Xunzi on Human Nature and Human Mind

Terence Hua Tai

Department of Philosophy, National Chengchi University, Taiwan

Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, Academia Sinica

1. "Human Nature is Bad"

Xunzi famously—or infamously, according to some influential Confucians—claims that "human nature is bad" (人之性惡) and that "any goodness in human beings is acquired through conscious exertion" (其善者偽也) (23.1a).[1] Exactly what does Xunzi mean to tell us by these two claims? Consider the first and negative claim about human nature. One may read it in at least two possible ways: it is one thing to say that "human nature is bad," *all* things considered, and another thing to say that "human nature is bad," *some* things considered. If Xunzi means to assert the *former*, then it seems difficult, if not impossible, for him to go on to explain how any "goodness in human beings" can ever be "acquired" by us or, more precisely, how anyone can ever become morally good *qua human being*. For, if human nature is bad, all things considered, then this amounts to saying that human nature is bad under any circumstances, and it is difficult to imagine how we can in that case become morally good as human beings.[2] If, on the other hand, Xunzi merely means to assert the *latter*, then it seems easy to explain how, given the first and negative claim, we can become morally good as human beings: avoid (where we can) the circumstances indicated by

[1] Throughout this paper I will indicate textual reference by the chapter and section number of John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford University Press, 1989). Translation of the *Xunzi* is based on Knoblock's, though with modifications and, sometimes, corrections.

[2] One might think it easy to imagine this sort of scenario: we simply develop a morally good "second nature," so to speak, that is capable of resisting bad influences of human nature; in this way, we become morally good in virtue of this "second nature" while retaining our original, allegedly bad nature. Unfortunately, in such a scenario we cannot be said to have become morally good *as human beings*. *Qua* beings with this "second nature" we cannot be called "human beings."

Xunzi under which human nature tends to turn bad, and then moral goodness will be within reach for us as human beings "through conscious exertion."

It seems to me that the second reading of Xunzi's claim that "human nature is bad" is intended by him, so that it is misguided to draw the familiar contrast between Mengzi (孟子) as extolling human nature, holding it to be "originally good" (性本善) on the one hand, and Xunzi as deprecating it, holding it to be "originally bad" (性本恶) on the other (they probably didn't even speak of the same thing when using the term 'human nature'). As I will argue in what follows, Xunzi does *not* think that human nature is "originally bad." Although the second reading of Xunzi's negative claim is by no means new, I will try to defend it in this paper in what I believe is a novel way. My chief task in what follows will be to attempt an account of how Xunzi may have understood functions of the human mind in relation to desires and inclinations that are part of human nature. There are several ways in which the human mind as Xunzi conceives it can work so as to produce, in the end, actions for the attainment of what it approves (*suo ke* 所可) as worth pursuing. I will single out a special case in which the human mind becomes, as I will put it, "functionally reduced" (or, simply, "reduced"). This reduced mind will serve to clarify and make sense of Xunzi's negative claim. After clarification comes justification: I will, toward the end of this paper, suggest how Xunzi's negative claim may be interpreted as holding *contingently* rather than necessarily true of human nature.

2. Analysis of the "Indulging" Clause

Xunzi puts forward the first of a series of arguments for both the negative and the positive claim cited above, as follows:

> Now, the nature of human beings is such that they are born with a love of profit. *Indulging this love of profit* will cause aggressiveness and greedy tendencies to grow and courtesy and deference to disappear. Human beings are born with feelings of envy and hatred. *Indulging these feelings* causes violence and crime to develop and loyalty and trustworthiness to perish. Human beings are born possessing the desires of the ears and eyes (which are fond of sounds and colors).

> *Indulging these desires* causes dissolute and wanton behavior to result, and ritual, moral principles, and precepts of proper form and reason to perish. This being the case, if human beings follow their inborn nature and indulge their natural inclinations, aggressiveness and greed are certain to develop. This is accompanied by violation of social distinctions and subversion of reason, resulting in a cruel tyranny. Thus, it is necessary that human nature undergo the transforming influence of a teacher or model to learn from and that human beings be guided by ritual and moral principles. Only after this has been accomplished do courtesy and deference develop. Unite these qualities with precepts of good form and reason, and the result is an age of orderly government. If we consider the implications of these facts, it is plain that human nature is bad and that any goodness in human beings is acquired through conscious exertion. [23.1a; emphases added]
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> 今人之性，生而有好利焉，順是，故爭奪生而辭讓亡焉；生而有疾惡焉，順是，故殘賊生而忠信亡焉；生而有耳目之欲，有好聲色焉，順是，故淫亂生而禮義文理亡焉。然則從人之性，順人之情，必出於爭奪，合於犯分亂理而歸於暴。故必將有師法之化、禮義之道，然後出於辭讓，合於文理而歸於治。用此觀之，然則人之性惡明矣，其善者偽也。

Our focus for now will be on what Xunzi says in support of his negative claim about human nature. The general point Xunzi makes here in this regard seems to be rather straightforward, namely, that

(P) human nature is such that *if we indulge (or follow) it*, we will develop bad characters and dispositions (such as "aggressiveness and greedy tendencies," and inclinations to "dissolute and wanton behavior").[3]

Xunzi's negative claim may be taken to assert that human nature is bad *to the extent that (P) is true*. Does this make it implausible to interpret Xunzi as holding that human nature is bad, all things considered? The answer depends, it seems to me, on whether there is any *other* factor in us than human nature itself that contributes to the

[3] I assume we can safely understand "bad characters and dispositions" as those which are contrary to recognized virtues and which tend to lead people to act in ways that disrupt social order.

development of bad characters and dispositions as a consequence of our "indulging" human nature.[4] Let us consider this latter question.

We may, to start with, compare the following two possible readings of (P):

(P1) Human nature is such that it will develop into bad characters and dispositions *if it gets its way*.

(P2) Human nature is such that it will develop into bad characters and dispositions *if we adopt a general policy of acting on something insofar as we believe it is part of human nature*.

(P1) understands the phrase "indulging human nature" as referring to a state of affairs in which one becomes, as it were, a mere bystander or even "turnspit" (to borrow Kant's metaphor[5]), *passively* following human nature as the source of motivation for one's actions. Accordingly, if (P) is interpreted in terms of (P1), then there will indeed be *no* contribution on our part to the development of human nature into bad characters and dispositions as a consequence of our "indulging" it. Consequently, human nature will have to be regarded as bad, all things considered. (P2), on the other hand, understands the phrase "indulging human nature" as referring to a state of affairs that involves a *choice* on our part to act on something insofar as we believe that it is part

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[4] Wei Zheng-tong (韋政通), *Xunzi and Ancient Philosophy* (Taiwan: The Commercial Press, 1966, 1st ed.) stresses the importance of the "indulging" clause by saying, "The crucial factor in the development of human nature into bad characters lies entirely in the 'indulging it' clause" (由自然之性導生惡的關鍵, 全由「順是」見之) (p. 68). Many scholars also think that even if Xunzi claims that "human nature is bad," he can consistently hold that human nature is in itself neither good nor bad; see, e.g., Eric Hutton, "Does Xunzi Have a Consistent Theory of Human Nature?", in *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the* Xunzi, T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. (Hackett, 2000): "Xunzi believes that we naturally have certain desires, which are neither good nor bad in themselves" (p. 221).

[5] In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant speaks of "the freedom of a turnspit, which when once wound up also carries out its motions of itself"; see the section entitled "Critical Elucidation of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason." This freedom is contrasted with a kind of freedom—"practical freedom," as Kant calls it—which consists in independence from desires rooted in human nature: for Kant, we have the latter freedom because when deciding what to do, we can make our decision independently of whatever influence desires rooted in human nature may exert upon us. Basically, the contrast between (P1) and (P2) can be understood in terms of the contrast between these two kinds of freedom in Kant.

of human nature. This choice commits one to a presumption that something is to be regarded as a good reason for acting as long as it is part of human nature. If (P) is interpreted in terms of (P2), then it is obviously *un*true that there will be no contribution on our part to the development of human nature into bad characters and dispositions as a consequence of our "indulging" it. For in this case a presumption which we take to serve as a (*prima facie*) guide for how we are to lead our lives, and which is by no means forced upon us by human nature, operates as a contributing factor in addition to human nature itself. If so, it cannot be said that human nature is bad, all things considered: strictly speaking, human nature is *in and by itself neither good nor bad*, and that it will turn bad (or develop into bad characters and dispositions) *if* we "indulge" it in the second sense explained above. We will return to this sense of "indulging human nature" later on.

3. "Normal" Human Beings

It seems to me that Xunzi's view about how the human mind (*xin* 心) "normally" works is not so simple as to lead him to embrace (P1). I will try to show shortly that his view is complex and incisive enough to make room for the reading suggested above of (P) in terms of (P2). But first, a preliminary observation.

Xunzi would certainly deny that human beings, *insofar as they remain subject to moral appraisal* (e.g., as having or lacking bad characters), can be motivated to act by nothing other than the brute force of desires and natural inclinations in the way (P1) supposes they can. When Xunzi ponders how anyone can ever become bellicose, constantly engaging in violent confrontation with others (the so-called 鬥者), he submits, "Were I to consider bellicose people as suffering from delusion, madness or disease, this would be impermissible because the sage-kings punished them with death" (我欲屬之狂惑疾病邪，則不可，聖王又誅之) (4.3). By implication, Xunzi seems to think that if such people could be taken to suffer from defective mental conditions, then it would *not* be proper to hold them amenable to moral appraisal, nor for that matter to capital punishment, contrary to the sage-kings' verdict. However, as though this initial and tentative thought of his *pace* the sage-kings still has a lingering

hold on him, Xunzi moves on immediately to a second hypothesis: “Were I to consider bellicose people as in a state of birds, mice or beasts, this would be impermissible because the bodily appearance of these people is the same as that of a human being, and their likes and dislikes are in large measure the same as those of a human being” (我欲屬之鳥鼠禽獸邪，則不可，其形體又人，而好惡多同) (ibid.). A conclusion Xunzi implicitly draws is that what we are considering here *are* to be regarded as human beings—and, of course, not only as human beings but also as “normal” ones, in that, unlike the insane or demented, they are human beings *in their “normal” mental condition*.

Thus, for Xunzi, not only do all “normal” human beings have the same nature, with similar “likes and dislikes” stemming from it, but they also have some basic mental capacities in common. These capacities can be exercised in different ways, leading to the development of different characters that range from the most despicable (the vicious) to the most admirable (the sage-like) (see 4.9), and for which normal human beings can be held accountable. It is worth exploring what these capacities are according to Xunzi.

4. Our Capacity for Approving What to Pursue

A mental capacity identified by Xunzi that is clearly essential to our status as “normal” human beings, good and bad alike, is a capacity for permitting or approving (*ke* 可) something as worthy of being pursued:

> We all approve some things or other, whether we are knowledgeable or ignorant; but the knowledgeable and the ignorant come apart in what they approve. [10.1]
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> 皆有可也，知愚同；所可異也，知愚分。

Moreover, according to Xunzi, normal human beings act on what they approve, and refrain from acting on what they disapprove: as he says, “As a general rule, all human beings follow what they approve and reject what they disapprove” (凡人莫不從其所

可而去其所不可) (22.6a). In other words, Xunzi takes our capacity for approving things to carry enough force to move us to action, at least in normal circumstances.

However, the difference in question between the knowledgeable and the ignorant is not yet deep enough. A deeper difference lies not so much in the particular things people approve and consequently act on, as in what they approve these things *by*. The knowledgeable and the ignorant, the (morally) good and the bad, differ in the *criteria* by which they approve things. What can these criteria be? And how do they differ from one another? The following passage may provide some initial clues:

> The presence of a desire in us does not depend on its object being obtainable, whereas those who are pursuing something follow what they approve of. That the presence of a desire in us does not depend on its object being obtainable is a feature imposed on us by heaven [*tien* 天]; that those who are pursuing something follow what they approve of is a feature conferred on us by our mind [*xin*心]. [22.5a][6]
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> 欲不待可得，而求者從所可。欲不待可得，所受乎天也；求者從所可，所受乎心也。

Given human nature as it is, we are constantly affected by some desires or other, regardless of whether we like it or not, and whether these desires can be satisfied or not if we act on them. For Xunzi, normal human beings have enough intelligence not to act on whatever desire is currently affecting them: they will, first of all, estimate whether they can attain the object of a desire by taking suitable action, adopting efficient means, or making up and implementing effective plans. Only after they have decided that the object of a desire is attainable, at least to some degree if not with complete certainty, will they approve the desire (or its object) and then act on it. *Attainability* of what is desired, then, seems to be a criterion for its *approvability*. Thus, if normal human beings are to exercise their capacity for approving what is desired, they must use a capacity for judging about its attainability. This is a capacity that normal human beings, whether knowledgeable or ignorant, good or bad, may

[6] Knoblock translates求者從所可as "what is sought after follows after what is possible," where所可is in my view mistakenly rendered as "what is possible."

exercise differently: some exercise it intelligently so as to come up with an efficient means to getting what is desired, while others do so only to come up with an inefficient or even futile means; some exercise it to find the most efficient means but approve it only if it complies with certain constraints other than efficiency, while others exercise it to find the most efficient means and approve it right away without any further constraints. This reference to other constraints than efficiency suggests that there may be other criteria for the approvability of what is desired. And Xunzi does recognize these other constraints.

In the passage cited above, Xunzi claims that even though the fact that desires affect us, regardless of whether or not their objects are attainable, is the work of nature, our approval and subsequent pursuit of what we desire *rests on the mind*. He goes on immediately to elaborate this claim as follows:

> The simple desires we receive from nature are controlled by the mind's various considerations…. What human beings desire most is life, and what they dislike most is death. Nevertheless, one who follows the pursuit of life may decide to have one's life ended; this is not because one comes to desire death rather than life, but because one disapproves of having one's life prolonged any further and approves of having it ended. Thus, we can remain unmoved by desires in spite of their excessive strength, because the mind stops them. *If what the mind approves coincides with reason*, then however numerous desires may be, how could they be detrimental to order? We can act in ways desires are too weak to move us to act, because the mind orders us to do so. *If what the mind approves departs from reason*, then however few desires may be, how could they stop at merely causing disorder? Thus, order and disorder lie in what the mind approves, not in desires arising from emotions. [22.5a; emphases added]
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> 所受乎天之一欲，制於所受乎心之多[計]…。人之所欲生甚矣，人之所惡死甚矣，然而人有從生成死者，非不欲生而欲死也，不可以生而可以死也。故欲過之而動不及，心止之也。心之所可中理，則欲雖多，奚傷於治！欲不及而動過之，心使之也。心之所可失理，則欲雖寡，奚止於亂！故治亂在於心之所可，亡於情之所欲。

The chief claims Xunzi makes in this passage are (1) that "order and disorder lie in what the mind approves"; (2) that approval of what is desired *empowers the mind with control over the desires affecting it*, so that the mind is able to refrain from acting on a desire, however strong it is, and to act on a desire, however weak it is; and (3) that it is therefore wrong-headed to look for the origin of order and disorder in the desires themselves. These claims may already suffice to vindicate the interpretation of (P), the "human nature is bad" doctrine, in terms of (P2) rather than (P1). For they suggest that Xunzi clearly construes the mind, rather than human nature itself, as responsible for the disorder-generating dispositions and characters that may be developed from human nature. But these claims themselves must be clarified.

5. The Good Mind and Its Essential Control Over Desires

The example Xunzi offers above to illustrate how the human mind can be in control of desires is an *exceptional* case that applies only to morally good characters not frequently seen among people. Although normal human beings naturally desire to hold on to life, there may come a time when, as in Xunzi's example, one prefers that one's life be ended rather than continued, simply because one decides that this is *the right thing* to do. In a similar vein, Xunzi says of the "gentlemen" (*jun zhi* 君子) that they "dread suffering but will not avoid dying righteously…[and they] desire what is beneficial but will never do what they believe to be wrongful" (畏患而不避義死，欲利而不為所非) (3.2). Not many people actually succeed in becoming "gentlemen," and few could be expected to become "sage-kings." But this does not prevent Xunzi from endorsing the common saying, "People in the street can become a Yu" (涂之人可以為禹) (23.5a). What this means, as he goes on to explain, is that "people in the street have the potential talent to know benevolence, righteousness, lawfulness, and rectitude, and are also equipped with the capacity for putting them into practice" (涂之人也，皆有可以知仁義法正之質，皆有可以能仁義法正之具) (23.5a). Thus, for Xunzi, we all have a cognitive capacity for knowing about certain moral values, all derived from principles of the Dao (道). More important, knowledge of the Dao, together with moral values derived from it, is supposed to lead one immediately to approve the Dao and put it into practice. In Xunzi's own words, "once the mind

knows the Dao, it will approve it, and once it approves it, it will abide by it, so as to refrain from what is contrary to it" (心知道然後可道，可道然後能守道以禁非道) (21.5c).

Here Xunzi alludes to a very special process of *knowing, approving, and practicing the Dao*, a process that takes place, if at all, only in a precious few among us (since few can claim to *know* the Dao in the first place, given that the attainment of such knowledge requires a highly sophisticated cognitive skill referred to as "emptiness, unity, and stillness" [虛壹而靜] [21.5d]). Its rarity notwithstanding, such a process results in one's coming to adopt and abide by what we may call "moral criteria" for the approvability of whatever one intends to do and pursue in particular circumstances. That is to say, the end-product of this process is *not* a determination to pursue this or that object by such and such particular means, but *a determination to subject whatever one may pursue or do in particular circumstances to the moral constraints imposed by the Dao*. Such a determination will be internalized in one's character and dispositions, and it will manifest itself at its best in one's unfailing employment of the moral criteria for approval of what to pursue and how to pursue it through concrete actions. To take Xunzi's example of someone acting to have one's life ended in spite of a strong desire to go on with it, this illustrates how one can act on what is approved by the moral criteria in particular circumstances, even if one's desire to do so carries weaker psychological force than one's desire to do otherwise. For Xunzi, one's approval of what is the right thing to do in particular circumstances should, if one is morally good enough, suffice to override any countervailing desire and result in a morally right action.

Such a view about the mind's ultimate control over desires may be thought to be overoptimistic or high-minded. This is understandable because it is a view about a mind that is supposed to have already attuned itself to moral requirements by having recognized, and then lived up to, the moral criteria for approving what to pursue and how to pursue it. However, precisely for this reason the view can only be used to explain, not Xunzi's *negative* claim that "human nature is bad" (人之性惡) (23.1a), but his *positive* claim that "any goodness in human beings is acquired through

conscious exertion" (其善者偽也) (ibid.). What it tells us about the negative claim is rather uninformative, namely, that normal human beings will develop bad dispositions and characters if they have not adopted the moral criteria and achieved ultimate control over desires. We must find out whether and, if so, how there is, besides this lack of "conscious exertion," anything else that contributes to the development of bad dispositions and characters.

6. Resolving Intrapersonal Conflict of Desires

We are now in a position to consider a still further criterion for the approvability of what is desired. A distinction may be drawn between desires whose objects we believe to be attainable if taken *individually* or apart from others, and desires whose objects we believe to be attainable if taken *collectively* or as a whole. From the fact that the objects of several desires are *individually* attainable for me, it does not follow that those objects are *collectively* possible for me as well. This is because desires whose objects are individually attainable for me may conflict with one another, and in a variety of ways. I may have a desire for *x* and also a desire for *y*, and yet, even though I can attain either *x* or *y*, I can never attain both *x* and *y*. If so, then which desire should I satisfy? Cases of this kind arise from conflict of desires, and in such cases our capacity for approval of what is desired must not only take into account the attainability of *each* desire involved, but also require, in order to reach its final decision, some *relative weights* assigned to the desires in conflict. Thus, we should ask: by what criteria are we to assign relative weights to different desires?

It may be noted that the kind of "conflict of desires" that concerns us here may arise, not from any inherent incongruity between objects of desire themselves, but from external circumstances, such as limitations in one's abilities or in the resources available for the satisfaction of desires, or simply from the finitude of human existence. Xunzi mentions "conflict of desires" in this sense when he says:

> Even though one were a gatekeeper, one could not get rid of one's desires…; and even though one were the Son of Heaven, one could not satisfy them one and all. Although one cannot satisfy all of one's

> desires, one can, when pursuing their objects, approximate to their complete satisfaction; and although one cannot get rid of desires, the pursuit of their objects can be moderated…. [22.5b]
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> 雖為守門，欲不可去…；雖為天子，欲不可盡。欲雖不可盡，可以近盡也；欲雖不可去，求可節也。

Whether moderation or maximization (short of complete satisfaction), it may be said to be a *second*-order measure that one adopts and employs in deciding what to do with one's (first-order) desires taken as a whole, given various practical difficulties one may encounter that are generated by the kind of "conflict of desires" described above. But such second-order measures would be futile if one did not know how to assign relative weights, or different degrees of urgency, to various desires. By what criteria should this assignment of relative weights proceed? Xunzi seems to be addressing such a question when he points out immediately after the passage cited above:

> What accords with the Dao is that when better off, satisfy your desires as completely as possible; and when worse off, moderate your pursuit of what is desired. In all the world, there is nothing to compare with it. [22.5b]
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> 道者，進則近盡，退則節求，天下莫之若也。

Thus, for Xunzi, in adopting moderation or maximization as a policy for the satisfaction of desires taken as a whole, one ought to bring the policy into agreement with the Dao; and one ought to do so because it is in some sense the incomparably "best" policy one can ever adopt for the overall satisfaction of one's desires. It is important to note that the Dao is here taken to function as a "balance" or "steelyard" (*heng* 衡), as may be seen from Xunzi's remark, "What is the balance? I say that it is the Dao" (何謂衡？曰：道) (21.5b).

To clarify the matter, we must distinguish between two kinds of the "balancing" or "weighing" role played by the Dao, or two kinds of adjudicating capacities of the mind. The two kinds of the "balancing" role pertain respectively to *inter*- and *intra*-personal comparison between desires, and such comparison results in different priorities or weights assigned to desires in conflict. Moreover, the former concerns

fairness in the arrangements for the distribution of desire-satisfaction among different people, and the latter concerns *prudence* in one's arrangements for achieving overall satisfaction of one's entire system of desires. In its second role, the Dao helps us to make *intra*personal comparison between desires and is supposed to supply a policy *par excellence* to help us to meet the requirements of prudence. However, whether or not it agrees with the Dao, a policy for the overall satisfaction of one's entire system of desires must be adopted by every normal human being if he or she is to deal with the intrapersonal "conflict of desires" situation as an inevitable fact of life. Leaving aside the *ideal* case in which such a policy is made agreeable with the Dao, it is worth asking: what would it be like if it did *not* agree with the Dao?

7. The (Functionally) Reduced Mind

One possible answer to this question is illuminating. Xunzi himself once remarked, "If one lacks a teacher or model to learn from, then one's mind will be just like one's mouth and stomach" (人無師無法，則其心正其口腹也) (4.10). This suggests a possible case—a degenerate one—in which the policy adopted by a "teacher-less" and "model-less" human being for resolving intrapersonal conflict of desires is to follow the inner economy of desires themselves by assigning relative weight to each desire in proportion to its relative *psychological strength* or *intensity* on one's mind. By approving whatever accords with human nature, and acting on whatever one believes at the moment to be the *strongest* desire, the human mind submits itself to a partially passive state in which it looks for ways to satisfy the strongest desires (and to satisfy them to the *greatest* possible extent[7]) without deciding *on its own* whether they are really worth satisfying. This is a degenerate case of balancing one's conflicting desires in that it is a case in which the human mind becomes (functionally) *reduced* by confining itself to what may be called "instrumental" deliberation, leaving the question as to which object of desire is worth pursuing to be settled by resorting to the strongest desire one is aware of.[8]

[7] This is implied by Xunzi's claim about the *insatiability* of desires.

[8] The human mind may be said to function in this degenerate case in the way "[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of passions," according to Hume; see his *Treatise of Human Nature*,

8. Deliberation and the Temporal Character of Our Existence

For Xunzi, our deliberation need not, and indeed *should* not, be purely "instrumental" in the aforementioned manner: it should also enable us to "choose or refuse desires and aversions" (欲惡取捨) (3.13) otherwise than according to their strengths. Here Xunzi has in mind cases in which our choice or refusal of desires and aversions is based, not on moral criteria, but, to put it crudely, on intrapersonal comparison between desires (and aversions) in terms of their relative weights. It is important to figure out how such comparison is to proceed according to Xuniz. As he points out,

> When one sees something desirable, one should consider whether it will sooner or later involve what is worth being averse to. When one sees something beneficial, one should consider whether it will sooner or later involve what is harmful. If, after balancing the upsides and downsides of the case and going through careful deliberation, one decides whether to choose or refuse desires and aversions, then one will regularly be free from failures and mistakes. [3.13]
>
> 見其可欲也，則必前後慮其可惡也者；見其可利也，則必前後慮其可害也者；而兼權之，孰計之，然後定其欲惡取舍，如是則常不失陷矣。

There may be two different ways to understand what Xunzi says here. He is apparently admonishing us to think carefully beforehand the adverse effects in the future of getting what one finds desirable now or doing what one thinks is worth doing now. But it may be unclear exactly how we are to "balance the upsides and downsides of the case." Suppose I am aware that if I buy a yacht that I've been dreaming of for many years, this will very likely lead me to bankruptcy in three years. My desire for owning a yacht may be strong at first, but after knowing about the bad future effects of satisfying it, I may decide to weaken or restrain it. But *why* would I? Right now, my desire for owning a yacht may or may not be stronger than my aversion to its future bad effects, depending on how much I am concerned with the welfare of my *future* self. If in deciding what to do I do not employ a conception of

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Book 2, Chapter 3, Section 3.

myself as numerically the same with a temporally extended life to lead, then, *given human nature*, it seems not very likely that my present self would care as much about my future self as it does about itself. If one does employ, in dealing with practical matters, the conception of oneself as numerically the same self existing at different times, then it will be *prima facie* inconsistent for one to care less about the future self than about the present self. More important, assuming such a conception of the self has been incorporated into one's criteria for resolving intrapersonal conflict of desires (and aversions), the conflict will not arise solely from desires of the present self, but may involve the future as well as the present desires of a continuing self. Thus there are two possible ways to construe the (intrapersonal[9]) balancing of the "upsides and downsides of the case": on the one hand, the balancing may be taken to cover nothing other than one's present desires; on the other hand, it may be taken to assign relative weights to both present and future desires without prejudice against the future self, or without presumption for discounting the moral claim of the future self.[10]

It should be noted that, on the second construal, balancing is an activity that requires one to have already adopted a (normative) conception of what one's *overall good as a continuing self* consists in. Employment of such a conception in turn requires that one be able, at times if not always, to restrain one's present desires, however strong they may be at the moment, if their satisfaction is expected to be detrimental to one's *overall* good. Xunzi may be interpreted, I suggest, as alluding to this "overall good" when he says, "Thus, words have the potential to summon disaster, and actions the potential to invite disgrace, so the gentlemen are cautious about the grounds on which they stand" (故言有招禍也，行有招辱也，君子慎所立乎) (1.5). The "grounds" on which a "gentleman" stands are supposedly those which contribute to his or her overall good, and they must be *acquired* through one's efforts to "dispel

[9] See section 6 above for the distinction between inter- and intra-personal balancing.

[10] I owe this distinction to Terence Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford University Press, 1990, reprint edition), Chapter 15. Irwin has relied on essentially the same distinction to explicate Aristotle's claim that "desires become contrary to each other, and this results when reason and appetite are contrary, and this happens in agents that have perception of time" (*De Anima*, 433b5-10). Although the distinction never explicitly figures anywhere in Xunzi's doctrine, I think it provides nonetheless a useful conceptual tool by which to bring out what underlies his doctrine.

blindness" (*jie-bi* 解蔽) and to know the Dao either directly, or indirectly by learning from a teacher or model.

It may well be that the "grounds" one ends up acquiring and standing on are actually some *false* or *misguided* ones, which don't contribute to one's overall good. However, the mere possibility of *acquiring* any such grounds, misguided or not, presupposes that one's mind does *not* function in the way it does in the degenerate case described above, where one's mind is "just like one's mouth and stomach," confining itself to the kind of instrumental-deliberative task mentioned earlier. This is because submission to the inner economy of one's desires in deciding what to do is incompatible with acknowledgement of oneself as a continuing self, and without such acknowledgement one would be unable to conceive of what the "grounds" aim at, including one's overall good.

Thus, someone with this reduced mind can only do the *first* kind of balancing act. This suffices to show that Xunzi speaks of the second rather than the first kind of balancing in the passage cited at the beginning of this section, given that he is concerned to stress that, rather than remaining merely instrumental, our deliberation should enable us to "choose or refuse desires and aversions." The reduced mind does not, therefore, serve any positive purpose of explaining how we can achieve a good life by exercising capacities of the human mind properly. Nevertheless, it can serve a negative purpose of explaining how we may develop bad characters if we "indulge" human nature. Let us see how it can serve this negative purpose.

Although someone with a reduced mind cannot acquire proper "grounds" to stand on, this does not mean that the life of such an individual will be "groundless": it can go by *some* kind of "grounds" *even though precisely what they are is left in the hands of human nature* (plus certain variable environmental and social factors that interact with it). Call them "natural grounds." Now I take it that to act on *natural* grounds is to act, at least implicitly, on something insofar as one believes it is part of human nature. Then recall the reading to be defended in this paper of Xunzi's claim that "human nature is bad," as follows:

(P2) human nature is such that it will develop into bad characters and dispositions *if we adopt a general policy of acting on something insofar as we believe it is part of human nature*.

So far I have tried to provide an account of what it is like to have a reduced mind. We can see at this point that this amounts to an account of what it is like for the antecedent of the conditional in (P2) to hold true of us. We must, as a last step to defend (P2) as an account of Xunzi's claim in question, examine whether and, if so, how the consequent of that conditional really follows from its antecedent.

9. The Contingent Character of Xunzi's Claim

It has been noted by some recent commentators that Xunzi's view about human nature is actually not as dismal as it may appear at first sight. David Wong, for example, points out that Xunzi has clearly recognized, as he does in the passage cited below, certain natural feelings and emotions, not yet moral in content, which can be cultivated through rites and music to develop into morally good dispositions:[11]

> As a general rule, all creatures that live between Heaven and Earth and have blood and breath are certain to possess awareness; and all creatures with awareness are certain to love their own kind…. Thus, since among creatures with blood and breath, only human beings possess awareness of the highest form, the feeling one has for one's parents is not exhausted even till death. [19.9b]
>
> 凡生天地之間者，有血氣之屬必有知，有知之屬莫不愛其類。…故有血氣之屬莫知於人，故人之於其親也，至死無窮。

The fact that certain feelings which are congenial to morality are allowed by Xunzi to be part of human nature will obviously raise difficulties for the "all things considered" reading of Xunzi's negative claim about human nature, but not for the "some things considered" reading, since the latter, but not the former, reading takes Xunzi to concede that human nature is in and by itself neither good nor bad.

[11] David B. Wong, "Xunzi on Moral Motivation," in *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the* Xunzi, T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. (Hackett, 2000): 135-154, esp. 147-150.

But the "some things considered" reading raises exegetical questions of its own: given that certain natural feelings in us are congenial to morality, there seems to be no *a priori* reason for thinking that if we "indulge" human nature in the way understood according to (P2), then we will develop bad characters and dispositions. So, it may be asked, does Xunzi really take it to be an *a priori* claim that "human nature is bad"? If he does, it is understandable why he concludes so self-assuredly, in his first argument cited in section 2 above for the claim that "human nature is bad," that "if human beings follow their inborn nature and indulge their natural inclinations, aggressiveness and greed are *certain* to develop" (emphasis added). Unfortunately, Xunzi cannot establish this conclusion in any *a priori* way: granted that there are elements in human nature which are congenial to morality and also those which are not, it is neither true *a priori* (a) that we will become morally bad if we "indulge" human nature, nor (b) that we will become morally good under the same condition. If so, then the only way in which Xunzi can ascribe any certainty to his claim that "human nature is bad" seems to be to maintain that not only is this claim contingently true, but there is also *strong* (empirical) evidence for (a) but little evidence for (b). Let us see how he can do so.

Central to my interpretation of Xunzi's negative view about human nature is the suggestion that to "indulge human nature" is to adopt a policy of acting on something insofar as one believes it is part of human nature, and that to do the latter is, in turn, to allow one's mind to become "reduced." However, it must be noted that what someone may turn out to be by acting and living with a reduced mind depends in part on some factors other than how, and to what extent, our mental capacities are exercised. It is clear from Xunzi's answer to the question "How did ritual principles arise?" (禮起於何也) (19.1a) that for him there are circumstances under which ritual principles become necessary if social order is to be secured, namely: the limitation of resources for the satisfaction of desires on the one hand and the insatiability of desires themselves on the other. Accordingly, Xunzi's claim that "human nature is bad" needs to be understood more precisely as saying that *if we "indulge" human nature (i.e., allow ourselves to have a reduced mind) in the circumstances that make ritual principles necessary, then we will develop bad characters and dispositions in spite of whatever*

elements there may be in human nature that are congenial to morality. Obviously, it is a matter of contingent fact, not an *a priori* truth, that such circumstances obtain (if they do). If so, it follows that Xunzi's claim itself can only be contingently true.

Thus, when Xunzi says such things as

> The inborn nature of human beings is certainly that of a petty person [*xiao ren*小人]; [for[12]] if they are without a teacher or model to learn from, they will see things solely in terms of benefit to themselves. [4.10]
>
> 人之生故小人，無師無法，則唯利之見耳。

he should be interpreted as saying, not that human nature contains *nothing but* what makes for a petty person, but that we will become petty persons (who "see things solely in terms of benefit to themselves") under the following conditions: (i) the circumstances that make ritual principles necessary obtain; and (ii) we are "without a teacher or model to learn from"—a condition stated in general terms that are intended by Xunzi to indicate how a reduced mind may be shaped in circumstances where one is neither cognizant of relevant facts nor motivated by the right kind of reasons.

In arguing that "human nature is bad," Xunzi often appeals to hypothetical cases concerning how family members would treat one another if human nature was "indulged." This may suggest that Xunzi hopes to convince his readers by inviting them to *test* his thesis about human nature against experiences that they are all familiar with in everyday life. Thus, consider the following passage,

> A love of profit and the desire to obtain it belong to human nature. Now, suppose that younger and elder brothers have valuable goods to be apportioned among them, and further suppose that they indulge human nature, allowing themselves to be led by a love of profit and the desire to obtain it, then younger and elder brothers will fall into fighting among themselves and robbing each other. But if they have been transformed by precepts of proper form and reason that are

[12] I interpret the sentence that follows as intended to explain why "the inborn nature of human beings is certainly that of a petty person."

> contained in rituals and moral principles, they will go so far as to yield their claim to others of their own country. Thus, indulging human nature will lead to strife even among brothers, but when human nature has been transformed by rituals and moral principles, brothers will go so far as to yield their claim to others of their own country. [23.2a]
>
> 夫好利而欲得者，此人之情性也。假之人有弟兄資財而分者，且順情性，好利而欲得，若是則兄弟相拂奪矣；且化禮義之文理，若是則讓乎國人矣。故順情性則弟兄爭矣，化禮義則讓乎國人矣。

Against Xunzi, one might argue that "indulging" human nature does *not* necessarily result in strife among siblings because in this particular context natural feelings of love toward one's next of kin may well *subdue* "a love of profit and the desire to attain it" when it comes to apportioning valuable goods. In reply, Xunzi could argue that even in the context of familial relationship these natural feelings, which are supposed to be congenial to morality, are not necessarily strong enough, either, to subdue desires for selfish gains. Inevitably, the debate here will turn on the question as to *which* psychological forces—those which are congenial to morality and those which are not—will more likely triumph over the others in moving one to action.

It seems fair to say that Xunzi's answer to this question is more reasonable than its opposite: our experiences seem to support his central claim that *if one's mind is "just like one's mouth and stomach," approving and acting on whatever is the strongest desire at the moment*, then *even* in the context of familial relationship (where natural feelings of love are typically at their strongest) one will be much more disposed, *in circumstances that make ritual principles necessary*, to act in ways contrary to recognized moral virtues than in conformity to them. Supposing that this claim of Xunzi's does sound more reasonable than its denial, we may ask if there is any theoretical account of its appeal to us. Perhaps Xunzi could point out that the problem with people in the kind of hypothetical cases that he adduces is not that they are weak-willed and easily succumb to temptations, but that they don't have a will (*zhi*志[13]) *of their own* at all, for they decide what to pursue only in reference to

[13] Xunzi apparently thinks that the human will ought to mature through self-cultivation, as when he says, "When one is cultivated in will and volition, steadfast in virtuous conduct, and lucid in cognition and deliberation, then there arises the cause of honor from within, and this

whatever is the strongest desire at the moment, without forming *their own* choices, based on their overall good, about what desires are worth having and which desires affecting them are worth acting on. Of course, we cannot rule out *a priori* the possibility of someone with a reduced mind whose feelings and desires will naturally and spontaneously prompt her to do what conforms to moral obligation, or even to lead her to form character-traits that conform to moral virtues. But Xunzi seems to be right in thinking that such an individual, with actions and character-traits that do not originate from choices *of her own* but from her inborn nature, is too good to be true in real life: if in *felicitous* circumstances someone generally does the right things by nature, common sense tells against the counterfactual claim that such an individual, who has been doing the right things *not on the ground that they are the right things to do but because doing them is part of human natur*e, would have done them all the same even if they had been situated in the kind of *adverse* circumstances that we typically encounter in real life.

10. Conclusion

In this paper I have made use of the notion of a (functionally) reduced mind to bring out what I think is a more accurate reading of Xunzi's claim that "human nature is bad." Someone with a reduced mind is strikingly similar to what Harry Frankfurt has called a "wanton."[14] As envisaged by Xunzi, such an individual's mind is "just like [his or her] mouth and stomach" in that it approves whatever is part of human nature, confines itself to instrumental deliberation, and is subservient to human nature by seeking the most effective means to the satisfaction of whatever is the strongest desire at the moment. As suggested earlier, one who answers to this description lacks a will *of one's own*, and it is precisely such an individual who can be said to "indulge"

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is what is meant by honor that derives from considerations of morality" (志意脩，德行厚，知慮明，是榮之由中出者也，夫是之謂義榮) (18.9).

[14] See Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5-20, esp. 10-11, where "wantons" are defined as those human beings "who have first-order desires but who are not persons because, whether or not they have desires of the second order [i.e., desires to have certain first-order desires], they have no second-order volitions [i.e., second-order desires to have certain first-order desires that are really effective or constitute their will]."

human nature (從其性，順其情) in a way that may serve to vindicate Xunzi's claim that "human nature is bad": situate this individual in the circumstances that make ritual principles necessary, and then, in all likelihood, he or she will develop bad character-traits and dispositions (even if there do exist in us natural feelings that are congenial to morality).

Granted, few of us can be said to have a reduced mind. But it seems to me that in order to show not only that "human nature is bad," but also that "any goodness in human beings is acquired through conscious exertion" (其善者偽也), Xunzi needs this notion of a reduced mind as a theoretical construct to illustrate how such goodness is strictly a contribution we (or, rather, virtuous people) make *independently* of human nature and as a result of our having learned to exercise *in the right way* certain mental capacities—such as the capacities for deliberating and approving what to pursue, for balancing desires in conflict, and for ascertaining criteria by which to do all these things—the mere possession of which capacities makes us all a *potential* Yao (堯) or Yu (禹).