

Title: Xunzi's Ideal Self and Autonomy

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to explore Xunzi's account of the ideal self, self-transformation, and the roles the self and others play in this account. As opposed to Mencius who puts strong emphasis on the heavenly endowment in human nature and cultivation, Xunzi takes the ideal state of the self, sagehood, to be an artifice resulting from doing inventive and accumulative work on the originally crude (if not bad) human nature. The crucial part of this work involves learning and practicing Confucian li 禮 (rituals and rites). It is through such intentional effort one gradually crafts oneself into an ideal self. Tang (2012) argues convincingly that Confucian rituals instantiate a normative framework containing norms for interpersonal relationships and personal behavior, and that it is through adopting this normative framework that one achieves a unified self. Tang further argues that the agent, through practicing rituals, thus gains control over his self and his life, which Tang considers to be an ultimate expression of 'autonomy'.

I find Tang's emphasis on autonomy worth examining. My view is that some form of autonomy is indeed recognized as a value in *Xunzi*. I compare this form of autonomy with the four elements of autonomy Chan (2002) discusses and show its particular strength. However, I also argue that autonomy is not the ultimate goal of Xunzi's ideal self. Indeed, as we will see, even though Xunzi emphasizes the reflective capacity of the heartmind, his concern is not so much with the complete control of the self (or the heartmind) or one's life; rather, it is to craft the self into a beautiful and substantially (instead of merely normatively) other-related existence. I argue that in this self-crafting process, one unavoidably loses oneself in various senses. I address three senses of such self-loss: 1. One loses one's naturally formed expression of one's natural states, which one may identify as part of one's (old) self. 2. One loses one's firm control of oneself by going through the training of rituals, with no clear prediction of what the transformed self will be. 3. The unified ideal self is also substantially other-related: One loses the focus on oneself in one's consciousness. Specifically, through moral transformation, one's consciousness is changed in that its focus is expanded: others structurally relate to the self in one's consciousness as one's focus, and one's focus on oneself is reshaped to include an awareness of others. As we will see, Xunzi's self-transformation is through self-loss and the connectedness to others.

Main references:

- Tang, Siufu, "Self and Community in the *Xunzi*", *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 7 (3):455-470 (2012)
Chan, Joseph, "Moral Autonomy, Civil Liberties, and Confucianism", *Philosophy East And West*, v. 52 n. 3, p. 281-310. (2002)
Chong, Kim-chong, "Autonomy in the *Analects*", in *Kim Chong Chong*, Sor-Hoon Tan & C. L. Ten (eds.), *The Moral Circle and the Self: Chinese and Western Approaches*. Open Court (2003)