

SELECTION FROM THE XUNZI: "HUMAN NATURE IS EVIL"

Introduction

Xunzi (Xun Qing, or Xun Kuang: c. 310-c. 219 BCE) lived at the very end of the Zhou dynasty. Like Mencius, he was an advocate and interpreter of the teachings of Confucius. Living a generation after Mencius, Xunzi lived through the final, brutal wars which ended with the state of Qin absorbing and unifying all the Chinese feudal states. Xunzi was a widely traveled scholar, teacher, and official.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 179-183. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Selection from the Xunzi:
"Human Nature Is Evil"

Human nature is evil: its goodness derives from conscious activity. Now it is human nature to be born with a fondness for profit. Indulging this leads to contention and strife, and the sense of modesty and yielding with which one was born disappears. One is born with feelings of envy and hate, and, by indulging these, one is led into banditry and theft, so that the sense of loyalty and good faith with which he was born disappears. One is born with the desires of the ears and eyes and with a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds, and, by indulging these, one is led into licentiousness and chaos, so that the sense of ritual, rightness, refinement, and principle with which one was born is lost. Hence, following human nature and indulging human emotions will inevitably lead to contention and strife, causing one to rebel against one's proper duty, reduce principle to chaos, and revert to violence. Therefore one must be transformed by the example of a teacher and guided by the way of ritual and rightness before one will attain modesty and yielding, accord with refinement and ritual, and return to order. ...

... A questioner asks: If human nature is evil, then where do ritual and rightness come from? I reply: ritual and rightness are always created by the conscious activity of the sages; essentially they are not created by human nature. ...

If human nature were good, we could dispense with the sage kings and desist from the practice of ritual and rightness. Since human nature is evil, we must elevate the sages and esteem ritual and rightness.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
SELECTION FROM THE XUNZI: "HUMAN NATURE IS EVIL"**

Questions:

1. How does Xunzi's understanding of human nature compare to your own?
2. How does Xunzi's understanding of human nature compare to that of Mencius? Which do you prefer, and why?
3. Why might the two men, from the same background, both self-appointed interpreters of Confucius, and only one generation apart, come up with their respective understandings of human nature?
4. What implications does Xunzi's understanding of human nature have for family life and government?

Longer Selection

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 179-183. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Selection from the Xunzi:
"Human Nature Is Evil"

Human nature is evil; its good derives from conscious activity. Now it is human nature to be born with a fondness for profit. Indulging this leads to contention and strife, and the sense of modesty and yielding with which one was born disappears. One is born with feelings of envy and hate, and, by indulging these, one is led into banditry and theft, so that the sense of loyalty and good faith with which he was born disappears. One is born with the desires of the ears and eyes and with a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds, and, by indulging these, one is led to licentiousness and chaos, so that the sense of ritual, rightness, refinement, and principle with which one was born is lost. Hence, following human nature and indulging human emotions will inevitably lead to contention and strife, causing one to rebel against one's proper duty, reduce principle to chaos, and revert to violence. Therefore one must be transformed by the example of a teacher and guided by the way of ritual and rightness before one will attain modesty and yielding, accord with refinement and ritual, and return to order. From this perspective it is apparent that human nature is evil and that its goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Thus warped wood must be laid against a straightening board, steamed, and bent into shape before it can become straight; blunt metal must be ground on a whetstone before it can become sharp. And in that human nature is evil, it must wait for the example of a teacher before it can become upright, and for ritual and rightness before it can become orderly. Now, if people lack the example of teachers they will be partial and narrow rather than upright; if they lack ritual and rightness they will be rebellious and chaotic rather than orderly. In ancient times the sage kings, recognizing that the nature of human beings is evil -- that they incline toward evil and are not upright, that they are disposed toward chaos and are not orderly -- created ritual and

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
SELECTION FROM THE XUNZI: "HUMAN NATURE IS EVIL"**

rightness and established models and limits in order to reform and improve the human emotional nature and make it upright, in order to train and transform the human emotional nature and provide it with a guide. They caused them to attain order and to conform to the Way. And so today a person who is transformed by the instructions of a teacher, devotes himself to study, and abides by ritual and rightness may become a noble person, while one who follows his nature and emotions, is content to give free play to his passions, and abandons ritual and rightness is a lesser person. It is obvious from this, therefore, that human nature is evil, and that its goodness results from conscious activity.

Mencius said, The fact that human beings learn shows that their nature is good. I say this is not so; this comes of his having neither understood human nature nor perceived the distinction between the nature and conscious activity. The nature is what is given by Heaven: one cannot learn it; one cannot acquire it by effort. Ritual and rightness are created by sages: people learn them and are capable, through effort, of bringing them to completion. What cannot be learned or acquired by effort but is within us is called the nature. What can be learned and, through effort, brought to completion is called conscious activity. This is the distinction between the nature and conscious activity. That the eyes can see and the ears can hear is human nature. But the faculty of clear sight does not exist apart from the eye, nor does the faculty of keen hearing exist apart from the ear. It is apparent that the eye's clear vision and the ear's acute hearing cannot be learned.

Mencius said, Now, human nature is good, and [when it is not] this is always a result of having lost or destroyed one's nature. I say that he was mistaken to take such a view. Now, it is human nature that, as soon as a person is born, he departs from his original substance¹ and from his natural disposition, so that he must inevitably lose and destroy them. Seen in this way, it is apparent that human nature is evil. Those who say that the nature is good find beauty in what does not depart from the original substance and value in what does not diverge from the natural disposition. They consider that the beauty of the natural disposition and the original substance and the goodness of the mind's intentions are [inseparable from the nature] in the same way that clear sight is inseparable from the eye and keen hearing is inseparable from the ear. Hence they maintain that [the nature possesses goodness] in the same way that the eye possesses clear vision or the ear possesses keenness of hearing.

Now, it is human nature that when one is hungry he will desire satisfaction, when he is cold he will desire warmth, and when he is weary he will desire rest. This is the emotional nature of human beings. Yet, even if a person is hungry, he will not dare to be the first to eat if he is in the presence of his elders because he knows that he should yield to them. Although he is weary, he will not dare to seek rest because he knows that he should work on behalf of others. For a son to yield to his father and a younger brother to yield to his elder brother, or for a son to work on

¹ The word Xunzi uses here is *pu*, a term that occurs frequently in the *Daodejing* and is often translated in that context as "the uncarved block."

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
SELECTION FROM THE XUNZI: "HUMAN NATURE IS EVIL"**

behalf of his father and a younger brother to work on behalf of his elder brother -- these two acts are contrary to the nature and counter to the emotions, and yet they represent the way of filial devotion and the refinement and principle that are associated with ritual and rightness. Hence, to follow the emotional nature would mean that there would be no courtesy or humility; courtesy and humility run counter to the emotional nature. From this perspective it is apparent that human nature is evil, and that goodness is the result of conscious activity. A questioner asks: If human nature is evil, then where do ritual and rightness come from? I reply: ritual and rightness are always created by the conscious activity of the sages; essentially they are not created by human nature. Thus a potter molds clay and makes a vessel, but the vessel is created by the conscious activity of the potter and is not created by his human nature. In the same way a carpenter carves a piece of wood and makes a utensil, but the utensil is created through the conscious activity of the carpenter and is not created by his human nature. A sage gathers his thoughts and reflections, engages in conscious activity, and thus creates ritual and rightness and produces models and regulations. Hence ritual, rightness, models, and limits are created by the conscious activity of the sage and not by his human nature. ...

When a person desires to do good he always does so because his nature is evil. A person who is shallow aspires to depth; one who is ugly aspires to beauty; one who is narrow aspires to breadth; one who is poor aspires to wealth; one who is humble aspires to esteem. Whatever one lacks in oneself he must seek outside. Therefore if a person is rich, he will not aspire to wealth, and if he is esteemed, he will not long for power. What a person possesses in himself he need not seek outside. One can see from this that the reason human beings desire to do good is that their nature is evil. Now human nature is definitely devoid of ritual and rightness. Therefore, they compel themselves to study and to seek to possess them. The nature knows nothing of ritual and rightness, and therefore they reflect and ponder and seek to understand them. Thus the nature is inborn, that is all, and human beings neither possess ritual and rightness, nor do they understand them. ...

If human nature were good, we could dispense with the sage kings and desist from the practice of ritual and rightness. Since human nature is evil, we must elevate the sages and esteem ritual and rightness. Therefore the straightening board was created because of warped wood, and the plumb line came into being because of things that are not straight. Rulers are established and ritual and rightness are illuminated because the nature is evil. From this perspective it is clear that human nature is evil and that goodness is the result of conscious activity. Wood that is straight need not wait for the straightening board to become straight; it is straight by nature. But a warped piece of wood must be laid against a straightening board, steamed, and bent into shape before it can become straight because its nature is not straight. Now since human nature is evil, people must await ordering by the sage kings and transformation through ritual and rightness, and only then do they attain order and accord with goodness. From this perspective, it is clear that human nature is evil and that goodness is the result of conscious activity. ...

Someone may ask whether ritual and rightness and sustained conscious activity are not themselves human nature, which would explain why the sage is able to create them. I reply that this is not the case. A potter may mold clay and produce an earthen pot, but how could molding pots out of clay be the potter's nature? A carpenter may carve wood and produce utensils, but how could carving utensils out of wood be the carpenter's nature? The sage stands in the same relation to ritual and rightness as the potter to the things he molds and produces. How then could ritual and rightness and sustained conscious activity be the original human nature?

In their human nature, Yao and Shun were one with Jie and Zhi, just as the noble person and the lesser person are, by nature, one. How could it be that ritual and rightness and sustained conscious activity are human nature? If this were the case, what reason would there be to honor Yao or Yu or to honor the noble person? People honor Yao, Yu, and the noble person because of their ability to transform their nature, to generate conscious activity, and, through this conscious activity, to create ritual and rightness. Thus the sage necessarily stands in the same relation to ritual and rightness and conscious activity as does the potter to the things he molds and produces. From this perspective, how could it be that ritual and rightness and sustained conscious activity are human nature? The reason people despise Jie, or the lesser person, is that they follow their nature, indulge their emotions, and are content to give free rein to their passions, so that their conduct is marked by greed and contentiousness. Therefore it is clear that human nature is evil and that goodness is the result of conscious activity. ...

"The man in the street can become a Yu."² What does this mean? I reply, What made the sage emperor Yu a Yu was the fact that he practiced humaneness and rightness and took uprightness as his standard. This being so, humaneness, rightness, and proper standards must be based upon principles that can be known and practiced. Any man in the street has the natural endowment needed to understand humaneness, rightness, proper standards, and uprightness and the ability to practice humaneness, rightness, proper standards, and uprightness. Therefore it is clear that he can become a Yu.

Is one to suppose that humaneness, rightness, proper standards, and uprightness are not based upon principles that can be known and practiced? If that were so, then even a Yu could not have understood and practiced them. Is one to suppose that the man in the street does not have the natural endowment needed to understand them or the ability to put them into practice? If that were so, then the man in the street, within his family, could not understand the rightness that pertains between father and son and, without, could not comprehend the correctness that pertains between ruler and subject. But this is not the case. The man in the street, within, can understand the rightness that pertains between father and son and, without, can understand the correctness between ruler and subject. Thus it is clear that he has in him the natural endowment needed to understand and the talent to put them into practice. Now if the man in the street

² This was apparently an old saying. Cf. *Mencius* 6B:2: "Cao Jiao asked, 'Is it true that all human beings are capable of becoming a Yao or a Shun?' Mencius said, 'It is true.'"

takes this endowment that enables him to know and this talent that enables him to act and applies them to the principles of humaneness and rightness, which are knowable, and the practice of humaneness and rightness, which is practicable, then it is clear that he can become a Yu. If the man in the street applies himself to training and study, concentrates his mind, unifies his will, and pondering and examining things carefully, continues his efforts over a long period of time, accumulating good acts without stop, then he can penetrate to a spiritual understanding and form a triad with Heaven and Earth. The sage is a person who has arrived where he has through the accumulation of good acts.