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8.3 Xunzi's pessimistic moral psychology

The slogan most commonly associated with Xunzi is one that occurs repeatedly in his last chapter, but nowhere else in anything he wrote or in his book. That slogan is:

人性惡
rénxìng è
(Human nature (is) evil.)

(Many scholars think some of these passages or even the whole chapter may be bogus. We won't deal at length with the textual issues, just remember that we shouldn't take this claim at face value.)

The formula "human nature is evil", places Xunzi at the exact opposite pole from the orthodox optimism of Mencius. Xunzi does seem to aim at Mencius, but we should not exaggerate their difference.

- First, we shouldn't confuse Xunzi with Western claims of psychological evil (original sin). He does not teach that human humans desire **evil for its own sake**.
- Nor should we even think of Xunzi as claiming that **human beings are inherently selfish (psychological egoists)**, in the way that many Western political and economic philosophers do.
- Furthermore, we should keep in mind that Xunzi clearly teaches that we are **social** and **educable and that we can naturally become moral**.

Still, it is clear that Xunzi is more pessimistic about human nature than other Classical Chinese schools. He is, obviously, more pessimistic than Mencius and even the Daoists, who thought that we can find ways of living together and accomodating each other. Xunzi seems to want to say: "**No. We cannot find new ways. There is only one natural way: the Confucian way of invented by the sage kings**."

Xunzi on punishment

We saw back in Confucius a powerful argument against punishment (see lecture 2.7).

But Xunzi seems more fond of **punishment**–in particular, physical (mutilating) punishment. In one passage another claims the ancients had no flesh punishments but simply marked the offender by having him wear, e.g., a red sleeve (symbolic cutting). The mark shames him and educates others about the offence, while leaving him able to support himself and his family.
Xunzi says: if we can have no flesh punishment, we also can have no symbolic punishment. Only flesh punishments can make ordinary people recognize guilt." (See Xunzi: Book 18: 8 & 9.)

Xunzi on sagehood

Surprisingly, Xunzi never backs off the Confucian commitment we've seen: **that everyone has the potential to become a sage**. But it is rather difficult to reconcile this commitment of Xunzi's with his view that human beings are not wise enough to figure out morality for themselves and so should simply follow the sages. After all, if we are *all* potential sages, **aren't we all potentially wise enough to figure out morality**?

Contrast with Mencius

Mencius: "Morality should be easy; it should flow with our natural inclinations."

Xunzi: "No! Morality should be hard. It *has* to be hard; after all, morality requires that we crush our natural, disruptive feelings and passions. That's why we need harsh punishments. Only punishment can get us to control our unruly natures."