

Xing and Native Conditions

Within the Chinese tradition, Xunzi has been remembered for his startling proclamation that “people’s *xing* is bad.”¹ However the exact meaning of such a claim and the role it plays in Xunzi’s moral philosophy has been a topic of heated debate among scholars.

Traditionally, it has been thought that Xunzi’s view on people’s *xing* 性 (nature/native conditions) is in fundamental disagreement with that of Mencius, as Xunzi claims “*xing* is bad” while Mencius maintains “*xing* is good.” Such an understanding is reinforced by Xunzi’s criticisms of Mencius in chapter 23 (*Xing Is Bad*) of the *Xunzi*. There, when expounding his view on people’s *xing*, Xunzi takes Mencius as his major opponent and repeatedly claims Mencius is wrong. David E. Soles, while admitting that a few scholars have disagreed with the traditional view that Xunzi and Mencius are in fundamental disagreement, suggests that such a view remains orthodox.² However, it should be pointed out that such a traditional understanding has indeed been challenged by quite a few commentators. For example, A. C. Graham indicates that Xunzi shifts the meaning of *xing* and that his criticism of Mencius does not really make contact with Mencius’s theory. Graham even suggests if we adopt Mencius’s use of the term *xing*, Xunzi’s acknowledgment that humans are capable of becoming good amounts to an admittance that people’s *xing* is good.³ Paul Goldin also suggests that Xunzi and Mencius use *xing* to refer to different things: for Xunzi *xing* refers to what all members of a species have in common, but for Mencius *xing* refers to what is distinctive of human beings opposed to other animals.⁴

On the other hand, Graham further suggests formulae such as “*xing* is good” or “*xing* is bad” more often than not serve only as convenient labels and pivots of debates. As such they do not give an adequate idea of a philosopher’s overall position.⁵ The suggestion that Xunzi’s slogan “*xing* is bad” is misleading has been echoed by other scholars. Wei Zhengtong 韋政通 suggests that for Xunzi, *xing* is just like a blank tablet, and the so-called badness in people’s *xing* comes from desires that develop after birth.⁶ Tang Junyi 唐君毅 points out that “*xing* is bad” for Xunzi operates as a comparative statement, merely suggesting that goodness requires *wei* 偽 (artifice); independent of such a comparison, *xing* by itself cannot be said to be bad.⁷ Cua remarks that “*xing* is bad” is highly misleading as a simple assertion but might nonetheless be profitably seen as a thesis expressing a set of arguments and observations about people’s *xing*.⁸ Janghee Lee also suggests that Xunzi’s thesis that *xing* is bad should be taken less literally and be regarded as a calculated rhetorical device to attack Xunzi’s opponents.⁹ Both Donald Munro and Chad Hansen, following Kanaya Osamu, further suggest that the slogan “*xing* is bad” is actually incompatible with the other parts of the *Xunzi*, which stress only the neutrality of people’s *xing*. Consequently, they suspect the slogan might be a later interpolation.¹⁰ Dan Robins conducts a more nuanced analysis of chapter 23 and provides two suggestions: First, the slogan is in many instances indeed an interpolation. Second, although Xunzi once did hold that people’s *xing* is bad, he later changed his mind.¹¹ Philip J. Ivanhoe, however, suggests that although Xunzi and Mencius share a lot of ground in terms of their ethical philosophies, they do disagree over the character of human *xing*. Ivanhoe points out that while Mencius believes in our having an innate moral sense, Xunzi insists that we have no innate conception of morality and this is the defining and most critical aspect of Xunzi’s position that *xing* is bad.¹²

From the various positions we could extract at least four questions. First, what is the meaning of *xing* as it is used by Xunzi? Second, what is the meaning of the claim “*xing* is bad”? Third, what role is played by the claim “*xing* is bad” in Xunzi’s moral philosophy? Is it incompatible with, unimportant to, or actually essential to his moral philosophy? Fourth, is the claim incompatible with, compatible with, or even complementary to Mencius’s claim that “*xing* is good”? Since our present concern is with Xunzi’s view on *xing*, the last question will be tackled only when it helps to clarify Xunzi’s ideas.

It should also be noted that there has been a debate concerning *xing* and human nature. Roger Ames analyzes Mencius's conception of *xing* and suggests that "human nature" is inadequate as a rendering of *xing* in the *Mencius*. This is because "human nature" in the Western tradition has been understood as something genetically given, while *xing* for classical Confucianism is not a given but an accomplished project.¹³ Irene Bloom, on the other hand, maintains that "human nature" is nonetheless an apt translation of *xing*. Bloom further suggests the disjuncture of innate and acquired, or the disjuncture of nature and nurture does not apply to Mencius's text.¹⁴ Although Ames and Bloom are concerned chiefly with Mencius, their ideas might be borrowed to shed light on Xunzi's view of *xing*. More recently, Dan Robins suggests that the term *xing* in Warring States texts should not be translated as "nature," and in particular people's *xing* is not a near-equivalent of human nature. For Robins *xing* refers to the characteristics one has naturally and the way one behaves spontaneously.¹⁵ Aaron Stalnaker has made the useful clarification that the talk of "human nature" involves at least four distinct sorts of issues: First, there is the issue of human beings' physicality and animality, as well as our basic needs and desires. Second, "human nature" is used to suggest what is common to all or most people. Third, "human nature" highlights our distinctive humanity as compared with other animals. Fourth, there is the idea of a natural course of human development.¹⁶ Stalnaker further suggests that Xunzi's account of people's *xing* fits better the first and the second aspects than the third, and that Xunzi implicitly rejects the value and centrality of the fourth aspect.¹⁷ Nevertheless, we shall inquire how Xunzi's account of people's *xing* helps us to gain an understanding of human beings. Without assuming that *xing* as used by Xunzi is equivalent to "nature," we shall see in the following what kind of picture of human beings is presented by Xunzi's remarks on people's *xing*.

Xunzi's definitions of *xing*

In chapter 22 (Rectification of Names) of the *Xunzi*, Xunzi gives a definition for various terms. His definition for *xing* is as follows: "That by which life is so is called *xing*. That which is produced out of *xing*'s harmony, adeptly corresponding to stimuli and responses, and is so of itself without

work is called *xing*.¹⁸ Since my interpretation and translation of the definition varies significantly from that of John Knoblock, Burton Watson, and other Western and Chinese commentators, and since this definition is crucial to our understanding of *xing* in the *Xunzi*, it is worthwhile to inspect the original text in greater detail.

First, it should be noted that Xunzi's definition of *xing* consists of two parts. Alternatively, we might say Xunzi gives two definitions of *xing*. What might be the relation between these two parts or two definitions? Our answer to this question will determine to a large extent our understanding of Xunzi's definitions. Now both Knoblock and Watson take the first part of the definition as referring to what characteristics human beings have at birth.¹⁹ Knoblock translates it as: "What characterizes a man from birth is called his 'nature.'"²⁰ Watson translates it as: "That which is as it is from the time of birth is called the nature of man."²¹ Quite a few Chinese commentators also have the same view. For example, Li Disheng 李滌生 suggests that in this sentence *xing* means what is naturally so by birth.²² Graham, on one occasion, translates the sentence without giving further explanation as follows: "That by which the living is as it is is called 'nature.'"²³ I agree with Graham's understanding. I suggest the disagreement with Knoblock and Watson derives from a different understanding of both the character *sheng* (生) and the phrase *suo yi ran* (所以然). The character *sheng* could mean variously "life," "living," "growth," "birth," or "produce," depending on the context. It is hard to determine the exact meaning of the character as it stands alone, which is the general case for any Chinese character. So the meaning of *suo yi ran* is important. I would like to suggest Watson's translation, "that which is as it is," captures only the meaning of *ran*, which means "[being] so." Knoblock's translation, though different from that of Watson, reflects a similar understanding. However, *suo yi ran* is actually a set phrase both in the *Xunzi* and in other texts of the late Warring States period. Literally, the phrase means "by which it is so." More loosely it might mean "why it is so," or just "the cause." There are only two instances of the phrase in the *Xunzi*. The other instance appears in chapter 12 (The Way of a Lord). There Xunzi points out a true lord makes the best use of the myriad things of Heaven and Earth without inquiring why they are so. This time Knoblock translates the phrase *suo yi ran* as "how they came to be as they are."²⁴ Such a translation is certainly closer to my understanding. We might see more clearly the meaning of the phrase from the instances in other early texts.

For example, in chapter 20 of *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (The Annals of Lü Buwei), a comment is made of the concept of *ming* 命 (fate). There, fate is identified as that which becomes so (*ran*) without us knowing why it becomes so (*suo yi ran*). Here the phrase *suo yi ran* is contrasted with the term *ran*. The translation by Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel runs as follows: “Fate is the way things turn out though we do not know the reason why they do.”²⁵ It is clear from this example that the concept *ran* is different from the concept *suo yi ran*.

Also, the phrase *suo yi ran* is employed six times in the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子. In every instance it means the cause or reason for something. As a reference we might cite Watson’s translation for one such instance: “And the reason such a state of affairs has come about is that the ruler does not make important decisions on the basis of law, but puts faith in whatever his subordinates do.”²⁶ This time Watson correctly translates the phrase *suo yi ran* as the reason for something’s being so.

There are still many instances of *suo yi ran* in early texts. None of them refers to the “being so” of a state of affairs. I hope it is clear by now the phrase *suo yi ran* in Xunzi’s first definition of *xing* refers to the reason or cause why *sheng* becomes so. Yet if that is the case, it is unlikely that *sheng* means “birth.”²⁷ A more reasonable interpretation is that the term *sheng* means life or growth. *Xing*, according to Xunzi’s first definition, then refers to the basis or the underlying cause by which our natural life and its activities become as they are.²⁸

Xunzi’s second definition of *xing* is just as problematic as the first. Wang Xianqian 王先謙 suggests the first character *xing* should be *sheng*.²⁹ It is generally accepted that the graph of *xing* was a later development and the character itself was originally not different graphically from the character *sheng*. Fu Sinian 傅斯年 even suggests that not only were the two characters indistinguishable in graphs in the pre-Qin period, their meanings were not sharply differentiated either.³⁰ Scholars have already expressed doubts over Fu’s suggestion.³¹ In Xunzi’s case it is certainly not an apt characterization. In chapter 22 (Rectification of Names) Xunzi is trying to give definitions for the concept of *xing*. He must be well aware of the boundary of the concept and its difference from *sheng* in order to do his job. That point however does not help us to determine whether the first character of the second definition should be *xing* or *sheng*. Since the two characters originally might have been written as the same graph and

the present *xing* was changed in a later addition, it could not be ruled out that the editor made a mistake and the character should be *sheng* instead. Whether the character is *xing* or *sheng* can then only be judged by context.

Now Wang's doubt is not pointless. If *xing* in the first definition refers not to concrete life characteristics but to their underlying cause and *sheng* there means life, it is plausible that the first character of the second definition, as a parallel to the first definition, is also *sheng* and refers to life as well. However, there are two reasons for judging otherwise. First, the structure of similar definitions suggests the definiendum of the first definition forms the subject of the second definition. Following the two definitions of *xing*, Xunzi also defines *neng* 能 (capacity) and *zhi* 知 (understanding). As with *xing*, Xunzi gives two definitions for each concept. For these two concepts, the subject of the second definition is the term being defined in the first definition. For example, he first defines *neng* as that which enables human beings to do various things. We might translate this *neng* as "capacity." Xunzi then goes on to say when capacity is successfully employed it is also called *neng*. We might translate the second *neng* as "capability." What is noteworthy is that Xunzi uses the character *he* 合 (correspond) to describe how capacity is being successfully employed: here he means literally "corresponding to," and the character is used to refer to the fact that capacity is employed in such a way that it corresponds to certain requirements. The same character is also employed in the second definition of *zhi* and *xing*. Judging from the examples of *neng* and *zhi*, it is reasonable to infer that *xing* is also the subject of the second definition and that the second definition describes how *xing* corresponds to certain things. Second, in chapter 23 Xunzi once points out the natural proclivities of human beings such as the liking for beauty by the eyes and the liking for taste by the mouth are produced out of *xing*. The terms Xunzi uses to describe these natural likings are almost the same as those he employs in the second definition: they become so after stimuli (*gan er ziran* 感而自然) and they do not wait for work (*bu dai shi* 不待事).³² It is very likely then that the second definition is used to describe how natural likes and dislikes of human beings are produced out of *xing*. According to Xunzi then, while the cause of life's becoming so is called *xing*, the various natural manifestations of life are also called *xing*. It seems reasonably clear that the first character of the second definition and thus the grammatical subject of the sentence is *xing* instead of *sheng*.

We might now describe Xunzi's conception of *xing* in outline. *Xing* is the underlying cause of natural development and natural occurrences of life. Yet natural life occurrences, including natural faculties, responses, likes and dislikes, are also called *xing*.³³ We might also say the two definitions of *xing* capture respectively why life turns out to be so (*suo yi ran*) and how life turns out to be (*ran*).³⁴ We should keep in mind such a two-tiered structure of *xing*, for it might be the key to a coherent picture of Xunzi's ideas of *xing*.

"People's *xing* is bad"

Besides the two definitions, Xunzi also talks about *xing* in other places. How might we relate his other statements on *xing* with the two definitions? Xunzi's most famous idea of *xing* is his claim that *ren zhi xing'e* 人之性惡 (people's *xing* is bad). And his exposition of this idea is concentrated in chapter 23. As I have mentioned before, some scholars challenge the authenticity of the claim and suggest it is an interpolation. However, it is imperative that we make clear the meaning of the claim "people's *xing* is bad" before we make any judgment on its status.

Right at the start of chapter 23 is the assertion "People's *xing* is bad; their goodness [comes from] *wei*."³⁵ Such an assertion, with certain variations, appears ten times in chapter 23. Now there are several points concerning the assertion of which we should take note. First, the claim "people's *xing* is bad" is almost always joined with the claim "their goodness [comes from] *wei*." It is likely that the claim "people's *xing* is bad" is intended to be an integral part of Xunzi's idea of human badness and goodness. As such, we should not take the claim out of context and judge it independent of Xunzi's positive claim about the origin of goodness. Second, the original Chinese term is *ren zhi xing* 人之性 instead of *renxing* 人性.³⁶ Actually, throughout the *Xunzi* the term *renxing* is never used.³⁷ As a contrast, the term *renxing* does appear in the *Mencius* and is used a few times in the discussion of the quality of people's *xing*.³⁸ The term *ren zhi xing*, on the other hand, appears only once in the *Mencius*. Such a difference between the *Xunzi* and the *Mencius* might prove to be significant. It might be a sign of the two thinkers' difference in not only the understanding of human beings but also in the very concept of people's *xing*. For Xunzi, as

he adds the character *zhi* in between the characters *ren* and *xing*, *xing* is emphasized as merely one component of human beings. It is unlikely then “people’s *xing*” is used to refer to the essence of human beings, as might be the case of “human nature.” Third, when Xunzi says that “goodness [comes from] *wei*” (善者偽也) he precedes *shan* 善 (goodness) with the character *qi* 其 (his/hers/its/theirs), which gives the ambiguous rendering “their/its goodness [comes from] *wei*.” Now it is not absolutely clear what is referred to by *qi*. Is it referring to *ren* 人 (human beings), or is it actually referring to people’s *xing*? If *qi* refers to human beings, then Xunzi intends to stress that human goodness comes not from their *xing*, since it is bad, but from artifice (*wei* 偽). It is as if Xunzi is making a contrast between two different components of human beings: their *xing* is bad but their *wei* can bring about goodness. That Xunzi does not say people’s artifice is good might just be because not every act of artifice is good. On the other hand, if *qi* refers to people’s *xing*, the assertion as a whole suggests the interesting point that although people’s *xing* by itself is bad, it might be turned into good by artifice. Xunzi need not be blatantly incoherent under such an interpretation. What is being asserted is not that people’s *xing* is bad and good at the same time. Rather, it is asserted that people’s *xing* is bad and that people’s *xing* plus artifice can be good. Admittedly, the former interpretation makes better sense, at first appearance at least, and it is adopted by the majority of translators and commentators.³⁹ Now the latter interpretation might be wrong as an understanding of the assertion itself, but it might be right as a more faithful understanding of Xunzi’s overall position. We shall have more to say on this later.

What is Xunzi’s reason for claiming “people’s *xing* is bad”? Just after the assertion, Xunzi gives the following explication:

Now people’s *xing* is such that they are born with a liking of benefits. Following this [*xing*], there will be strife and plunder and no more courtesy or deference. They are born with an abhorrence of harms. Following this [*xing*], there will be violence and crime and no more loyalty or faithfulness. They are born with desires of eyes and ears, and a liking of beautiful sights and sounds. Following this [*xing*], there will be indulgence and wantonness, and there will be no more ritual propriety, appropriateness, culture, or ordered pattern. Thus, if people’s *xing* is accorded with, and people’s feelings followed, necessarily there will arise strife

and plunder. This will be accompanied by violation of social distinctions and the upsetting of ordered pattern, resulting in violence. Accordingly, only with the transformation of teachers and standards, guidance of ritual propriety and appropriateness, will people emerge in courtesy and deference. This will be accompanied by culture and ordered pattern, resulting in good order. If we base our observation on this, it is thus clear that people's *xing* is bad, their goodness [comes from] *wei*.⁴⁰

In this paragraph, Xunzi seems to state merely that human beings are born with the innocuous inclinations of benefit-loving and harm-hating and other natural bodily desires. How might Xunzi infer from the premise that people's *xing* has as its contents these seemingly neutral inclinations and desires to the conclusion that people's *xing* is bad? Indeed many have challenged Xunzi's conclusion. As I have mentioned before, Kanaya, Munro, and Hansen think that the arguments in chapter 23 prove only that people's *xing* is neutral. It is an overstatement to assert further that people's *xing* is bad. Since they think Xunzi is unlikely to be so inconsistent, they suggest the slogan "people's *xing* is bad" is actually an interpolation.⁴¹

Is it true that the natural inclinations of benefit-loving and harm-hating and other natural desires are really neutral in themselves and should be regarded as neither good nor bad? It is worth inspecting Xunzi's key argument more closely.

It should be noted that in a sentence like "Now people's *xing* is such that they are born with a liking of benefits, following this [*xing*] (*shunshi* 順是), there will be strife and plunder and no more courtesy or deference," the term *shunshi* (following this) plays an important role. It might be thought that the term itself is clear enough in its meaning: that it simply means an indulgence in our inclinations and desires. It should be noted however the character *shun* 順 (follow) contains different shades of meaning that bring much complexity to a proper understanding of the term. For the present purpose we could differentiate at least five uses of the character *shun* in the *Xunzi*. I am not suggesting these uses are distinct and independent from each other. The intention is rather to bring out the different emphases they indicate.

First, *shun* can mean "following the direction of" something. Such a meaning is employed in the sentence: "Shouting down (*shun* 順) the wind does not increase the sonority of the sound, but it is heard more clearly."⁴²

The importance of this usage lies in its suggestion of actively following an inherent direction. As a further illustration we might compare the character *shun* with another character, *sui* 隨, which in general can also be translated as “follow.” If the wind is being *sui* instead of being *shun*, the emphasis will be on the fact that someone or something passively follows the wind and goes in whatever direction it blows. Unlike *shun*, *sui* does not indicate a particular direction to be followed. It might be that when we *shun* people’s *xing*, we are thus following a natural and pre-given course of development. Looked at in this way, people’s *xing* is seen not as static states but as dynamic tendencies. Second, *shun* can be used to stress the smoothness of the event or the situation. The clearest example of this usage appears in Xunzi’s praise for “the method of conduct for the whole world,” which he describes as “constantly without impediment” (*wu bushun* 無不順).⁴³ The emphasis of this usage is on the smooth application or realization of the thing in question. If this shade of meaning is applied to people’s *xing*, the character *shun* might refer to the smooth and successful realization of natural inclinations and desires. We might translate the third usage of *shun* as “conformity.” Such a usage is employed when Xunzi stresses repeatedly the importance of conforming to *liyi* 禮義 (ritual propriety and appropriateness).⁴⁴ Seen in this light, when we *shun* people’s *xing*, we conform to the demands of natural inclinations and desires. It might even be suggested we thus take natural inclinations and desires as standards of behavior. There is however an interesting complication to this usage. Xunzi suggests if someone conforms only to standards or models implicit in the *Odes* and the *Documents* without exaltation of ritual propriety, he could not become a true Confucian.⁴⁵ The point is not that the *Odes* and the *Documents* are unimportant, but that mere conformity to superficial standards without understanding the underlying spirit will not bring about true transformation. It is true that conformity to the *Odes* and *Documents* and conformity to people’s *xing* are not only different but contradictory, yet the lesson is that conformity need not imply true acceptance. It is a crucial question whether *shuning* people’s *xing* means mere conformity or means further that we truly accept natural desires and take them as our ends. Fourth, *shun* might be understood as “submission.” Xunzi says of the sage-kings Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 that they were “persons who were good at teaching and transforming the whole world, when facing the south and governing the whole world, all living people were stirred and moved to come along and

yield to them, and to submit to them by being transformed (*hua shun zhi* 化順之).⁴⁶ Here *shun* is used to underline the fact that all people submit to the sage-kings' authority. Elsewhere Xunzi points out *shun* refers to the way that people serve their superiors.⁴⁷ Such a meaning of *shun* highlights the hierarchical difference between the party who submits and the party who is being submitted to. It also suggests the senior party has a kind of authority or force to compel the junior party to submit. It might be suggested that when people *shun* their *xing*, they are being compelled by the natural force of inborn inclinations and desires to submit. Fifth, *shun* can have the connotation of "at ease" or "feeling comfortable." It is said in the *Xunzi*,

Ritual propriety takes being at ease with people's heart-mind (*shun ren xin* 順人心) as their foundation. Therefore those practices that are not [recorded] in the Classic of Ritual propriety but still put people's heart-mind at ease (*shun ren xin* 順人心), are all proper ritual propriety.⁴⁸

It is unlikely that *shun* in this sentence means either "conformity" or "submission," for it is a dominant teaching in the *Xunzi* that we should direct the *xin* 心 (heart-mind) to follow ritual propriety and appropriateness. A more reasonable interpretation is that ritual propriety is not supposed to be contrary to the heart-mind and its feelings, that is, ritual propriety is not an alien constraint that forces us into conformity. The present meaning of *shun* is closely related to the second meaning of "smoothness" but is different in its emphasis. When applied to the case of people's *xing*, the present meaning suggests we feel at ease with the natural inclinations and desires and have no intention to act against them.

I am not suggesting all five meanings are intended at the same time by the term *shunshi*. The survey of the different shades of meaning of the character *shun* is meant to expose two distinct yet related questions. There is first an interpretative question: What is the exact meaning of the term *shunshi*? The survey suggests this question is more difficult to answer than is normally thought. However this question should not be confused with a question of moral psychology: What is it like for people to *shun* their *xing*? The latter question concerns the states of natural inclinations and desires—and their relationship to persons. It is thus distinct from the

former semantic question. The two questions are nonetheless related because an answer to one of the questions will inevitably bear on the solution to the other.

We might group the five meanings of the character *shun* into three sets and make the following observations: The first meaning suggests the natural inclinations and desires have a tendency to complete or realize themselves. When there is *shunshi*, the tendency is allowed to thrive. The second and the fifth meanings suggest that when there is *shunshi*, the natural inclinations and desires are realized successfully because we offer no resistance or even delight in their realization. The third and fourth meanings suggest when there is *shunshi*, the natural inclinations and desires exert their force on us to compel a submission. Consequently we take natural inclinations and desires as standards of behavior and act accordingly. The latter two observations offer seemingly conflicting pictures of *shunshi*: On the one hand, it is thought that when people *shun* their *xing*, they play merely a passive role by offering no resistance and allowing the natural inclinations and desires to realize themselves. On the other hand, it is suggested that people take up a more active role in fulfilling the natural inclinations and desires. Similar ambivalence occurs in commentators' remarks. For example, Wei Zhengtong, a leading Chinese commentator on Xunzi, explains the term *shunshi* as "following natural feelings without imposing any constraints."⁴⁹ On another occasion, Wei stresses that *shunshi* is not part of people's *xing* but is actually people's choice as influenced by culture.⁵⁰ The two explanations offered by Wei need not be incompatible. They do however highlight two different aspects of *shunshi*. Wei is right in saying that *shunshi* refers to people's choice, for without the act of following, natural inclinations and desires would not be realized. Yet *shunshi*, as the act of following, has a target to follow. In that sense *shunshi* is dependent on its target, people's *xing*. The crucial question then concerns the interplay between people's *xing* and the act of following. Is there anything distinctive about people's following their *xing*? How might it be different from a leaf's being carried away by water, from a victim's following a robber's demands under threat, or from a person's following a friend's advice?

When we say a fallen leaf follows the flow of water, it is not supposed the leaf really acts with an intention to follow the water. In Chinese *shun* need not imply an action either. It is perfectly alright to say the leaf *shuns* the flow of water, without implying that the leaf takes an active role in

following the water. In such a case the character *shun* describes not what has been actively done by the fallen leaf. The leaf is simply in a passive state. *Shun* then emphasizes the event of the leaf being carried away by the flow of water. The active force in such an event is the flow of water. When people *shun* their *xing*, are they just as passive as the fallen leaf? We might have the experience of or have observed others being swept off their feet by extreme emotions such as rage. Under such circumstances, they might be prompted by emotion to do something that they, in calmer moments, regret and feel are not actions of their own. It is as if they are carried away by the emotions and lose control of themselves, just like the fallen leaf being swept away by the current. However extreme emotions and strong urges, as suggested by the terms themselves, are exceptions rather than the rule. People's *xing*, as it is understood by Xunzi, is mainly comprised of the normal desires for food, warmth, and rest, and also the common inclinations of benefit-loving and harm-hating. As human beings we have certain control upon our own inclinations and desires. We are thus not as passive as a fallen leaf in the water's current. Yet what sort of active role do we play?

Now imagine two different cases. In one scenario, I am visited by a robber. He seizes all valuables and is ready to leave. He does not want the trouble of opening the door himself. He points his gun at me and orders, "Open the door for me or I will shoot you." Unwillingly, I follow his order and open the door. He then flees. In another scenario, I am at home with a friend on a hot summer day. My friend feels the air is stagnant. He thinks opening the door might help the air circulate and cool down the house. He suggests his idea to me and I agree with him. I follow his advice and open the door. Wind blows through the house and both of us feel more comfortable. In both cases I follow someone else's suggestion. But in one case I am under threat and do it unwillingly. In another case I am under no compulsion and do it willingly. Which one might be a more apt description of people's following their *xing*? Natural inclinations and desires are part of us and do not pose an external threat. Nonetheless, they might bring about a kind of compulsion. We might not be as blind as in rage, but the object of an immediate desire might loom so large in our mind that we are unable to make proper judgment of its importance. Once our mind is fixated on an immediate desire, we are likely under the urge to satisfy it right now. Considerations against its satisfaction might

still be there, but they are not given proper weight. However, if desires do compel, they most often compel not by threat but by lure. An immediate desire presents us with attractions of its satisfaction, and when we do follow it, we, at that particular moment at least, believe in the goods it projects and comply with the desire willingly. Thus in one aspect the act of following desires is not unlike that of following advice: in both cases we are presented with some goods that we consequently agree with. The difference lies in the way the proposed goods are being presented. Ideally, when a piece of advice is offered, the advisee is under no undue influence from the adviser and the advisee can consider the matter thoroughly in order to make his own decision. The attractions of an immediate desire, however, are presented exaggeratedly at the expense of other considerations. Also, under the agitation of an immediate desire, we are unlikely to think clearly.

If the preceding analysis is sound, *shunshi* has both a passive and an active aspect. When people follow their *xing*, they are subject passively to the prompting of natural inclinations and desires, but they nonetheless actively comply with these natural inclinations and desires, even if under undue influence of desires.⁵¹ Such a description involves three elements: First, it is assumed natural inclinations and desires have a kind of force with them. Second, such a force is believed to be able to influence people's choices and actions. Third, when people are under undue influence of such a force, they tend to comply with whatever demands are put forward by natural inclinations and desires.

Xunzi does think that desires have a natural tendency to seek satisfaction. However, he also thinks that in normal cases the pursuit of desires are subject to the approval of the person. He points out, "Taking what is desired as obtainable and pursuing it, that is unavoidable for the feelings; thinking it approvable and giving direction for it, that must come from understanding."⁵² Such a statement by Xunzi echoes our analysis. The former part of it, that which describes the natural tendency of desires, corresponds to the passive aspect of *shunshi*, where the prompting of natural inclinations and desires is emphasized. The latter part of it, that which describes the approving and directing role of understanding, corresponds to the active role of *shunshi*, where the active role of the person is emphasized. Also consistent with my analysis is Xunzi's admission that our heart-mind can be dominated by natural inclinations and desires. He points out, "People are originally petty men by birth. If they are without teachers and without

standards, they will only see things in terms of benefits.”⁵³ In the same paragraph he continues, “If people are without teachers and without standards, then their heart-mind will be just like their mouth and stomach.”⁵⁴ It should be pointed out these two remarks occur in the same paragraph where Xunzi comments on people’s natural inclinations of benefit-loving and harm-hating and their natural desires for food, warmth, and rest. As such it is reasonable to treat the two remarks as complementary explications of *shunshi*. If it is right to suggest that *shunshi* refers to the state under which people are dominated by their natural inclinations and desires, how does such a state help to make sense of the claim that people’s *xing* is bad?

Xunzi argues that if we follow our *xing*, necessarily there will be strife, plunder, disorder, and violence. It might appear that these awful states are only the consequences of following people’s *xing* and are not directly caused by people’s *xing*. If the act of following is further understood as merely indulgence or lack of restraints,⁵⁵ we might be led to the picture of a human agent making wrong but nonetheless free choices with his *xing*. Understood in this way, people’s *xing* is certainly neutral; any good or bad states are the result of people’s choices. However, if our analysis of the term *shunshi* is sound, the act of following is not completely free. Rather, *shunshi* suggests that if nothing is done, there is a natural tendency for the natural inclinations and desires to dominate people and lead them to act badly, as a result of which there are bad consequences. Xunzi is not denying the possibility of free choices. Yet free choices are more fragile than we suppose, and in order to secure our freedom, we need to do something to counter the dominating tendency of our *xing*.⁵⁶ The claim “people’s *xing* is bad” is meant to remind us of such a dominating tendency. Another water analogy might help illustrate the point. Suppose someone *shuns* the flooding water, that is, does nothing to stop it, and then the flooding water wrecks his house. The person might be accused of doing nothing, but unless the precaution is easy and effective, it is more reasonable to attribute the damage to the flood. The case is similar for people’s *xing*. Natural inclinations and desires come with motivating power, and if nothing is done, they will lead to bad behavior and bad consequences. Graham suggests, “The desires in their natural state are bad only in the sense of being anarchic.”⁵⁷ Xunzi would agree that desires in their natural state are without rule or control. Yet for Xunzi this means further that desires have no natural order and would not form any natural harmony. Given that desires are not inert states

awaiting human manipulation but come with motivating power and tend to act themselves out, in natural states they would inevitably conflict with each other not only within a person but between persons. As such, natural desires do not bring about intrapersonally a peaceful life or interpersonally a peaceful world. It is in this sense that Xunzi claims “people’s *xing* is bad.”

Natural desires and moral neutrality

Even if desires by themselves would necessarily lead to strife and disorder, the satisfaction of certain desires seems nonetheless good. How can we deny that food, rest, and warmth are good for us most of the time? It might be thought that while the satisfaction of desires normally contributes to personal welfare, it need not be good morally. Yet perhaps for Xunzi personal interest can also be a part of moral goodness.

At this point we should present Xunzi’s definitions of *shan* 善 (good) and *e* 惡 (bad): “What has been called good from the ancient times until the present day and for the whole world is what is correct, reasonable, peaceful, and orderly. What has been called bad is what is partial, perilous, perverse, and disorderly. This is the distinction between good and bad.”⁵⁸

The terms Xunzi uses for defining good and bad might appear applicable only to states of affairs and not to personal character traits. As such it might be thought that “good” or “bad” are used for the evaluation of the consequences of our actions and not, at least not directly, our character.⁵⁹ It might be further thought that people’s *xing* is thus not bad in itself but bad only in the sense of bringing about bad consequences. Although Xunzi does tend to emphasize the bad consequences of following our *xing*, there is no reason why “good” or “bad” could not be used to describe character traits as well. Actually, immediately following the definition, Xunzi applies *zhengli pingzhi* 正理平治 (correct, reasonable, peaceful, and orderly) as well as *pianxian beiluan* 偏險悖亂 (partial, perilous, perverse, and disorderly) directly to people’s *xing*. Here he says people’s *xing* is such and such and not merely that situations become such and such because of people’s *xing*. Also, throughout the *Xunzi*, these terms are repeatedly used to describe personal qualities and character traits. For example, Xunzi uses *pian* 偏 (partial), *xian* 險 (perilous), and *luan* 亂 (disorderly) to describe a petty man.⁶⁰ He also uses *bei* 悖 (perverse) to describe rulers of his time.⁶¹ On

the other hand, *zheng* 正 (correct) is used not only for conduct but also for the person himself.⁶² *Li* 理 (reasonable) is used for describing the noble man and the sages.⁶³ *Ping* 平 (peaceful) is used for the heart-mind's condition when the person is at ease in life.⁶⁴ *Zhi* 治 (orderly) is used variously for the regulation of the heart-mind, the feelings, and the five sensory organs.⁶⁵ It is thus reasonable to take seriously Xunzi's suggestion that people's *xing* itself is bad and to inquire precisely by virtue of what Xunzi thinks that people's *xing* is bad.

Nonetheless, our puzzle persists. Is it possible to reconcile the Xunzian claim "people's *xing* is bad" with the commonsense perception that satisfaction of desires is normally good? Xunzi does contrast *li* 利 (benefits) with *yi* 義 (appropriateness). Xunzi suggests further that appropriateness should be employed to regulate the seeking of benefits, just as artifice is necessary for the embellishment of people's *xing*.⁶⁶ It might be thought that since a parallel is drawn between benefits and people's *xing* and since people's *xing* is bad, benefits are bad in the same sense, and that is why appropriateness is required to regulate the seeking of benefits. Consequently, it is possible to suggest that even though the satisfaction of desires appears to be good, it is only a kind of benefit and not appropriateness. Thus the satisfaction of desires is not good morally. It is actually bad morally because it disrupts the ethical order. Such a portrait of Xunzi's position draws a sharp distinction between personal benefits and public morality. It also positions desires as being antagonistic to morality. Xunzi, in fact, does not hold such a bleak picture of human desires, and he does not think that morality and people's *xing* are irreconcilable and independent.⁶⁷ In chapter 19 (Discourse on Ritual Propriety) Xunzi suggests that people's *xing* is the raw material or foundation to which artificial embellishments are added and that people's *xing* is indispensable for order and flourishing. Xunzi says:

Xing is the original basis and the plain materials. *Wei* is the grandness and flourishing of culture and ordered pattern. Without *xing* then *wei* has nothing to improve upon. Without *wei* then *xing* cannot beautify itself. Only after *xing* and *wei* have been conjoined is the title of the sage achieved, and the merit of uniting the whole world fulfilled. Hence, it is said: when Heaven and Earth conjoin, the myriad things are born; when the *Yin* and *Yang* connect, changes and transformations are

produced; when *xing* and *wei* conjoin, the whole world is properly ordered.⁶⁸

Such a statement appears incompatible with the claim “people’s *xing* is bad.” Wei Zhengtong suggests that natural feelings and desires are neither good nor bad in themselves; the badness of people’s *xing* refers only to the fact that strife and disorder ensue when there is no regulation of natural feelings and desires.⁶⁹ Such a view of feelings and desires seems to accord with Xunzi’s ideas that the function of *li* 禮 (ritual propriety) is to nurture desires and that the function of *yue* 樂 (music) is to express feelings.⁷⁰ Ritual propriety and music are central to Xunzi’s vision of moral education. What is nurtured or expressed by moral education seems unlikely to be something bad. Yet is the fact that desires can be nurtured by moral education incompatible with the preceding analysis that desires have inherent motivating power and tend to dominate people’s judgments and choices? If we look more closely at Xunzi’s description of the function of ritual propriety, we find that not only is the motivating power of desires compatible with ritual propriety, but it is actually a crucial reason why ritual propriety is necessary. Xunzi points out:

From what did ritual propriety arise? I say: human beings are born with desires. If what they desire is not obtained, they cannot but seek for it. If there are no measures and limits on their seeking, then they will inevitably fight with each other. Fighting leads to disorder, disorder leads to destitution. The ancient kings disliked such disorder, so they designed ritual propriety and appropriateness to make distinctions, so as to nurture people’s desires, and to provide for their seeking. They saw to it that desires never wanted for goods and goods were never exhausted by desires. Desires and goods were sustained by each other and developed. This is the origin of ritual propriety.⁷¹

The necessity of ritual propriety depends precisely on the fact that desires necessarily seek for satisfaction. Since desires have inherent motivating power, if there is no proper measure on their seeking for satisfaction, chaos and disorder ensue. The case is similar for music. Xunzi suggests:

Music is joy, which is unavoidable for people's feelings. Thus people cannot be without music. . . . Joy cannot go unexpressed; if [it] is not guided when being expressed, there cannot but be disorder. The ancient kings disliked such disorder, so they instituted the sounds of the *Odes* and the *Hymns* to guide its expression.⁷²

People's feelings must be expressed. If the expression is not in good form, there will be disorder. The claim "people's *xing* is bad" is meant to highlight that feelings and desires in their natural state necessarily will be expressed and satisfied in the wrong way. Thus ritual propriety and music are necessary so as to express feelings properly and satisfy desires in a good way. As such, Xunzi's views on ritual propriety and music are not only consistent with but are actually complementary to the claim "people's *xing* is bad."

On the other hand, we might question if it is right to say that for Xunzi desires in themselves are neither good nor bad. The claim that desires are neither good nor bad might mean that desires are morally neutral, a judgment affirmed by A. S. Cua.⁷³ But malleability of desires need not presuppose moral neutrality. For Xunzi it is enough that desires can be either good or bad, depending on whether they are ethically transformed or not. Someone might argue that if desires are to be capable of being either good or bad, in themselves they must be neither good nor bad. This is not necessarily so. We know that some fish species (for example, *Semicossyphus pulcher*) are capable of changing sex. If there is no male within a group of fish, the leading female will change into a male fish. Later, if another male joins the group, the original fish might change back into a female fish. That a certain fish is capable of becoming either male or female does not mean that it is neither male nor female. Here we are not drawing a strict analogy between the sex of fish and the evaluative quality of desires, for the two belong to different categories. What the example tries to show is that if a certain feature or aspect is necessary for a certain thing, then the variability of the feature or aspect implies no neutrality. That is, if any desire necessarily has the evaluative aspect and must be either good or bad, then of course the possibility of any desire to be either good or bad does not imply it is neutral. The malleability of gold does not imply in itself that gold has no physical shape, for the physical shape is integral to any

physical thing including gold. It might be argued that the analogy does not hold, because features like sex or physical shape admit no neutrality, but the evaluative quality might be good or bad or neutral. It should be admitted that neutrality is plausible for any evaluation. A certain thing might turn out to be beyond the scope of an evaluation, that is, it is simply irrelevant to the evaluation. Desires might be thought to be morally neutral in this sense: desires themselves are not the proper target of moral evaluation, thus they are neither good nor bad. However, the preceding discussion is meant to suggest the situation is not as simple as we suppose. Whether desires are indeed morally neutral should be subject to further examination. It simply begs the question if we assume without argument that desires are neither good nor bad. We cannot draw hasty conclusions that the desires are neutral simply because they are malleable. And actually there are two different questions. One is whether desires are justifiably morally neutral. Another is whether Xunzi thinks desires are morally neutral.

Now we are chiefly concerned with the latter question. As I have indicated, the answer depends largely on whether for Xunzi desires must be either good or bad. We might think that desires in principle could be independent of moral evaluation, that the quality of good or bad is imposed on them from a moral perspective. But it is not at all clear how desires are supposed to be independent of moral evaluation. Now it is uncontroversial that a stone or any natural physical object is in itself independent of moral evaluation. We might think up of a moral scenario in which a stone plays a role. For example, a person uses a stone to hit and hurt another person. Even here, the so-called role of the stone is metaphorical and derivative. The stone is simply an object used by an agent to do something. It seems a stone is amoral or morally neutral in at least two senses: First, it is an object and not an agent; it cannot act but can only be acted upon. As such it could make no moral difference. Second, a full and complete description of a stone need not incur any moral terms. How do desires fare with regard to these two aspects? It might appear that we need not incur any moral terms to describe a desire for food. Yet do we need to describe as well the context of the desire? It certainly makes a big difference whether the desire for food occurs under normal circumstances or in a time of exigency, say, on a desolate island after shipwreck when there is not enough food for all survivors. It might be thought that even in such an emergency the desire for food itself is innocuous and morally neutral. Isn't