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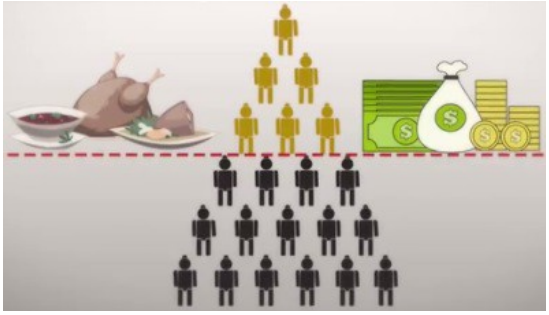
8.5 Economics: "equality via inequality"

In this section we'll look at another aspect of Xunzi's emphasis on managing human feelings, and that is in the area of economic distribution.

Xunzi discusses what we now would call "the conditions of justice", though he doesn't use those terms.

The problem:
There are many desires and a limited number of goods. So given that there are not enough goods to satisfy everyone's desires, what to do?

The solution
"Silk for the leaders, sackcloth for the peasants" (in Prof Hansen's phrase)



The **elite** of society, the small number of people at the top of the pyramid, should get the "rare objects" (see 5:9).

Why?

Partly so those in the lower echelons of society will respect the higher, admiring them for their fine goods and partly because there are fewer at the top so the there are enough r are things to go around. More occupy the lower ranks and the ordinary goods allocated are more plentiful. Thus the *approved* desires of both groups are fulfilled.

*(Recall that Laozi advocated instead eliminating your desires for rare, expensive goods to avoid the indirect slavery of consumerism. Xunzi's "solution" leaves the desires in place. Human desires are **all** natural and cannot be eliminated but we can teach those below to treat their desires as not permitted to us but to the rulers. The rulers are taught they are permitted to pursue their desires for rare objects.)*

Xunzi calls this "equality through inequality". He seems to have in mind that it distributes rare things to the few and common to the many.

Does Xunzi's solution satisfy this slogan? It seems that **he hasn't equally satisfied desires**, only made some of us feel guilty about pursuing them, that our desires *ought* not be satisfied. But Xunzi rules out the version of his solution (Laozi's) that would merit the slogan—because it implies that humans desires can be eliminated by changing conventional norms in language. Starting that debate, he thinks, leads to endless disagreements and a breakdown of order.

The problem of rectifying names

What about the problem of interpreting the social ***dào*** that we first noticed in Confucius?

Xunzi addresses this in the alternative way from Mencius. Mencius turned to 仁 **rén** (intuitive guidance of the heart). Xunzi instead borrows from the Mohists the concept of 法 **fǎ** (standards for word use), as we noted in lecture 8.1.

For Xunzi, the 法 **fǎ** consists in the considered judgement of the 君子 **jūnzǐ** (scholar aristocrat), who has internalized the conventions as natural reactions. His trained interpretive responses become the norm for everyone else—and the question of whether his training was accurate is ignored. As long as he is the senior or highest ranking scholar, his views, however arbitrary, are correct. Xunzi teaches that the ranking scholar has an elevated capacity for eliminating bias and taking an ideal observer, comprehensive viewpoint.

(What happens when two scholar gentlemen disagree? Xunzi doesn't give us an answer – but presumably it will look the same as his answer to everything else: one of them will have higher rank. The lower ranked will defer—or suffer a "meat punishment" – "Shut up or I'll cut out your tongue". This ends the debate and avoids social confusion about norms and consequent 亂 **lùan** or disorder.*)*