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Totalistic Implications in *Xunzi*’s Political Theory

The political turmoil and devastation of the Warring States period of Zhou dynasty China proved, conversely, to be a productive and formative era in early Chinese philosophy. As regional powers battled for predominance, intellectuals and officials promoted theories of governance to transcend the disunity and conflict that thwarted any attempts to reestablish an ordered society. It was in this political and intellectual context that Xunzi produced and wrote his own theory of governance in the 3rd century BCE. Xunzi’s philosophy emphasizes the utility of rituals in creating order. However, he suggests that rituals are, in fact, a subject of human artifice created by rulers, but they nonetheless are effective in producing and extending Goodness in an ordered society. Taken in full, Xunzi’s philosophy relies on an appeal to social contract theory, but this appeal is problematized when the system’s lack of checks to authority and relative ethical framework implicate a potential descent to totalitarianism.

In order to analyze Xunzi’s work, one must first understand the orientation of Xunzi’s overarching philosophical vision. Xunzi’s philosophy relies upon the fundamental assertion that “human nature is bad,” and his philosophy extends from this assumption (298). The tendency of human nature is to propagate disorder, but according to Xunzi, this barrier of human nature is rectified through Good rituals distributed by the sages and rulers who have the enlightened vision to recognize order and the patterns of rituals that manifest this order. This fundamental presumption of bad human nature necessitates the need for a codified set of rituals to facilitate transcendence from this state in order to organize an ordered society. Xunzi roots this authority in rulers who can study the patterns of governance and ritual to determine what rituals will further propagate these patterns of order and Goodness because for Xunzi, “the rules are the beginning of order, and the gentleman is the origin of the rules” (269). Thus, common people are to defer to the rulers who are vested with the legitimate authority to establish such a system of rituals.

The legitimization of a ruler’s power relies on a sense of manufactured selflessness, that is, it seems as though the ruler has acted against his own natural dispositions to extend Goodness and order through rituals and regulations. Following from this implausible ethical transition, the ruler is granted the authority to create rules and rituals to govern society and establish structured hierarchy according to ritual; “the sage-kings saw that because people’s nature is bad...they were unruly, chaotic, and not well-ordered. Therefore for their sake they set up ritual and standards of righteousness, and established proper models and measures” (299). To the extent that rulers create rituals, Xunzi’s views seem more compatible with those of Laozi or Zhuangzi in that he recognizes the worldly artificiality of distinctions and definitions, namely rituals. He renders rituals merely human artifice but simultaneously maintains that they are necessary to manifest order in society and have utility in extending Goodness.

Considering the previous analysis one can label Xunzi’s philosophy and vision of governance as representative of a unique strain of Chinese social contract theory, developed centuries before it was manifested in European Enlightenment ideals. Following tenets of social contract theory, Xunzi proposes a government structured by ritual and hierarchy in which the upper echelons are motivated to serve the lower classes because that is the essential function of government. Those who are capable of dictating Good rituals are given central authority, and the lower classes reciprocate by deferring to these rulers on the condition that they govern in ways that facilitate an ordered society; the people believe that the government exists to serve them.

Despite this optimistic vision of governance, Xunzi’s philosophy extended to political theory rests on disputable ethical grounds, and it is not difficult to conceive of a totalistic state founded on the fundamental assumptions of Xunzi’s proposal for social contract theory. For instance, if one were to accept Xunzi’s notion that human nature is essentially bad, then this propensity for badness must necessarily extend to sages and rulers. Xunzi, in fact, does not deny this and asserts that “the gentleman is not different from the others by birth. Rather, he is good at making use of things...” (257). Xunzi further elaborates that “in every case, ritual and the standards of righteousness are produced from deliberate effort of the sage; they are not produced from people’s nature” (300). Through this remark Xunzi makes a distinction between the innate disposition of the sages and their deliberate effort, actions, and decisions, but the mechanism through which this distinction can be justified is left ambiguous. Nowhere in this narrative is a standard from which sages derive their sense of Goodness and it is questionable whether the kings are capable of producing Good rituals at all.

Despite this lack of ethical foundation, sages and rulers are charged with the duty of establishing rules and ritual standards of Goodness that correspond to abstract ideals of Goodness and order which are also determined by the sages and rulers. This authority to create laws and rituals becomes problematic when Xunzi makes clear that coercion and punishments are included within this nexus of rituals; “They set up laws and standards in order to manage them. They multiplied punishments and fines in order to restrain them” (302). Xunzi authorizes a monopoly on force, which is necessary for centralized power to operate free from constant and imminent threat of violent usurpations of power. Xunzi circumscribes these punishments within rituals, thus granting the ruling authority the right to legitimize the use of force for the sake of propagating Goodness among the people, who are encouraged to buy into the system under the assumption that the system serves to provide for them. This vision of the lower classes prescribes a sort of non-intellectualism, or at least complacency and non-engagement whereby through ritual, “compliant subordinates are created” under the assumption that they are incapable of acting against their own inherently bad natural dispositions without the aid of ritual (276). The justification of punishments and coercion seem counterintuitive to realizing a state of Goodness but are nonetheless a mechanism through which rulers legitimize power while restricting challenges and checks to authority.

It should be noted that no appeal to Heaven thus far has been mentioned in analyzing Xunzi. This is because, unlike many of his predecessors, Xunzi does not concern himself with that which humans cannot know and remains worldly and humanistic. One implication of this philosophy is his lack of grounding ethics in a higher order in the universe, or more broadly an assumption of an objective standard for ethics. Xunzi proposes a type of relativistic ethics that are a product of human artifice and which are founded upon historical standards interpreted by sages and rulers. The logic points out that if a ritual worked in history, then sages and rulers have the enlightened vision to identify these rituals and propagate them in their contemporary society. There is no absolute objective consistency between rulers. Rather, Xunzi suggests that the realization of the Way is the ultimate objective of rituals so objective standards are not necessary and relativism can be productive and appropriate. However, this proposal suggests an ethics rooted in historical analysis to be determined by sages and rulers, and more broadly this implicates more problematically that they have a monopoly over the ideological regime and system of morality governing society.

Xunzi does not cite Heaven as a source of an objective standard, but the notion of Heaven does play a role in his philosophy. For Xunzi, Heaven is a “constant” and dynamic process that sustains the universe, and human faculties are manifestations of Heaven and should be utilized in accordance with Heaven’s patterns (269). Xunzi’s vision of order assumes that human behavior and societal organization align with Heaven’s patterns, and this organization is propagated through the established rules and rituals of rulers and sages. However, Xunzi also acknowledges the artificiality of words and distinctions, so the possibility that the notion of Heaven is simply human artifice manufactured for the legitimization of control by rulers cannot necessarily be discredited (293). Although this is not what Xunzi directly asserts, the implications of such a system are further control over the prevailing ideological regime by rulers at the top of the hierarchy distributed through teachers and models down to the bottom of the hierarchy.

Although the lofty aspirations and culpability of such a vision of society as Xunzi’s social contract theory cannot be denied, if one were to analyze Xunzi’s philosophy pessimistically, one cannot deny the instable framework through which Xunzi proposes this vision of social contract theory. Assuming that human nature is essentially bad, there seems to be no foundation to grant the authority to rulers except through self-legitimization of power and manufactured selflessness since they, themselves, are also plagued by an inherently bad human nature. There is no inherent incentive for rulers to act against their own selfish interests that is characteristic of their fundamental nature, and the mechanism by which rulers are actually capable of producing Good rituals is left ambiguous which further complicates this implausible ethical transition. However, if the concept of “Goodness” is divorced from any system of morality but instead refers to an orderly and structured society that benefits people broadly, then a ruler does not necessarily have to act against selfish interests to create rituals that benefit society (302). The act of choosing rituals and rules that benefit an orderly society can in turn benefit the ruler whose own power becomes legitimized. Xunzi’s philosophy and political theory do not contain internal checks to power to these potentially problematic implications to his tenets of social contract theory, and the establishment of a totalistic regime that serves rulers can be extrapolated.