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# Can Virtue Grow Out of Vicious Human Nature?

## Xunzi's Genealogy of Virtue Reconstructed

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### Introduction

Among the pre-Qin Confucians, Xunzi is unique in his insistence on the claim that human nature is bad,<sup>1</sup> while endorsing the Confucian virtue of *yi* (義). The first feature draws him close to the legalists (*fajia* 法家), who also firmly believe in vicious human nature, whereas the second feature confirms his status as a Confucian. Although the assignment of a status resolves Xunzi's classification *as a philosopher*, it does not resolve the problems the dichotomy causes *within his philosophy*, and it certainly does not assuage the doubts concerning the two seemingly opposing elements in Xunzi's moral philosophy: whether bad human nature and virtue can indeed form a coherent whole without compromising the integrity of each.

The doubts, as I see them, boil down to the following: Given bad human nature--"bad" in the sense Xunzi specifies--how confident are we in aligning such bad human nature with virtue? Can humans' "cruelty and villainy" (Hutton.248.10)<sup>2</sup> allow them to comply with the Confucian virtue of *yi* (義)? If they can, would it be possible for Xunzi to deliver a *truly virtuous person* with intrinsic moral motivations rather than merely ulterior motives to abide by social norms? That is, could they simply go through the motions without acquiring moral motives? These questions naturally arise given the understanding of bad human nature and

the intrinsic requirements we normally associate with being virtuous. For the sake of brevity, we can call it *the compatibility problem*.<sup>3</sup>

The doubts are further compounded by the contradictory relationship between the functional understanding of the virtue characteristic in Xunzi's moral philosophy and the intrinsic value he ascribes to virtue. Since in Xunzi's naturalistic account "Morality is born of the need to create a social order that will benefit all,"<sup>4</sup> it has a particular function to serve; that is, morality has its origin in the kinds of circumstances where "violence" and "lasciviousness and chaos" (Hutton.248.5) are the order of the day. Meanwhile, Xunzi speaks of virtue as something worth pursuing for its own sake, independent of the considerations of utility and interests—according to this understanding, morality *cannot* be valued functionally. There is tension, then, in viewing morality as a functional concept and seeing it as a value concept. If Xunzi takes a state-of-nature approach to morality and conceives of virtue as a solution to the practical problems bad human nature causes, we may reasonably ask, how can it be squared with the understanding that morality possesses intrinsic value? Hence, there is another compatibility problem in his moral philosophy between morality as a functional concept and a value concept. While the first compatibility problem is concerned with compatibility *between* bad human nature and virtue, the second compatibility problem is concerned with compatibility *within* the concept of virtue, that is, between its functionality and its intrinsic value.

To the best of my knowledge, the first compatibility problem has received sufficient attention in the current literature,<sup>5</sup> but this second compatibility problem has not. To make sense of Xunzi's moral philosophy, we need to grapple with both problems; that is, we need

to reconcile not only virtue and the claim of bad human nature but also the functional understanding of virtue and the understanding of virtue as a value concept, so as to gain a sufficiently coherent understanding of Xunzi. As we know, Xunzi's solution to these problems centers upon the idea of *huaxing qiwei* (化性起偽; that is, transforming nature and establishing deliberative efforts), which turns on the idea of transforming one's original nature into one that is compatible with *yi* (義 which Xunzi believes to be a form of "artifice" (*wei* 偽)). Once this is successfully accomplished, one's outward behaviors will align with society's moral norms, but an inward change of character will also occur as people internalize moral norms and "come to delight in" their compliance, to borrow Van Norden's terms.<sup>6</sup>

In Xunzi's scheme of things, humans originate in a state of nature where conflict and chaos prevail, so transformation into something that betrays humans' original nature is a must if one wants to ensure peace and social order. Paralleling this image with Hobbes's prompts many explications of Xunzi to model themselves on Hobbes's state of nature. However, I find that these explications are not fully satisfactory for three reasons: 1) They cannot resolve the two abovementioned compatibility problems, and, as I shall explain, Hobbes's explanation is too static a model to accommodate the dynamic required for the solution of the compatibility problems.<sup>7</sup> 2) Xunzi's description of the state of nature is a far cry from Hobbes's in that the former already entails the presence of a form of community; this should give us pause when an analogy is drawn between Xunzi and Hobbes with a view to bringing out the complexities of the former. 3) These explications fail to bring Xunzi's other arguments to bear on the idea of *huaxing qiwei* (化性起偽) in such a way as to reveal the *functional* role virtue originally plays and then *sheds* in order to assume a new role; this comes at a cost regarding the strength

of the existing explications modeled on Hobbes.

In this essay, I argue that Xunzi's *huaxing qiwei* (化性起偽) provides a solution to the two compatibility problems and that his moral philosophy is a consistent whole. However, to arrive at this conclusion, I contend that Xunzi's arguments need to be expanded. Thus, the content of this essay is a genealogical *reconstruction* of Xunzi, which I accomplish by employing a method borrowed from genealogists such as Hume, Nietzsche, and Bernard Williams.<sup>8</sup> While it is possible that these three philosophers might have distinct understandings of genealogy and may have exercised the genealogical methodology differently in their respective philosophical investigations, I want to highlight that on which they commonly agree, namely genealogy as a philosophical method of delving into the history of ideas so as to trace their origins and reveal their normally concealed functions, thereby throwing into sharp relief the idea that *an intrinsically valuable entity can derive its value from its functionality*. Applied to the problems that concern us, genealogy invites us to change our mode of asking questions by inquiring as to the *value* rather than the *nature* of virtue. We ask questions such as these: Why have we come to think in terms of virtue? What function did it serve when it was first brought into existence? Why did such a functional understanding of virtue later make a place for virtue as an intrinsic value etc?<sup>9</sup> It seems to me that, for Xunzi, the journey of our *valuing* virtue begins with humans' "self-seeking nature," which serves as a reason for such valuing.

Given this understanding of genealogy, we can immediately see why it is especially suited to illustrating the dynamic in Xunzi's explanation of the emergence of virtue. That this explanation is a form of reconstruction should be clear once we make it explicit that

genealogy is a method of unpacking on a time axis, starting as it is from a narrative of the state of nature, followed by subsequent developments that bring an intrinsic value into being. As we shall see, Xunzi does not go all the way down, and to the extent that he does not, we need to speak on his behalf and say what he does not say but could have said given the argumentative momentum within his explanation.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, in performing a genealogical reading of the materials that are available to us (primarily, *Xunzi*), gaps in his arguments need to be filled—this makes a genealogical reading of Xunzi even more of a reconstruction: Insofar as the inner logic embedded in the text *Xunzi* is hidden, a philosophical job has to be done to bring the inner logic to light without, of course, violating the meaning of his words.<sup>11</sup> If successful, my reconstruction will have two merits: It will explain why humans endowed with a bad nature can *voluntarily* act on moral reasons instead of reasons of expedience or prudence, and it will provide a justificatory narrative of how even virtue as a value concept can grow out of bad human nature.

### Virtue as a Function and Its Original Motives

Let me begin with the question Nietzsche famously poses in *Genealogy*. In addressing the problem of the genesis of slaves' values, Nietzsche asks the following question: “Under what conditions did man devise these value judgments ‘good’ and ‘evil’?”<sup>12</sup> The question is posed in this way for a deliberate purpose: Nietzsche wants to usher in a change of perspective in philosophical inquiries; rather than taking the value judgments of “good” and “evil” for granted like Paul Rée<sup>13</sup> and studying their nature as if they form part of a substratum waiting

to be unearthed through philosophy, Nietzsche aims to build a link between value judgments and practical needs under certain circumstances, which entails asking questions like what they can do *for us*, what functions they have come to serve, and how. This approach of tracing the *practical* origin of morality--what Nietzsche calls "genealogy"--has yielded many fruitful results including insights into "the slave revolt in morality,"<sup>14</sup> the physio-psychological critique of resentment, and the opening up of the possibility of the reevaluation of values, etc., but trumping all of these is the effect of the disenchantment of the sacred and the divine through linkage to their original, local, and contingent functionality. Whatever their functionality, the very linking of value judgments to their functional origins, by way of revealing the conditions under which they were born, pushes the *function* of value judgments to the forefront and casts serious doubt on their value, which was formerly believed to be divine and unconditional.

In asking the question regarding the emergence of virtue, namely "From what did ritual (*li* 禮) arise?" (Hutton.201.5), Xunzi also raises a pressing question concerning the function of *li* (禮), although his purpose was to secure and uphold its legitimacy. This genealogical approach to the Confucian moral judgment of *li* (禮), which emphatically assumes the feature of prioritizing function, sets Xunzi apart from other Confucians of his time and afterward and also creates unexpected problems for him. These problems would not have arisen if Xunzi had agreed with Mencius that human nature is good and that virtue is worth valuing for its own sake or if he had agreed with Han Fei that human nature is bad and that intrinsically valuable virtue can be dispensed with altogether. Under either of these circumstances, the function of virtue would not have arisen, and neither could the *moral* motivation that is

necessitated by our understanding of being moral. Seeing it this way, we note that Xunzi puts himself in a unique position with regard to the function of virtue and human nature.

To see what these problems amount to and ascertain whether Xunzi's genealogy is up to the task, we need to first reconstruct a narrative based on his explanation of the genesis of virtue.<sup>15</sup> Some stages of this narrative are already there, with arguments Xunzi made ready to use, but there are also other stages that are not present, and some arguments are missing. In those cases, we will need to reconstruct them on Xunzi's behalf. As we know, Xunzi starts his narrative with a version of the state of nature; in the following well-known passage, he explains how bad human nature is and why, in the absence of restraints, humans would drive perpetual war and chaos that would threaten everyone. In this way, Xunzi's thought indeed resembles Hobbes's "the war of all against all":

People's nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort. Now people's nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit in them. If they follow along with this, then struggle and contention will arise, and yielding and deference will perish therein. They are born with feelings of hate and dislike in them. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise, and loyalty and trustworthiness will perish therein. They are born with desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then lasciviousness and chaos will arise, and ritual and *yi*, proper form and order, will perish therein. Thus, if people follow along with their inborn dispositions and obey their nature, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end up becoming violent. (Hutton.248.5-15)

It is important to note that Xunzi's state of nature is *already* a small community (*qun* 群) where people live together. It is also a state where people constantly come into conflict with one another over external goods and mutually show their unscrupulousness in inflicting violence. This existence of community differs from Hobbes's state of nature where no community exists, and this difference constitutes a precondition for Xunzi's *moral* solution to the problems of the state of nature, in contrast to Hobbes's "political solution,"<sup>16</sup> as we shall see. For now, we need to ask why Xunzi thinks that humans cannot live alone without forming a community. Indeed, we may wonder why, if they only form small communities to fight with each other, they cannot simply withdraw into solitude. Xunzi's answer is that humans are too weak to be alone: "[Humans] are not as strong as oxen or as fast as horses," and only by living together can they become powerful and overpower and even domesticate oxen and horses for their use (Hutton.70.75).<sup>17</sup> Putting these two elements together, it seems that living in Xunzi's state of nature is a predicament from which humans have no escape: On the one hand, they have to join a community because they are too weak as individuals; on the other hand, their natural disposition disallows a peaceful communal life in which they can avoid perpetual war.<sup>18</sup> This predicament, to phrase it differently, manifests in the fact that the community in which humans have no choice but to live simultaneously *empowers* and *endangers* them.

Fortunately, there is a way out of this predicament, and, according to Xunzi, it is straightforward: Emerging from the state of nature is a *vital need* that everyone naturally entertains in terms of ending the perpetual war over external goods so as to ensure social order. It is straightforward because to opt out or to keep living in the state of nature without

satisfying this need is not a real option. However, it is a straightforward solution to a *complex* problem. The sages invented *li* (禮 rituals) and *yi* (義 righteousness) “in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking” (Hutton.201.10).<sup>19</sup> Once rituals and righteousness have been invented, people's self-interest can be modified, allowing for a proper communal life. It is on this account that virtue has a function to perform, namely to create *ex nihilo* a reasonably safe community where everyone has a reason to opt in because each person can benefit from it. That is to say, all community members have a reason to accept virtue *even if* they are only disposed toward self-preservation and personal profit-seeking. If thinking straight, they would all agree to curb their natural desires and transform them into socially acceptable ones. These modified desires are *enlightened* desires that are compatible with co-existing with others. Given Xunzi's belief in people's self-seeking nature, it is simply impossible for people to reach enlightenment regarding their desires on the strength of consideration for others or altruism.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the motivational source for the modification can only be self-interest. Given that no one can benefit from the state of nature, where endless struggles prevail, Xunzi seems to be arguing that one's self-interest can *only* be taken care of if one reaches a state of enlightenment regarding one's desires; it is this enlightenment that sets uncultivated people, including petty person (*xiaoren* 小人), apart from *shi* 士, *junzi* 君子, and *shengren* 聖人 (Hutton.59.240-265). To this, we may add that for each individual to reach enlightenment regarding their desires, they also need to ensure that everyone else does the same. Thus, there is an additional requirement: Apart from everyone taking the same action, enlightenment regarding desires requires that everyone *knows* that everyone else is doing the same.<sup>21</sup> This is exactly what it takes when

prudential calculation based on personal interest powers the emergence of enlightenment regarding desires. It is a natural development when, as David Wong puts it, “For Xunzi[,] the desire to do good and the sense of duty are not original to human nature but derived from calculation on what is in our self interest.”<sup>22</sup>

This explains why virtue arises, for it shows that virtue serves a particular function given crucial human needs under certain conditions. However, with respect to these needs, Xunzi’s genealogy implies that virtue would not be present, which, in turn, implies that virtue would not take the same form if the needs were different. Hence, the first feature of Xunzi’s genealogy comes into view. His genealogy relates the *value* of virtue to a function it performs and claims that virtue first emerges because its *function* is called for, rather than its metaphysical status or cultural inheritance. Accompanying this feature is Xunzi’s pivotal insight that it is self-interest that motivates people to embrace virtue *in the first place*. This insight would carry no weight if one were of the belief that human nature tends toward natural motives to be virtuous, in which case generating a developmental narrative that accounts for how people come to embody virtue would make no sense at all. What Xunzi’s genealogical narrative perspicuously elucidates is this: Bad human nature, when properly shaped, can function as a motive for the creation of virtue, and, more importantly, humans endowed with bad nature can be *self*-motivated to pursue virtue.

At this point, we can see why the first compatibility problem has been partially resolved--partly because the problem states that bad human nature may not be compatible with virtue in the sense that there may not be *moral* motives to embody virtue, not merely due to the absence of motives to embody virtue. What Xunzi has proved up to this point is that

the latter is false, and people do have *prudential* motives to embody virtue even if they are endowed with bad human nature. Only when the presence of *moral* motives is proved and only when people can be said to be moral “in the full-blooded sense of worth doing in their own right”<sup>23</sup> can Xunzi claim that this compatibility problem is fully resolved. This means that Xunzi still has a distance to travel before reaching a point where “restraints on desires can come to be seen as *intrinsically valuable*.”<sup>24</sup> So far, the prudential motives to embody virtue only enables him to reach the state of *shi* 士, who is merely at the first stage of the development of moral psychology, and who “ha[s] little understanding of the meaning of ritual and the *moral* categories that it embodies.” (Kline 1998: 152, emphasis added).

#### De-Instrumentalization of Virtue and Moralization of Motives

For Xunzi, humans are born having desires: “When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, 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” (Hutton.201.5). From this dire situation arises an urgent need to restrain desires and end “the war of all against all.” As we have seen, virtue proves to be a viable means of satisfying this need, and it constitutes a solution that is distinct from the one Hobbes proposed because, most importantly, the *Leviathan* shows no interest in virtue.<sup>25</sup> However, so far Xunzi’s solution merely amounts to an instrumental reason for virtue, which is inevitably bound to be unstable because, even when fully convinced, people would still not be able to acquire *reliable* psychological sources for *moral* action. They would reason as follows: Indeed, I

should curb my interests, but I should do so only for the sake of my own interests and provided that my own interests can be ensured by not curbing my interests while others do, I shall not curb my interests.

While this line of reasoning is problematic from a normative viewpoint, it is not if one does not *already* possess that point of view. Since Xunzi does not hold that moral judgment has a transcendental or supernatural basis, nor does he believe that normative knowledge is innate in human nature, he does not have a ready-made normative position to condemn the lack of *moral* motives. If he were to object to the line of reasoning mentioned above, he could only do so *from a prudential point of view* by pointing out that it undermines the stability of social compliance when each and every individual's compliance is predicated on contingent calculations. What Xunzi cannot make is a *normative* claim to the effect that apparently moral conduct without the correct motives is *morally* bad.

This absence of a moral position, however, is at odds with Xunzi's insistence on the importance of self-cultivation. Like Confucius and Mencius, who very much cherish moral initiative, Xunzi holds that men should practice the cultivation of appropriate moral sensibilities, skills, and virtues by themselves.<sup>26</sup> Xunzi seems to think, again like Confucius and Mencius, that this practice should be viewed as valuable on its own, independent of calculations regarding individual interests and utility. Now, it is obvious that for self-cultivation to occur, restraining personal interests for instrumental reasons is insufficient, as self-cultivation requires our seeing virtue as *intrinsically* valuable and thereby something worth pursuing for its own sake. As an "uncompromising self-cultivationist" in the eyes of David Nivison,<sup>27</sup> Xunzi maintains that one of the requirements of enlightened self-interest is

the cultivation of one's behaviors and that one should not only restrain one's desires but take delight in the constraints that one has taken the initiative to put on oneself—a psychological feat that is only available to *junzi* 君子 and *shengren* 聖人 who are at the second and third stages of the development of moral psychology in the *Xunzi*. It is this practice of self-cultivation that sits uneasily with the instrumental understanding of virtue that emerges from the state of nature. In light of this, Xunzi has a task cut out for him: He has to turn the instrumental understanding of virtue into something altogether different--something that possesses intrinsic value. What justifies this transformation?

For Xunzi, an instrumental reason provides justification. We can see this more clearly in David Wong's discussion of motivational sources in Xunzi. It is particularly noteworthy that Wong shifts the focus from individual moral psychology to that of society in his discussion, thereby inquiring as to what problems there are if the motivation for restraining desires is merely self-interest *in a society*:

The rules that curb the pursuit of desire are mutually beneficial to all, but individuals can benefit even more if they can cheat on them while others generally comply. Since everyone knows this fact, no one will have confidence that others will comply, and therefore no one will have a self-interested reason to comply.<sup>28</sup>

If one's reason for accepting social rules in the context of curbing one's desires is to secure one's personal interests, according to Wong, one will inevitably choose to cheat. It seems to me that it is most likely that one will do so strategically--that is, cheat sometimes and obey the rules most of the time--so as to ensure that one can still benefit from others' compliance with the rules. Being prudential in this sense is sufficient to safeguard one's own

interests without undermining other people's willingness to comply and hence without destroying their self-interested tendency to protect their own interests. It is clear that this strategy, however useful from the perspective of a calculating individual, is profoundly detrimental to society, if only because being prudential in this way threatens the social fabric of trust and erodes the moral environment, in that when everyone thinks alike (which can be expected to come to pass eventually), the situation will escalate into one in which everyone cheats while knowing that others would do the same. This result means that everyone will cheat all the time, which is a situation from which no one can benefit and thus a situation no one wants. It is here that Xunzi sees an instrumental reason for virtue to transform itself. In this dire situation, it is necessary for virtue to outgrow the instrumental understanding of itself and become its own reward, so that even when being virtuous gives an individual no advantage, people will still pursue it. This can only be the case with a *non-functional* understanding of virtue.

Here, the illuminating point is that virtue as a functional concept cannot fulfill the function it sets out to fulfill, namely the maintenance of social order and the stabilization of moral conduct. That is to say, without transformation, virtue would undermine itself. Therefore, for virtue to function at all, it needs to de-instrumentalize itself by ceasing to be a functional concept: The functionality of virtue needs, *for instrumental reasons*, to efface itself in favor of moral reasons governing its appropriateness. Matthieu Queloz calls this mechanism "the self-effacing functionality," which, according to him, is constitutive of Williams's genealogy in general and his explanation of the emergence of value (of truthfulness) in particular.<sup>29</sup> The mechanism of self-effacing functionality paves the way for

the moralization of motives necessitated by self-cultivation in Xunzi's moral psychology: By dint of virtue's transformation, people's motives to embody virtue can finally be moral rather than prudential; they finally go beyond expedient calculations and cease to be a form of prudential reasoning.

This reveals the second feature of Xunzi's genealogy: In tying intrinsic values up with their functions under a given circumstance, the genealogy shows that there are essentially *functional* reasons for values to be intrinsically valuable and thus for them to shed their originally instrumental understanding in order to make place for an intrinsic value. This positions Xunzi's virtue at peace with his description of human nature as self-seeking: It is self-seeking human nature that drives the self-effacement of the functionality of virtue for the sake of being functional. This confirms the gap between the origin of virtue as a functional concept and the subsequent recognition of virtue as an intrinsic value. In the process of filling the gap, the functionality of virtue normally escapes our attention because it is a form of functionality that is put in place for *social* rather than *individual* reasons; the former comes into view only upon reflection. For this reason, we may claim that it is from the perspective of the society that the functionality of virtue has to "efface" itself.

### The Two Compatibility Problems

We have explained *why* virtue as a value comes into existence in terms of practical needs (which exist because of self-seeking human nature), but we have not explained *how* it arises. Obviously, it does not follow from the fact that an intrinsically valued virtue is so desperately

needed that it *can* be acquired from among people's motivational sources. For virtue as a functional concept to turn itself into an intrinsic value, multiple conditions need to be met. In this section, I shall pursue the argument that only when two conditions are met can virtue arise as an intrinsic value start to perform magic.

The first condition for the transformation of virtue into an intrinsic value has to do with people's initial unhappiness with self-cultivation, a reaction people naturally display when they first encounter virtue. According to Bryan W. Van Norden, "the process of self-cultivation begins with performance of ritual activities which one does not yet delight in."<sup>30</sup> This means that self-cultivation does not initially take the form of *self*-cultivation. This unhappiness stems from the fact that people are made to practice self-cultivation *before* they can develop their own initiative to do so. David Wong throws this point into sharp relief when he addresses the issue of the presence of external forces in moralization; according to Wong, it has "general significance for moral psychology."<sup>31</sup> Drawing on Richard Wollheim, Wong maintains that natural desires and feelings have to be "moralized" by *external forces* in order to result in moral behaviors. The external forces can and must intervene from the outside and are capable of shaping humans. With such forces in place, Wong contends that we have "a rather unhappy picture [to paint] of our relation to morality." The reason for this is simple: "Human beings are first bullied into internalizing morality."<sup>32</sup>

For Wong, this has general significance for moral psychology because moralities, no matter what they contain, share the structure of the juxtaposition of external forces and internal willingness. For this very reason, there is bound to be a transition from the former to the latter, which takes the form of *moralization*. It is an unhappy picture for humans,

especially when they are first introduced to moralities. However, this condition of the presence of external forces is insufficient because to make internalization possible, it is not enough to have power capable of bullying to back it up. Suppose there are only external forces, we can imagine that people would not simply give in and passively *internalize* morality. Internalization, however, cannot succeed without the active participation of the party exercising it. Thus, another condition needs to be present to facilitate the transformation of virtue into an intrinsic value. That condition concerns internal psychological sources. According to Bernard Williams, these sources are required because "those who treat it as having an intrinsic value must themselves be able to make sense of it as having intrinsic value. This means that its value must make sense to them *from the inside*, so to speak."<sup>33</sup> This condition of making sense cannot be met by the presence of external forces alone.

For people to internally make sense of virtue, external forces cannot be allowed to work alone, for they would serve as a powerful reminder that virtue is *not* intrinsically valuable and that internalization is *not* fully voluntary. That is why external forces need to be combined with psychological sources in such a way so as to generate *internal* motives to embody virtue. These motives are crucial because the voluntariness that is part and parcel of *moral* behaviors can only be made available when they are suitably taken care of by internal psychological resources. In Confucian tradition, which is Xunzi's origin, they are taken care of by the culture of ritual and music (*liyue jiaohua* 禮樂教化).<sup>34</sup> Such a culture, together with righteousness (*yi* 義), as Xunzi emphasized, facilitates internalization and smooths the process, as it were. For Confucians, external forces cannot act alone; otherwise, they would be ineffective and, worse still, undermine the purpose of moral cultivation. Xunzi makes it

particularly explicit that there must be psychological resources to render self-cultivation possible and to cope with internalization, which external forces alone cannot accomplish.

It is this alertness to the importance of internal psychological resources that separates Xunzi from the legalists (*fajia* 法家). For the latter, the reward and punishment associated with *fa* (法) are sufficient conditions for making people moral. Hence, a minimal level of voluntariness is deemed otiose, and for them, nothing better performs the function of establishing and maintaining social order than the reward and punishment associated with *fa* (法). This belief comes from what Han Fei famously dubbed “the two handles” (*er bing* 二柄), which can be rendered literally as the two effective ways of handling the ruled. In Han Fei’s understanding, insofar as humans are naturally disposed to respond to reward and punishment in the most immediate way, the pursuit of pleasure (“the likes” 喜) and the avoidance of pain (“the dislikes” 惡) will shape people’s behavior in conformance with a socially acceptable pattern.<sup>35</sup> What Han Fei fails to see and Xunzi does not is that without internal psychological motives to be moral, the reward and punishment associated with *fa* (法) cannot engender reliable moral behaviors, for that mechanism cannot render people's motives to be moral independent of the authority who wields external power; when the latter is not present--and people know that it cannot be always present--they will cease to do what *fa* (法) requires. Allegiance to *fa* (法) in Han Fei’s legalism is thus contingent on the perceived presence of a powerful authority, which contributes to its gloomy prospects regarding constituting an independent moral philosophy.<sup>36</sup> What *fa* (法) can engender and, in fact, reinforce and constantly remind us about is the functional understanding of morality. It is bound to face the challenges we have seen, namely the absence of reliable moral motives and

internalization failure; this also constitutes a profound reason why legalism, when acting alone, failed miserably in Chinese history.

With psychological resources as the final building block that has been put in place, we complete the reconstruction of Xunzi's genealogy. Now, we can see how the two compatibility problems are resolved as well as how virtue grows out of bad human nature. First, Xunzi's genealogy exposes how bad human nature has forced virtue into existence so as to provide a solution to practical problems, and it explains the transition from functional virtue to intrinsically valuable virtue. As such, a virtue not only makes people act morally but makes them able to resort to moral motivations when they act morally--a feat that the Hobbesian state-of-nature approach cannot achieve. Prudence and expedience that are usually associated with humans' "self-seeking nature" do not figure at this point, and people have genuine *moral* motives to embody virtue, despite their endowment with a "self-seeking nature" from the outset. This perfectly resolves the first compatibility problem that questions whether virtue is compatible with the claim of bad human nature.

Second, Xunzi's genealogy demonstrates the reasons functional virtue needs to be transformed into having intrinsic value: Insofar as virtue is to perform its function, it *has* to be transformed. Moreover, the genealogy also shows how the transformation is rendered possible. Two conditions are required, according to our reconstruction: the external forces condition and the psychological resources condition. Together they manage to do away with the functional understanding of virtue. The result is that virtue exists as something worth valuing intrinsically, as if it were valuable from the very beginning, as if, that is, it is *unconditionally* valuable. In this sense, genealogy provides a diachronic view in which

functional virtue evolves into this unconditionally valuable virtue. Hence, it resolves the second compatibility problem that questions whether virtue as a functional concept is compatible with virtue as an intrinsic value. The genealogy shows that it can by elaborating why and how the transformation is done.

It is worth noting at this juncture that because virtue evolves from a functional understanding, virtue's origin as a function cannot *completely* do away with. This implies that people's prudential considerations of their personal interests cannot be entirely eliminated, and this is true even *after* virtue assumes the new role of being intrinsically valuable. Jiwei Ci reveals this effect of persistent functionality in his discussion of the virtue of justice.

According to him, even after the transformation, justice "remains tied to its prudential origins," in that although the idea of its being conditional has been removed from consciousness, "its simultaneous retention in the unconscious" cannot be removed.<sup>37</sup> For Ci, the transformation from the functional to the intrinsically valuable virtue works both ways: On the one hand, it enables the deinstrumentalization of virtue, and on the other hand, it makes the residue of functionality readily perceivable when necessary. The same, I believe, can be said of Xunzi's virtue: It is only when virtue is in good working order that its intrinsic value remains intact, but when the breach of moral rules goes unpunished, the functional understanding of virtue that is retained in the unconscious will then surface to consciousness and threaten to undermine intrinsic virtue. By facilitating this connection, genealogy serves as a powerful reminder that our valuing virtue as an end itself is in fact contingent on others valuing it in the same way. When virtue is in good working order, this symmetrical valuing is guaranteed; when it is not, others' breach of the rules will serve to remind us that virtue is

functional and conditional.<sup>38</sup> It is for this reason, I believe, that David Wong stresses that “[The state] must create a risk of punishment that makes it irrational for any individual to try to cheat. Only with the state does it become perfectly rational for the egoist to obey the rules.”<sup>39</sup> Rightful punishment can strengthen people's willingness to comply with virtue, thereby taking care of the problems caused by the persistence of the functionality of virtue. Note that in Wong's context virtue is understood as a function. It does not have to be so, I contend, and we can extend Wong's remark a bit to cover virtue as an intrinsic value as well: There are good reasons to use punishment to prevent people from corrupting one another's willingness to value virtue *intrinsically* by rendering the surfacing of the conditionality of virtue to consciousness more difficult, as Xunzi's genealogy shows.

## Conclusion

In this essay, we have seen that Xunzi's journey regarding valuing virtue starts with “self-seeking” human nature, which serves as a reason for such valuing. For Xunzi, it is the threat of social chaos and perpetual war that bad human nature poses that gives birth to virtue in the first place. Invented by the sages, virtue functions to ensure peace and social order, which nothing else can more suitably serve. This is what drove Xunzi to give pride of place to virtue and employ it as an instrument for curbing surplus desires that threaten the prospects of social cooperation and stability. Considering that a mere functional understanding of virtue is insufficient because of the free-riding problem, there arises a social need to transform virtue into something qualitatively different, namely an intrinsic value. To render this

transformation possible, however, both the external forces condition and the internal psychological condition have to be met. Only then can voluntariness, which is constitutive of virtue as an intrinsic value, be properly established.

Xunzi's genealogy manages to show that the two senses of virtue, functional and intrinsically valuable, can both grow out of vicious human nature. To assess the success or failure of his genealogy is to assess the empirical foundation on which his appraisal of human nature is based. To the extent that this appraisal is reliable, his genealogy perfectly resolves the two compatibility problems. However, one element that touches upon the *content* of virtue in Xunzi's philosophy has not been dealt with in this essay. If we take it into account, we will encounter the following questions: Is virtue unnecessarily demanding as far as the function of maintaining social order is concerned? Do we really need such virtue as *yi* (義), as Xunzi defines it, to resolve the problems of social disorder? Can the less demanding virtue, justice, for instance, do the trick? Answering these questions will necessarily take our inquiry beyond the scope of the present essay. However, whatever the answers to these questions, they will not affect our seeing Xunzi as the first Confucian genealogist in Chinese history.

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<sup>1</sup> It is only for the sake of convenience that *xing* 性 is translated as human nature in this essay. It is important to note the subtle connotations of the term, lest misunderstandings concerning the consistency of Xunzi's moral psychology would incur: Xunzi includes in *xing* a fondness for one's own benefit, feelings of envy and hatred, and sensory desires that lead humans to seek pleasure; in this sense, it designates the innate tendencies, desires, and emotions that cannot be qualified as "good," because without correcting these tendencies, desires, and emotions humans will be led to act harmfully against one another (see Kline

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1998: 99; Tang 2016a: 51 and 2016b). However, there are elements in *xing*, as well as in *qing* 情 which is the substance of the innate endowment, that can render moral cultivation possible. So, when Xunzi states that *xing* is bad, he does not mean that it is incorrigible in the moral sense. As Stanaker puts it, the “largely chaotic innate desires [can] eventually become consonant with the Way” (Stalnaker 2016: 44; see also Hutton 2000: 229-230; Stalnaker 2006).

<sup>2</sup> For the translation of the *Xunzi* I use Eric Hutton 2014, cited as Hutton, page number.line number.

<sup>3</sup> David Nivison, for instance, discusses the problem without using the term I use here in “The paradox of virtue.” See Nivison 1996a. Also David Wong: “How does one become a person who sacrifices himself for morality when the raw material for such a transformation is a self-interested nature?” (Wong 2000, p. 142), and Philip J. Ivanhoe: “Xunzi would agree with the view that one can't fully delight in moral actions until one sees them as moral, in the full-blooded sense of worth doing in their own right. But...he denies that we are endowed with a moral sense. As a consequence, before we learn to be moral, we are incapable of appreciating the right actions we may encounter or do as moral in the requisite way... *When all we have to deploy are our natural faculties, we will not experience any recognizably moral responses to the events and situations we encounter in the world.*” See Ivanhoe 2000a, p. 238, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Wong 2000, p, 145. Cf. Fung Yu-lan 1965, p. 294.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Nivision 1996a, 1996b; Wong 2000; Ivanhoe 2000; Van Nordon 2000; T. C. Kline 2000.

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<sup>6</sup> Van Norden 2000, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> David Wong hints at the limits of Hobbes's explanation when he argues that Xunzi expects the self-interested motivation of human beings to change in the transition from the state of nature to a civil society where they can have intrinsic moral reasons to act, whereas Hobbes does not entertain such an expectation. Pace David Gauthier, Wong claims that Hobbes provides "a political solution to the problem, not a moral one." It shows Wong's concern with the issue of how to acquire virtue starting from a "self-seeking" nature. See Wong 2000, pp. 136, 137. I share Wong's concern entirely. In reconstructing a genealogy, however, I aim to explain, on top of how people acquire intrinsic moral reasons, why virtue is transformed from a function concept to a value concept and how.

<sup>8</sup> See Hume 2000, Nietzsche 1989, and Williams 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Chengyang Li draws a useful distinction between the two senses of "the origin of goodness" in the *Xunzi*. The first is "how goodness was first generated in human society constituted by members with only a bad nature" and the second "how humans born with egoistic tendencies become transformed to act ethically in a society regulated by rules of ritual propriety." See Li 2011, pp. 46-47. While Li's article deals with the first sense of the origin, the method of genealogy we employ in this essay is concerned with the second.

<sup>10</sup> In putting it this way, I intend to suggest that Xunzi is a genealogist and the reading given in this essay is genealogical; in other words, it is a genealogical reading of Xunzi as a genealogist.

<sup>11</sup> By emphasizing that it is a reconstruction I also want to stress that the essay is not interested so much in getting Xunzi "right" (what the "right" understanding is in a

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post-hermeneutics age anyway?) as in shedding light on the dynamic of his genealogical explanation and how this genealogical explanation can resolve the problems that are internal to it.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche 1989, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche criticizes Paul Rée's treatment of morality in the latter's book *Origin of the Moral Sensations*, see *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche 1989, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> While stressing that it is the genealogy of virtue that concerns us in the essay, we should note that Xunzi also provides a genealogy of moral development operating at the level of individual moral psychology. According to this genealogy, the transition from uncultivated person to sage takes three stages: the stage of the *shi* 士 where one is “most firm in acting according to the proper model and does not allow selfish desires to disorder what he has learned”, the stage of the *junzi* 君子 where one “likes to cultivate and practice what he has learned, in order to straighten out and ornament his inborn dispositions and nature”, and the stage of the *shengren* 聖人 where one “practices ritual and holds to proper regulation and feels...much at ease.” (Hutton.59.240-265; for thoughtful discussions of the issue, see Kline 1998: 151-58 and Stalnaker 2016: 59-60). To the extent that *junzi* 君子 and *shengren* 聖人 can act in accordance with virtue, and to the extent that virtue can be understood as an intrinsically valuable entity, the genealogy of virtue can be seen as an explanation concerning how this is made possible. In other words, the genealogy of virtue is explanatorily prior to the genealogy of individual moral development; it is only when the intrinsically valuable virtue is rendered available that the self-cultivation of *junzi* 君子 and *shengren* 聖人 is possible. I

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thank one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to these two forms of genealogy in the Xunzi.

<sup>16</sup> Wong 2000, p. 137.

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of why and how humans come to live together in a community, see Eirik Lang Harris 2016, pp. 96-106.

<sup>18</sup> "If...their desires and dislikes are the same, then goods cannot be made sufficient for them, and they will certainly struggle. If they struggle then there will certainly be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished." Hutton.69.75.

<sup>19</sup> Xunzi goes on to say "They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose." Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> For Schofer, "people do not have innate tendencies that can guide them toward developing virtuous qualities." See Jonathan W. Schofer 2000, p. 69. Also, see Hagen 2011. For textual evidence of *yi* (義) as something "external and acquired" in the Xunzi, see Hutton 2000, p. 224. Following Hume, we may speak of *yi* (義) as an "artificial virtue," but not an "arbitrary virtue" for it is triggered by vital practical needs. See Hume 2000, 3.2.1.19.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Williams 2002, pp. 58-59, with regard to the virtue of truthfulness.

<sup>22</sup> Wong 2000, p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> Ivanhoe 2000a, p. 238.

<sup>24</sup> Hutton 2000, p. 221, emphasis added. This valuing restraints on desires intrinsically Eric Hutton believes to be internal to Xunzi's understanding of human nature.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Kim 2011.

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<sup>26</sup> For the importance of self-cultivation for Xunzi, see Nivison 1996b; Stalnaker 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Nivison 1988, p. 416.

<sup>28</sup> Wong 2000, p. 136.

<sup>29</sup> Queloz 2021, pp. 178-186.

<sup>30</sup> Van Norton 2000, p. 123.

<sup>31</sup> Wong 2000, p. 150.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Williams 2002, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> For the function of Confucian Ritual and Propriety in self-cultivation, see Sigurðsson 2016; Lewis 2020.

<sup>35</sup> For instance, Han Fei says: “Generally speaking, the order of All-under-heaven must accord with human feeling. Human feelings have likes and dislikes, wherefore reward and punishment can be applied. If reward and punishment are applicable, prohibitions and orders will prevail and the course of government will be accomplished. As the ruler has the handles in his grip and thereby upholds his august position, what is ordered works and what is prohibition stops. The handles are regulators of life and death; the position is the means of overcoming the masses.” See *Han Fei Tzu*, 1959, p. 258.

<sup>36</sup> For a criticism of legalism in terms of the failed internalization and its reliance on sheer power, see Tang 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Ci 2006, p. 173, also see pp. 163 174-8, 182.

<sup>38</sup> The punishment is only directed towards average people and *shi* 士, but not *junzi* 君子 and *shengren* 聖人, whose commitment to the Way is emphatically not contingent and

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conditional on the circumstances and what others do.

<sup>39</sup> Wong 2000, p. 136.

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