These handouts are for personal educational use only: do not copy, cite, or distribute.

8.1 Xunzi: Back to a ritual morality

With Xunzi (荀子 **Xúnzi**) we return to a Confucian ritual morality (禮義 **lǐ yì**).

Mencius's morality was a 仁義 **rén yì** intuitive morality, based on the heart-mind (心 **xīn**). Mozi's was a benefit (利 **lì**) morality. With Xunzi we return to the original Confucian form. Below we'll highlight some features of Xunzi's approach to morality and how he both takes from and departs from earlier figures.

1. **Xunzi rejects the way Zhuangzi takes into account the perspectives of the other animals and the whole natural world.** Xunzi insists that the focus remain on human beings. For Xunzi, the perspectives that dogs and fish have may be interesting but are irrelevant to *us*, human beings with human needs and wants and problems.

2. **But Xunzi takes from Zhuangzi the insight that there is no one purely natural way of choosing**: that nature does not select for human beings a dao to follow. He agrees with Zhuangzi that we always choose within a context. And for Xunzi, that context is going to be some **traditional morality** – specifically, the traditional morality of the sage kings that Confucius relied on.

   *(Why does Xunzi assume there is only one traditional morality, the Confucian morality? After all, the Mohists had been out there with their alternative morality for 200 years. It's not entirely clear, but Xunzi seems to be relying on the idea that the **oldest** tradition is the best.)*

3. **Xunzi has to face the old Confucian problem of rectifying names – of closing the gap between discourse and performance (see lecture 2.9).** Xunzi addresses this in the opposite way to how Mencius addressed it. Mencius relied on 仁 **rén** (intuitive guidance of the heart). Xunzi instead makes the Mohist's concept of 法 **fǎ** (measurement) privilege scholarly authority.

   Mozi's 法 **fǎ** (measurement standards) was intended as a natural, operational dào that **ordinary people** could follow using only their eyes and ears. For Xunzi, the 法 **fǎ** (standard) is the subjective or intuitive conclusion of the 君子 **jūnzǐ** (scholar aristocrat), who study the past tradition. So here we see the key to Xunzi's authoritarianism.

4. **Xunzi argues, very much like Mozi, that the reason for a single source of authority is cooperation. The goal of that cooperation is social utility. But, Xunzi rejects using that the utility standard to reform tradition. It has produced good results in the past so don't change it.** For Xunzi, the fact of human dominance in the natural order of things proves that nature intends our domination. The traditional Confucian dao is the naturally right way for human beings.

   *(What about Mozi's suggestion that we can **reform** tradition to produce **even more benefit**? Xunzi's response is essentially conservative: "Don't risk unintended consequences." Xunzi's views the sage kings as supernaturally wise. We should not hack their program for little improvements. Preserve and transmit the whole complex structure from the past as understood by the orthodox scholar of that past.)*