



Reforming human nature: Xunzi's ethical and political philosophy

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Abstract

Xunzi expressed a contrary view to Mencius' hopeful perspective of human nature because he believed that humans are fundamentally flawed, so they need rituals (li) and educational development to progress. This paper studies Xunzi's ethical and political approach, which promotes social institutions as the pathway to moral growth instead of natural goodness. Research explores the following proposition: What effects does Xunzi's conception of human nature produce on his ethical philosophy and political outlook while revealing governance implications? The study employs a textual analysis of Xunzi alongside comparative insights from Confucian and Legalist traditions. The essay maintains that Xunzi proposes disciplined, organized learning and state-led regulation as essential components for developing moral virtue. Xunzi advocates authoritarian governance through his political philosophy because he believes rulers direct moral social order. The main research outcome demonstrates that Xunzi presents practical principles for moral growth, which require state-guided educational systems for ethical progress. Several scholars maintain that his perspectives potentially support authoritarian government structures. The paper demonstrates how Xunzi stands relevant to modern governance and ethical debates concerning human nature along with education systems and state duties in moral development.

Keywords: Xunzi, human nature, ethical philosophy, political philosophy, Confucianism, moral cultivation, virtue ethics, reform, ancient Chinese thought, classical philosophy

Introduction

The Confucian philosopher Xunzi (荀子) took a leading position in the Warring States period moral and political theory to become one of the strongest Confucian thinkers in Chinese intellectual history. Xunzi differed from Confucius and Mencius by explaining that human nature exists naturally as selfish and disorderly rather than being inherently good or able to teach itself. For Xunzi, moral development does not emerge naturally since humans require artificial methods such as education alongside rituals (li, 礼) and social institutions to achieve it. Lesson 5 of Xunzi's philosophy demonstrates an approach to ethics and governance that contrasts Mencius' belief in human nature's natural goodness by proposing structured pragmatic guides for ethics. (*Xunzi (Hsin Tzu) Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.) The basis of Xunzi's moral theory consists of his belief in the need for external training because people can only develop ethical values through strict education and social norm enforcement. Xunzi supports the state institutions as key drivers to develop ethical traits in citizens and maintain public harmony. To Xunzi, rituals existed not only as traditional ceremonies but also served as fundamental methods for developing virtue, keeping society organized, and establishing human distinction from animals. (Kim, 2011) According to his belief, individuals would amplify their natural impulses when both rituals and educational systems are absent, thus sparking a societal collapse. According to him, ethical development requires external direction because people seek guidance from virtuous authorities such as sages and rulers who supervise ethical procedure execution. In some aspects, his approach matches the Legalists by supporting a centralized government and moral discipline through state intervention. Xunzi put more emphasis on education along with ritual as ways to change human behaviors, while Legalists

concentrated solely on rules and punishments. According to his political philosophy, we need a society that brings together rulers, scholars, and institutions to teach virtues as well as sustain social order. The social and ethical beliefs of Xunzi receive analysis in this paper using the core inquiry, which evaluates how his human nature principles guide his morality framework and establish consequences for governmental systems. (Ngai, 2019) [3] The study examines Xunzi's alternative moral and political approach, which relies on structured cultivation methods rather than relying on natural moral potential through its analysis of both Confucian and Legalist perspective sources. The discussion has two parts, which begin by examining Xunzi's conclusion about human nature being naturally bad along with his criticism of Mencius' theory that human beings contain natural goodness. Xunzi presents his philosophical framework along with the logical basis that justifies the importance of external moral training. The paper investigates how Xunzi built his ethical system by studying his teachings about rituals along with education and teacher-student interactions in developing moral practices. This analysis demonstrates the way Xunzi combined Confucian values through his implementation of disciplined learning systems. The discussion then centers on Xunzi's political beliefs, which explore his approach to governing and ruler responsibilities together with his argument for state involvement in educational reform. The writing provides dual analysis by evaluating identical and distinct concepts between Xunzi's thoughts and Han Feizi's Legalist viewpoints. The final part critically examines Xunzi's philosophy by exploring both his weaknesses and advantages, which impact contemporary discussions about human nature and finance systems and educational pedagogy. The external focus on discipline established by Xunzi offers an effective system for moral growth, yet his

approaches face criticism because they could justify oppressive governmental power by elevating state control above personal freedom. The concluding part of this research works to combine discovered information while showing Xunzi's ongoing importance in current ethical and instructional debates. His arguments offer valuable insights into how structured moral cultivation and institutional guidance can contribute to social harmony and governance. Ultimately, Xunzi's philosophy challenges idealistic notions of innate morality, advocating for a pragmatic approach that recognizes the necessity of external intervention in shaping ethical and political order.

The Philosophical and Ethical Foundations of Xunzi's Views

Xunzi stays within the Confucian framework yet stands apart from predecessors such as Confucius and Mencius because he constructs different ideas about human nature (xing, 性) and moral training. The views of Mencius about humans as innately good beings who need proper nurture to achieve virtue differ from Xunzi, who presented a dark yet practical outlook. Human beings possess a naturally corrupt nature, which is moved by personal motives, sensitive aerial wants, and disruptive instincts. (Kline, 2014) [15] Through external methods such as education and rituals (li, 礼) and laws, individuals develop ethical behavior because Xunzi dismissed natural human virtuous tendencies. Xunzi established his ethical philosophy through the belief that human ethics emerge from social processes that people learn as they grow older. Peng, Chen, & Yang, 2008) [5] The deliberate moral refinement taught by Xunzi establishes clear differences with Confucian self-cultivation techniques since he labels moral development as an art, an artificially structured process instead of natural evolution. (Ivanhoe, 1994) [8] According to Xunzi, ritual practices dedicated themselves to being the fundamental tool to develop morals because they supplied the essential framework that allowed people to better their animalistic behaviors and follow social rules. The disciplined practice of tradition-bound education enables people to progress beyond their defective human condition toward moral greatness, according to his doctrine. Xunzi's political ideas are sourced from Confucian doctrines, yet they display multiple points of similarity with Legalist beliefs about the requirement of focused governmental authority with enforced administrative systems to manage societal conduct. According to Xunzi, the leader required both strict authority and disciplinary enforcement to achieve moral progress even though Mencius and Confucius promoted royal virtuous examples based on benevolent governance. According to his political thoughts, a robust state needs to establish moral order through systemized influence and forced compliance to execute ethical principles. From this perspective, the political ideology matches the Legalist approach because it enforces mandatory laws with established rewards and punishments to stabilize social relations. Xunzi disagreed with the Legalists about governance principles because he placed rituals and moral education above the law (fa, 法) in developing moral behavior. (Zygadło, 2020) [9] Xunzi formulated his political doctrine by uniting Confucian moral teachings with Legalist functional methods into a system where leaders should use tradition-backed education along with legal enforcement to promote moral development. Xunzi's philosophy is uniquely situated in early Chinese

theory because it fuses Confucian ethical principles with Legalist practical governance methods to offer an organized system for ethical and political order, which continues to contribute to modern studies on governance and ethics.

Xunzi on Human Nature (性 xing)

Among Xunzi's most notable and challenged ideas exists his thinking about human nature, which shifts away from Mencius' positive views to establish a strongly negative outlook. Unlike Mencius, who believed people possess built-in moral tendencies, Xunzi declared that human nature presents itself as wicked (e, 恶) with inherently selfish instincts and tendencies to generate disharmony. According to Xunzi, people are born with a natural drive to pursue their satisfaction; while unchecked, this tendency causes social and individual disorder. According to Xunzi, human nature required transformation through ritual training and moral education because he believed proper governance could lead to the development of virtue in people. (Angle, 2022) [16] Within his moral development framework, Xunzi proposes behavioral modification through outside guidance because he believes pragmatic intervention is essential to developing moral conduct.

In his work *Xunzi* (荀子), Xunzi explicitly states:

“The nature of man is evil; his goodness is the result of his activity.” (*Xunzi*, Chapter 23, “Human Nature is Bad”)

The essential meaning of his argument demonstrates that good character emerges from deliberate human dedication. In his explanation, Thomas Hobbes suggests people enter the world with a profit-making, pleasure-seeking, and self-serving nature, which prompts them toward deceptive and aggressive actions. According to him, moral excellence develops through education and ritual practices after people have undergone structured learning reinforced by self-discipline. (Huang, 2020) [10] Mencius holds, contrary to Xunzi, that humans naturally possess natural moral sensations represented by “four beginnings” (si duan, 四端) of compassion, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, which education can mature into actual virtue. During the Song dynasty, Mencius presented human nature as similar to a sprout that grows into a fully developed plant under appropriate conditions. According to Xunzi, human nature functions as broken wood that needs rigorous efforts to reach its potential usefulness. Through this metaphor, he demonstrates that he sees moral cultivation as something artificial that requires outside direction. Xunzi provides further textual evidence to support his claim that human nature is not naturally inclined toward virtue. He writes:

“Now people's nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit. If they follow along with this, then struggles and contention will arise, and yielding and deference will perish. They are born with feelings of hate and dislike. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise, and loyalty and good faith will perish. They are born with desires of the ears and eyes, with a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then wantonness and disorder will arise, and ritual and the standards of righteousness will perish.” (*Xunzi*, Chapter 23) According to Xunzi, the following natural impulse creates social chaos, which breaks down harmonious social structure. Xunzi disagreed with the Mencian approach that natural human goodness needed to be discovered by promoting moral development through

education. Xunzi appointed rituals (li) as his essential tool for human development because he believed they provide humans with both necessary boundary control for desires and social leadership skills. Xunzi presents a depressed perspective on human nature at first glance, but his views demonstrate ultimate optimism through his belief in human potential to change. (Sung, 2016)^[11] According to his belief, people did not need to remain trapped in immoral behavior because education alongside training would allow them to surpass their natural inclinations toward evil and develop ethical mastery. He wrote:

“The person who transforms his nature by accumulating goodness is called a sage.” (*Xunzi*, Chapter 23)

This indicates that despite his assertion that human nature is inherently bad, Xunzi believed in the possibility of moral improvement through conscious effort. This perspective aligns him with Confucian ideals while distinguishing his philosophy from both Mencius’ innate moral optimism and the Legalist reliance on external coercion. Ultimately, the debate between Mencius and Xunzi over human nature represents a fundamental divide in Confucian thought. Mencius’ view is more idealistic, emphasizing the inherent moral potential of individuals, while Xunzi’s perspective is more pragmatic, stressing the need for structured moral cultivation. (Chong, 2005)^[17] While Mencius argued that a benevolent ruler should nurture the people’s innate goodness, Xunzi believed that a ruler must enforce strict moral education and institutional discipline to guide people toward virtue. This difference had significant implications for later Chinese political thought, influencing both Confucian and Legalist traditions in governance and moral philosophy. (Mäkelä, 2022)^[12]

Ethical Reform through Rituals and Education (礼 li & 教育 jiaoyu)

Xunzi assigns great importance to ethical reform because he believes human nature is naturally flawed but cannot be improved without structured moral instruction methods. Xunzi argued that education, together with rituals, functions as a fundamental tool to guide human actions and control inherent selfishness, which results in social disorder, thus facilitating universal peace. Xunzi disagreed with Mencius by stating that ethical improvement needs external direction because the process of moral development originates from natural morality. Xunzi argues that rituals provide essential direction to help people practice discipline while supporting social roles and preserving order, and education serves to pass on ethical teachings and information from one generation to another. These mechanisms constitute the basis for a well-ordered society by helping people develop virtue through the ongoing advancement of tradition and practice. Rituals (li), according to Xunzi, have a hierarchal structure that guides human emotional expressions alongside behavioral responses. Xunzi declared that human beings would result in uncontrollable social disorder and conflict when they lack ritual practices to guide their passions. Through social training rituals, prepare people to behave according to what society and ethical codes require. He writes:

“Rituals cut off what is excessive and supply what is lacking; they curb desires and provide refinement.” (*Xunzi*, Chapter 19, "A Discussion of Rituals")

When people take part in rituals, they gain skills at mastering human impulses that help them build virtues,

including respect and humility with deference skills. The rituals promoting filial piety make people demonstrate parental respect, which develops their responsibility to family structures that mirror state organization. Through participation in rituals, people build ethical character while sustaining social harmony instead of receiving limitations. Education stands as one of the central pillars that Xunzi developed for his ethical reform. For Xunzi, education served as the development method through which people obtained moral understanding while building their self-discipline abilities. In contrast to Mencius, who thought nature would lead people toward virtue with suitable surroundings, Xunzi argued that expert training becomes mandatory for developing ethical character. He stated:

“A person is born with desires. If he follows them, he will fall into disorder. Only through education and the guidance of teachers can he become good.” (*Xunzi*, Chapter 1, "Encouraging Learning")

Xunzi identified the teachers as essential for moral education because they taught virtue and helped students strengthen themselves to become virtuous people. According to Xunzi, role models play a vital teaching role because people develop their morality by observing ethical teachers and then imitating them. A teacher with ethical knowledge and moral supremacy helps students adopt ethical values together with self-disciplinary skills, which benefit personal development and social progress. Xunzi establishes an important place for the state within his system of ethics. Governance should embrace principles from moral teaching alongside ritual enforcement, according to his thoughts. The fundamental duty of rulemaking involves creating laws together with institution-based leadership duties to develop virtuous character traits throughout the population. He wrote:

“The ruler is like the wind, and the people are like grass; when the wind blows, the grass bends.” (*Xunzi*, Chapter 9, "The Way of the Ruler")

Through this allegory, the ruler maintains essential responsibility for creating exemplary behavior that defines societal guidelines. According to Xunzi, a model state needs powerful governance combined with dedicated educational systems to maintain ethical discipline by continuous mentoring of citizens. The state serves in two capacities by establishing moral principles and enforcing ritual practices that lead to a disciplined, harmonious society.

Xunzi’s Political Philosophy

Xunzi merges Confucian elements with Legalist principles to endorse a system of education and powerful governance that directs moral growth in a properly organized society. According to Xunzi, the proper regulation of human conduct through rituals (li, 礼) and laws was necessary for establishing an orderly state rather than relying on rulers with moral virtue as did Confucius and Mencius. The flawed nature of human beings requires rulers to establish educational systems while maintaining social order and preserving hierarchal systems because these practices shape society towards the right path. (Goldin, 2018)^[14] His governmental approach combines Confucian moral educational values with legalist authoritarian methods because he acknowledges that powerful leadership is essential for governance. Xunzi differentiates from Legalist philosophy because he believes that maintaining order requires both strict laws and rigorous punishments together

with moral education and ritual practices. Laws operated as essential management tools for controlling the populace, according to Zhou, while he advocated that sustainable order required people to permanently assimilate ethical principles learned through cultural advancement. He wrote: "When the people are transformed by ritual and duty, and when punishments and laws are clear, then the state is well-governed." (Xunzi, Chapter 12)

Through this statement, he displays his balanced view, showing that laws work against disorder, yet ritual practices and education in morality produce well-disciplined ethical citizens. In his understanding, the ruler held complete moral authority to deliver proper instruction about virtue and propriety to his subjects. Xunzi differed from Confucius because he specified that rulers needed to create systematic programs that actively developed moral character within their people. People can apply Xunzi's political perspectives to modern governance systems, especially when discussing state responsibilities regarding moral development and social management. The need for institutions to actively promote virtue matches the current discussion about education's capacity to develop ethical citizens through civic programs. The concept of structured learning along with ritual practices leads to social balance, which modern states should use in their policy formation regarding cultural integration governance systems and social order maintenance. His method of combining legal restrictions with ethical teaching methods reflects the current democratic governance approaches that use ethical education and legal enforcement to build responsible citizens. (Lewis, 2017) ^[13] Xunzi developed a practical political philosophy to unite Confucian ethical aspiration with the Legalist practical approach to governance. Although he supported Confucianism's moral society concept, he understood that external regulatory systems were essential for human behavioural control. The intersection of education with regulatory measures through laws and rituals creates an advanced governance method that modern political philosophy and policy development still apply today.

Criticism and Counterarguments

During Xunzi's time, along with the Confucian philosophical discussions that followed, scholars actively challenged and evaluated his philosophical perspectives. Xunzi's characterization of bad human nature faces opposition mostly from Mencius alongside others in his following. Mencius believed that a predisposition to wickedness would make moral development pointless. According to his beliefs, the natural tendencies of people are good, and he advocated for the growth of moral character through support of pre-existing virtue rather than techniques of discipline control. The philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200) joined other Neo-Confucians in rejecting Xunzi's position to follow Mencius' belief in human nature as basically good. The critics dismissed Xunzi's method of using laws and rituals because they believed external systems produced an ineffective transformation of true moral character. Academics have criticized Xunzi's philosophy because of its links with Legalist ideas, thus creating doubts about his potential role in forming authoritarian rule. Xunzi adopted different perspectives than Confucius and Mencius because he favoured strict regimes that depended on institutional control over moral persuasion and benevolent rule. Critics

state that his argument about state control of morality endangers personal freedom while creating a structured society that becomes excessively hierarchical. His teachings about governance align with the Legalist philosophy, where people need to obey laws before they can work on moral development. The philosophy of Xunzi remains viable due to its conspicuous positive aspects despite ongoing debate about its weaknesses. His ethics of practicality use structured learning methods alongside rituals to provide effective moral development systems. His framework of governance combines education and law because it acknowledges flawed human nature while continuing to seek social harmony.

The external control method, which dominates Xunzi's philosophy, constitutes its biggest shortcoming because it creates problems with flexibility for individual-based moral approaches.

Contemporary Relevance of Xunzi's Philosophy

Xunzi's philosophical perspective, especially concerning human nature, moral development, and political management, continues to solve contemporary ethical problems and political challenges. The flaws within human nature can be changed through education rituals along with institutional structures, according to Xunzi, while providing modern understandings of moral development governance and societal concordance. Modern standards require Xunzi's systematic framework to develop virtues alongside ethical code enforcement and social stability practices due to rising ethnic division, ethical degradation, and governmental issues. The most relevant component of Xunzi's teachings adopts moral education as the primary means for creating ethical conduct. The modern world struggles against misinformation and minimal civic responsibility as well as moral relativism, making Xunzi's message of intentional virtue education through structured learning highly valuable. The modern education system should adopt his model to develop responsible individuals who maintain discipline while exhibiting ethical judgment skills and social commitment. Rituals (li) represent a power that, according to Xunzi, demonstrates why engagement with cultural traditions and civic activities helps strengthen moral values. Social systems that fail to maintain these principles will face moral degradation; thus, Xunzi's support for planned moral education remains crucial for both educational administrators and teachers. Xunzi's political doctrine remains relevant today when people analyse state governance and how official agencies steer ethical choices. Xunzi's concept about strong institutions directing human behaviour applies to contemporary government structures that link individual autonomy with community obligations. His approach, which combines legal enforcement with moral education for creating responsible citizens, matches the principles of modern democratic systems. The modern world continues to discuss political corruption alongside social disorder and ethical leadership failures because Xunzi insisted on disciplined governance and ethical leadership. Xunzi successfully demonstrated the need to manage human wants, which remains important for present-day evaluations of consumerism, environmental conservation, and digital moral principles. Through his observations of human desires, Xunzi presents a warning about a disorder that emerges from uncontrolled wants in a materialistic society focused on instant gratification. Institutions and

governments should use Xunzi's teaching to establish policies focused on sustainable practices as well as ethical technology adoption and social accountability. The institutional approach to discipline combined with moral development, which Xunzi advocates, delivers beneficial education, yet his government-led control system of morality creation conflicts with democracy's principle of independent autonomy. The aspect of his method could feel too strict or autocratic because modern societies prioritize individual rights to freedom. Although his moral system creates a solid foundation for transformation, it has to be applied today by integrating institutional programs that guard both collective growth and protect individual freedoms.

Conclusion

Xunzi develops an organized pragmatic system to understand human nature and the practices needed for moral growth and political governance. According to his doctrine, humans are born with a defective nature, which rituals, along with education and effective institutional power, can transform. Xunzi disagreed with Mencius' similar view of people being born good by holding that internal goodness emerges from outside discipline and extensive training. The human behavioural pattern formed by rigid learning methods alongside community standards and governmental control leads to important consequences from both political and ethical viewpoints. Xunzi's central teaching promotes education and rituals as the primary instruments for human transformation. Moral excellence is obtained through permanent learning and social norm practice, according to Xunzi, while the Legalist philosophy focuses mainly on laws and punishments. The use of rituals, according to Xunzi, to create disciplined behaviour serves our modern ethical perspectives and civic duty considerations. Xunzi's guide to moral development serves as a timely blueprint to address ethical decline because he teaches how controlled moral education and cultural principles preserve ethical conduct in today's fragmented world. This framework explaining ethical growth through active action instead of passive discovery creates a compelling approach to dealing with educational and character development problems. From a political standpoint, Xunzi manages to unite Confucian teacher-based principles with institutional Legalist administrative control. Xunzi understood the necessity for rulers to possess virtue yet accepted the need for appropriate institutions and laws to establish behavioural regulation in governance. This knowledge holds great significance in current governance discussions about achieving the proper harmony between state oversight and personal liberties. According to Xunzi, the leadership system he advocated matches current ideas about public administration and societal value formation led by educated bureaucrats. His principal belief is that combined law and ritual practice support social cohesion, which appears in current democratic regimes that blend legal instruments with educational approaches and cultural initiatives in their governance systems. The doctrines of Xunzi present numerous meaningful connections with contemporary moral and governmental perspectives. Xunzi's guidance continues to offer solutions for present-day issues that include political corruption as well as moral education and maintaining societal unity. The training of ethical skills should be a fundamental requirement for modern leadership just as

technical competence plays its role. The recognition of uncontrolled human desires by Xunzi finds present-day echoes during examinations of consumerism as well as environmental ethics together with responsible technology management. Additional academic inquiry should explore the many important aspects of Xunzi's philosophical thought. What modifications should be made to his method of ethical development when working in liberal democratic systems with freedom clauses? Present-day institutions need strategies to teach moral values while protecting basic liberties for individuals. The understanding of Xunzi's philosophies would benefit from additional research that compares his principles to Western concepts such as virtue ethics and republicanism to discover their shared fundamental concepts.

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