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8.2 Xunzi's justification of sage authority

Xunzi thinks of morality as an **artifice** invented by the **sage kings** in order to keep our unruly human feelings under control, and the value of this invention of theirs justifies us in taking them as an **authority**.

Recall that when we discussed Laozi, we distinguished between artificial (false) and real and focused on the slogan **wu-wei 無為**. The wei was a concept like belief, but linking objects in the world to named categories rather than sentences to facts. .

wěi
(artificial)

偽 wěi adds a "person" radical on the left of that concept, marking the word as having to do with social or human things. **偽 wěi** is typically translated as *artificial* or *false* – in contrast with **zhen 真** we associate with the English concepts of *authentic, natural, real* or *true*.

Xunzi, unlike Laozi, **favours the artificial**, and in fact, he thinks that **artifice** is the source of **morality**. The sage kings, who ponder or think (思 **sī**) using their extraordinary wisdom, invented morality – in the form of traditions, rituals, and so on. They invented it as a **道 dào** (way) for human beings to organize themselves in a cooperative way. Here we see Xunzi putting sage kings into the role of Zhuangzi's **ideal observers** (ignoring Zhuangzi's concerns about ideal observer morality – see lecture 7.11), capable of telling all of us exactly how to behave, live and find meaning. The important point here is that Xunzi thinks that

morality is *not* autonomous, *not* independent of human practices, and does *not* exist in a natural form in the world.

Rather, Xunzi thinks of morality as a human invention created **in order to control our own behaviour**. And what the sage kings were wise about is **the disruptive power of human nature and human feelings**. So they invented morality to curb our **natural reactions** and produce a society **they envisioned** as right.

人情
rénqíng
(human feelings)

In Xunzi's view, what needs controlling in particular are our human feelings, the reactions Zhuangzi treated as the source of our **selves** and of the possibility of **choosing**. These natural, choice-guiding reactions are opposed by the Sage kings in favor of cultivated inclinations to play the social roles they authored in their artistic creation of **their view** of a perfect society. To them, our natural feelings are powerful, disruptive forces undermining their enlightened conception of utopia--sources of disorder and disharmony. This leads to Xunzi's deep **pessimism** about human nature making him an distant outlier within the mainstream of more optimistic Chinese philosophers.