary person). Given the amount of time required for the preparation of the funeral, even those who live far away are able to attend the funeral to show their loyalty and respect (Knoblock, 19.4b-c). Last but not least, since the proper expression of emotions in various situations is a sign that one is observing one's duties as required by a particular relation, the rites also prescribe how and what kind of emotions one should express as required by the situation. For instance, the funeral rites prescribe how the deceased should be adorned to ensure the proper expression of emotions. If the deceased is not adorned properly, no grief can be expressed; this implies that one is not performing one's duty as a child properly and that one is not showing respect and love towards one's parent (Knoblock, 19.5a). The rites are therefore important in maintaining human relations: practicing them not only defines various human relations and the duties that flow from such relations, but also cultivates virtues that are necessary for performing those duties and provides a proper means for people to express their emotions properly. In sum, through such practice, one does not only satisfy one's self-interest, but also eventually becomes a virtuous person.

Because they install social institutions and prescribe the proper expression of emotions through defining human relations, the rites are said to be able to beautify human nature. Xunzi's assertion that human nature is evil is made in response to Mencius's claim that humans are born with innate incipient moral capacities—the four moral sprouts. For Xunzi, human nature refers to capacities that humans are

born with and can be exercised without learning, such as the capacities of seeing and hearing, as well as the desire for profits and pleasure. Moral acts, by contrast, are acquired through conscious exertion (*wei* 偽). Xunzi draws an analogy between a warped board and human nature. Human effort such as press-framing, steaming and force must be applied if the warped board is to be made straight, which indicates the fact that the board is not straight by nature. By the same reasoning, since human beings must learn and practice the rites if they are to act morally and to bring order to a society, it can be shown that acting morally is not human nature (Knoblock, 23.3c).<sup>22</sup> Thus, instead of being executed by calling upon the innate capacities within oneself, moral acts are performed under the guidance of the rites, and hence humans must exert their own effort in order to be moral. For instance, human beings have the desire to eat when starving, and they will fight others over food. Hence, deference to one's parents would not be possible without learning (Knoblock, 23.1c–d). Furthermore, Xunzi has observed that human relations are often seen as instrumental: once individuals set up their own family, they may cease to observe filial obligations; once they have satisfied their desires, they may no longer be faithful to their friends and lords. Once their desires are satisfied, human beings would fail to observe their obligations as required by various relations and he thus concludes that their nature is ugly (*bu mei* 不美) (Knoblock, 23.6a).

It is in the consequentialist sense that the rites are able to transform human desires and bring order to a society, and it is in the non-consequentialist sense that the practice of the rites marks the distinction between human beings and beasts that the rites are said to be able to beautify human nature. From a consequentialist point of view, humans are no longer driven by their immediate desires and social order can be maintained within a society. As the rites define social classes and allocate resources accordingly, human desires are refined in such a way that are appropriate to their social status, and humans are allowed to satisfy their refined desires through proper means prescribed in the rites. For instance, with the help of the noble persons, ordinary people would be able to taste fine food such as rice

---

<sup>22</sup> For this section, my interpretation on the Chinese text is different from that of Knoblock. Part of Knoblock's translation of this section is "since the nature of man is evil, it must await the government of the sage kings and the transformation effected by ritual and morality before everything develops with good order and is consistent with the good," where "the nature of man is evil" becomes a premise rather than a conclusion. However, I contend that Xunzi aims to show that humans are not good by nature with the help of an analogy with the warped board in this section, and hence I do not follow Knoblock's translation here. I still include Knoblock's section for reference.

and meat and come to desire them. Furthermore, although it is a fact that human beings want to indulge in immediate luxury, they nonetheless also want their wealth to perpetuate, and thus they are willing to lead the life prescribed by the rites in order to obtain their new objects of desire (Knoblock, 4.9-4.11).<sup>23</sup> As human beings form new desires and have them satisfied in accordance with the rites, they no longer fight against each other for resources, and societal chaos is thus prevented.

From a non-consequentialist point of view, human nature is refined in such a way that they are distinguished from beasts. Despite the fact that Xunzi calls for a transformation of nature, for human beings to learn to become moral agents, he does not renounce their inborn nature. Xunzi asserts that even ancient sage kings were born with the same inborn nature as those of ordinary people, and hence human beings are not evil by virtue of their inborn nature. Nonetheless, human beings should not leave their inborn nature uncultivated (*lou* 陋); they should strive to render their nature complete through the practice of the rites (Knoblock, 4.9, 19.6). This is not only for the benefit of a society, but also because such practice is the beauty itself that marks the distinction between humans and beasts. Take funeral rites as an example again. Xunzi asserts that as long as they have awareness (*zhi* 知), even animals and birds will grieve the loss of their mates. Since human beings are superior among those that have awareness, if they do not grieve as the beasts do, they do not even amount to beasts (Knoblock, 19.5a, 19.9b). As it is the inborn nature of both human beings and beasts to have various emotions, what distinguishes them from each other is the proper expression of emotions, which can only be achieved through the practice of the rites. Through employing various rituals in a funeral, emotions are expressed neither in excess nor deficiency, but are appropriate for one's relations with the deceased (Knoblock, 19.5b). Moreover, it is only through the practice of funeral rites that one would be able to extend one's relationship with the deceased. If their loved ones die in the morning, beasts forget their relations by evening; however, relations among human beings continue to constitute a significant part of their lives even after their loved ones have departed. Through practicing the funeral rites, human beings are able to extend their remembrance—as well as their loyalty,

---

<sup>23</sup> It would be another project to look into the question of how it is possible for human beings to transform their nature and how is it possible for the ancient kings to establish the rites in the first place. However, as this paper focuses on why practicing the rites could lead one to live a meaningful life, I do not intend to discuss this matter in this paper. For further details on this topic, see, for example, Chong (2008), Cua (2005), Fung (2012), Hagen (2007), Kline III and Ivanhoe (2000), and Lee (2005).

faithfulness, love and reverence—to the deceased and continue their relations (Knoblock, 19.4c, 19.11). As such, human beings are reminded of the intrinsic value of human relations and are willing to observe their duties even if their desires have been satisfied through such relations. In this sense, human nature is said to be beautified and is no longer ugly.

The reason why transcending one's animal self confers meaning to the lives of human beings can be explained in terms of Metz's fundamentality theory. The fundamentality theory states that "a human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence",<sup>24</sup> where "fundamental conditions of human existence" refers to "conditions that are largely responsible for many other conditions in a given domain [a living human person, human life as a collective, and the environment in which humans live]".<sup>25</sup> It is a theory of self-transcendence that focuses on moving beyond one's animal self through the exercise of one's rationality, such that not only are one's decisions and volition rational, but also one's conation, affection and emotions are responsive to reason.<sup>26</sup> The practice of the rites is an exercise of rationality, where one refines one's desires and emotions such that they are expressed as required by the situation (in other words, rationality is oriented to the fundamental condition in the domain of a living human person). At the same time, through the practice, people are assigned to stations that are appropriate to their talents and virtues, such that each person is able to perform their duties accordingly and society is kept wealthy and functional. As such, on top of the satisfaction of one's own desires, the desires of others can also be sustained. At the same time, virtues that are other-regarding, such as respect, loyalty, deference, and love are cultivated and human relations are sustained (in other words, rationality is oriented to the fundamental condition in the domain of human life as a collective). Through maintaining a harmonious society, the practice of the rites contributes to an environment that enables the flourishing of all (that is, rationality is oriented to the fundamental condition in the domain of the environment in which humans live).

If the "objective attractiveness" of practicing the rites lies in its function in bringing about an ordered society and distinguishing humans from beasts, the

---

<sup>24</sup> Metz (2015), 222.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>26</sup> Metz (2011), p. 495.

“subjective attraction” is manifested in the joy one experiences during the practice. It may be argued that if morality is not part of the inborn nature of human beings, and if the rites consist of rules and norms that assign people to different stations and prescribe duties (and even the expression of emotions associated with various human relations), it is impossible to find any “subjective attraction” in following such practices, for the rites are mere external sanctions. Furthermore, if the rites only prescribe behaviors, and if the question of whether one is performing the rites properly can only be judged by one’s behaviors, why does it matter if one is subjectively attracted to such a practice? While it is possible that one may simply follow the procedures without truly understanding them, the practice is not genuine if one does not express one’s emotions sincerely during the practice. At the same time, if one expresses one’s emotions without following the rites, one would harm oneself. It is only when one performs the rites and shows the appropriate emotions that the practice is authentic (Knoblock, 19.3). Being authentic to the practice of the rites requires one to see the beauty and intrinsic value of the practice, and those who are able to truly appreciate the rationale behind them would perform the rites without exerting themselves and truly take joy in the practice (Knoblock, 19.2d, 21.7d). In other words, the rites cannot be said to be properly performed if one is not engaged in the practice.

#### **4. Conclusion: What Can Xunzi’s Conception of Meaningfulness Contribute to Modern Societies?**

In this paper I have shown that the practice of the rites promoted by Xunzi could lead one to live a meaningful life in the sense of meaningfulness given by Susan Wolf, where both subjective and objective values are necessary for a life to be meaningful. I have shown that the practice of the rites has objective value. Through practising the rites and aiming for the establishment of a harmonious society, human beings are turned away from selfishness and oriented to a perspective that is indifferent to their self-interests. Furthermore, instead of leaving the objective value opaque, Xunzi’s conception of meaningfulness provides a clear picture of what counts as objective values—transcending one’s animal self and striving for the beautification of human nature. With the help of the rites, emotions are properly expressed and virtues are developed to maintain human relations. The beautification of human nature has objective value and is intrinsically valuable in that it marks the distinction between humans and beasts.

The subjective value of the practice of the rites lies in one's engagement and enjoyment in the practice.

While promoting the achievement of perfection in such performances, the practice of the rites also emphasises the importance of taking delight in them, and the practice itself is a manifestation of the completion of human nature. As such, another advantage of practicing the rites is that it solves the Paradox of the End. The major problem mentioned in the Paradox of the End is that people experience emptiness after achieving their goals, and would rather continue with their struggles. This problem arises when there is a clear distinction between means and ends, and that one desires only the ends. For instance, imagine that Sisyphus is keen on building a temple but has no interest in rolling boulders. Thus, the only reason for Sisyphus to keep rolling the boulder would be his interest in achieving his end. Seeing the act of rolling the boulder as only a means and not something that he desires, he would be caught in a dilemma: he should try to achieve his goal because it is what he wants, but at the same time he should not achieve it since he would lose a sense of purposefulness and significance after it is achieved.<sup>27</sup> One of the solutions to the Paradox of the End is to eliminate the distinction between means and ends, where "the activity transcends the means/end categories".<sup>28</sup> The practice of the rites is said to be able to solve the Paradox of the End in this sense. One does not only enjoy the practice, but during the practice, one transcends one's animal self and renders one's nature complete.

It may be objected that the rites are not applicable to the contemporary world. After all, it is not feasible to spend three years on mourning even if one loves one's parents deeply. At the same time, a hierarchical society is against the modern spirit of justice, such as that presented by Rawls. In response to this objection, it is true that the rites that were written around two thousand years ago are not applicable to modern societies. Nonetheless, it is the principle (*li* 理) that is important. As Xunzi has mentioned, the details of the rites may change over time in response to the changing environment, while the principle remains the same (Knoblock, 17.11). The principle of the rites is to establish a harmonious society in response to the fact that human beings are social animals and are driven by their immediate desires. Indeed, the human condition has not changed drastically for the past two thousand years. Whether in the past or present, human beings are still living in societies and are still driven by their

---

<sup>27</sup> Landau (1995), p. 556-557.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 563.

desires, while resources are increasingly limited. In this respect, although the rules written in the rites are no longer applicable, Xunzi's emphasis on the cultivation of other-regarding virtues that enable one to maintain human relations is still valuable and significant in modern societies, for human relations are unavoidable when human beings are living in a society. By all means, if Rawls's principle of justice is proved to be more suitable in contemporary times, Xunzi would not object to it.

Xunzi's emphasis on human relations is thus subject to another criticism: the account of meaningful life found in the *Xunzi* focuses only on partial relations, which ignores the impartiality that is advocated by most modern moral principles, especially utilitarianism. The utilitarian may take a position similar to that of the Mohist. Instead of spending resources on the practice of the rites, which aims to maintain partial relations (lord and minister, parents and children, husbands and wives, and amongst siblings and friends), resources should be distributed in such a way that maximizes the happiness (or welfare) of a society, disregarding partiality. Take the modern movement of effective altruism as an example. Being an effective altruist is not simply to maximise happiness in this world, but to adopt the most effective way of doing so. For instance, instead of going to a distant country and helping people in need, one should probably work in a career that allows them to make as much money as possible; in doing so, one would be able to donate as much money as possible, allowing for the hiring of more aid workers and saving more people's lives as a result.<sup>29</sup> It may be suggested that by participating in effective altruism, one is still able to maintain partial relations in order to maximize *effectiveness*. Nonetheless, these partial relations would then be seen as means only. Xunzi would argue that these partial relations have intrinsic value in that they enable human beings to transcend their animal self. For Xunzi, to engage in partial relations requires the exercise of rationality, which orients one's cognition and affection to other persons, and hence the engagement itself is intrinsically good. To treat partial relations as means only is to neglect our human nature and render human beings as mere beasts. Furthermore, being an effective altruist also means using oneself as merely a means to an end, which neglects one's self-interests.<sup>30</sup> I contend that the problem of the meaning of life is a problem that must involve self-interest: an

---

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed introduction to effective altruism, see Singer (2015).

<sup>30</sup> For an analysis of the meaning of life and utilitarianism as well as its criticisms, see Metz (2003).

interest for one to continue living.<sup>31</sup> As Camus has put it nicely, if one judges that life is not worth living for *oneself*, there is no reason for *that person* to continue living. Even though Mother Teresa may still have a meaningful life, I would have no reason for *me* to continue living if a computer programme could do a better job in eradicating poverty than me. The matter of the meaning of life is thus by default a matter of satisfying one's interest in continuing one's life.

The above discussion on effective altruism also reveals a tension between self-interest, morality and meaningfulness. It seems that while being moral would probably lead to a meaningful life, one's self-interest would be considerably compromised. Nonetheless, if one focuses on the satisfaction of one's self-interests, one is unlikely to live a meaningful life in the eyes of the others. I maintain that the practice of the rites could reconcile this tension. On the one hand, one's interests are satisfied and one is able to rejoice in participating in partial relations by following the practice. On the other hand, one eventually becomes a virtuous person and contributes to the development of a harmonious society and enables the flourishing of others.

## References

- Benatar, David (2017). *The Human Predicament*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Camus, Albert (2005). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. England: Penguin Group.
- Chong, Kim Chong (2008). "Xunzi and the Essentialist Mode of Thinking on Human Nature." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 35: 63-78.
- Cua, Antonio (2003). "The Ethical Significance of Shame: Insights of Aristotle and Xunzi." *Philosophy East and West*, 53: 147-202.

---

<sup>31</sup> One may argue that this may not be true for those who are willing to sacrifice their lives for some purpose. For example, parents are often willing to sacrifice their lives in order to save their children, and in a case mentioned by Mencius, a person may be willing to sacrifice themselves in order to maintain their integrity and righteousness. In these cases, I would claim that these people are taking those things that they have sacrificed for as part of their self-interests, and have weighted them as being more valuable than their own lives. The parents take the well-being of their children as part of their own interests, while the person in Mencius's case takes their integrity and righteousness as part of their self-interests too—for them, it is better to die than to live with dishonour. The idea of 'an interest in whether one should continue living' may be comparable to David Benatar's (2017) notion of 'an interest in continuing to exist' in his discussion of suicide.



- \_\_\_\_\_ (2005). *Human Nature, Ritual, and History: Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy*. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Fung, Yiu Ming (2012). “Two Senses of “Wei 偽”: A New Interpretation of Xunzi’s Theory of Human Nature.” *Dao*, 11: 187–200.
- Hagen, Kurtis (2007). *The Philosophy of Xunzi*. Chicago, Illinois: Open Court Publication.
- Kline III, T. C. and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. (2000). *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Pub.
- Knoblock, John (1998). *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*. 3 Vols. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Landau, Iddo (1995). “The Paradox of the End.” *Philosophy*, 70: 555–565.
- Lee, Janghee (2005). *Xunzi and Early Chinese Naturalism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Metz, Thaddeus (2001). “The Concept of a Meaningful Life.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 38: 137–153.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2002). “Recent Work on the Meaning of Life.” *Ethics*, 112: 781–814.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2003). “Utilitarianism and the Meaning of Life.” *Utilitas*, 15: 50–70.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2011). “The Good, The True, and the Beautiful: Toward a Unified Account of Great Meaning in Life.” *Religious Studies*, 47: 389–409.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015). *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, Richard (2000). *Good and Evil*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books.
- Singer, Peter (1995). *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books.
- Singer, Peter (2015). *The Most Good You Can Do*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wolf, Susan (1982). “Moral Saints.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 79: 419–439.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1997). “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life.” *Social Philosophy and Policy*: 207–225.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2010). *Meaning in Life and Why Does It Matter*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2013). “The Meanings of Lives.” In *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, edited by Joshua W. Seachris. UK: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.