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MENCIUS AND XUNZI ON HUMAN NATURE: 
THE CONCEPT OF MORAL AUTONOMY 
IN THE EARLY CONFUCIAN TRADITION

In both China and the West, intellectuals and scholars from different backgrounds have for centuries debated one of the most discussed themes in the history of Chinese philosophical thought, that is the counterposing, which has been interpreted mostly as a contradiction, between the doctrine of the innate goodness of human nature maintained by Mencius (390-305 B.C.) and the doctrine that man’s nature is evil maintained by Xunzi (310-219 B.C.) in open polemic with Mencius. The difficulty lies in trying to conciliate, within the same philosophical school (Confucian), two conceptions which are apparently so extreme and divergent. Even though the doctrine that human nature is evil is not Xunzi’s fundamental idea – as the noted Qing commentator Wang Xianqian (1842-1918) claimed1 – but only the position he had to adopt in response to an age of war and chaos, it is precisely on the possible interpretations of that doctrine that the most significant studies have concentrated over the past few years.2

Mencius is generally considered an intuitionalist, an idealist, the maintainer of an overly optimistic conception of man, while Xunzi is presented in diametrically opposite terms – he is a rationalist, a pragmatist, the harbinger of a pessimistic vision and the initiator of that tendency to authoritarianism that, according to some, was to become a peculiar element in Con-

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1 See the Preface to his Xunzi jijie (Collected Commentaries of the Xunzi), 1891.

2 On the theme of human nature in early Confucianism there is an extremely large bibliography. For an overall view of the theme, see my two volumes: La concezione della natura umana in Confucio e Mencio, Venezia, 1991, and Xunzi e il problema del male, Venezia, 1997.
fucianism over time.³ It has been asserted that Xunzi held greater authority and prestige than Mencius in the early imperial period. It was during the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) Dynasties, with the flourishing of Neo-Confucianism, that Mencius was venerated as the only, authentic interpreter of the thought of Confucius (551-479 B.C.), while Xunzi was referred to as a shameful heterodoxist. This interpretation has considerably conditioned subsequent studies and became paradoxical in the 1970s, during the critical campaign carried out against Lin

³ This vision of Xunzi’s thought is present in the two main interpretative currents, which are represented in the West by, respectively, Homer H. Dubs and Antonio S. Cua, whose works have exerted a marked influence on scholars, and still do. HOMER H. DUBS, author of the essay Mencius and Sándz on Human Nature («Philosophy East and West», 6, 1956, pp. 213-222), is representative of what Philip J. Ivanhoe refers to as the Augustinian turn in the Confucian tradition: “Dubs argues that Xunzi believed that human nature was essentially evil and that it therefore needed to be restrained; and so he devised the xing’e slogan (which Dubs translates as “human nature is evil”) in order to counter the overly tender-hearted Mencius. Dubs sees this move by Xunzi as initiating an authoritarian theme in Chinese thought, a theme which Dubs sees as the de facto dominant tendency in the Confucian tradition. Whatever merits his analysis may possess, this aspect of his interpretation appears to be both wrong and misleading. It is unwarranted to ascribe to Xunzi, or to any early Chinese thinker, the view that our nature, in whole or part, is fundamentally and incorrigibly bad. There is nothing in Xunzi’s thought that approaches the Augustinian notion of sin as a willful rejection of God’s will. There is no hint in his writings that might lead one to think he believed we take a perverse pleasure in doing wrong. This is an important point, for in order to oppose Mencius’ position as Dubs believes Xunzi’s theory does, Xunzi would have to be saying precisely this.” (PHILIP J. IVANHOE, Human Nature and Moral Understanding in Xunzi, «International Philosophical Quarterly», 34, 1994, pp. 167-175:172). Antonio S. Cua, on the other hand, who has written a truly amazing number of works on Xunzi (I have listed them all in my Xunzi e il problema del male, cit., pp. 94-96), is considered by Ivanhoe to be the most prominent exponent of the pessimistic complement interpretation: “Essentially, proponents of this position argue that Xunzi’s ‘pessimistic’ theory complements Mencius’ more optimistic view of human nature. They see Mencius as cheerfully pointing out that the glass is half full (i.e., we already are partially good), whereas Xunzi glumly focuses on the glass being half empty (i.e., we still are half-bad). Mencius offers an ideal toward which we are to strive and which is seen as encouraging us to develop the good already within us. Xunzi sets forth restrictions on our actions and warns us to curb our innate tendencies to err. A crucial feature of this position is the contention that the two views are essentially the same, differing only in what they emphasize.” (PHILIP J. IVANHOE, op. cit., pp. 172-173). Obviously Ivanhoe offers a critique of this type of approach as well, as it “obscures the profound optimism of the Xunzian position” as the difference between the theories of the two philosophers is “not one of degree but of kind” (Ibidem, p. 174).
Biao and Confucius. The campaign, launched at the 10th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1973, and orchestrated by the so-called Gang of Four, labelled Xunzi a Legalist, in accordance with the impelling need the Communist Party felt at that time to present Confucianism and Legalism as two clearly distinct categories (a reaction against progress).

In accordance with this interpretative line is the position assumed in the mid-70s by Lin Yü-sheng, according to which there are two uses of ren (which we commonly render with "humanity, humaneness, benevolence, virtue etc.") in the Lunyu (the Analects of Confucius): 1) the pre-Confucian conventional usage indicating man's distinctive quality, meaning "manliness, manhood"; 2) the new usage originated by Confucius, who gave the word a "protean meaning" denoting "an all-inclusive moral virtue as well as the highest moral attainment that a man can achieve in life by human effort". In other words, thanks to the innovative change within tradition introduced for the first time by Confucius, the word ren shifted implicitly from the formal, basic meaning of "manliness, manhood" to the derivative ethical meaning of "goodness":

Confucius' concept of ren entails a notion of uninterrupted dynamic process of moral life. [...] Since ren - moral excellence - is the highest or furthest growth of man's distinctive nature, ren can be cultivated and developed from a natural resource of man's nature. If a man desires ren, he can cultivate and develop it at every moment of his life. Of course, this developing ren has not reached the highest level of moral excellence. But, moral excellence is developed rather than generically changed from the distinctive nature of man; every stage of moral cultivation and development can be conceived as a stage of potential moral excellence, hence the statement that "as soon as we want ren, we should find that it is at our very side" ([Lunyu, 7.29]). This understanding of Confucius' concept of ren does not mean that Confucius has advocated in a clear and explicit fashion the idea of innate goodness of human nature. But it does mean that Mencius' concept of innate goodness of man is a further development of Confucius' thought. [...] If one adopts a strictly literal point of view, one must see Mencius as the originator of the concept of innate goodness of man (Mengzi 2A.6 and 6A.1-8.) However, if my elucidation of Confucius' concept of ren is valid, then Mencius'

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4 Lin Yü-Sheng, The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of Jen and the Confucian Conception of Moral Autonomy, "Monumenta Serica", 31, 1974-75, pp. 172-204:184. The pinyin system of transcription has been used to uniform all citations throughout the current text.
concept of the innate goodness of man was not so much an original idea as an explication of an implicit notion of Confucius.\(^5\)

The genetic link between the doctrine of Confucius and the Mencian theory of the innate goodness of human nature has been clearly established. Thus Lin Yü-sheng states, as a logical consequence, that “although Xunzi adopted many values and goals of Confucius, took a number of Confucius’ ideas as points of departure, and has generally been regarded as a Confucian philosopher, his philosophical system is, if considered as a whole from the point of view expounded in this essay, structurally incompatible with that of Confucius.”\(^6\)

Philip J. Ivanhoe’s opinion is diametrically opposed to this view. He has recently dealt with complex themes such as what is the origin of one’s knowledge of the Way (dao 道) and how one comes to know the Way in order to explore the question of how the earlier Confucianists thought one comes to be moral. In other words, is the individual capable of discovering the Way by himself, through a process of introspection and reflection, or, rather, is the Way something that man is incapable of discerning, and that must be learnt through a protracted and difficult process of acquiring knowledge? The focal point of Ivanhoe’s analysis is the polarity between si 思 “thinking” and xue 學 “learning”, which is not seen as restricted to the early phase of the Confucian tradition, but as a constant thread running through subsequent philosophical speculation. Ivanhoe distinguishes between two distinct strands of thought: the first, consisting of Confucius and Xunzi, emphasises “the need to submit oneself to the authority of the rites and acquire knowledge of the Way through extensive study. One comes to know the Way through learning, by studying the legacy of the sages.”\(^7\) The second, consisting of Mencius, emphasises “the moral autonomy of each individual. Each person has within nascent ‘moral sprouts’ which can serve as infallible moral guides. These moral sprouts are nourished by the spontaneous feeling of joy which accompanies the contemplation of moral action. And if so nourished they will naturally grow into full and powerful moral dispositions. Thus, self cultivation is the devel-

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\(^5\) *Ibidem*, pp. 185-186.

\(^6\) *Ibidem*, p. 172 footnote 2. Italics mine.

opment of an internal moral sense that one discovers and nurtures through thinking. By introspection and reflection, one can guide oneself to an understanding of the Way."^8

Ivanhoe insists on the evident links between the thought of Xunzi and Confucius, and especially on the primary role both give the Classics, the rites and the teachings of the sages. Hence the inevitable conclusion that "Xunzi remained true to important features of Confucius’ original vision. [Compared to Mencius] he held more tightly to the Confucian tradition by emphasizing the central role of the rites and the sages."^9 Xunzi’s attitude is therefore contrasted with Mencius’, who greatly diminished the role of rituals and their importance for the moral self-cultivation of the individual. This and other aspects of Mencius’ thought, claims Ivanhoe, “represent a significant departure from Confucius.”^10

These statements are by no means unimportant if compared to those of Lin Yü-sheng. They seem to repropound the original theme with renewed vigour: was the real interpreter and continuer of Confucius’ thought Mencius, as Lin Yü-sheng maintains, or Xunzi, as Ivanhoe insists? In fact, in my opinion the real question that should be addressed is whether it is correct and useful to maintain this particular framework of the problem. I feel that answering this question is critical to the task of understanding some fundamental aspects of Confucian ethical philosophy as they have been expressed in the debate on human nature. Numerous new hypotheses and interpreta-

^8 Ibidem, p. 488.

^9 Ibidem, p 486. Italics mine. Benjamin I. Schwartz maintains a similar thesis: “Xunzi’s conception of learning is very close to that of the Analects and at least in this area he seems closer to the Analects than does Mencius. Learning in the literal sense is elevated to the level of a sacred enterprise. It certainly involves, as with Confucius, much more than fact-gathering. Fundamentally, it involves nothing less than the herculean task of mastering the anarchic forces of one’s own nature. Only by exposing oneself to the true wisdom embodied in the cultural heritage can one acquire this power. One has indeed the sense that despite Confucius’ insistence on the ‘unity’ underlying all learning he would clearly have appreciated Xunzi’s emphasis on unremitting, cumulative concrete learning and might have been somewhat disconcerted by Mencius’ ‘easy’ confidence in his ‘intuitive’ insights. Knowledge must be acquired from without” (Benjamin I. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China, Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 297).

^10 Philip J. Ivanhoe, Thinking and Learning in Early Confucianism, cit., p. 486. Italics mine.
tions of certain aspects connected to the theme of the concept of moral autonomy in early Confucianism have been presented over the last few decades. They suggest a more unbiased consideration of the issue and make it possible to adopt a less ideological approach capable of offering a more convincing solution to the apparent, and as I see it inconsistent, contradiction that seems to be present within the Confucian school.

To better understand the different positions expressed by those who have dealt with this theme, their motivations, subtle arguments and the aims of the debate, we have to start with Confucius himself and explain how Mencius' and Xunzi's doctrines are nothing other than a representation of two distinct, yet possible and congruous, modes of interpreting and re-elaborating the Master's teachings. They are two opposing yet largely complementary currents which have developed within the Confucian school.

The plurality of the arguments and opinions which have come to the fore between disciples can, to a certain extent, be seen as due to the different possible interpretations of some of the salient aspects of Confucius' doctrine as inferred from a reading of the Lunyu, the main source available to us. This work, which was posthumously put together by disciples and followers in different epochs, is held to be authentic only in part. In all likelihood, an ampler version than the one handed down to us and perhaps even a series of different versions were available in the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. The textus receptus is rather disorganized in its structure. So much so, in fact, that it seems to be a disordered compendium of maxims, conversations and anecdotes which are often devoid of a specific context. Their exposition is so laconic and their style so essential that any number of different readings are possible. The fragmentary and non-systematic nature of the collection has given rise to a large corpus of exegetical literature (which is still growing), and the formation of distinct currents of constantly-competing literati. According to the Legalist philosopher Han Feizi (280-233 B.C.), within the Confucian school there were as many as eight factions during the 3rd century B.C.\textsuperscript{11} It must also be said that Confucius did not openly deal with the question of evaluating human nature with regard to its goodness or badness. As far as we can glean from the Lunyu, he

\textsuperscript{11} Han Feizi, 50.
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mentions it on only one occasion in order to affirm that “men are close to one another by nature; but they diverge from one another through practice.”

Confucius

Confucius proposes a model for an ideal society, which roughly corresponds to what he maintained existed centuries before, when everything seemed to function properly thanks to the illuminated guide of sage rulers and the reassuring assistance offered by a munificent Heaven. A mythical Golden Age, respectfully and admiringly contemplated by Confucians, during which the dao, the Way of the Sage Kings of the past, was present in the world. The Golden Age of Chinese history, wonderfully described in the Classics and particularly in the Shi jing (Classic of Poetry), was assumed as an example that had to be looked on with a sense of regret and profound, almost religious, devotion. The continuous reference to antiquity was meant to invest the entire wealth of knowledge and values that man had accumulated in that happy period: “The Zhou”, as Confucius has it, “is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties. I am for the Zhou.” Confucius became the interpreter and harbinger of those very values, the apparently lost dao: “A man is worthy of being a teacher only if he gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with.”

Unfortunately this social equilibrium was dissolving, but could still be brought back. As Confucius said: “It is man who can make the Way great, it is not the Way which can make man great.” Thus he who has had the right education and has become, thanks to this education, a junzi 君子, a man superior to the average, a true gentleman, an exemplary person, “devotes his efforts to the roots, for once the roots are

12 Lunyu, 17.2. Zigong, one of Confucius’ favourite disciples, confirms a sort of reticence not only over the question itself, but also over its possible relation with the Way of Heaven: “One can get to hear about the Master’s cultural heritage, but one cannot get to hear his views on human nature and the Way of Heaven” (ibidem, 5.13).
14 Ibidem, 2.11.
15 Ibidem, 15.29.
established, the Way will grow therefrom.\textsuperscript{16} The sages of the past are recognised as having the merit of having understood the dao, the Way. The dao, the principle that regulates the world, men and all things, can therefore be learnt and handed down. Handing down the dao is the mission Confucius was infused with. It was the dao of men more than the dao of Heaven that he was interested in. Confucius held the divine world in due respect, but also at an appropriate distance.\textsuperscript{17}

But is it really possible to learn the dao? Is this a task that anyone can undertake, or is it rather something that should be reserved for the elect few? Confucius tried to give convincing answers to these questions and their countless implications. And this is the point from which, according to my interpretation of the development of early Confucianism, the two main branches of Confucian thought derive. They correspond to the branches that Mencius and Xunzi later respectively adhered to: the doctrine of ren (humanity, humaneness, benevolence, virtue) and the doctrine of li 禮 (rites, traditional norms of ritual propriety).

Confucius maintained that love and sense of duty towards the family (firstly parents, then elder brothers and so on) were natural feelings for man. Affection and respect within the family were for Confucius primary values, the foundations of a wider feeling irradiating towards the external sphere, towards fellow-men. He assigned great importance to this feeling, which he called ren. Ren assumed the role of the greatest virtue and was considered a whole which contained all the moral qualities present in man’s heart, the distinguishing characteristic of man, implying the notion of his innate goodness. This view was shared by Mencius\textsuperscript{18} and after him by many other Confucians.

It is in one’s relationship with others that the condition of maximum virtue is made concrete and manifests itself, becoming a profound sense of humaneness, behaviour which is inspired by the broadest possible understanding and benevolence towards others. This is not a static ideal. Rather, it is dynamic in that it involves the entire process of the interior growth of the individual. This is a long and difficult path, which is none-

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibidem}, 1.2.

\textsuperscript{17} “To work for the things the common people have a right to and to keep a distance from the gods and spirits while showing them due reverence – this can be called wisdom” Confucius states in \textit{Lunyu}, 6.22. See also \textit{Lunyu}, 7.21 and 11.12.

\textsuperscript{18} Mengzi, 7B.16.
theless essential if the individual really wants to become integrated within the social context.

The family was therefore assumed to be a paradigm for the moral life of every individual and was put forward as a model for all society. According to this view, social life was studied with a complex structure of obligations founded on specific norms, the *li*, which is generally translated as “rites, ritual action, ceremony etc.” or “moral conventions, proper form, propriety, etiquette, *decorum*, norms of good conduct, traditional behavioural norms, traditional norms of ritual propriety etc.” These obligations, which recall the order found in nature and the universe, assigned everyone a specific place and role. In this way a direct link was established between the world of man and the supernatural. A rigorous respect for norms would guarantee each individual a defined position within the family and within society. The importance of the *li* was emphasised by Confucius not only because of the evident material benefits that would derive from their correct application, but above all in so far as they provided a model of life which conformed to a celestial design.

It was thanks to Confucius that the *li* acquired the meaning of ritual rules and conventions able to guarantee the individual behaviour in keeping with the full observance of a traditional cultural heritage. The religious and social nature of the traditional norms of ritual propriety was exalted by the level of solemnity they were accorded, which gave them an aura of profound sacredness, respect and awe. Not by chance did Confucius state that man should “in public behave as though you were receiving an important guest, employ the common people as if you were performing a great sacrifice.”

Hence music and dance, which were essential elements in sacred functions, assumed an important role in social life. As in a well-crafted and directed ballet, the master assigned each man, according to a pre-determined choreography, a specific role, indicating precise positions and attitudes. Each individual actor had to play the part he was given scrupulously and as solemnly as possible. The function of the master could be compared to that of a very careful director who kept an eye on and co-ordinated each action so that the final performance would be as perfect and harmonious as possible.

19 *Lunyu*, 12.2.
20 *Ibidem*, 1.12.
If the application of the traditional norms of ritual propriety were not preceded and accompanied by a honing of one's own character, they would be transformed into empty, formalistic rules, useless self-parodies, and would eventually be abandoned, thus opening society up to the risks of degenerating into disorder and anarchy. The original function for which they were devised would therefore have failed. On the other hand, if educating oneself were simply a private fact and not projected outwards, it would not benefit society at all and man would have failed the primary aim of his life. The symbiotic relationship between ren and li is thus clearly evident: the ideal state can be obtained only when there is complete harmony between ren and li – this is the perfect equilibrium, a difficult yet not impossible aim.

It must be possible to adapt rites and social conventions to the changes implied by a society that is rapidly evolving, otherwise they run the risk of being repeated mechanically as gratuitous gestures and formal crystallisations in time. This is possible thanks to *yi* 義, the ability to evaluate and recognise what is right, appropriate, correct, in keeping with the situation, the foundation of the feeling of justice which animates a man of great virtue, the basis of his heightened sense of duty, righteousness and morality itself: “The true gentleman has morality as his basic material, performs it according to the rituals, brings it forth in humility, and completes it with reliability – this is indeed a true gentleman!”

Ceremonial norms and social conventions established over the centuries should therefore be seen as the end result and synthesis of preceding choices, conditioned and determined as they have been by moral judgement. According to Confucius, it is thanks to the harmonious interaction of these principles – ren, li and yi – that man is able to dominate himself and cultivate his moral and intellectual qualities: “To discipline oneself and submit to the observance of the rites is to become a man of great virtue. If for a single day one could submit to the observance of the rites through disciplining himself, then the whole world would find virtue. However, to become a man of great virtue depends on oneself alone, and not on others.”

Cultivating one’s own qualities means applying oneself dili-

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21 Ibidem, 15.18.
22 Ibidem, 12.1.
gently to studying, which is intended “to improve oneself” rather than “to impress others”.

One has to particularly devote oneself to the acquisition and interiorisation of the *li*, which are the highest form of moral knowledge. Confucius himself had to apply himself diligently: “I was not born with knowledge but, being fond of ancient culture, I am quick to seek it.”

The process of interior maturation might last one's entire life, as was the case with Confucius who confided that “At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stance; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the will of Heaven; at sixty I listened with an attentive ear; at seventy I followed my heart’s desires without transgressing what was proper.”

A systematic and thorough study of the rich cultural heritage is insufficient in and of itself; it must be aided by thinking and reflection, one of man's peculiar faculties, which allows him to elaborate with originality and creativity what he has learnt in order to adapt it with flexible intelligence to the changing social reality he is immersed in: “If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. If, on the other hand, one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be in peril.” In this sense, Confucius is underlining the importance of studying the traditional norms of ritual propriety: “I once spent the whole day without taking food and the whole night without going to bed constantly engaged in thinking. It did not benefit me at all. It would have been better for me to have spent the time in learning.” Reflecting on the *li* after having learnt to recognise them and putting them into practice correctly is considered an essential exercise in the long path that leads to the full comprehension of the Way. It is no accident that the *Lunyu* begins with an exaltation of the sense of interior fulfilment experienced during this long and laborious path: “Is it not a joy, having learned something, to try it out at the right time?” It is thanks to the constructive interaction between thinking and learning that the individual can attain real perception, real understanding, the scrupulous rec-

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23 Ibidem, 14.24.
24 Ibidem, 7.20.
25 Ibidem, 2.4.
26 Ibidem, 2.15.
27 Ibidem, 15.31.
28 Ibidem, 1.1.
ognition of the reality surrounding him. Learning, reflection and profound knowledge are therefore distinct yet complementary components of the global project of moral and intellectual growth of the individual, which Confucius both proposed and followed.

It is over the different interpretation of the role of *si* (thinking) and *xue* (learning) in the process of interior growth of the individual that Mencius and Xunzi once again set off on different paths.

**Mencius**

Mencius gave a prevalently innatist and idealistic interpretation to Confucius’ doctrine. Faithful to the Master’s teachings, he placed great importance on the value of culture and the traditional norms of ritual propriety, intended as an indispensable premise for a valid system of social conventions. However, he assigned them a secondary role compared to the principles of humaneness (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*), which he thought were the highest expressions of the heart (*xin* 心). For Mencius, *ren* and *yi* belong to the interior sphere of man, and for this reason they are considered founding values of morality. Almost as if he wanted to emphasize their pre-eminence in respect of the other virtues, Mencius coined the two-word term *renyi* 仁義, which he intended to mean “morality”.

Love of one’s parents is innate in Mencius, just as it was in Confucius. As such, it has a primary value in man and must be extended beyond the family. According to Mencius man has an innate capacity (*liang neng* 良能) and an innate knowledge (*liang zhi* 良知). Thanks to these natural gifts, all children instinctively recognise their love for their parents and, once they have grown, their respect for their elder brothers:

What a man is able to do without having to learn it is his innate capacity; what a man knows without having to think it is his innate knowledge. Among children, there is none of them which do not know how to love their parents, and none of them when they have grown up will not know how to respect their elder brothers. Loving one’s parents is humaneness; respecting one’s elders is righteousness. What is left to be done is simply the extension of these to the whole world.\(^{29}\)

\(^{29}\) *Mengzi*, 6A.11 and 6A.1.

\(^{30}\) *Ibidem*, 7A.15.
The content of humaneness is the serving of one's parents; the content of righteousness is obedience to one's elder brothers; the content of wisdom is to understand these two and to hold fast to them; the content of the traditional norms of ritual propriety is the regulation and adornment of them; the content of music is the joy that comes of delighting in them. When joy arises how can one stop it? And when one cannot stop it, then one begins to dance with one's feet and wave one's arms without realising it.\textsuperscript{31}

Mencius gives the greatest value to xin, a term which, for the Chinese, denotes the heart and at the same time the mind. Xin is the seat of the intellectual and affective faculties, of desires and moral qualities, but above all the centre which is intended as responsible, thanks to thinking and reflection, for guiding the individual in making the important decisions which he is constantly having to make: "The office of the heart is to think. When it thinks it will find the answer; if it does not think it will not find the answer. This is what Heaven has given us."\textsuperscript{32} Mencius held that the ability to evaluate and opt for the most appropriate behaviour in each situation is not formed simply by interiorising cultural norms, but rather depends on an innate faculty of man, a real possibility that each individual, thanks to thinking and reflection, is able to realise: "Humaneness, righteousness, traditional norms of ritual propriety, and wisdom are not welded on to us from outside, they are in us originally. It is just that we have not concentrated upon them."\textsuperscript{33}

Man's predisposition to goodness, a precious gift from Heaven, is often described metaphorically by Mencius as the germ or sprout of a plant which grows until it is strong and mature. From birth, each individual has four moral impulses in his heart, called duan 端: "seeds, shoots, germs, sprouts etc." If properly tended and nourished, they develop into the four cardinal virtues recognised by Mencius: "The feeling of compassion and participation in the sufferings of others is the sprout of humaneness and benevolence (ren); the feeling of shame and dislike is the sprout of righteousness, sense of justice, and morality (yi); the feeling of deference and respect for

\textsuperscript{31} Ibidem, 4A.27.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibidem, 6A.15.
elders and superiors is the sprout of the rites and the traditional norms of ritual propriety (li); the sense of what is right and what is wrong is the sprout of wisdom (zhi 知)

Men have these four sprouts just as they have their four limbs; and since they have them, to claim to be unable to develop them is a crime against oneself; to declare your prince is unable to develop them is a crime against your prince. Each of us has these four sprouts. If we know how to expand and bring to completion all of them, they will develop like a fire that has just been lit or a spring just welling out. If one knows how to bring them to completion, it will suffice to protect all within the four seas; if one does not bring them to completion, it will not even suffice to serve one’s father and mother.34

According to Mencius, human nature, xing 性, is not complete at birth. The tendency to goodness and morality is a potential, in the form of sprouts which have to be cultivated to grow. At birth, in fact, man is able to respond only instinctively to external stimuli. Development does not take place arbitrarily, but must follow a specific way (dao). Each sprout in fact has a sort of DNA which guides it along an established path. Ad semem nata respondet: just as an oak could never grow from the peach seed, so the sprouts of virtue could never give rise to anything that has not already been pre-inscribed in their genetic code. At most, they might not grow at all, remain latent or even be repressed. If man knows how to cultivate them, then he will be able to find the Way that leads to the full realisation of self, to perfection and wisdom. A close and constant reflection on one’s own actions is the key that will allow men to understand and nourish their own sprouts of goodness. Acting in conformity with morality and reflecting on one’s own actions gives rise to an uncontrollable sense of joy, a feeling that is so strong that “one begins to dance with one’s feet and wave one’s arms without realising it”, and the moral sprouts will grow and flourish naturally and harmoniously. Moral inclinations belong to nature in the same way as the physical growth of the body does. They are so beneficial for the individual that “they manifest themselves in his face, giving it a sleek appearance; it will also show in his back and extend to his limbs, rendering their message intelligible without words.”35

34 Mengzi, 2A.6.
One does not have to follow the teachings of the philosophers, insists Mencius. It is quite sufficient to give oneself over to one's own natural predisposition and act intuitively and harmoniously with the force that regulates the world and the entire cosmos, that is qi 氣 (psycho-physical energy, vital energy, vital breath, primordial breath, élan vital etc.). Mencius re-elaborated the concept of qi, providing it with an ethical value it had formerly not had, and coined a special expression, haoran zhi qi 浩然之氣, "the flood-like qi": "A sort of qi which is utmost in vastness, utmost in firmness. If nourished by righteousness and not interfered with, it will fill the space between heaven and earth. It is the sort of qi which matches the right with the Way; without these it starves. It is generated by an accumulation of rightdoing and cannot be appropriated by anyone through a sporadic show of righteousness. If anything in one's conduct is dissatisfying to the heart it starves."\(^{36}\)

It is therefore the pure essence of vital energy which is fed by a firmness of spirit that only true gentlemen and the sage can attain when they base their every action on the principles of integrity and righteousness, which are the constitutive elements of morality. This peculiar form of qi is responsible for directly conditioning a person's character, his temperament and will. It is a fundamental component of the xin of true gentlemen, not only because its seat is the heart and it regulates its stability, but also because it is connected to the moral force (de 德) which is the basis of the masterful behaviour of the sage, the illuminated ruler and Heaven itself. It "fills the space between heaven and earth" and allows the individual to become one with all things, transcending human experience and relating directly with the entire universe. The continual accumulation of this qi produces resolution within the individual, which is the characteristic attitude of those who know they are right and are not afraid of anything or anyone, a moral courage which knows no fear, based as it is on calmness and an internal sense of sureness. These are essential elements for the unmoved mind (bu dong xin 不動心), which is proper to the sage.

Mencius identified goodness with the innate tendency in man to become good, and he considered badness, which could be defined as privatio boni rather than an effective reality counter-

\(^{36}\) *Ibidem, 2A.2.*
posed with evil, to be an independent factor in the natural qualities of the individual.\textsuperscript{37} It is significant that, in describing evil and having to indicate the opposite concept to \textit{shan} 善 “good”, Mencius never used the term commonly used in contemporary literature, \textit{e} 惡 “evil”, but rather \textit{bu shan} 不善 “not being good, not becoming good”. Evil is therefore explained in terms of “failure”, an inability to develop one’s own potential and to be in harmony with the \textit{dao}. Mencius’ was not a positive reality of evil, but only a negative one. He intended evil as something which, rather than adding, takes away from being: it is a privation, it is a “not-being-what-might-and-should-be”.

The awareness of the risk of sliding towards evil is indispensable in perfecting one’s interior growth: “If he does not clearly understand goodness he cannot become a complete person. Hence being morally complete is the Way of Heaven; to reflect carefully upon moral completeness is the Way of man.”\textsuperscript{38} Each individual has to work as diligently as possible so that the positive values that Heaven has given him at birth will come to fruition. This is why, according to Mencius, “a man who gives full realisation to his heart understands his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature understands Heaven. Retaining one’s heart and nurturing one’s nature – this is the way to serve Heaven.”\textsuperscript{39} Suffering and pain help temper the character and strengthen will. Thanks to the experience of pain, in fact, the individual is able to understand others’ suffering and thus feel compassion.\textsuperscript{40}

Mencius was convinced that “all men are capable of becoming a Yao or Shun”,\textsuperscript{41} the mythical Sage Kings of the past, as, all things considered, “the sage and we are of the same kind.”\textsuperscript{42} However, he was also aware that for most men a full realisation of their own nature is made difficult if not impossible thanks to the adverse material conditions in which all of humanity lives and the negative influence offered by the surrounding environment, which stop the individual from developing his own innate positive inclinations:

\textsuperscript{37} Ibidem, 6A.6.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibidem, 4A.12.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibidem, 7A.1.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibidem, 2A.6 and 7B.31.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibidem, 6B.2.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibidem, 6A.7.
In good years young men are mostly remissive, while in bad years they are mostly violent. This is not because Heaven has endowed men with different natural qualities. The difference is due to what lead men to restrain their hearts. Take barley for example. Sow the seeds and cover them with soil. The earth is the same and the time of sowing is also the same. The plants shoot up and by the summer solstice they all ripen. If there is any unevenness, it is because the soil varies in richness and there is no uniformity in the benefit of rain and dew and the amount of human effort devoted to tending it. Now things of the same kind are all alike. Why should we be uncertain when it comes to man? [...] Should hearts prove to be an exception by possessing nothing in common? What is it, then, that is common to all hearts? In my opinion, the basic principles of natural order and morality. The sage is simply the man who first discovered these common elements in our hearts.\(^{43}\)

Providing a basic level of well-being, which is a prerequisite to moral education, is solely the concern of the ruler. This is a responsibility he must be completely conscious of, and it is only the beginning and not the ultimate aim of wise government policy – something that the Sage Kings of the past were well aware of. In fact, according to Mencius only a true gentleman can have a constant heart in spite of a lack of constant means of support; without these constant means, the common people will not have constant hearts. Lacking constant hearts, they will go astray and fall into excesses, stopping at nothing. To punish them after they have been led to commit a crime is to set a trap for the people. How can a man of great virtue in authority allow himself to set a trap for his people? Hence when determining what means of support the people should have, a clear-sighted ruler ensures that these are sufficient, on the one hand, for the care of parents, and, on the other, for the support of wife and children, so that the people always have sufficient food in good years and escape starvation in bad; only then does he drive them towards goodness.\(^{44}\)

Mencius valorised thinking and reflection intended as a faculty of the heart, giving it the function of evaluating correctness of behaviour from the moral point of view. The heart, or \textit{xin}, was now recognised as the authority in terms of moral decisions, and not the rites and the traditional ritual norms for good conduct, or \textit{li}. Mencius attributed maximum importance to the heart’s innate ability to make the most opportune decisions. In fact, reflection affords the individual a moral auton-

\(^{43}\) \textit{Ibidem.}

\(^{44}\) \textit{Ibidem}, 1A.7.
omy which allows him to acquire his own independent conscience; it is the key which leads to the state of wisdom, which, once it has been reached, makes it possible to understand the Way. This approach, which considers culture and learning to be important factors in interior growth (even though it is not posited as the initial or basic element), is perfectly consistent with Confucius’ doctrine of ren (humanity, humaneness, benevolence, virtue).

Xunzi, however, did not feel that the idea that moral completeness could be attained through introspection and reflection was plausible or acceptable. He did not think that man was capable of moral autonomy, but, rather, emphasised the importance of studying the rich cultural inheritance offered by the past, the Classics and above all the rites and social conventions. These rites and conventions became, for Xunzi, the pivot around which the entire system embracing the political, social and moral control of the individual rotated. This is perfectly consistent with Confucius’ doctrine of li (rites, traditional norms of ritual propriety).

Mencius’ and Xunzi’s theses are therefore evidently perfectly in line with Confucius’ thought. The differences can to a large extent be seen to derive from the different emphasis placed by the two philosophers on the doctrines of ren and li, and consequently on the counterposed role of si (thinking) and xue (learning).

Xunzi

Xunzi, who painstakingly interpreted the reality of his time (on the eve of the founding of the empire), re-elaborated Confucius’ and Mencius’ doctrines in the light of the main ideas put forward by other schools of thought, which he nonetheless never tired of criticising. Before analysing his doctrines, however, it might be worth our while considering the controversial question of the authenticity of Chapter 23 of the work attributed to Xunzi, which is dedicated to human nature. Some scholars have in fact expressed doubts as to the paternity of the entire chapter, some only a few of its parts, and others more simply a few of the affirmations made in the chapter – and above all that [ren zhi] xing 人之性恶 (man’s nature is evil) which provides the title for the chapter itself, a sort of
slogan that is used almost monotonously, as if it were an antiphon, towards the end of the main sections.

My own view is that Xunzi is the author of most of the sections contained in Chapter 23, in that the great part of the ideas expressed are consistent with those found in the rest of the work. Some passages are simply a repetition of others that are found in other sections; others are paraphrases of passages found in the rest of the work; and sometimes we have an “echoing” of the terminology used by Xunzi. On the whole, the chapter is a veritable essay on the theme of human nature, deliberately constructed as a critique of Mencius and his theories. Almost certainly it was not compiled by Xunzi in its current form. It was in all likelihood skilfully constructed by Liu Xiang (79-6 B.C.), editor of the first edition of Xunzi’s work, the “Xunzi”, who “sewed together” texts which were generally homogeneous in their style, terminology and contents, trying to give some logical and systematic shape to the different sections. The essay is made up of two distinct parts (sections 23.1-5 and 23.6-8, respectively), where the second, as several scholars have pointed out, is to be considered spurious as it is clearly not homogeneous if compared to the first. This does not mean that the last three sections were not written by Xunzi: it is the fact that they have been placed at the end of Chapter 23 that seems inappropriate, or at least questionable. In the same way, other passages and sections could have been more appropriately placed in Chapter 23, such as section 19.6, which itself seems inappropriately placed in the chapter entitled Lilun (Discourse on Ritual Principles).

The so-called slogans which appear at the end of some of the main sections seem to be mere interpolations. They are not consistent with Xunzi’s style or rhetoric and, in fact, they are never found in the rest of the work nor in the spurious sections inserted at the end of the essay. It is therefore quite plausible that they were written by someone else – if not by Liu Xiang or some other commentator, then almost certainly a disciple of the more “fundamentalist” Legalist wing, as Kanaya

Osamu has proposed.\textsuperscript{46} In my opinion this is more likely than the assertion that Xunzi himself wrote the essay rather late in life, when his disillusionment and pessimism had led him to extremist positions. Without these slogans, the entire chapter would appear to be decidedly more in keeping with the tone of the rest of the work. In the philosophical literature of the classical period there is a marked tendency to reduce the doctrines of adversaries to simplified formulas, summarising their thought schematically and in an exasperated fashion albeit efficiently and suggestively. It is therefore quite legitimate to doubt that the slogans underlining the difference between Xunzi’s and Mencius’ theses are really the expression of Xunzi’s thought.\textsuperscript{47}

Lastly, we should consider the terminological question, which is often invoked in order to mitigate the “irresolvable conflict” between Mencius’ and Xunzi’s theses on human nature. It must be said that, as opposed to the West, the concept of evil in China has not been perceived or dealt with in “totalising” terms. It thus seems that the notion of “absolute evil” or “radical evil”, as it has been presented in our culture, is completely lacking in Chinese culture. In Chinese tradition evil is conceived more as an incapacity, partiality, deviation from natural principles, transgression of norms or rebellion. It is sometimes also intended as repugnant, with a very marked aesthetic characterisation, or as dangerous, and in this case it


\textsuperscript{47} This is what A.C. Graham has to say on the argument: “It is not in question that Mencius and Xunzi have complex and distinctive theories of man arising from opposite attitudes of trust or distrust in spontaneity. However, since they use their respective slogans only as convenient labels and pivots of debate, one may suspect that they had some inking that the formulae unduly simplify what they have to say. In the case of Xunzi there is good reason to doubt whether the label he pinned on himself to distinguish himself from Mencius gives an adequate idea of his position. According to Xunzi, Heaven and earth are morally neutral, and the spontaneous course of things goes neither for nor against man; the conflicting desires with which Heaven has endowed us, like the cycles of the seasons and resources of earth, are simply neutral facts with which we have to deal. Man’s nature, like his environment, has to be reduced to order if he is to satisfy his desires; but there can be no culture without something to cultivate, and aside from ‘Our Nature Is Bad’ Xunzi’s tendency is to think of nature and culture as each making its contribution to the good life.” (A.C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China, La Salle, Ill., 1989, p. 251).
would correspond to what we have defined as “natural evil”. It is, however, never represented as a cosmic force, or absolute entity, counterposed with goodness, nor as one of two opposed and incompatible divinities. The forces of evil are never figured as having any propulsive force; they are never occult, nor are they comparable to the Nietzschean conceptions of the Cyclops, the architects and pioneers of humanity. The notion of original sin is also absent. What’s more, the idea itself of sin, as it was introduced to China by Buddhism, is radically different from the notions of sin, guilt and repentance as elaborated by the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The word used in Chinese, 

which is usually translated as “evil”, certainly does not have the pregnant reverberations that “evil” and its derivatives and synonyms have in Western languages and culture. Never does Xunzi go so far as to imagine or theorise the existence of an ontological evil or, even more, of the possibility of being attracted to evil as a means unto itself, of a subservient relationship or dedication to evil 

Donna J. Munro has explained Xunzi’s concept of evil in terms of incompleteness of xing, human nature. Clearly at pains to point out the areas of agreement between Mencius and Xunzi, he was the first in the West to clearly state the terms of the problem:

The traditional interpretations often involve gross oversimplifications of the portrait of xing in the work, generally supported entirely by a few citations from the first part of the chapter “On the Evilness of Human Nature” (Xing e pian). The detailed study of the Liu Xiang text of the Xunzi made by Kanaya Osamu has brought forth interesting arguments for viewing at least the first part of that section as composed by later disciples of Xunzi working under the influence of the Han Fei school of legalism. Even in that part the repetition of the statement that the xing is evil is done partly for emphasis in criticizing the Mencius. Other facts besides the textual evidence discussed at length by Kanaya should make one extremely wary of attributing great significance to the notion of an evil human nature in any examination of the thought of Xunzi. First, there are no other references to xing as evil in the remainder of the work, which would be unusual if it were such an important idea in the thought of Xunzi. Second, the theme with which Xunzi is concerned is

48 For an overall view of the different positions assumed by the main schools of thought during the classical period on the problem of good and evil, see my Xunzi e il problema del male, cit., and La concezione del bene e del male nel pensiero cinese classico, in Del bene e del male. Tradizioni religiose a confronto, edited by Massimo Raveri, Venezia, 1997, pp. 71-91.
quite evident: how to achieve a balance of goods, which are in short supply, and human desires, which are extremely numerous, without demanding asceticism of anyone. Finally, in the rest of the work xing clearly appears not as something evil, but as something undeveloped.\(^{49}\)

Chad Hansen makes reference to the existential void that leads man to desire goodness, an aspiration that would most certainly not spring from evil, but rather from a desire to fill the internal void that man is prey to:

\[...\]

We lack any evidence that Xunzi had a Christian view of a positive evil in human nature. Whatever role the slogan [human nature is evil] might have played in distinguishing his view from that of Mencius, we more accurately characterize him as saying that human nature is neutral. It is neutral in principle as to which morality it will adopt, and it quite naturally does adopt one. The strongest coherent interpretation we can give the slogan is that humans would live in chaos and disorder without a social guiding morality. [...] All humans have a natural tendency to learn language, rituals, shared pronouncements. We are a species with a natural tendency to conformity in a common doctrine, that is, to morality. We desire good because we have that unfilled potential, a natural void in our constitution. We do not desire it because we are evil, but because we are empty. That unfilled potential is all that Xunzi can mean by evil, if he is indeed the author of that slogan.\(^{50}\)

\(^{49}\) Donald J. Munro, The Concept of Man in Early China, Stanford, 1969, p. 78. Munro has recently returned to the question, reiterating his reservations about the authorship of the Xing e Chapter. He has also underlined the numerous contradictions to be found on the theme of human nature in the Xunzi in its overall form, and has stressed that the dispute between Xunzi e Mencius has been so emphasised as to obscure the main object of Xunzi’s criticism, i.e. the philosopher Mo Di (Donald J. Munro, A Villain in the Xunzi, in Chinese Language, Thought and Culture: Nivison and His Critics, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe, Chicago and La Salle, Ill., 1996, pp. 193-201).

\(^{50}\) Chad Hansen, A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation, New York and Oxford, 1992, p. 337. Hansen is not the only one to consider Xunzi’s position on the theme of human nature to be “neutral”. On the interesting implications that this reading of Xunzi’s thought leads to, see my Gaozi, Xunzi e i capitoli 6A1-5 del Mengzi, in Studi in onore di Lionello Lanciotti, edited by S.M. Carletti, M. Sacchetti and P. Santangelo, Napoli, 1996, pp. 1275-1294, where it is propounded that chapters 6A1-5 of Mengzi, pertaining to the debate on human nature which presumably took place between Mencius and Gaozi in the 4th century B.C., were actually written only after Xunzi’s death (roughly in the second half of the 5th century B.C.), probably during the Han Dynasty, in the first half of the 2nd century B.C. This hypothesis would explain why all pre-Qin literature, except for Mengzi and a disputable passage in Mozi, completely ignores Gaozi and, more particularly, why Xunzi does so. Not even when Men-
This is precisely the sort of existential void that Xunzi appears to be referring to when, in one of the definitions of human nature that he characterises in terms of e “evil”, he affirms:

In general, the reason that men desire to be good is because their nature is evil. The mediocre desire to be excellent, the ugly desire to be beautiful, those in cramped quarters desire spaciousness, the poor desire to be rich, the lowly desire eminence – indeed whatever a man lacks within himself he will seek from without.\(^{51}\)

From this point of view, evil is not something which is of itself positive and independent; it is rather an absence, a lack, a structural void within man due to his natural imperfection qua finite creature.

Even the key term in the debate, xing, normally translated as “nature, inborn nature, original nature”, offers no small number of problems. One is certainly a transcultural problem: I suspect that it is practically impossible to find, in Western languages, corresponding terms which are less demanding or compromising than the ones normally used. There is also, what’s more, a problem within the Chinese debate itself. As different scholars have pointed out, Xunzi seems to have misunderstood Mencius’ position on human nature precisely because of a different meaning attributed to xing.\(^{52}\) Many schol-

\(^{51}\) Xunzi, 23.2b.

ars seem to agree on this point — from D.C. Lau, according to whom “Mencius was looking for what is distinctive while Xunzi was looking for what forms an inseparable part of it”,53 to A.C. Graham, according to whom “Xunzi criticises the doctrine of natural goodness from a definition of human nature which is not that of Mencius, so that his objections although lucidly argued are not quite to the point. It is indeed far from easy to locate any issue of fact on which they disagree.”54

On the basis of these considerations, let us now examine the position Xunzi assumes. Convinced supporter of an ideal model of the universe that sees man in perfect unity with Heaven and Earth, he emphasised the role of culture and education and vigorously re-affirmed the importance of the rites and social conventions (li). For Xunzi, the rites (or traditional norms of ritual propriety, as it would seem preferable to render li in most cases) are nothing other than an extension of the order present in nature: just as there are laws and principles governing the natural world, so the world of men is governed, in its turn, by models and rules. The sages have discovered and understood them and have translated them into an organic system of formal norms, following which harmony between the natural and the earthly world is assured:

Rites and traditional norms of ritual propriety are the highest expression of order and discrimination, the root of strength in the state, the Way by which the majestic sway of authority is created, and the focus of merit and fame. Rulers and nobles who proceed in accord with their requirements obtain the whole world, whereas those who do not bring ruin to their altars of soil and grain.55

Through rites, Heaven and earth join in harmony, the sun and moon shine brightly, the four seasons observe their natural precedence, the stars and planets move in ranks, the rivers and streams flow, and the myriad things flourish. Through rites and traditional norms of ritual propriety, men’s passions are tempered and find their appropriate balance, inferiors are obedient and superiors enlightened. Through a myriad


54 A.C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao, cit., p. 250.
55 Xunzi, 15.4. It is thought that this passage is part of Chapter 19.
of transformations all things become orderly; only he who turns his back upon rites will be brought to ruin. Are they not wonderful indeed?\textsuperscript{56}

Diligently studying the rites and the traditional norms of ritual propriety, following them with devotion, putting them into practice with constancy: these are, according to Xunzi, the fundamental steps in the process of education which each individual should undergo. Not all, however, have what it takes to proceed along the path in the same way. On the contrary, for most men it is an extremely difficult path to follow, and in some cases even impossible. In contrast with what Mencius maintained, according to whom thanks to thinking and reflection anyone could understand himself and concretely realise the Way indicated by the Sage Kings of the past,\textsuperscript{57} and in accordance with Confucius' assumption that "the common people can be brought to follow the Way, but they cannot be brought to understand it,"\textsuperscript{58} Xunzi affirmed that only a very small number of particularly gifted people were able to succeed where others could not: "Only he who has an understanding that is acute without limit is a sage."\textsuperscript{59}

The sage alone can appreciate the meaning and profound value of the rites and the traditional norms of ritual propriety and follow the Way. These aims cannot be attained by developing one's own inborn nature, but rather through a long and painstaking process of study and learning. Like Confucius who having "spent the whole day without taking food and the whole night without going to bed constantly engaged in thinking, without receiving any benefit at all" so that for him "it would have been better to have spent the time in learning,"\textsuperscript{60} Xunzi also "spent a whole day in thought, but it was of less value than a moment of study."\textsuperscript{61} Thinking and reflection alone, he agreed with the Master, are of little use. It is on studying and learning the rituals and the Classics of the tradition that one must concentrate. In other words, moral principles are not born in the heart, nor are they already present when we are born, as Mencius believed. They are, rather, a factor which is exter-

\textsuperscript{56} Ibidem, 19.2c.  
\textsuperscript{57} Mengzi, 6A.6.  
\textsuperscript{58} Lunyu, 8.9.  
\textsuperscript{59} Xunzi, 2.10.  
\textsuperscript{60} Lunyu, 15.31.  
\textsuperscript{61} Xunzi, 1.3.
nal to the heart, "creations of the sages", to use Xunzi's words, "things that people must study to be able to follow them and to which they must apply themselves before they can bring them to completion."

These ideas are reminiscent of those, much older, put forward by Gaozi (420-350 B.C.). He had maintained the thesis of the moral indifference, a sort of neutrality of human nature, which he saw as essentially conditioned by a few primary needs that have to be satisfied: "food and sex", to use his words, "characterise human nature." He had considered humaneness (ren) to be a feeling within the heart, and righteousness (yi), the founding element of morality, as external. He agreed with Confucius on the fact that each individual has a natural predisposition to love the members of his own family, but considered this feeling to be highly insufficient in defining man as good. Just as Xunzi was later to do, Gaozi maintained that the ability to evaluate and choose the most appropriate behaviour in each circumstance depends on the interiorisation of external factors, such as social conventions based on the rites and the traditional norms of ritual propriety learnt through education.

Xunzi gave an important role to the Classics. These, after all, are the works which admirably describe the happy age of humanity and the legendary exploits of the Sage Kings of the past. Reading the Classics allows one to extract the method of those exceptional men, give concrete form to their teachings, trying to adapt the idealised vision of that all-too mythicised age to the increasing moral and social degradation. The ideal model of society can thus be studied and learnt, and reproduced in the present:

How important are the Way of the Sage Kings of the past, the guiding principles of humanity and justice, and the pattern of life given in

62 Ibidem, 23.1c.
63 Little is known about this philosopher, but an interesting debate has developed around his figure and the role he played in the philosophical debate of the 4th century B.C. For a detailed analysis of his doctrines, see my La concezione della natura umana in Confucio e Mencio, cit., pp. 105-122 passim, and the recent study by Kwong-Loi Shun, Mencius and Early Chinese Thought, Stanford, 1997, pp. 87-126. On the relationship between the doctrines of Gaozi and those of Xunzi, see my Gaozi, Xunzi e i capitoli 6A1-5 del Mengzi, cit.
64 Mengzi, 6A.4.
65 Ibidem.
the Classic of Poetry, the Classic of Documents, the Books on Ritual, and the Record on Music; they certainly contain the most important thoughts in the world. They will cause anyone born to the world to consider the long view of things and think of the consequences, thereby protecting a myriad of generations. Their influence is eternal, their accumulated wisdom to be re-animated is substantial, and their achievements and accomplishments stretch far and wide. [...] If you use them to bring order to your emotional nature, you will benefit. If you employ them to make a name for yourself, you will gain honour. If you use them in the company of others, you will become concordant with them. If you employ them when you are alone, you will be satisfied. What could bring greater joy to your intellect than this?66

The joy Xunzi refers to is the same joy that Confucius mentions in the first passage of the Lunyu ("Is it not a joy, having learned something, to try it out at the right time?"), not the happiness that comes from conforming to morality, which makes one “dance with one’s feet and wave one’s arms without realising it”,67 that Mencius had raved about. This kind of joy, a fundamental foodstuff for the moral sprouts, was completely unknown to Confucius and Xunzi.

As common people, by themselves, are not able to realise the Way of the Sage Kings of the past, "in learning, no method is of more advantage than to associate with a man of learning."68 Xunzi gave the greatest importance to the role of teachers and the beneficial influence of their teachings. Thanks to the guide offered by good teachers, it is doubtless easier to understand the Way:

Teachers’ positive precepts are man’s greatest treasure, and their lack is his greatest calamity. If a man is without the positive precepts of a teacher, he will exalt his inborn nature; if he has them, he will exalt his acquired nature. Now teachers’ positive precepts are the result of accumulated effort and are not something received from one’s inborn nature, for inborn nature is inadequate to establish by itself a model of good order.69

It is through rituals that the individual can be rectified; it is by means of a teacher that the ritual can be rectified. If there were no ritual, how could the individual be rectified? If there were no teachers, how could you know which ritual is correct? If you behaves in confor-

66 Xunzi, 4.11.
67 Mengzi, 4A.27.
68 Xunzi, 1.10.
69 Ibidem, 8.11.
mity with the rites and the traditional norms of ritual propriety, your emotional nature would be tempered by those same norms. When you speak as your teacher speaks, it means that your knowledge has become like that of your teacher. When your emotional nature find peace in ritual and your knowledge is like that of your teacher, then you have become a sage.\textsuperscript{70}

Xunzi was convinced there was a common principle for all the creatures who live between heaven and earth: the need to associate with their fellow creatures. Man is no exception, and if anything, being the most gifted of creatures, this tendency is even stronger and comes to the fore above all in “his love for his parents which is not exhausted until death.”\textsuperscript{71} Man is the noblest creature in nature as he alone possesses yi: “the sense of what is right and appropriate”, the foundation of righteousness and morality, and fen 亖: the ability to organise society on the basis of a precise “social division, class distinction”.\textsuperscript{72} If the classes and their specific functions are based on principles of morality and justice (yi) and are regulated by the rites and the traditional norms of ritual propriety (li), then harmony will prevail in the world. If there is harmony, then there will also be unity and strength, which are determining factors in overcoming difficulties and creating well-being and security for everyone. On the contrary, if there are no social distinctions, or if they are not respected, then disorder, violence and poverty will ensue:

If all men gave free rein to their desires, the result would be impossible to endure, and the material goods of the whole world would be inadequate to satisfy them. Accordingly, the Sage Kings of the past acted to control them with regulations, ritual, and moral principles, in order thereby to divide society into classes, creating therewith differences in status between the noble and base, disparities between the privileges of age and youth, and the division of the wise from the stupid, the able from the incapable.\textsuperscript{73}

Where do ritual principles arise from? I say that men are born with desires. If not satisfied, they cannot but lead men to seek to satisfy them. If in seeking to satisfy their desires men observe no measure and apportion things without limits, then it will be inevitable to contend over the means by which their desires can be satisfied. Such contention

\textsuperscript{70} Ibidem, 2.11.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibidem, 19.9b.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibidem, 9.16a and 10.4.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibidem, 4.12.
leads to social disorder and social disorder to misery. The Sage Kings of the past abhorred such disorder, and therefore they established the regulations, the rituals and the moral principles in order to set up a division of roles, to nurture the desires of men, and to supply the means for their satisfaction. They so fashioned their regulations that desires should not want for the things which satisfy them and goods would not be exhausted by the desires. In this way the two of them, desires and goods, supported one another over the course of time. This is the origin of ritual principles.  

Vitiis nemo sine nascitur. Xunzi would certainly have agreed with Horace’s maxim. According to Xunzi, in fact, not only fen and yi but also desires, emotions and passions are constitutive elements of the heart and are part of the emotional nature (qing) of each individual. It is therefore completely natural for man to want to satisfy them. This is where evil originates; in fact, man’s aspirations and desires are many and varied, but the material resources for their fulfilment are limited. Men share the same desires and need the same things, but the means by which they can attain their goals are different because they each have a different attitude to what they desire and need: this is part of their nature. The imbalance between desires and needs on the one hand and the scarcity of goods on the other, the differences of strength and intelligence, the lack of precise divisions and functions, and the absence of clear and certain rules in the relationships between men and women are all cause for continual conflicts. If man follows his natural inclinations, if he is incapable of controlling them, then aggression and greed will prevail over courtesy and deference, violence and disorder will replace social peace and order, and principles of morality and civil cohabitation will be destroyed:

The nature of man is such that he is born with a fondness for profit. If he indulges this fondness, it will lead him to aggression and greed and courtesy and deference will disappear. Humans are born with feelings of envy and hatred. Indulging these feelings causes violence and crime to develop and loyalty and trustworthiness to perish. Man is born possessing the desires of the ears and eyes which are fond of sounds and colours. Indulging these desires causes dissoluteness and intemperance to result and basic principles of morality and civil cohabitation to perish.

74 Ibidem, 19.1a.
75 Horace, I, 3, 68.
76 Xunzi, 4.9, 4.11, 5.4 and 23.1e.
77 Ibidem, 10.1.
Hence, any man who follows his inborn nature and indulges his natural inclinations will inevitably manifest aggression and greed. This will be accompanied by violation of social class distinctions and overthrowing of the natural order, regressing to a state of barbarism. Thus, it is necessary that man’s nature undergo the transforming influence of the positive precepts of a teacher and be guided by ritual and moral principles. Only after this has been accomplished do courtesy and deference develop. Unite these qualities with the basic principles of civil cohabitation, and the result is an orderly society.\(^{78}\)

Xunzi seems to be convinced that disorder is born of conflict between different conceptions of morality.\(^{79}\) Like Confucius, he recognises that the sages had the merit of understanding the dao, of correcting their own nature to become a model for their families and the entire society, creating a complex of rites and social conventions and establishing regulations and legal models for the governing of the world.\(^{80}\) Thanks to the sages, man is in turn able to transform his own inborn nature which, it must be noted, is not evil per se, but contains some potentially negative components which, if not corrected in time, can lead to evil. According to Xunzi, it is through education, the study of the Classics, the rites and the traditional norms of ritual propriety, and a constant diligence in putting them into practice that anyone can create for himself a nature which is different from the original one. This acquired nature will be totally good, as was that of the Sage Kings of the past:

The sage gathers together his thoughts and ideas, masters through practice the skills of his conscious activity and the principles involved therein in order to produce moral principles and to set forth norms and standards. Hence, moral principles, norms, and standards are the creation of the conscious activity of the sage and not the product of anything inherent in his inborn nature. [...] Thus, the sage by transforming his original nature begins to develop his acquired nature; from this developed acquired nature, he creates moral principles; having produced them, he sets up norms and standards.\(^{81}\)

In general, the reason people honour Yao, Yu, and the true gentlemen is that they were able to transform their inborn nature and were

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\(^{78}\) Ibidem, 23.1a.

\(^{79}\) Ibidem, 3.1a.

\(^{80}\) Ibidem, 23.1a and 23.2a.

\(^{81}\) Ibidem, 23.2a.
able to develop their acquired nature, which in turn produced moral principles.\textsuperscript{82}

Transformation (\textit{hua} 化) is an essential yet always superficial operation which does not definitively alter the basis of things, but however produces a positive change: “Transformation means changing the form of things without altering their substance: although they have changed form, they are not distinguishable anew because they are actually the same in reality, they only appear to be different,”\textsuperscript{83} like the chrysalis that is transformed into a butterfly: it is still the same insect, even if its aspect has decidedly changed.\textsuperscript{84}

According to Mencius, \textit{xing}, inborn nature, can be identified with the positive potentials that man has in his heart when he is born. According to Xunzi, however, \textit{xing} is a static entity: it represents the raw material that man is made of, something that does not substantially change over time; it is the basis that has to be worked on to create a different, fictitious and artificial, yet complete and perfect, nature. The term used to indicate this procedure is \textit{wei} 偽, which means both “art, artificial, counterfeit, false” and “conscious exertion, accumulated efforts, experience”. Xunzi uses this word in both its meanings, and adds a novel meaning: “acquired nature”. It is therefore through his conscious activity (\textit{wei}) that man can transform (\textit{hua}) his own inborn nature (\textit{xing}) and his own emotional nature (\textit{qing}) into an acquired nature (\textit{wei}), which is accorded full moral value. This operation, even though it does not alter the original substance, is not simply made over in that it leads to the creation of a new and better nature, which has to interact constantly with the inborn nature: “Only after inborn nature and acquired nature have been combined does a true sage emerge, and the task of unifying the world brought to fulfilment.”\textsuperscript{85} With these words, Xunzi outlines the difference between different types of nature:

That which characterises a man from birth, that is harmonious in him, which is capable of perceiving through senses and of responding to

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibidem}, 23.4a.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Ibidem}, 22.2b.
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ibidem}, 22.74.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibidem}, 19.6. This passage very probably belongs to Chapter 23 and has been erroneously included in Chapter 19.
stimuli spontaneously and without effort – this is called inborn nature. The feelings of liking and disliking, of delight and anger, and of grief and joy – this is called emotional nature. The mind's choosing between different emotions – this is called thinking. When the mind thinks something and the action comes as a consequence – this is called conscious activity. When the thoughts have accumulated sufficiently, the body is well trained, and then the action is carried to completion – this is called acquired nature.\footnote{Ibidem, 22.1b.}

What is impossible for me to create but which I can nonetheless transform – this is inborn nature. What I do not possess but which I can nonetheless create – this is acquired nature.\footnote{Ibidem, 8.11.}

In general, inborn nature is that which is given by Heaven, that cannot be learned, and that requires no application to master. Moral principles, on the other hand, are creations of the sages. It is something you must study to be able to follow them and to which you must apply yourself before you can bring them to completion. What cannot be gained by learning and cannot be mastered by application yet is found in man is properly termed inborn nature. What must be learned before a man can do it and what he must apply himself to before he can master it yet is found in man is properly called acquired nature. This is precisely the distinction between inborn nature and acquired nature.\footnote{Ibidem, 23.1c.}

Morality is therefore not innate but a cultural fact that anyone can acquire through study and practice. Peculiar to man, however, are the ability to discern between goodness and evil and the tendency to conform to morality.

Conclusion

The doctrines of Mencius and Xunzi represent two different interpretative developments of Confucius' thought, and were destined to be present in the ensuing epochs. On the definition of goodness and evil, the followers of Confucius might have agreed with Xunzi when he affirmed that "as a rule, from antiquity to the present day, what the world has called good is integrity, accordance with natural principles, peace, and social order; what has been called evil is partiality, contravention of natural principles, rebellion, and social disorder."\footnote{Ibidem, 22.1b.} It is about
the causes from which evil originates that they did not agree, even if in the final analysis their doctrines would appear, albeit with different nuances, consistent with the Master’s thought. The differences are mainly due to the different emphasis placed on distinct aspects of his teachings.

In particular, both maintain the postulate according to which man is naturally predisposed to love his relatives, and at the same time what is emphasised is the importance of moral principles, social conventions and education. Both are optimistic in identifying a solution to the human condition. Mencius stresses the positive potentials inherent within the heart and the need to cultivate them in order to avoid a generation and subsequent propagation of evil. He exalts the doctrine of ren and yi (sometimes together, renyi, with the meaning of “moral principles”) rather than that of li, and gives the role of si (thinking, reflection) pride of place, seeing it as the foundation of and origin for an authentic independent conscience. Xunzi, on the other hand, stresses the risk inherent in the more emotional and passionate inclinations of man, emphasising more than Mencius does the doctrine of li and yi (often together, liyi 禮義, with the meaning of “moral principles”) and insisting, as Gaozi had already done, on the cultural value of xue (studying, learning), intended as the ineluctable route between man and morality. Both are, in their own way, in keeping with Confucius’ thought. It would therefore seem useless to want to establish which of the two philosophers should be considered as the authentic interpreter of Confucius’ thought – both are, in their own way.

Finally, it should also be noted that in the Chinese tradition the intrinsically positive complementarity of good and evil is accepted without too many problems. Yang Xiong (52 B.C. - 18 A.D.), in attempting to strike a compromise between Mencius’ and Xunzi’s positions, considered human nature as an indistinct whole, an amalgam of goodness and badness. Before him, Dong Zhongshu (179-104 B.C.) had associated human nature, which was potentially good, with yang 陽 – the active, luminous, masculine principle – and the desires and passions with yin 陰 – the passive, obscure, feminine principle. This vision, which side-steps the problem of seeing the two terms as clearly antithetical, was to be maintained for many centuries,

\[89\] Ibidem, 23.3a.
albeit with variations and different shades. On the contrary, in Western culture, a non-antithetical vision of good and evil would be unthinkable. Christianity identifies the Supreme Good with God. The origins of evil, its coexistence with the good and its personification in the devil (he who divides) are sources of difficulty for theological speculation and are shrouded in mystery. The gap between the concepts of good and evil is, however, annulled in the paradox of the felix culpa (present in the Lent liturgy of the Church). According to the tradition accepted by both St Paul and St Augustine and theorised by Leibnitz, God permitted evil to exist in order to obtain a greater good. Original sin, which gave rise to all evil, provoked the fall of humanity to a condition of suffering, but at the same time it constituted the necessary premise for the coming of Christ, with its consequent redemption of man.

**ABSTRACT**
The doctrines on the goodness or evilness of human nature maintained in ancient China respectively by Mencius (390-305 B.C.) and Xunzi (310-219 B.C.) has been interpreted mostly as a contradiction within the Confucian school. In this article it is argued that they represent two distinct, yet possible and congruous, modes of interpreting and re-elaborating Confucius' teachings, two opposing yet largely complementary currents which have developed within the Confucian school.

**KEY WORDS**