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Xunzi's Humanistic Naturalism: Utilizing Rituals to Address Our Psychological Challenges

This paper is on Xunzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher from the Warring States period of Chinese history. I have chosen to write about Xunzi for his theory of ritual, in which he discusses the psychological benefits that result from practicing rituals in our lives. Xunzi's works are made up of a collection of essays that are each on specific subjects; the ideas in his essay titled "On Ritual," in particular, is one of his greatest contributions to Chinese thought. In it, Xunzi explains why rituals are so essential to our psychological wellbeing. The aim of this paper, then, is to show how Xunzi's theory is relevant by elucidating the role that ritual plays in our lives. I argue that Xunzi demonstrates why ritual is so important, in a psychological sense, and why it does not need to be grounded in religious beliefs.

Before jumping into his thoughts on ritual, however, it is worth briefly explaining the context of Xunzi's overall philosophical project. Xunzi is one of the great Confucian philosophers, and he is often viewed alongside his counterpart thinker, Mencius. It is often said that Mencius represents the school of "idealistic" Confucianism, and Xunzi acts as the posterchild for the opposing branch of "naturalistic" Confucianism (Chan, 115). Ultimately, the main thing that distinguishes Xunzi from Mencius is their directly opposing views on human nature. Whereas Mencius claims that human nature is good, Xunzi opposes this and claims that human nature is in fact bad. Xunzi says that "The nature of man is evil; his goodness is the result of his activity." (Chan, 128). He also uses the metaphor that "crooked wood must be heated and bent before it becomes straight" to further illustrate this point (Ibid). Although Xunzi considers human nature to be bad, he still believes that humans have the capacity for perfection, and this is achieved through processes of trial and error.

It is important to note that, while Xunzi is called a “naturalist” and Mencius an “idealist,” these terms have different connotations than those which are commonly associated with in Western culture. In the Chinese context, the term “naturalistic” does not have to do with a philosophy concerned with nature, as in the natural environment or the natural world. Rather, Xunzi is called a naturalist philosopher because he believes that ethical human behavior is developed and cultivated over time, through trial and error – which he calls “artifice” (Chan, 115-135). In this same context, Mencius is called an “idealist” because he believes there is a mandate of heaven that bestows humans with the seeds for ethical behavior. Xunzi posits the idea of human artifice leading to proper ethical behavior as a reaction to his understanding of the natural world being chaotic and irrespective of human nature. Xunzi believes that humans do not affect the natural world, nor does the natural world really play a role in human development. Through artifice, then, Xunzi’s term for the progression of trial and error, humans are able to perfect their inherently evil nature.

In addition to things like self-cultivation and education, Xunzi emphasizes the role that ritual plays in perfecting our nature. Rituals are vital to our development, because they allow us to fully develop and express our natural emotions. In particular, Xunzi stresses the importance of formal rituals, such as marriage and funerals. Xunzi claims that these rituals were created and established by great Sages of the ancient past as a means of improving the quality of our lives; through ritual, the Sages provided us with structures through which we can express ourselves (*Xunzi*). In other words, rituals provide us with channels for our emotions to run through. Xunzi says that emotions such as joy, grief, and reverence are distinctly human characteristics, and so it is necessary that we come to terms with them to be fully human (*Ibid*). (When he mentions the ancient Sages, Xunzi is not speaking in a religious context, he is referring to a particularly wise

and gifted group of people that he considers to be exemplars of the perfect human life.) This is where Xunzi's psychological insight on the topic of ritual becomes clear: He believes that rituals embody a way of expressing our uniquely human existence into the world from within the confines of our inner emotions (Ibid). What's more, rituals satisfy certain psychological needs and desires that are natural to us, and they allow us to contribute to the satisfaction of others' needs and desires as well.

As I've previously indicated, Xunzi takes a non-theological approach to his discussion on ritual. He says, "The noble [superior] person understands them as the human way; the hundred names [common people] think of them as matters having to do with spirits" (Ibid). Xunzi says this about the ritual of sacrifice, specifically, but we can assume that this characterization applies to ritual in a broad sense. Regardless, this has significant implications for the relationship between ritual and religious belief. Since Xunzi considers ritual to be a means of satisfying our emotional desires and needs, he believes that the Sages actually had a psychological motive in creating rituals. In fact, Xunzi believes that the rituals constructed by the ancient Sages have such longstanding tradition and value primarily for this reason, that is, because they established them through artifice. The Sages were *not* supernatural beings, but humans, too, so it follows logically that they would have developed rituals in the most effective way possible – through trial and error. And so, in light of this, one can infer that the efficacy in the practice of rituals does not at all depend on supernatural beliefs (Ibid). Rituals serve to affect us directly and internally, irrespective of the position of our spiritual or religious faith. It is predominantly for this reason that Xunzi can be interpreted as a "humanist" in a modern context.

It is worth further elucidating, at this point, how this is relevant in today's context. We must first keep in mind that Xunzi proposed this theory thousands of years ago. Considering this

historical fact, along with the vastly different culture of China in comparison to the West, his ideas probably won't directly line up with our modern-day views. For these reasons, in order to really appreciate the value of Xunzi's theory of ritual, we must consider the implications it has for our lives today. I believe that Xunzi provides a kind of philosophical groundwork for us to truly understand why we engage in ritual activities and practices. Xunzi's theory is centered around the notion that rituals enhance our psychological wellbeing, because they act as channels for us to express our emotions through. If we forget about Xunzi's personal examples of rituals, for a moment, and focus on this main point of his, it's easier to see how it applies to our own lives.

One way that we can make sense of Xunzi's views on ritual, which reflect those of Confucius, is to consider the role of ritual in a social context. In his book titled *The Path*, Michael Puett also takes a psychological approach to the topic of ritual in Confucian philosophy. Puett thinks that ritual is a way for people to "role play," or to take an "as-if" mindset in socially interactive situations (Puett, Ch. 3). When we interact with others, we tend to act and respond in ways that have been refined to our preferences; Puett claims that this refining is actually done through ritual. In this sense, one way of thinking about ritual is to think of it as *custom*; we often behave in certain ways, according to the situation we are in, because we have integrated customs into our character (Ibid). Often times, customs are reflected in small or ordinary acts, but occasionally they can be made into rituals. Likewise, another way we might conceive of rituals is to think about them as the traditions we commit ourselves to. These could be as simple as engaging in a specific activity or enjoying a meal when we see a friend or family member for the first time in a while. These are simple examples, of course, but the point is that rituals do not have to be decorated in some formal manner for them to be rituals. Regardless of what it is, we

all have certain rituals that have meaning to us, and sometimes their meanings are only implicit in our minds. More importantly, though, the rituals we establish in our social lives are what really give worth to the interactions we have with others.

There is, certainly, an additional way of thinking about ritual in a social context. As I alluded to in the beginning of this paper, Xunzi believes that humans are inherently selfish and evil. Because of this, he claims that people need to practice behaving in ways that exemplify their regard for others. Whether or not his view about human nature is accurate, Xunzi is absolutely right in saying that treating others in a proper, respectful manner is key to our personal development and growth. In a similar way to how we think of children today, Xunzi thinks this other-regarding behavior needs to first be taught, and then perfected over time. Utilizing ritual is one method of cultivating ourselves into better morals agents, through the context of our social lives. But what exactly is meant by this? Since we are a social species, and therefore we inevitably live in a social environment, our personal and moral development is influenced by our social sphere. As such, rituals that apply to social interactions are crucial to our moral development. In short, ritual is valuable on both the social and individual level, but the key takeaway from Xunzi's insight is that ritual has a psychologically significant impact on our growth and development.

It goes without question that rituals are a vital part of our lives, and there's no reason to think they won't always be. Rituals are absolutely necessary components of the human experience. They do not serve to facilitate theological means, however, but they serve as practical methods for satisfying our psychological health, in a humanistic sense. Even if rituals are grounded in religious connotations, the ends they serve are, in actuality, humanistic ones. In today's age, a time in which overall religious belief is declining in many parts of the world,

Xunzi's theory of ritual is especially helpful for individuals who hold secular beliefs. We *all* deal with psychological struggles, but a large number of us do not subscribe to any religion.

Nonetheless, many of the most common rituals are tied to some form of theological rationale, and therefore, the secular population may feel a natural disconnect from such rituals, or may have trouble finding a purposeful reason for adopting them at all. For these reasons, the value of ritual is better understood in a humanistic sense, as opposed to a theological one. It is more effective to address our psychological emotions without religious notions, as this is more practical and less dogmatic. This is not to say that rituals cannot be grounded in religion, but their value and purpose are not reliant on any kind of supernatural justification or reasoning.

I hope to have conveyed, in this essay, not only an adequate understanding of Xunzi's theory of ritual, but an overall improved sense of the important role that rituals continue to play in our lives. On a different note, the significance of Xunzi's insight lies in large part, I believe, in the fact that his views fall in line with modern psychological theories of moral development. In this respect, Xunzi can be seen as an ancient precursor to the field of development psychology. From Xunzi's perspective, ritual is one of the ways in which we can correct our inherently evil nature, as it helps satisfy our psychological needs and desires. Moreover, Xunzi's claim that rituals have been historically constructed through artifice, the process of trial and error, offers a humanistic and naturalistic account as to how rituals came to be fundamental parts of the human experience. The rituals we partake in are, of course, relative to our own lives, but they are always meaningful in the same way. I propose that we take Xunzi's thoughts on ritual into deep consideration, and dedicate time to reflecting on how they have, and continue to, help shape who we are.

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