

# Xunzi and the Ancient Chinese Philosophical Debate on Human Nature

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It took an event of extremely tragic proportions such as the Holocaust for Western thinkers to begin to reverse our traditional understanding of man as innately good but corruptible by the environment to the more sobering postmodern understanding that man is evil with a potential for good. Despite the sporadic emergence of such negative views of mankind, we had to wait until the latter half of the twentieth century for this view to receive at least some academic attention. After World War II, the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, a disciple of Sigmund Freud, warned us of the dangers of man to himself. The war experience but also his realization that revolutions create violent vacuums in the political and social order opened his eyes to man's violent nature and to the likelihood that man needs order to protect him from himself. This negative understanding of human civilization as a protective process of deferring human violence may seem indeed revolutionary. However, such controversy is nothing new to man's understanding of himself; it already appeared in ancient myth. Like the Adam and Eve myth, a number of cultures explained the birth of civilization negatively, as a violation of taboo, whereas other myths and the religious institutions that developed out of them explained it positively, as divine intervention. It is needless to point out that the latter view came to dominate our ways of understanding our institutions until recently. The violence of the twentieth century, however, reminded some Western intellectuals of the possibly negative beginnings of our civilization.

Unlike those of the West, Chinese thinkers carried this negative understanding of the human from myth into the historical state-forming periods. During the Spring and Autumn (770-481) and Warring States (480-221) periods, many Chinese intellectuals and political advisors to kings and princes engaged each other in a lively debate about human nature and its significance for, and impact on, the state. The following is meant to further the debate on generative anthropology with a discussion of this approximately two-thousand-three-hundred-year-old debate.

As I understand it, Rene Girard and Eric Gans's generative anthropology is basically a reflection on human violence caused by man's mimetic desire and the resentment it

generates. According to this view, human civilization developed as an effort to defer resentment and violence by channeling them into institutions intended to protect us from them. Humans defer violence into such artificially created institutions as language, ritual, religion, law and ultimately the state.

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I wish to start my discussion where I left it in my article, "Ancient Chinese Sacrificial Practice in the Light of Generative Anthropology" (*Anthropoetics* 1, 2 [December 1995]). Given the extent to which the first two historical dynasties of ancient China, Shang (c. 1570-1045 BCE) and Western Zhou (1045-771 BCE) practiced human sacrifice, a fact for which there is archeological evidence in both oracle bone inscriptions and mass graves of sacrificial victims discovered in recent decades, I proposed to define these dynasties as sacrificial states according to the terms set forth by generative anthropology.<sup>(1)</sup> However, human sacrifice disappeared as a state ritual in the subsequent Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods.<sup>(2)</sup> Though practiced privately, the sacrifice of human victims came to be replaced at the state level by straw or clay puppets of the kind Chinese archeologists recently unearthed at the foot of Qin's (221-207 BCE) first emperor, and/or by animal sacrifice, the latter practiced in fact until the end of China's last dynasty, the Qing (1644-1912).

The reasons for the discontinuation of human sacrifice are unknown but open to speculation. Ancient Chinese philosophers ignore ritual bloodletting but emphasize instead ritual morality as the foundation of state. Xunzi (Hsun tzu, ca. 310-ca. 215 BCE) presents funeral ritual, that is, ancestral rites requiring blood sacrifice in ancient times, as the basis for ritual morality and good citizenship. In the world, those who obey the dictates of ritual will achieve order; those who turn against them will suffer disorder, as Xunzi wrote in his *Discussion of Rites*.<sup>(3)</sup>

This shift from a sacrificial to a moral ritual is particularly evident in the philosophical debates stretching from the Spring and Autumn period to the end of the Warring States period and beyond. None of the other prominent Spring and Autumn and Warring States period philosophers: Confucius (Kong Fuzi, 551-479), Mozi, (ca. 480-390), Mencius (Meng Zi, ca. 382-300) Zhuangzi (ca. 365-280), and Han Feizi (d. 233) took issue with human sacrifice, however they may have deviated from each other in their opinions about the principles of statehood and good citizenship. This may have been because these philosophers realized the moral potential ritual creates in humans, namely respect, loyalty, love, reverence, and frugality, not to mention its potential for philosophical debate on social and political issues.

While they were idealizing the first dynasties and their wise rulers, it seems enigmatic, however, that none of these philosophers even so much as mentions human sacrifice, not

even as a negative, no-longer-desirable state-supporting ritual. They write as if such sacrifice had never existed. They ignore the fact that the wise Yao, Shun, Yu, King Tang of Shang, Wen and Wu of Zhou, whom they all idealized as the fathers of good statehood, actually practiced human sacrifice.<sup>(4)</sup> The philosophers stress the kings' moral qualities-virtues they themselves recommended to their contemporaries-rather than the sacrificial violence these kings had perpetrated. They prefer to render these sage kings meaningful to their own contemporary socio-political needs and to use them as metaphors for what they believed the ideal state to be in their own times.

The breakdown of the unified dynasties of Shang and Zhou into a number of separate, independent, and often violently competing states prompted these philosophers to look back upon the Shang and Zhou dynasties as the ideal foundation of the kind of unified peaceful state they themselves envisioned. A peaceful and prosperous China, for them, had to be a unified China a la Shang and Zhou and not the China divided into violently competing "Warring States." In order to achieve the ideal unified China, these philosophers, often employed by the state as government advisers, advocated what they believed, each in his own way, to be the moral qualities necessary for the kind of citizenship they all considered essential to the state. None of them even remotely considered anything but ritual and morality to be the ideal foundation of state.

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These philosophers all agreed on yet another premise. They all felt that moral virtue, whether innate or acquired through education, must be cultivated under state guidance. Morality and state depended on each other; one could not exist without the other. Whether this morality was given at birth or not, a controversial question for some of them, as we shall see below, they all agreed that this cultivation, more or less synonymous with learning, is indeed essential to state order. One had to learn to be a good citizen, whether or not the tendency for good moral citizenship is believed innate or acquired.

Another common feature one discovers in all these philosophers is the debate on statecraft, that is, they asked themselves fundamental questions as to how a state should be organized: what should be the relationship of rulers and ruled in a network of reciprocal duties and responsibilities, which they all believed to depend on morality. What is unique in the history of human civilization at that time is that these philosophers preferred to debate socio-political morality, as it were, rather than engaging in metaphysical speculations; that is, they placed man and not the gods at the center of the state. Some, it is true, used the supernatural as a metaphor for the state, but their debates were worldly rather than metaphysical. Xunzi himself proposed that good government brings about heavenly blessings. Xunzi and his contemporaries refused to rely on the supernatural to the extent we observe in most other ancient states. For reasons we do not always understand, they preferred to concentrate on the socio-political foundation of the state, that is, on the socio-

political dimensions of ritual morality.

Among these philosophical debates, there is one particularly relevant to the discourse of generative anthropology: the debate on human nature. This debate centered on two prominent philosophers: Mencius and Xunzi, although others sporadically nurtured the debate with their own views. Idealist that he was, Mencius believed in the innate goodness of man. He believed that man's ability to learn how to be a good and responsible citizen stems from and thrives upon his innate goodness. If man were not innately good, Mencius argued, how could he possibly learn to be a good citizen? However, Xunzi maintained that man is bad and that the state needs to control and guide him to becoming a good citizen. Mencius nevertheless maintained that the individual must cultivate and the state must nurture, guide, and help maintain his goodness. For Xunzi a man without a state was a wild man, one who could not possibly be civilized, whereas Mencius seems to have believed in the basic goodness of even a stateless person.

This debate is not one conducted from extreme opposites as it may seem at first sight, for both Mencius and Xunzi concurred that man must practice his goodness consciously and conscientiously regardless of whether it comes to him by birth or from the state. Living in a state meant living for the sake of the state; it presupposed being good. Both agreed that man has the ability, whether by birth or inclination, to be good. Yet, unlike Xunzi, Mencius did not believe in a state-enforced morality; morality had to come more from the heart than from the state. For him, a child is good; thus, in order to be a worthy citizen, man should carry his childlike naiveté and simplicity into his adulthood. According to the more realistic Xunzi, however, the state must contain man's behavior and dictate the moral principles necessary for its interests and survival. Since man's nature is evil, it must wait for a teacher before it can become upright, and for the guidance of ritual principles before it can become orderly.<sup>(5)</sup> I understand this "teacher" to be the state or its representative; he teaches in the interest of the state, of the common good. Xunzi maintained that the two important ritual principles, namely, courtesy in interpersonal relations and the humility of controlling one's personal instincts and desires, must be imposed by the state. They are not innate. If man does not possess ritual principles, his behavior will be chaotic. Xunzi taught that if man does not understand these principles, he will be wild and irresponsible. For him, man is evil, and, arguing against Mencius, he claims that man's goodness is not a gift of nature, but the result of conscious activity of being in a state.<sup>(6)</sup>

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As others had done before him, Xunzi justified his negative views of man through the sage kings of antiquity, the ultimate legitimizing authorities. Xunzi maintains that they had been able to create an ideal statehood precisely because they operated not on an idealized understanding of man as innately good as much as on the realization that man's nature is evil, deciding instead to provide an example of good, moral leadership. According to Xunzi,

the wise kings were wise precisely because they understood that if man has no ritual principles to guide him, he will be perverse, violent, and disorderly. Accordingly, Xunzi taught that the wise kings created ritual principles in such a way as to reform man's emotional nature and make it upright, and to train, transform, and guide it into the proper channels.<sup>(7)</sup> These kings were wise because they themselves provided the example of such enlightened conduct. Xunzi argues against Mencius that if man were indeed good, we could dispense with sage kings and forget about ritual principles.<sup>(8)</sup>

In his explanations of man's evil nature, we find Xunzi amazingly close to the ongoing debate in generative anthropology. Desire is the main cause of man's evil nature, Xunzi argued. Unbound desire is inimical to the state. Desire and morality are incompatible. Any man who follows his nature and indulges his emotions will inevitably violate the forms and rules of society and will end up as a criminal.<sup>(9)</sup>

The nature of man is such that he is born with a fondness for profit. If he indulges in this fondness, it will lead him into wrangling and strife, and all sense of courtesy and humility will disappear. He is born with a feeling of envy and hate, and if he indulges in these, they will lead him into violence and crime, and all sense of loyalty and good faith will disappear.<sup>(10)</sup> Here Xunzi comes close to GA's notion of the deferral of desire. For Xunzi, man defers his desires within a ritual. If a man concentrates upon fulfilling ritual principles, then he may satisfy both his human desires and the demands of ritual; but if he concentrates only upon fulfilling his desires, then he will end by satisfying neither.<sup>(11)</sup>

Ritual for Xunzi seems to fulfill a dual purpose: it both defers and satisfies desire. Desire unbound by ritual constraints creates disorder, preventing one from satisfying one's desires. It was most likely this deferring quality of ritual that led ancient Chinese philosophers to consider ritual as the foundation of the state. If the state fails to channel human desire through ritual restraints, it will crumble. Xunzi elaborates this point further:

Man is born with desires. If his desires are not satisfied for him, he cannot but seek some means to satisfy them himself. If there are no limits and degrees to his seeking, then he will inevitably fall to wrangling with other men. From wrangling comes disorder and from disorder comes exhaustion. The ancient kings hated such disorder, and therefore they established ritual and right in order to curb it, to train man's desires and to provide for their satisfaction.<sup>(12)</sup>

Xunzi believed that, under proper government control, desires can be channeled to the benefit of the state. All those who maintain that desires must be lessened before there can be orderly government, he maintains, fail to consider whether desires can be controlled, but merely deplore the fact that they are so numerous.<sup>(13)</sup> Desire is not necessarily disruptive to the state, as many of Xunzi's contemporaries claimed. For him a successful state is one

that effectively controls human desire through the self-controlling mechanisms of morality and outside pressures he calls “environment.”[\(14\)](#)

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Morality was the key to controlling desire. Xunzi understood morality as a self-controlling mechanism. Although a man’s desires may be 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, then, even if the desires are manifold, what harm will this be to good government?[\(15\)](#) For Xunzi, government authority and self-control were the keys to good citizenship and the foundation of an orderly, peaceful state.

In his philosophy, Xunzi responded to what seems to have been a common debate to which other Chinese philosophers contributed. Shen Tao and Sung Chien, for example, emphasized self-control, that is, human passivity and self-generated elimination of desire, over government control. Han Feizi of the legalist school, on the other hand, put the emphasis squarely on the side of government. For him, all must be under government control; the state will ruin itself unless it controls the people through law.

In sum, ancient Chinese philosophers agreed on a number of fundamental premises: they concurred in their emphasis on benevolent government as a unifying source. Another such premise is education: they all thought it necessary for man to be educated in order for him to practice and cultivate a morality of good citizenship. They all felt that the morality of each individual citizen contributes to state welfare and that the rulers should set the example. None of these philosophers thought that domination by sheer force can constitute an ideal and lasting state. A stable state was only possible as a reciprocal endeavor; the rulers provide the example to which the ruled respond positively by individual morality and good will. Some advocated more or less total state control over mind and behavior. In the debate between Mencius and Xunzi, a debate between idealism and realism of sorts, all aimed in fact at the same end: the restoration of a united China under a strong but benevolent dynasty.

The subsequent unified Chinese dynasties profited from one or another of these philosophical debates. The state of Qin that unified China in 221 inspired itself from the legalist school founded by Han Feizi, a disciple of Xunzi. The Han who came into power in 207 marked a return to the less radical schools of Confucianism. Later philosophers continued the debate, which became a philosophical tradition. It shaped Chinese historiography. Beginning in the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) it was customary practice to portray the last king(s) or emperor(s) of the preceding state or dynasty as evil (something that justified dynastic change), and to portray the founders of new dynasties as moral examples. Chinese histories explain political change as a struggle between good and evil. The last rulers mark a movement away from the moral examples set by the founding fathers



and a return to the evil, violent instincts of man. The founding fathers, in contrast, establish peace and order by diverting human energy towards peaceful ends.

This debate was carried on in Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, especially after these countries adopted Chinese-style governments. In Japan this happened roughly in the mid-seventh century, but there is much earlier evidence of the influence of Chinese statecraft. In none of the Japanese imperial tombs, which archeologists date back to the third through the sixth centuries, do we find sacrificial burials; we find only such clay substitutes such as recently uncovered by the thousands on the bottom of the tomb of the first emperor of Qin (r. 221-207). However, stories of human sacrifice, usually portrayed as self-sacrifice to counter the dangers of flooding, are widespread. Human bones have been unearthed in riverbanks, dikes, bridgeheads and, as late as the seventeenth century, at strategic points of castle walls. Such sacrificial practice, however, could no longer be public; it could only be practiced in secret. The many *hito-bashira* (human pillar) legends suggest a widespread sacrificial practice, but it is also conceivable, especially in cases lacking archeological evidence, that storytelling was in itself a substitute for human sacrifice. The existence of storytelling as a substitute for ritual is now common knowledge among scholars of mythology and folklore.

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The Chinese-style government established in Japan by the mid-seventh century prompted the Japanese to look up to China as a model in practically all important state matters, but also to continue the Chinese philosophical debate on political morality and good citizenship. The Japanese state developed in a combination of Chinese Confucianism, legalism, and, as is evident in Japanese political behavior and punitive practice, on Xunzi's realistic warnings that a strong and successful state is necessary to contain man's evil nature.

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### Notes

1. More than 1200 sacrificial pits were unearthed in 1934-1935 in the area of An Yang, the capital of Shang. In 1976, archaeologists discovered 191 pits containing more than 1200 victims. ([back](#))
2. The latest law prohibiting human sacrifice was promulgated by Qin in 384 BCE. ([back](#))
3. Hsun tzu, *Basic Writings*, tr. Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, 1963) p. 94. ([back](#))
4. Yao: legendary wise king of antiquity  
Shun: legendary wise king of antiquity

King Tang of Shang: dynastic founder

King Wen of Zhou (r. 1099-1050 BCE), dynastic founder

King Wu of Zhou (r. 1049/45-1043 BCE), dynastic founder ([back](#))

5. Hsun tzu, *Basic Writings*, p. 158. ([back](#))

6. P. 157. ([back](#))

7. P. 163. ([back](#))

8. P. 163. ([back](#))

9. P. 157. ([back](#))

10. P. 157. ([back](#))

11. P. 91. ([back](#))

12. P. 89. ([back](#))

13. P. 150. ([back](#))

14. P. 171. ([back](#))

15. P. 151. ([back](#))