

## TAMING HUMAN NATURE? REFLECTIONS ON XUNZI AND HOBBS

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*Abstract: It is a common practice to compare Thomas Hobbes with the ancient Chinese philosopher, Xunzi. Indeed, for the student who is acquainted with Hobbes and Western Philosophy but unfamiliar with Ancient Chinese philosophy, accessing Xunzi through the lens of Hobbes can help provide a tractable entry point into a different philosophical tradition. This is because, like Hobbes, Xunzi takes human nature to be bad and envisions a state of nature that, on account of human badness, is chaotic and violent. And like Hobbes, Xunzi justifies the establishment of political authority because it brings order and peace in place of chaos and violence. But the common starting points of these philosophers should not obscure some very significant differences that come to the fore on further comparison. While Hobbes believes that a powerful political authority with strong laws can maintain a well-ordered society in spite of bad human nature, Xunzi believes that a well-ordered society must also require some reformation of human nature. Thus in addition to effective laws, a truly stable and harmonious political society must also encourage the practice of rituals across the different areas of human life through which human nature is corrected. This difference with Hobbes furthermore invites a more general question with respect to human nature and political society. Is the end of political society that of securing peace and cooperation among people (regardless of their nature), or is it ultimately that of moral self-cultivation?*

### I

Like Thomas Hobbes, although predating him by nearly two millennia, the ancient Chinese philosopher Xunzi imagines a human state of nature that is

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chaotic and violent, akin to Hobbes's state of war of everyone against everyone.<sup>1</sup> Like Hobbes, Xunzi pins this miserable human natural condition in part on the natural "badness" of people. And like Hobbes, Xunzi justifies the establishment of political authority because it brings order and peace among people. But while Hobbes takes the establishment and enforcement of positive laws by an all-powerful political authority to be sufficient for keeping the state of nature at bay in spite of human badness, Xunzi believes that positive laws alone are inadequate. Laws must be accompanied by a reformation of human nature if a well-ordered society is to be achieved and sustained. In contrast to Hobbes, then, Xunzi thinks that a well-ordered political society must have both good laws and good people. This is where the Confucian ideal of rituals comes in. Rituals have the important function of making people better in spite of their original bad nature that laws alone do not.

Recalling the place of rituals in Xunzi's ideal of a well-ordered society draws our attention to a crucial difference between Xunzi and Hobbes, their similar starting points notwithstanding. It shows that while Hobbes thinks that a peaceful political society is realizable even if human nature is incorrigibly bad, Xunzi thinks a stable civil order must take on the task of improving human nature. More interestingly perhaps, it also shows that Xunzi and Hobbes in fact see the aims of political society differently. For Hobbes, the purpose of politics is the peaceful co-existence of people in spite of their natural badness. For Xunzi, the aim of politics is not just peaceful co-existence among flawed individuals but, ultimately, their moral self-improvement and cultivation.

Before beginning, let me clarify the aims and method of my comparative exercise. The value of this essay, if any, will be in the whole rather than in the sum of its parts, in what the comparative engagement of Hobbes and Xunzi can tell or remind us about the moral cultivation of individuals and the possibility of a well-ordered society. Thus, I do not offer a novel reading of Hobbes, nor do I aim to engage in the interpretation commentaries surrounding Xunzi. To the contrary,

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<sup>1</sup> No exact dates are available for Xunzi, but his date of birth is typically noted as circa 310 B.C.E. He thus lived during the period of Chinese history known as the Warring States period (403-221 B.C.E.). Just as historians of ideas would point to the English Civil War as an influence on Hobbes's understanding of and his aversion to the state of nature as a state of strife, so Xunzi's historical setting and experience can be seen as a source of his understanding of the state of nature as a state of anarchy and violence that is to be avoided.

I hope that my basic reading of each is relatively uncontroversial or plausible. It is the *comparative exercise* from which I hope we can gain some insights. I take it that this is where one of the merits of comparative philosophy lies: not necessarily in the offering of original readings of each of the philosophical traditions at play, but in what we can learn when we juxtapose them, even if it means generalizing (within reason and not misleadingly) certain basic features of each.

In particular, then, I will not try to interpret the place of rituals in Xunzi's system of thought, about which much has been written, as we should expect. Rather, generalizing this basic idea from the *Xunzi*, I want to see what we can learn when we compare it with the Hobbesian view of law and order. And comparing basic concepts generalized from Xunzi and Hobbes is not an arbitrary exercise but a rather natural one, since both philosophers, as noted above, begin from a broadly similar idea of the state of nature. In a sense then, a scholar of Hobbes and a scholar of Xunzi will not learn anything new from my depiction of each per se; but I hope such readers will nonetheless find something of interest when we put the two together.

## II

It is a commonplace that Hobbes regards individuals as (what we now call) "psychological egoists". According to psychological egoism, individuals are, in the final analysis, motivated solely by their self-interests. That is, individual actions, choices and relationships can be reduced and understood purely in terms of an individual's perception of what best serves her own interests. Even acts that in the first instance appear altruistic can be unpacked in terms of an agent's self-interests. Statements in *The Leviathan* such as "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death"; and "[c]ompetition of riches, honor, command, or other power, inclineth to contention, enmity, and war" support this psychological egoistic reading of Hobbes. (Hobbes, 1996: 66) Indeed, these remarks further imply that individuals are not merely egoistical, but belligerent and confrontation and given to violence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This strong reading of the badness of humanity in Hobbes is not a contemporary trend but is a common interpretation in the history of philosophy. For example, J.-J. Rousseau

To be exact, a closer reading of Hobbes also suggests that he endorses a more complex view of human psychology than that given by psychological egoism. For instance, in his more extensive account of human psychology, Hobbes writes that humans are naturally capable of benevolence, goodwill and charity, where these are understood as “desire of good to another” without qualifying that this desire must be further reduced to an agent’s self-interest. (Hobbes, 1996: 37) These statements, coupled with the independent implausibility of psychological egoism (as a complete theory of human psychology) put enormous pressure on the psychological egoist reading of Hobbes.

At any rate, whether or not Hobbes subscribes to psychological egoism, it is a fair and productive reading of Hobbes to say that he emphasizes the egoistical and adversarial tendencies of human nature for the purpose of his normative political philosophical project. (Rawls, 2008: 46) Indeed, even if human psychological nature is not as simple as to be wholly explained by the thesis of psychological egoism, Hobbes’s plausible assumption is that that given our strong instinct of self-preservation and the drive to satisfy our material needs, we will tend, in the end, to privilege our interests and goals, and see others as potential adversaries in a state of nature that is lawless and characterized by fierce competition for the basic means of survival.<sup>3</sup>

This is a contest rendered even more unpredictable and intense for any individual, and hence more hazardous, by the further assumption that in their natural state, humans are more or less equal in their capacity to injure or harm each other. Thus a combination of human nature and the external natural conditions forces humanity into a state of war of “every man, against every man.” (Hobbes, 1996: 84) So, even if Hobbes does not think that human nature is fundamentally and irreducibly egoistical and confrontational, it is reasonable to say that he adopts such a view of human nature for the purposes of his political

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attributes to Hobbes the view that individuals are fundamentally “vicious”, seeking “only to attack, and to fight”. “Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Men”, in Victor Gourevitch (trs.), *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), e.g., pp. 151, 135.

<sup>3</sup> This is compatible with the idea that individuals can form associations with some other individuals for mutual advantage or with kin based on what Hobbes calls “conjugal affections”. But associations will still be in fierce competition with other associations in a state of nature without an overarching authority to keep them in check.

philosophy.<sup>4</sup> We might say that if Hobbes does not subscribe to psychological egoism as the correct theory of human psychology, he nonetheless adopts what we might call *methodological psychological egoism*.

Hobbes's signature idea is that even if human beings are (assumed to be) inherently bad, and inclined moreover to resort to violence to satisfy their own interests when the stakes are high (and the stakes are high in Hobbes's precarious state of nature), it is nonetheless possible to found a stable and peaceful political society among individuals so conceived. That is, out of human badness, there is nonetheless the hope of achieving a peaceful and well-ordered civil society.

The trick, for Hobbes, is not to radically change or reform human nature, which is not an option (at least by hypothesis). That human beings are presumed to be fundamentally rational and self-interested is taken as a fixed point. The trick, then, is to have beneficial, i.e., effective, laws which can give self-regarding individuals prudential reasons to co-exist in peace and even cooperate with each other. That is, instead of trying to repair human nature, we should try to alter the external conditions in which humans interact. Laws can direct people's behavior for the better of society not by transforming the self-interested character of their preferences, but by changing their structure of choice or "choice architecture" (to borrow and generalize a term from behavioral economics).<sup>5</sup> That is, their preferences are not so much changed, as redirected in a way that can produce mutually beneficial outcomes.

Specifically, for Hobbes, it is the fear of an all-powerful Sovereign, or "the Leviathan", that will give individuals the necessary incentive to comply with the laws of society and to pursue their own ends peacefully with each other. As is well known, basic to Hobbes's account of political authority is the social contract idea, that rational self-interested individual would consent to the rule of an all powerful political authority since they would see this to be better for them than the anarchic state of nature in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and

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<sup>4</sup> This helps explain the popularity of the view from Hobbes's own time through to our own that Hobbes takes human nature to be essentially "bad", his more extensive and complex remarks on human psychology notwithstanding: it vivifies the parameters of his political philosophical project.

<sup>5</sup> "Generalize" because the term "choice architecture" is typically invoked in conjunction with "nudges", whereas Hobbes of course is content with plain old coercion and fear of Sovereign authority.

short”. (Hobbes, 1996: 84)

An achievement of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* is that it planted the idea that a peaceful and well-ordered society is nonetheless possible among rational self-interested agents. Individual moral self-improvement is not a necessary condition for the creation of a well-ordered and peaceful state if we can install and enforce a system of rewards and punishments such that self-seeking individuals can be motivated to submit to the laws of society. This basic idea, as we know, has been influential in the history of political philosophy. It informed, for example, Adam Smith’s basic thesis that a mutually beneficial society is possible among individuals pursuing their selfish ends if we put in place the right kind of economic institutions. It also is present in Jeremy Bentham’s argument that society can be so “constituted” that we (since we lack the “enlightened spirit” to adopt utilitarian principles in the course of daily life) “labor for our own particular good, we labor also for the good of the whole”.<sup>6</sup> Even Kant, in affirming his point about the significance of state institutions, tipped his hat at this Hobbesian idea and quipped that with a just constitution, “the problem of setting up a state can be solved even for a nation of devils”. (Kant, 1991: 112)

Xunzi’s philosophy of political authority anticipates Hobbes’s starting points.<sup>7</sup> He invokes the idea of a state of nature in which human natural badness has brought on a situation of strife, adversary and insecurity, or more generally a state of chaos. By human “badness”, Xunzi takes it that people are born “with

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, Adam. 1993. *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Jeremy Bentham, *Theory of Legislation*, chap. 10, at <https://archive.org/details/legislation00bentuoft>.

<sup>7</sup> Xunzi’s teaching and writings are collected and edited in the eponymously named *Xunzi*. It is a matter of debate which parts of the *Xunzi* are actually written by Xunzi himself or that accurately transcribe his teachings, and which are later inserts by disciples and commentators. But for our purpose I will leave this issue aside. What matters for us are the relevant ideas and arguments as they appear in the *Xunzi* and are attributed to his philosophical position, regardless of whether the historical Xunzi actually said or wrote them. So when I say “Xunzi writes” or the like, the reader if she prefers can translate this into “as is written in the *Xunzi*”.

feelings of hate and dislikes” towards others.<sup>8</sup> They are also given to the immediate satisfaction of their desires and narrow interests.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, “because their nature is bad, people were deviant, dangerous, and not correct in their behavior, and they were unruly, chaotic, and not well-ordered” (p. 249). In the natural state of lawlessness, “if people follow along with their inborn nature and dispositions, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and disorder, and end up in violence” (ibid.). We have, due to human’s natural badness, a state of nature reminiscent of Hobbes’s state of war of everyone against everyone.

One way human nature causes chaos and violence in human’s natural pre-political state is because of human beings’ unchecked natural desires and passions: As Xunzi writes:

Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the object of their desires, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other, then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos, then they will be impoverished.<sup>10</sup>

For Xunzi, this chaotic and violent natural condition explains and justifies the creation of political authority. The “sage kings”, as Xunzi tells it, disapproved or “hated” (ibid.) the chaos and violence of the state of nature, and imposed laws or

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<sup>8</sup> Xunzi, *Xunzi: the Complete Texts* in Hutton, E. (tr. and ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 249. Henceforth, page references from the *Xunzi* will be from this translation, and for convenience noted in parentheses in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Like Hobbes, Xunzi need not be claiming implausibly that human nature is singularly and entirely “bad.” But self-regarding motivations tend to dominant under conditions of lawlessness and insecurity. It is this tendency towards “badness” that is relevant for his account of the state of nature. For a discussion on Xunzi and human natural “badness”, see Bryan Van Norden, “Mengzi and Xunzi” in Kline, T.C, and Ivanhoe, P.J. (eds), *Virtue, Nature and Moral Agency in the Xunzi* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000); also Eric Hutton, “Does Xunzi have a Consistent Theory of Human Nature?” in Kline and Ivanhoe.

<sup>10</sup> Xunzi. 2014. *Xunzi: the Complete Texts* in Hutton, E. (tr. and ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, p201.

standards of rightness in order to control and restrain people's behavior.

Therefore, for their sake they set up the power of rulers and superiors in order to control them. They made clear rituals and the standards of righteousness in order to transform them. They set up laws and standards in order to manage them. They multiplied punishments and fines in order to restrain them. As a result, they caused all under Heaven to become well ordered and conform to the Way. This is the order of the sage-kings, and the transformation from ritual and the standards of righteousness.<sup>11</sup>

As is clear from his remarks, Xunzi has no use for the social contract ideal contra Hobbes.<sup>12</sup> Political authority is not justified by what subjects themselves would want or could consent to. Rather, it seems that it is just taken as a given that a condition of lawfulness, peace and order is morally superior to a state of lawlessness, chaos and war. If ordinary persons aren't able to see this, it is because their natural crooked dispositions and their preoccupation with satisfying their immediate desires and interests have blinded them to this moral truth. The sage-king, however, is able to look to and understand the good.

It is the sage-king's disapproval of this disorderliness and violent natural condition of humanity that moves the sage-king to establish and to exercise authority over people. The sage-king's moral genius if we like, suffices to justify human's exit from the state of nature and their submission to political authority. Contra Hobbes, the subjects' consent is not sought nor is it relevant. But the useful comparative point, for my present purpose, is less the justification for exiting the state of nature and more how this exit is to be realized or sustained.

Like Hobbes after him, Xunzi is explicit about the indispensable function of the rule of law in attaining peaceful co-existence among individuals. A system of

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<sup>11</sup> Xunzi. 2014. *Xunzi: the Complete Texts* in Hutton, E. (tr. and ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, p252.

<sup>12</sup> In contrast, see Mozi (c. 480-390 B.C.E.), for an example of a classical Chinese philosopher who advocates what we can reasonably interpret as a social contract justification of the state. Mozi writes, very reminiscent of Hobbes: "Those who understood the nature of this chaos [in the state of nature] saw that it arose from a lack of rulers and leaders and so they chose the best person among the most worthy and capable in the world and established him as the Son of Heaven". In "Chapter Eleven" of *The Mozi*. Mozi, trs. P.J. Ivanhoe, in Ivanhoe, P.J, and Van Norden, B. (eds), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001 [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.]), p. 65.



rewards and punishment provides individuals with the necessary incentives to submit to the law and to respect the lawful entitlements of each other. This is clear in his remarks, cited above, that the sage-kings set up “laws and standards” and impose “punishments and fines in order to restrain” people. Laws and rewards and punishment will curb and rein in our natural badness by making the cost of law-violation in the end contrary to any calculated self-interest and satisfaction of personal desires.

But in addition to laws and standards, and punishments and fines, the sage-kings also introduced rituals and standards of righteousness, as noted in the passage cited. By “standards of *righteousness*”, Xunzi means moral standards and moral norms as opposed to legal rules. These moral standards and norms are by their nature not enforceable via laws and threats of legal sanctions, but are to be encouraged and inculcated through socialization and social practices.

One important reason for the inefficacy of laws in this respect is that the moral education that is sought is that of the cultivation of moral character. A well-ordered society requires not just subjects who are in conformity with the laws in their outward conduct, but who have acquired the right attitude and respect for the law and for each other. Such attitudes and states of character include having a proper deference to rulers, respect for fellow subjects, proper piety towards one’s parents and so on. It is one thing to go through the motion of doing the right thing; another to properly value performing this action with the right attitude and moral character.

While some of the specific standards of righteousness or good character in ancient Chinese society will jar our modern sensibilities, the general idea that a well-ordered society needs not just good laws but also subjects with a certain attitude and temperament with respect to their role as citizens is not an antiquated or a farfetched one. There is a live debate in contemporary political philosophy (even within the liberal tradition) whether a well-ordered society is achievable with rational individuals assumed to be wholly self-interested, or whether a well-ordered society must presume that individuals are not just rationally self-interested but also morally reasonable. John Rawls, to invoke just one example, takes as one of his starting points the assumption that individuals don’t just have a sense of their own good, but also a sense of justice. That is, they have the two-sided capacity to want to pursue their interests on rightful terms with regard to others. In contrast, David Gauthier has influentially developed the Hobbesian ideal that moral co-existence is realizable among individuals

presumed basically as rational self-interested.<sup>13</sup>

But why the need to cultivate a particular moral character? Why can't a Hobbesian Sovereign with awful powers be adequate to the task of keeping the peace? Xunzi might as well be addressing the Hobbesian when he writes that "The [state] power to inspire awe that comes from being harsh and stringent results in danger and weakness."<sup>14</sup> This is because, he explains

When things are like this [under strict laws enforced by a harsh ruler], then if the common are constrained, they will be extremely fearful, but if their circumstances are relaxed, then they will treat their superiors arrogantly... If the ruler does not constrain them by means of arrangements and authority, and if he does not shake them by means of executions and killings, then he will have no way to keep hold of his subordinates.<sup>15</sup>

That is, without the proper internalization of subjects with respect to the laws of their society, peace and order are sustained only to the extent that the state authority can effectively enforce and execute the law. But since fear of punishment is the chief motivation for compliance, then whenever an individual can break the law to her advantage without exposure, she will have no reason to comply and not defect. Thus, under a state that rules by fear and power alone (through its laws), any social stability that is achieved is only contingent on the state's de facto capacity to enforce the law and to instill fear in its subjects to conform. But if we want genuine social stability, subjects must themselves endorse the laws for themselves; they must comply not just because they want to avoid punishment but because they have acquired a certain attitude towards the law, and are moved to act out of respect for the law and state authority.

It is for this reason that Xunzi says that a state that can "inspire awe that comes from the Way and virtue results in security and strength."<sup>16</sup> A well-ordered society cannot therefore be founded on people taking them as they originally are.

To our modern eyes, there is the danger that this deference to the state and its

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<sup>13</sup> John Rawls, 1987. *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1971; David Gauthier, *Morals By Agreement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Xunzi. 2014. *Xunzi: the Complete Texts* in Hutton, E. (tr. and ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, p164.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p164.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p164.

laws can go too far. We don't want citizens to acquire an unquestioning and uncritical attitude towards political authority. But the basic point to draw from Xunzi is the more plausible and moderate one that a stable political society must not only have just laws but also citizens who are able to internalize the values of these laws and to endorse them from within (and not merely comply with them out of fear of punishment).

In this respect, Xunzi and Hobbes part ways significantly with regard to how they understand human morality and the well-ordered society. Xunzi believes that a well-ordered society is not possible without an accompanying reformation of human nature, and this recasting of human nature is to be achieved and sustained through an elaborate set of social rituals. As the *Xunzi* puts it: "Ritual is that by which to correct the person... If you are without ritual, then how are you to correct your person?" (Ibid. 14). Thus well-ordered society is not just a society with good laws, but a society regulated by rituals through which people can be made good.

### III

Rituals are a central feature of the Confucian moral tradition, and they take on different forms in the different social settings across the various spheres of human activity in society.<sup>17</sup> But these specific expressions of rituals all have as to their general and most basic function that of making people more humane (as in Kongzi) or to correct for their natural badness (as in Xunzi). A crucial consequence of rituals, then, is to make people more governable.

How do rituals do that? According to the Confucians, rituals do this by nurturing and sensitizing the human psyche, through the habituation and patterning of certain actions or conduct. Essentially the idea behind rituals as a means of moral cultivation is that the regulation one's action and outward behavior can over time inculcate in that person a certain character. This is reminiscent of Aristotle's ideal that one becomes good in character by habitually doing good acts. The outward conduct of a person overtime gets internalized and informs and shapes her moral temperament, instilling in her the corresponding

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<sup>17</sup> Kongzi, 2003. *The Analects*, in Edward Slingerland (trs.), *Confucius: Analects with selections from traditional commentaries*, Indianapolis: Hackett.

disposition and attitude.

An elaborate system of rituals, across different spheres of human activity in society, will have the collective effect of taming and straightening our crooked nature. Some of the specific rites described in the Confucian tradition appears quaint, perhaps even petty and excessively formal and superficial, to us now. For example, statements holding up Kongzi as a model practitioner of the rites have become easy targets of parody: “He would not instruct while eating, nor continue to converse once he has retreated to bed”; “He would not sit unless his mat was straight”; “He would not come to a halt at the center of the doorway and when walking would not tread upon the threshold”; and “When presented food with full ritual propriety, he would invariably assume a solemn expression and rise from his seat.”<sup>18</sup>

A first thing to note, though, is that these seeming superficial acts, seeming a matter of form for form’s sake, acquire substance and meaning when we take them in the context of the customs of the period in which they were discussed. For instance, as Edward Slingerland notes, when we note that it the custom in Kongzi’s China that ministers can pass only on the right side of a doorway in ceremonial possession, and that only a ruler can stand in the middle, then treading on the threshold becomes more substantively, and nontrivially, an expression “of insubordination”.<sup>19</sup>

But the more important point for my purpose is the general ideal behind the function of rituals, that the regularization and patterning of actions and conduct across different areas of human activity can have a cumulative sensitizing effect on the human soul. For example, Kongzi’s obsession with what seems like mere table-manners – observing proper form and expression before eating, moderating one’s intake and the like – whatever its specific historical cultural value can be seen as methods by which we train our appetites and learn to control them. It cultivates, even in just the context of eating, a certain mindfulness and deliberativeness that contribute to the cultivation of a moral character. And more generally, as we noted, for Xunzi it is the uncontrolled need to satisfy our natural of desires that is one source of conflict between people and the reason for the

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<sup>18</sup> These examples are from Book 10 of *The Analects*. See Kongzi, in Slingerland, pp. 99, 104, 105 and 109.

<sup>19</sup> Kongzi. 2003. *The Analects*, in Edward Slingerland (trs.), *Confucius: Analects with selections from traditional commentaries*, Indianapolis: Hackett. p. 99.

anarchic and impoverished condition of the state of nature (Xunzi. 201).

Indeed, Xunzi expressly take one reason for having rituals to be that of tempering and moderating our desires and appetites, to nurture them and make them fall in line with what we are rightfully entitled to in society. Finally, assuming a “solemn expression” that is befitting of an occasion is not merely putting on a façade but in fact a way of reminding oneself of the solemnity of the occasion, and hence a way of instilling the right attitude or disposition appropriate to it.

A key idea from the *Xunzi* is that even though we can improve human moral character, this is never an easy task and can be achieved only through concerted “deliberate” effort. Indeed, given our tendency is to be bad, moral self-cultivation is an ongoing task that we cannot let up on lest we revert to our natural ways. Moreover, the job of moral education and cultivation is never done since (barring the ideal sage-kings) complete individual moral fulfillment is a quest rather than a state to be achieved. Xunzi uses the metaphors of arduously “steaming and straightening” a “crooked wood” to shape it to our purposes; and the regular “honing and grinding” of knives to sharpen them (p. 248) to convey the challenge of making and keeping people good.

Indeed, Xunzi goes to length to impress on us that human nature is inherently bad precisely to bolster his thematic point that moral education, through the rituals among other things, must be constant and persistent. Hence rituals not only improve our natures but are also the bulwark against our falling back into our natural selves.

#### IV

Much more can be said about rituals and how they exactly make people better people. But granting that rituals serve this function of taming human nature, the question I want to focus on is whether erecting good laws alone, as in Hobbes, is inadequate. Can a well-ordered society dispense with the need to correct and improve human nature? Does reading Hobbes through the lens of Xunzi expose a deficiency in his conception of political society? Let me propose and test two possible Hobbesian responses to this question, contra Xunzi.

The first is that clear and strong rules backed by a strong ruler (as Hobbes’s presumptive all powerful Leviathan is) will suffice to make people submit to the rule of law in spite of their crooked and egoistical nature. On this response, there

is no need for rituals, or for any extra-legal attempts more generally, to straighten out humanity. As mentioned above, for Hobbes, a system of legal punishment and rewards can adequately motivate self-interested and competitive individuals to comply with the rules of society. There is no attempt, or a need, to make individuals less egoistical and more reasonable. What we need to do is to provide them with self-interested reason (e.g., to avoid punishment) to play by the rules of society.

It is clear that Hobbes does not pretend that the Sovereign is so omnipotent such that individuals must believe that *any* violation on their part will result in their being punished. It is enough that the system of rewards and punishment is designed such that the expected disutility of getting caught by the state for any particular transgression is higher than the expected gain from the transgression. We can always establish a punishment costly enough such that whatever the probability (so long as it is not zero) of a transgression being found out, the expected cost of breaking the law is high enough to discourage its violation. So the Sovereign must still be all powerful in order to enact the necessary laws and to show that it means business; but there is no unrealistic assumption here that the Sovereign must be a perfect enforcer and a flawless executioner of the law.

Thus, it is in principle possible for a peaceful social order to be forged among Hobbesian individuals. But, as the student of Hobbes knows, the price for this is the total submission and subjection to a *Hobbesian Leviathan*. This is how Hobbes himself sees the condition of the success of his own project: assuming human nature to be irredeemably bad, a well-ordered society must be a society governed by an absolute authority with indivisible powers. Hobbes's Sovereign provides the "visible power to keep [people] in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants [to live in peace together]". (Hobbes, 1996: 111)

In this respect, Xunzi's emphasis on rituals to make people more governable is significant. He has in mind a political society in which individuals are able to come to internalize the rules of their society (and not just comply with them for the sake of avoiding the expected disutility of punishment). While Hobbes' political society can appear well-ordered, it is well-ordered only to the extent that the Sovereign is able to effectively display its authority over the people. Xunzi's well-ordered society is not just one in which people act merely in accordance with the law, but that they through the rituals can come to internalize and endorse these laws for themselves. This provides a more enduring form of societal

stability than what Hobbes's reliance on positive law alone can attain. And when people endorse the laws and act out of respect for them (and not just because they are motivated to avoid punishment), there will be a greater harmony between people's character and what they see to be the good of society.

Xunzi's conception of a well-ordered society is, of course, far from what we would today regard as an egalitarian or liberal society. His conception of the ideal society is that of a hierarchical society ruled by elites. But since people can come to have internal reasons to obey the law (through the effects of rituals), he does not on the other hand invoke the "terror of some power" to make people act in ways "contrary to their natural passions", pace Hobbes. (Hobbes, 1996: 111) Instead, he thinks we can try to reform their natural passions, to make them better align with the ideals what it takes to be in a well-ordered society. This basic difference between a society governed only by law and a society where subjects have also internalized the law is well expressed by Kongzi in *The Analects*:

If you try to guide the common people with coercive regulations and keep them in line with punishment, the common people will become evasive and will have no sense of shame. If however you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and will rectify themselves.<sup>20</sup>

The second Hobbesian response I countenance says that contrary to common interpretation, there is a certain transformation in human nature in Hobbes's well-ordered society. The Hobbesian individual does not exit the state of nature and enter into political society with their existing preferences literally intact. At the very least, individuals must come to appreciate the good of peaceful coexistence with others, and the value of social cooperation and mutual conformity with the law in this regard. They must acquire a new understanding of what is in their best interests. But their fundamental interest of self-preservation remains intact.

So the difference between Xunzi and Hobbes is not that the latter's political society has no impact on human nature. The real difference, on this response, is that a revised self-understanding of what is in people's interest can be affected through the legal institutional mechanism of the state, such as its laws and public policies like education (and even religious propagation in Hobbes case).

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<sup>20</sup> Kongzi. 2003. *The Analects*, in Edward Slingerland (trs.), *Confucius: Analects with selections from traditional commentaries*, Indianapolis: Hackett. p. 8.

Certainly it is the case for Hobbes that subjects must come to recognize the authority of the Sovereignty and to accept its authority to rule, and this for Hobbes will require some state inculcation in people of what is truly in their best interests. Thus, even though people may be wary of the potential “evil consequences” of living under an authority that has unlimited power, they will also see that the consequences of the absence of such an authority, “which is perpetual war of every man against his neighbors, are much worse”. (Hobbes, 1996: 138) Thus, on this response, the difference between Hobbes and Xunzi is not that one wants to transform human nature and the other does not, but that Hobbes believes that the formal institutions of the state have the necessary educative effects on people’s preferences. There is no need for extra-legal modes of moral education, such as that provided by the system of rituals as advocated by Xunzi.

But the difference between Xunzi and Hobbes with respect to human nature in fact remains. Even if there is some alteration in people’s conception of their own interests in Hobbes, there is no radical reshaping of human nature, as in Xunzi. For Hobbes, humans remain *fundamentally* self-interested.<sup>21</sup> What is impressed on them is not that they ought to be less self-interested, but they are given a *revised understanding* of their self-interests. Or put it more accurately, they are offered a system of incentives and punishment that direct self-interests towards cooperation.

Hobbesian individuals, if we like, are transformed from persons with narrow self-interests to citizens with more enlightened or informed self-interests. But they remain fundamentally self-interested. Their pursuits can be channeled, as mentioned above, by changing their choice architecture and providing them with new motivations as given by a system of punishments and rewards. But an altered or even enlightened understanding of self-interest is still self-interest. In Xunzi’s case, there is the deeper reshaping in human nature: there isn’t just the redirecting of self-interested pursuits but the tempering of self-interest itself by a genuine concern and a cultivated humanness towards others.

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<sup>21</sup> It is a mistake then to think that, for Hobbes, just because individuals are capable of cooperation in political society, their fundamental nature has changed. They cooperate out of self-interest. What has changed is their external social and institutional arrangement. This can direct self-interest into a cooperative activity among other things via a system of rewards and punishment.



So the difference between Xunzi and Hobbes with respect to cultivating human nature is not illusionary. But a question that is further motivated, although it requires taking a step away from Hobbes, is this: do laws and formal institutional rules by themselves not have any fundamental transformative effect at all on human nature? Consider the imposition of civil rights laws and desegregationist policies against the will of southern states in the US in the 1960s by the Federal government. Over time, anti-discrimination laws and policies, backed by fines and punishments, and educational policies, appear to have corrected the racist attitudes of people. Thus, one might take this to be evidence of the educative and transformative effects of legal and formal institutions on people's character. On the other hand, one might argue that informal social norms and interaction and other non-legal cultural factors (literature, films, etc) played crucial roles as well in this transformation and correction of racist attitudes.

This is a complex sociological issue that is beyond the scope of this paper to address in some depth. The point I wish to highlight is that the idea that formal institutions of society can shape to a significant extent people's attitudes and instill in them new moral perspectives is not an implausible one. If so, rituals and other informal mechanism of moral cultivation become less central.

Thus, my comparative exercise on Hobbes versus Xunzi is not meant to show that one of them has the advantage on the other. Indeed, taking Hobbes on his own terms, it is hardly obvious that the absence of rituals, or more generally extra-legal mechanism of socialization and moral education, is a deficiency. Given Hobbes's readiness to commit to an absolute and indivisible authority who is *ex hypothesis* able to exercise de fact authority in making and enforcing laws and keep all subjects in check, his confidence that a stable society is possible even if human nature is bad is not an implausible one.

We might find this implication for the form of political authority that we will end up with morally unattractive, but it was of course Hobbes's whole purpose to defend an absolute sovereign, indeed in the form of absolute monarchy. Moreover, as noted, Hobbes can allow, and in fact must acknowledge, some changes in individual self-understanding of their preferences. To be sure, as mentioned, this is not a radical transformation but only a new understanding of what is in their own best interests. But on Hobbes' own terms, this alone, too, could suffice for the purpose of achieving a peaceful political society.

What the comparative exercise helps bring to our attention, however, is the

question of the relationship between the moral character of citizens and the stability of a well-ordered and just society, a question that in its general form remains pertinent for us. Moreover, this comparative exercise, as I will explain in the next section, also helps remind us of the deeper question concerning the purpose of political life.

## V

The above discussion points to a further important difference between Hobbes and Xunzi, a divergence that is easy to overlook because of their apparent similarities. This is the difference in how they each understand the purpose of political philosophy, or more practically, the purpose of political life. Is the establishment of a well-ordered and peaceful society the end itself, or does politics have the deeper purpose of the moral self-improvement of individuals?

What, in the end drives Xunzi's preoccupation with rituals and their transformative impact on human nature, it seems, is not just that he thinks that reshaping human nature is a precondition for political society. It is that a political order, based on laws and rituals, provides the requisite stage in which to continuously reshape and improve human nature. In other words, Xunzi is not concerned about reshaping human nature merely for the sake of a well-ordered society. The basic theme of the *Xunzi* is that of moral self-cultivation, and its engagements with political authority are directed toward this final purpose of moral education. Xunzi's concern is in the final analysis, an ethical one: he is concerned with improving human nature for its own sake.

A reason political authority matters is that it is only in an orderly society, governed by good laws and regulated by social rituals, that human nature can be "deliberately" cultivated and shaped for the better. The sage-king is moved to impose order and peace not for their own sake, although these are of course desirable, but because the sage-king wants ultimately to correct human's flawed nature.

So while Hobbes' project in the *Leviathan* is essentially concerned with the question of how to account for and justify absolute political authority, Xunzi's interest in political philosophy has the very different end of how to make people better in spite of their original nature. For Xunzi, even if a well-ordered society can be realized taking people as they are (i.e., naturally bad), we would still have failed to fulfill the purpose of political life.

Hobbes, in this regard, helped usher in modern political philosophy (in the form of the Western liberal tradition). For the moderns, the aim of politics is to secure stable and peaceful institutional arrangement among individuals with conflicting interests. For Hobbes, happily, this can be achieved with a strong state and effective laws. Taming the human soul, as it were, became no longer the concern of the modern political society. Xunzi's idea of the aim of politics, in contrast, is more typically classical.

Like the ancient Greeks, the chief purpose of political life for Xunzi is not just peaceful coexistence among competing individuals but that of individual moral cultivation.<sup>22</sup> The end of politics is not peace and order; peace and order are valued because they are among the social preconditions for moral self-improvement.

If this is correct, then it seems that contrasting Xunzi with Rousseau can yield additional insights, insights that are obscured in the more standard comparison with Hobbes. Rousseau clearly rejects the premise that humans are naturally bad or vicious, and explicitly denies what he calls Hobbes's "vicious" natural person. (Rousseau, 2008: 135) So in this way, there is a clear difference in Rousseau's and Xunzi's starting positions. But what is significant, I think, is Rousseau's belief that human nature can be improved and that it in fact becomes radically transformed when humanity moves from their natural condition to form a genuine political association.

That is, there is a kind of moral self-improvement that takes place when people come together with others to form a political association. They surrender certain rights and liberties that we get to exercise in nature, but in exchange they acquire new and nobler forms of freedom and new understanding of what it means to be free. They are transformed from "a stupid and bounded animal [and] made an intelligent being and man". (Rousseau, 1997: 53, 53-54) Like Xunzi, this moral self-improvement of individuals is not just a means to the end of a

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<sup>22</sup> This difference between Hobbes and Xunzi regarding the ends of politics is thus not a division between East and West, but a division more accurately between the ancient and modern understanding of politics and ethics. In our own time, G.A. Cohen has argued that a truly just society cannot be had merely with just institutions; a just society must also depend on must be accompanied by a "revolution in the human soul." G.A. Cohen, *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 2.

well-order political association, which it is, but a key motivation for why humanity would want to find a way of living together in political association with each other.

In sum, the malleability of human nature and that it is a purpose of political society to reshape human nature mark important differences between Xunzi and Hobbes. Reading Hobbes through the lens of Xunzi not only highlights for us certain features (even if not necessarily shortcomings on their own terms) in Hobbes's political philosophy that raises important questions of their own but also animates general questions about the conditions and purposes of a just and well-ordered society that are still salient for us today.

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