

# A Reasoning of Xunzi's (荀子) State Governance Ideas: A Case Study on The Theory of Human Nature (Xing性)\*

Xunzi'nin Devlet Yönetimi Düşüncesinin Temellendirmesi: 'İnsan Doğası' Teorisinin İncelenmesi

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## Abstract

Xunzi was a Chinese thinker who lived in the period of Warring States (480/403-222 BCE). He was critical of philosophical ideas in his time and brought forward ideas for establishing and preserving order in society. He created a state governance system in which rituals (li 禮) and law (fa 法) worked together. He reasoned his ideas on state governance and theories about an ideal society on his theories of human nature, and he has been criticized for his negative attributions to it. However, in the book bearing his name, Xunzi, it is seen that there are different presentations of his views on human nature. This article presents these different perspectives on Xunzi's theory of human nature and shows why he attributed negative qualities to it. It offers a better understanding of the character of his theories, in this way, enlightens the way to a better understanding of his state governance ideas.

**Keywords:** Xunzi, Chinese State Governance, Human Nature is Bad, Human Philosophy, Confucianism.

## Öz

Xunzi, Çin'in Savaşan Devletler döneminde (MÖ 480/ 403- 222) yaşamış bir düşündürdür. Kendi döneminin ve öncesinin düşüncelerini eleştirmiş, yaşadığı toplumda düzenin kurulması ve korunması için fikirler üretmiştir. Toplumda ideal düzenin kurulması için ritüeller ve yasanın birlikte işlediği bir devlet yönetim sistemi oluşturmuştur. Xunzi devlet yönetimi düşüncesini ve ideal toplum anlayışını insan doğası hakkındaki teorileri ile temellendirmiştir ve insan doğası hakkındaki olumsuz düşünceleri nedeniyle eleştirilmiştir. Ancak, kendi adını taşıyan Xunzi adındaki kitabında, insan doğası hakkındaki görüşlerinde farklılıklar görülmektedir. Bu çalışma Xunzi'nin insan doğası hakkındaki bu farklı görüşlerini sunmakta ve neden olumsuz düşünceleri olduğunu göstermektedir. Çalışmada Xunzi'nin teorilerinin karakterine daha iyi açıklama önermekte, bu şekilde, devlet yönetimi düşüncelerini daha iyi anlamının yolunu açmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Xunzi, Çin Devlet Yönetimi, İnsan Doğası Kötüdür, İnsan Felsefesi, Konfüçyanizm.

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## **A Reasoning of Xunzi's (荀子) State Governance Ideas: A Case Study on The Theory of Human Nature (Xing性)**

Xunzi's<sup>i</sup> ideas have attracted the attention of Chinese intellectuals such as Hanyu, Zhuxi, and Mou Zongsan as well as Western researchers such as Antonio Cua, David Shepherd Nivison, and Philip J. Ivanhoe. His theories were correlative and based on reasonings, whereby his works are among philosophical texts that present systematic arguments in Chinese Philosophy. His theories on state governance and the reasoning behind these theories that he set in the framework of human nature contribute to the studies of both political philosophy and human philosophy. Therefore, it is essential to analyze his ideas correlatively because, in this way, it is only possible to understand the outcomes of his theories. For this purpose, by asking the right questions and finding the correct answers, this paper aims to illuminate how to analyze his theories. A way to follow is that: Integrating rituals<sup>ii</sup> and law, Xunzi set a state governance system that establishes and preserves order in society and the state. Rituals have been the main component of this system. Other concepts in his governance system, such as law and order, have been tied to Rituals. The importance of the concept of rituals comes to light with this proposition in the book *Xunzi*: "People cannot live without rituals, doings cannot succeed without rituals, state cannot find peace without rituals" (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 2).<sup>iii</sup> In this theory, the expression that is closer to the political function of rituals is the statement that the *state cannot find peace without rituals*. An inquisition to this statement will help to understand Xunzi's reasoning of his political thought: Why cannot a state find peace without rituals? To find an answer to this question, I can start by examining his theories on human nature.<sup>iv</sup> What directs me to do that is his claims about human nature he expressed in the chapter Human Nature is Bad (Xing'e 性惡), and the human takes an important place in his theories. It is such a pitch that he was at the fore with his claims about human nature throughout the history of Chinese philosophy compared to other Chinese philosophers. He states (ibid.):

Human nature is bad, goodness is a conscious activity. Human nature innately has a favor for self-profit, once followed, it causes fights and ends devotion and obedience; it innately holds envy and hate, once followed, it causes feloniousness and treason and ends loyalty and reliability; ears and eyes innately have desires, have a favor for nice sound and color, once followed, it causes lust and chaos and ends rituals and Yi<sup>v</sup> and order<sup>vi</sup>. Such that from one's human nature and following one's emotions, conflict and contest surely occurs, therewithal social classes and order break down and violence returns. Thus, it is necessary a tutor's instructions and transformation of human nature, guidance of rituals and Yi, only then occurs the devotion and obedience, therewithal order returns results in good governance. When considered from this point of view, it is clear that human nature is bad, goodness is a conscious activity (Chapter 23).

It is clear to see his view on 'goodness': it is not innately hold nor it belongs to human nature. It is gained through conscious activity. Human nature, on the other hand, is what innately resides in human. Xunzi (ibid.) also states: "Human nature is from Tian (nature 天), cannot be learned, cannot be made" (Chapter 23). While evaluating this chapter and the rest of the book, raising a few questions, and finding answer to them could illuminate the dilemma of human nature in Xunzi's thought. For example, why did Xunzi think about human nature, did he aim to justify his political views? As Yan (2010) stated that it is considered among scholars that Xunzi aimed to challenge Mengzi's view of 'human nature is good' (p.65). Xunzi surely challenged Mengzi's view, however, he did not only aim to do that. Xunzi (2006-2022) stated: "Mengzi says: 'man learns, his nature is good'. I say: It is not so. It is not knowing human nature, moreover it is not inquiring about the distinction between human nature and conscious activity" (Chapter 23). Here it is seen that Xunzi did not agree with Mengzi. Mengzi defined human's ability for

learning as good, Xunzi, on the other hand, did not attribute any goodness to that ability. Was Xunzi's only motivation to disagree with Mengzi? Guo Moruo (1996) advocated this view and thought that: "He hurried to speak about it, therefore he often tried to be marginal, besides he barely exerted himself. His claims on human nature being bad is deliberate and against Mengzi's claim on human nature being good" (p. 229). Xunzi advocated his thoughts because he did not agree with Mengzi. Moruo, only reviewing the texts, concluded that Xunzi was clumsy, because there are expressions in the texts that are difficult to establish a meaningful unity among them. However, it will be more accurate to see it as 'he did not agree with Mengzi, he thought that human nature is bad' and evaluate his views on the grounds of his statements. There are no further statements in the texts to claim that he only aimed to hit at Mengzi. Moreover, there are other statements that we can conclude more about his views on human nature and these statements are not about teasing Mengzi. It is clear to see that with his views on human nature, Xunzi formed a basis for his state governance ideas. Yan Shi'an thought differently, and his views are more conceivable than Guo Moruo's. Yan (2010) stated that Xunzi and Mengzi disagreed on where 'morality' comes from and Xunzi emphasized the distinction between human nature and conscious activity:

While Mengzi thinks that the basis of goodness and moral consciousness is internal, Xunzi disagrees with this view, saying that human nature is evil. He argued that morality did not come from nature, but rather as a result of education gained later... Does morality, in Xunzi's words, come from 'human nature' or 'conscious activity' [?]. The main theme of Xunzi's thought is actually the theory of the 'distinction of human nature and conscious activity'<sup>vii</sup> (p. 65).

In the chapter 'Human Nature is Bad' Xunzi made a distinction between the notions of good and bad. However, that is also not his real intention. There are important points to be noted in his words. According to his statements, human nature, once followed, it causes fights, feloniousness, treason, lust and chaos. Therefore, it certainly needs to be transformed. Xunzi's ideas focused not only on producing theories, but also on putting the produced theories into practice. Xunzi was not just trying to explain what the concepts meant. What mattered to him was the issue of 'what can be done' with them or 'how to gain them'. Xunzi explored 'how to achieve the good' rather than what the concepts of good and bad meant. In the chapter 'Human Nature is Bad', he claimed that human nature is at the forefront of the elements that disrupt the order. With his views on human nature, Xunzi's purpose was to show the need of transforming it and directing it to the better, thus ensuring order in society.<sup>viii</sup> Therefore, it would be more appropriate to focus on the ideas he presented on how human nature should be handled in order to stabilize the social order, rather than evaluating his judgments only as a proposition in his philosophy.

Thomas Hobbes' political philosophy is often compared to Xunzi's ideas. Kim Sungmoon's (2011) remarks should be enough to make a relevance between the two philosophers reasoning on human nature: "Xunzi, like Hobbes, believed that strife is inevitable because of human beings' essential self-love, and that the only solution for human beings' natural predicament consists in the artificial construction of a civil political order" (pp. 291-92). As it can be understood, Hobbes thought that people's self-love would cause conflict in society and in an environment where there is no political order, people will only consider their own lives and interests, and this will cause conflict in relations with other people. Therefore, there is a need for a political structure that will control this aspect of human nature. In *Xunzi*, there are statements that show the need for a political structure in the similar sense: "If the human nature was firm, right, rational, balanced, ordered, then would there be a need for Wise Rulers, would there be a need for rituals and Yi (乂)?" (Xunzi, 2006- 2022, Chapter 23). Another statement is that: "If human nature was good, then Wise Rulers would be abandoned, rituals and Yi would be ceased; if human nature is bad, then Wise Rulers would be followed, rituals and Yi would be praised" (ibid., Chapter 23). It is seen that for Xunzi, similar to Hobbes, Wise Ruler and rituals came

about because human nature was not right and good and a political entity was needed to control it.

It is clear that Xunzi reasoned his state governance ideas on his views about human nature (Hu, 2011, pp. 51-56). However, there are also scholars, such as Zhou Chicheng, that claim Xunzi did not define human nature as bad. According to this view, the chapter on human nature is out of tune with other chapters. This position arises the need to evaluate these views and Xunzi's views on human nature scattered in different chapters. For this reason, this study expresses an opinion about how Xunzi defined human nature. The answer to be found will illuminate the connection between his political thought and his view on human nature.

### **Man Innately Has Mind (心)**

When the chapter 'Human Nature is Bad' is taken account, it is clear that Xunzi has put forward a proposition claiming that 'human nature is evil'. When the chapter is evaluated together with the book as a whole, it is seen that this statement appears only in the chapter 'Human Nature is Bad'. In other chapters of the book, Xunzi did not describe human nature as bad. <sup>ix</sup> For this reason, an attempt has been made to interpret this issue by considering the statements in other chapters of the book. The exploration of the topic can start with a statement in the chapter 'Free from Obsessions' (jiebi解弊):

The mind is the master of the body, also the ruler of the soul, gives orders but does not take. It has its own prohibitions, its own sanctions, its own losses, its own gains, its own behaviors, its own limits... The mind cannot be forced and its thoughts cannot be changed, it accepts what is right and does not accept what is wrong (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 21).

It is clear from these words that mind is free and also accepts what is true. With a free mind that accepts what is true, how can human nature be bad? Tang Duanzheng says that scholars thought that, for Xunzi, the human mind is only capable of understanding objective facts, but not of an ethical nature capable of establishing perceptible values, and he finds this interpretation unacceptable. According to him, human mind has ethical values and moral understanding. The researcher thinks that in Xunzi thought, human beings know the good (zhishan知善), love the good (haoshan好善) and have the ability to act the good (nengshan能善), they have instinctive moral consciousness (liangzhi liangneng良知良能), and have moral will (Tang, 2019, pp. 27, 38, 69, 75). Liang Tao agrees with Tang and emphasizes that mind according to Xunzi is a moral reason (Liang, 2015, 73-74). Liang Tao cites the following words from the 'Strong Country'(qiangguo强国) chapter of the book as evidence for this view: "What do people dislike? I say: Deception, conflict, greedy self-interest. What do people like? I say: Rituals [and] Yi submission [and] obedience loyalty [and] trust" (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 16). But here Xunzi explained why people do not support the rule of evil rulers. That is, what people like and dislike is the way they are treated. This does not mean that people prefer what is good in their actions. Nor does it prove that the mind likes what is good and is moral. Tang's views are erroneous for the following reasons, which I will present in three stages: First of all, in the chapter on 'Free from Obsessions', mind is depicted as empty, one and still (xuyierjing虚壹而静), not as good or bad. Second, the right and wrong (shi-fei是非) that human mind recognizes is not necessarily connected to what is ethical or good. Xunzi thought that there should be a clear distinction between right and wrong. In Chinese philosophy, shi-fei arguments have to do with ethical rules that are in the general interest of society in the past. However, Xunzi did not focus on shi-fei arguments. In Xunzi's thought, shi-fei arguments are encountered as linguistic connections. For example, it is recorded in the book as follows:

Leading people with what is good is called education, following people with what is good is called obedience; leading people with what is not good is called flattery, following people with what is not good is called submission. To say right is right and wrong is wrong is called wisdom;

to say wrong is right and right is wrong is called foolishness (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 2).

As seen here, the shi-fei sentences in *Xunzi* are expressions of ‘what is what’ and ‘what is not what’. The mind has its own right and wrong. The human mind does not accept wrong even if it knows it is wrong but accepts it because it thinks it is right. However, in Xunzi thought, human intention and thoughts are dealt with in terms of ‘one’s intention and thoughts is to follow rituals’. Apart from this, no *good/bad intentions* are taken into account in terms of the motivation point and consequences of their actions. In other words, when the mind unknowingly does bad, it is considered ‘bad’. Moreover, this does not show that the mind consciously tends towards what is good or ethical in these assumptions and acts what is good or ethical. Because the mind thinks of its own interest (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 11). Also, what each mind approves of is different (ibid., Chapter 10). So, each mind’s ‘understanding of right’ is different. Therefore, the result of the mind’s assumptions in favor of right can be good or ethical, but it can also lead to bad results. Third, according to Xunzi, one of the faculties that make humans human is their ability to discriminate (bian辨). However, the philosopher did not argue that humans can distinguish between good and bad and choose the good. One can choose the bad as well. Xunzi saw order and chaos as the result of what mind approves of. This means that what the mind approves is not necessarily what is good and brings order. On the contrary, what the mind approves can also bring chaos. As can be understood from all this, in Xunzi’s thought, the fact that human beings have mind and certain faculties, does not make human mind and faculties themselves beautiful. The human mind has the faculty of knowing, and just because human beings know the good (zhishan知善) through this faculty, it cannot be said that the faculty itself is ‘good’ or that ‘human beings have an innately good faculty’. Because with this faculty, humans can also know bad. Xu Fuguan holds a similar view and thinks that the human mind is capable of recognizing, but its actions can be both moral and immoral, and there is no absolute guarantee of this (Xu, 2001, p. 210). Therefore, in Xunzi thought, human beings do not have an ‘instinctive moral sense’ or ‘moral will’. Human mind is not innately inclined towards good or bad, and mind is neither good nor bad. In Xunzi thought, mind is only capable of moral reasoning (Dongfang, 2017a, p. 168). However, the fact that it is able to do so does not make mind itself moral (He, 1988, p. 128), nor does it show that humans are innately moral. This is entirely related to the ability of mind to think and infer. As seen so far, in Xunzi thought, the fact that human beings innately have mind does not refute the theory that ‘human nature is bad’.

### Human Nature is Plain (性朴)

Another noteworthy issue in the book is that there is another description of human nature in another chapter of the book. In the chapter ‘On Rituals’ it is recorded as follows: “Human nature, in the first essence of its roots, is plain; conscious activity, cultivated prosperous flourishing” (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 19). What should be noted in this sentence is how human nature is described. In the text, the essence/substance (cai材) of human nature is described as ‘plain/unprocessed’<sup>x</sup> by the word Pu (朴). Moreover, in this passage where ‘Pu’ is mentioned, human nature is not depicted as bad in any way.<sup>xi</sup> Does this simplicity then have anything to do with being ‘good’? The word ‘Pu’ appears in a total of nine places in the book. Four of these are related to human nature. The first one, as translated above, depicts human nature as plain. The remaining three appear in the same paragraph in the chapter ‘Human Nature is Bad’:

Mengzi says: ‘now human nature is good, then it completely loses its nature and destroys it [so it becomes bad].’ And I say: if this is true, then he is wrong. If human nature, after it is born, is separated from its **simplicity**, separated from its source, then it is definitely losing and destroying [it]. If we think in this way, then it is clear that human nature is bad. The so-called good nature does not depart from its **simplicity** but makes it beautiful, does not depart from its

source but makes use of it. The association of source [and] **simplicity** with the beautiful is [like] the association of mind [and] thought with the good” (Wang, 2018, pp. 515-516).

As seen in the text, Mengzi does not actually mention simplicity or source.<sup>xii</sup> However, Xunzi’s words contain these expressions, suggesting that Mengzi is also talking about them. Looking at the text only, for Mengzi, ‘man is born good and then loses his innate good nature’; for Xunzi, ‘according to Mengzi, human nature loses its simplicity and source’. For Mengzi, ‘this loss of man makes him bad’; for Xunzi, ‘the reason for this loss of man proves that his nature is already bad’. In this text, Xunzi evaluates Mengzi’s views. He does not emphasize whether, in his own view, human nature possesses simplicity and source. However, he draws attention to the relationship of the concepts of simplicity and source with beauty. This relationship is likened to the relationship of mind and thought with the good. As seen in the previous headline, the relation of mind to the good is not a necessary direct relation. In addition, the thinker states that ‘if human nature were good, it would not depart from its simplicity and would beautify it’. In that case, this simplicity in human nature does not mean ‘beautiful’. Because it is not necessary to beautify something that is already beautiful. It is seen in the light of this information: Xunzi’s explanations are consistent with the following statement in the following sentences of the paragraph in which he describes the substance of human nature as ‘plain’: ‘human nature alone cannot be beautiful without conscious activity’. The plain/simplicity of human nature does not describe it as beautiful. On the contrary, what is understood from these statements is that the plain/simple should be beautified. Moreover, no relation is established between this simplicity and the ‘good’. However, this does not mean that what is described with simplicity is ‘ugly’. Plain has no qualities other than simplicity in Xunzi thought. As can be seen, the ideas expressed in ‘Human Nature is Bad’ does not contradict the ideas expressed in ‘On Rituals’, but neither does it create a meaningful unity. Burton Watson nevertheless thinks that the statement in ‘On Rituals’ should probably belong to ‘Human Nature is Bad’:

This paragraph seems to have little to do with what goes before or after and almost certainly does not belong here. In wording and thought it is most closely allied to sec. 23., “Man’ Nature is Evil.” Probably five or six of the bamboo slips upon which the text of that section was originally written dropped out and were mistakenly inserted here (Watson, 2003, p. 114).

When the expressions are brought together in the same chapter, there is still no unity of meaning between them. There are also researchers who think that the expressions in the two sections have completely different meanings. For example, Liang Qixiong thinks as follows:

In his words ‘human nature is plain’, Xunzi takes ‘human nature’ as the first essence of its roots and calls it that ‘which comes from Nature’ or that ‘which is unmanufactured and but natural’. He also brings out ‘conscious activity’ with ‘rituals and Yi’ and compares it with ‘human nature’. He called the nature of this root simply ‘plain’ and ‘cannot be beautiful by itself’<sup>xiii</sup>. This is certainly not to say that it is ‘bad’. Xunzi’s statements of ‘human nature is bad’ emphasize that: ‘human nature is bad, goodness is a conscious activity’. In this sentence, he defines the ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Xunzi said: ‘in the past and now, a good person on earth is righteous, rational, balanced and orderly; a bad person is dangerous, unbalanced and disorderly.’<sup>xiv</sup> The theory, Xunzi is discussing here is the ‘human nature is bad theory’. In fact, these two theories are different (Liang, 1963, p. 52).

Liang is right because Xunzi does not describe human nature as bad when he says, ‘human nature is plain’. In this sense, this statement is different from ‘human nature is bad’. However, it should be noted here that the idea of *simplicity* does not refute the idea of *bad*.

Zhou Chicheng thinks that some scholars have presuppositions and are influenced by Xunzi’s view that

'human nature is bad' and cannot see different ideas. Zhou Chicheng agrees with Liang Qixiong that the two statements are different. According to him, Xunzi's statement does not show a pure attitude towards human nature. Zhou explains his thoughts as follows: "The theory of the simplicity of human nature does not have a pure naturalistic attitude toward human nature, but the theory that human nature is neither good nor bad does" (Zhou, 2014, p. 123).<sup>xv</sup> Zhou's argument is reasonable. Compared to a precise statement like 'human nature is bad', these words expressing the simplicity of human nature do not contain a clear description of human nature. It should also be noted that, as in the case of 'human nature is bad', there is not a clear statement such as 'human nature is plain' (xingpu 性朴) in the book. Zhou offers a different perspective on this issue. According to him, Xunzi did not delve into the discussion of 'human nature is good' or 'human nature is bad'. The importance of this question has increased with developments in history. For many thinkers of his time, this problem was not considered important (Zhou, 2014, p. 124). This view of Zhou is also quite reasonable. For Xunzi, the human is of course important, but what the thinker focuses on is that human beings cannot be expected to be 'good' without education or any intervention, rather than emphasizing that they are 'bad'.<sup>xvi</sup> This is what is emphasized in *Xunzi* in chapters such as 'Promoting Education' (quanxue 劝学) and 'Cultivating the Body' (xiusheng 修身):

He who is not aware of the precious words of previous rulers does not know the importance of education [and] research. The children of Gan, Yue, Yi, Mo [people] cry in the same way from birth, they differ in their customs as they grow up, [this is because] their education is different (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 1).

What is important for Xunzi is not the 'same' things that people are born with, but the 'different' things they are born with.

### Human Desires (欲)

In Xunzi thought, one of the issues that must be examined in order to make definitive judgments about the theory of human nature is that human beings have certain desires from birth. The chapter 'On Rituals' contains the most comprehensive information about rituals in the book. The reason for the creation of rituals is clearly stated in the chapter.<sup>xvii</sup> The chapter begins with the following notes:

How did rituals come into being? I say: people have innate desires, if they don't get what they desire, it's inevitable that they will seek, if there is no measure of boundary [and] no distinction in their search, it's inevitable that there will be strife. Strife brings chaos, and chaos brings powerlessness. The previous rulers disliked chaos, so they created rituals [and] Yi to make distinctions, satisfy people's desires, and satisfy their search (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 19).

As can be understood, Xunzi again explained the reason for the existence of rituals with a phenomenon that humans are born with. This time the subject is human desires. In the chapter 'The Correct Use of Names', Xunzi defines human desires as follows: "Human nature is from Nature; emotions are the original substance of human nature; desires are the manifestation of emotions" (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 22). Clearly, desires do not describe human nature, but human beings are born with desires. What should be noted in the book is Xunzi's attitude towards human desires. Although Xunzi sees human desires as a cause of disorder in society, he does not characterize them as evil, on the contrary, he sees human desires as a human phenomenon. The following paragraph, he states: "To seek, thinking that they can obtain what they desire, is absolutely inevitable for human emotions" (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 22). Kim Sungmoon interprets these words as follows: "Xunzi never condemns yu 欲 as a source of evil. What is evil in his view is rather the negative consequences that are likely to be brought to the person and eventually to the society under certain circumstances, given the universal appetitive

desire” (Kim, 2011, p. 299). For Xunzi, desires lead to disorder if they are not under certain limits and measures, and it is not possible to get rid of desires<sup>xviii</sup>: “Even with the Son of Nature, it is not possible for desires to disappear. Although it is not possible for desires to disappear, one can come close to destroying [them]. Although it is impossible to get rid of desires, their pursuit can be controlled” (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 22). Therefore, in order to maintain order in society, human desires must be properly satisfied. This is possible through rituals. It is recorded in the book as follows:

Rituals, then, satisfy. Foraged animal meat [and] rice up to the rafters, the harmony of the five flavors, satisfy the mouth; spices [and] the fragrance of orchids, satisfy the nose; ornate decorations carved bright jade patterns, satisfy the eye; bells drums harmonious instruments, satisfy the ear; a spacious room a secluded house wicker flooring sofa bed cushion armrest [and] table, satisfy the body. Rituals, then, satisfy<sup>xix</sup> (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 19).

As can be seen, it is rituals that bring order to human desires and thus to society. So far, the analysis of the idea of human nature in *Xunzi* has shown the following: First, the human mind is neutral in Xunzi thought. Second, the substance of human nature is simple, but this simplicity does not mean ‘beautiful’. Third, human beings have innate desires and it is possible to maintain order by satisfying these desires to a certain extent. These three theories do not refute the theory that ‘human nature is bad’. However, it is seen that the expression ‘human nature is bad’ leads to confusion. Considering this situation and the fact that the phrase appears in only one chapter of the book, one may be skeptical about the thinker’s views on human nature. Therefore, in order to make a clear argument on the thinker’s idea of ‘human being’, it is necessary to evaluate the chapter itself from a different perspective. The question to be investigated here is the following: Is there a statement in the chapter that can be clearly inferred about the philosopher’s philosophy of human nature and that is compatible with the other chapters of the book?

### **Human Nature is Bad (性恶)**

In the chapter ‘Human Nature is Bad’, the concepts of good and bad are defined as follows: “A good [person] is righteous logical balanced orderly; a bad [person] is danger-prone unstable chaotic” (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 23). It is clear that good is associated with order and bad is associated with chaos. Cheng Chung-Ying also explains his views on this issue as follows: “to say that human nature is bad is equivalent to saying that it can bring bad results or consequences and that that is undesirable from a political-social-moral point of view” (Cheng, 2008, p. 24).

For Xunzi, bad ‘means that which causes trouble in society’. Moreover, the connection between human desires and social chaos is quite clear. For this reason, one can comment on the thinker’s view of human nature by drawing attention to the following two statements: The first is the following statement in the section ‘The Proper Use of Names’: “Love, hatred, joy, anger, sadness, happiness in human nature are called emotions. The choice made by the mind among emotions is called decision. The action made by the mind’s decision and the [ability] to act is called conscious activity” (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 22). Therefore, human nature also contains emotions such as love, joy, happiness, etc., and the free mind can choose them. The second is the following statements in the chapter ‘The Sovereign’s System’:

Water [and] fire have air/breath<sup>xx</sup> but no life, grass [and] trees have life but no cognition<sup>xxi</sup>, animals have cognition but no Yi, human beings have breath, life, cognition, and moreover Yi, so they are the most precious on earth (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 9).

Here Xunzi explained the aspects that distinguish human beings from other beings with the characteristics they have from their creation. It is important to note that he emphasizes that human beings have the principle of Yi (righteousness/justice) from creation.

The first statement can be interpreted as follows: The fact that the mind chooses emotions such as love, joy, happiness, etc. does not mean that human beings would definitely act in a good way with these emotions. The result of the choice of these emotions can still be evil. Antonio Cua has a similar view on this issue. Cua thinks that the issue is about the negative consequences of these emotions, for him emotions and desires themselves are morally neutral (Cua, 1977, p. 377). This statement, then, is not against the idea that ‘human nature is bad’, but rather supports it. For man harbors an innate love of self-interest, and if he pursues it, strife [with] fight arise and submission [with] obedience disappear. When the choices of the human mind are self-interested, bad action will be the result. So not every conscious activity is a good activity. A contradiction emerges here<sup>xxiii</sup>: In the chapter ‘Human Nature is Bad’, it is seen that human nature and conscious activity are separate from each other. Moreover, the thinker says that ‘human nature is bad’ and ‘goodness is conscious activity’. When we look at the consequences of the choices of mind, we see that ‘evil is also conscious activity’. What is understood here is that human nature is influential on the choices of mind, but human mind, which is free in its choices, is not determinative on human nature. Human mind determines the quality of the results of conscious activity. Shangguan Jie also holds this view, emphasizing that the goodness or badness of human actions has something to do with human nature, but rather depends on the consequences of the choices made by mind (Shangguan, 1989, p. 40).

The second statement can be interpreted as follows: First of all, it is necessary to understand what kind of character Yi is. In the chapter ‘Strong Country’, Xunzi defines Yi as that which prevents people from committing evil and violent acts (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 16). So, it is certain that Yi is a concept that can be described as ‘good’. Li Chengyang, on the other hand, thinks that Yi is a potential capacity in human beings and argues that this potential capacity was not active before the sages created rituals<sup>xxiii</sup> (Li, 2011, pp. 55-56). In *Xunzi*, Yi and its function are not described as a ‘potential capacity’ as interpreted by Li Chengyang. However, this can be interpreted in the following way: Breath, life, and the faculty of knowing, which are said to be possessed by human beings in this text, are not things that determine the character of human nature. Therefore, the fact that humans have these and Yi by birth does not prove that human nature is not bad. The fact that humans have Yi can be interpreted as a principle that exists neutrally in humans, such as having emotions like love, joy and happiness. The problem here, however, is that the fact that humans have Yi by birth is completely contradicted by the following statement in the chapter ‘Human Nature is Bad’: “Human nature today, in fact, does not have rituals [and] Yi, ... in terms of [man’s] birth, man does not have rituals [and] Yi, [man] does not know rituals [and] Yi” (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 23).

### Conclusion

Given the interpretations and statements, the answer to the question of the character of the thinker’s thought on human nature is the following: The description of human nature in Xunzi’s philosophy is not clear, it is contradictory. However, there is no argument that suggests that human beings are innately good. Throughout the book, the goodness of human beings and the beautification of their nature are associated with their conscious activities. The answer to the question of whether there is a coherent common expression between the chapters is the following: Xunzi makes it clear that human beings, no matter what their nature is, need to be educated. For Xunzi, evil means uneducated people who cause chaos in society. Human nature, on the other hand, inclines human actions towards evil due to the sense of self-interest it harbors. According to the thinker, when one is hungry, one craves food, when one is cold, one craves heat, when one is tired, one craves rest, and when in the presence of an elder, one does not dare to get what one desires immediately. These things are realized through rituals and observance of Yi. The point he wants to emphasize is that decorum, manners and social harmony can be achieved through education. Xunzi integrated state governance with education and morality. He aimed to create

good governance through good morals and good traditions. Good traditions require developing one's morality in accordance with the traditions of society, while good governance requires creating legal systems for society. For this reason, what is important for this study is the place of the idea of human nature in the reasoning of his state governance ideas, and according to this, whether human nature is good or bad, it must be educated to ensure social order. Order cannot be established without educating and controlling human beings. In the section 'Human Nature is Bad', after stating that human nature causes chaos, the following statement is made:

The ancient wise rulers saw that human nature was bad, thought that it was danger-prone and untrue, unstable chaotic and disorderly, created rituals and Yi, established laws [and] standards, and corrected [it] by correcting [and] cultivating human emotion [and] nature (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 23).

This is also how the thinker reasoned his system of thought on 'man', in which rituals and law were the basis for bringing order to political and social life and protecting it.

## **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

### **Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval for this study is not applicable.

### **Author Contributions**

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> Xunzi (荀子): his name was Kuang (况). Some studies mention the thinker with the name Xun Kuang. In this paper, Xunzi refers to the thinker, and *Xunzi*, in italic form, refers to the book bearing his name.
- <sup>ii</sup> The concept of rituals (li 禮), in a general sense, refers to the conventions to be followed both in the government and society for peaceful and orderly rule and life.
- <sup>iii</sup> All the translations from Chinese, not otherwise cited, are my own.
- <sup>iv</sup> In Xunzi's thought, human nature (xing 性) is described as “the nature that is possessed by birth; the innate nature, its essence [and] emotional reactions as a whole, not produced but the natural one” (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 22).
- <sup>v</sup> The concept, Yi (义), means “righteousness”, “honesty” and “just”. It also means the proper/right way of action taken in accordance with rituals.
- <sup>vi</sup> The concept, wenli (文理), is often mentioned in *Xunzi*. Liang Qixiong (1963) explains it as “embroidered with rituals and Yi” (p.52). Liang Qichao (1999), on the other hand, separates the words and describes ‘wen’ as cultural heritage (wenli 文物) and describes ‘Li’ as order (tiaoli 条理) (p. 4641). The term is translated as ‘order’ in this paper, but it should not be forgotten that it is an order that contains culture within itself.
- <sup>vii</sup> There is an important point to note in Yan Shi'an's words: The researcher thought that Xunzi argued that morality comes as a result of later education. This view is frequently encountered in studies comparing Xunzi's thought with Confucius and Mengzi's thought. Researchers base their opinions on the statements of Mou Zongsan. Mou (1982) thought that in Confucius and Mengzi's thinking, man is born with the principle of Ren (仁) and morality is internal (youneizhuan- yourenyichu 由内转-由仁义出); For Xunzi, this is not the case, and morality is external since he believed that man was not born with rituals and Yi (ziwaizhuan-youliyiru 自外转-由礼义入) (p. 120). According to this view, human morality needs to follow rituals in Xunzi thought and without rituals one cannot be moral. This view also has led researchers to different ideas on the origins of rituals. For detailed information, see (Dongfang, 2017b, pp. 14-25).

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<sup>viii</sup> Xunzi is not the only thinker who reflects on the nature of human nature and develops his state philosophy based on it. Social and political order, morality and virtue etc. were related with human nature both in Chinese and Western philosophies. The view that everything is related to ‘human’ and that everything can be explained by knowing and explaining ‘human’ have also been influential in both traditions. As a matter of fact, it is emphasized in the book, *Xunzi*, that man is “the most precious thing on earth” (Xunzi, 2006- 2022, Chapter 9).

<sup>ix</sup> Except for the chapter ‘Human Nature is Bad’, there is no reference to Xing’e (性恶) in any part of the book.

<sup>x</sup> The reason for using the word ‘plain’ for Pu (朴) in the translation is to correspond with the word wenli (文理) in the description of conscious activity. The word wenli here means that which is embodied with cultural heritage and principles. The word pu can also mean simple and is used in some places according to the flow of the sentence.

<sup>xi</sup> However, in the next sentence of the paragraph, it is noted that human nature alone cannot be beautiful without conscious activity. Therefore, the plain/unprocessed state of human nature before conscious activity is not beautiful!

<sup>xii</sup> The word Pu (朴) does not appear in the Mengzi texts either. The link to the book is given in the bibliography.

<sup>xiii</sup> “Human nature alone cannot be beautiful without conscious activity” Liang Qixiong refers to this sentence here.

<sup>xiv</sup> This is how good and bad are described in the 23rd Chapter.

<sup>xv</sup> Zhou also states in his study that he thinks that the chapter ‘Human Nature is Bad’ does not belong to Xunzi. To prove his ideas, he cites both the contradictions in the book and shows the fact that scholars such as Sima Qian and Dong Zhongshu, who lived in the Han Dynasty and gave information about Xunzi, never mentioned it.

<sup>xvi</sup> It is recorded in the book as follows: “human nature alone is not sufficient to establish order” (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 8).

<sup>xvii</sup> Scholars consider this text as the origin/ basis (laiyuan/qiyuan来源/起源) of the rituals. However, as can be seen from the text, the ‘reason’ (liyuan理由) for the creation of rituals is explained here. Hui Jixing agrees: “Scholars haphazardly assume that Xunzi’s words explain the basis (qiyuan起源) of rituals. But the basis (qiyuan起源) that Xunzi mentions here is the reason for the production of rituals in terms of its function and purpose” (Hui, 1996, p. 47).

<sup>xviii</sup> For Xunzi, there is no need to get rid of desires anyway: “Those who say that order can only be based on getting rid of desires are those who cannot direct their desires and are slaves to their desires” (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 22).

<sup>xix</sup> The text mentions various instruments and objects of the period. For the English translation, the instruments are named in general terms.

<sup>xx</sup> Qi (气): literally translated as ‘air’, this concept is encountered in Chinese thought as ‘life’, ‘breath’ and vitalizing ‘energy’. Qi refers to the movement between Tian and Earth, the coming into existence of being and the balance between Tian and Earth. Man also possesses Qi, and he who balances his Qi balances his soul and nature. In *Xunzi*, Qi is encountered in the idea of ‘training the body’. For more information on Qi, see: (Guo, 2006, p.20)

<sup>xxi</sup> Zhi (知): the ability to know, to understand, and understanding. This is innate in the human mind.

<sup>xxii</sup> Another of these contradictions is the following: According to ‘Human Nature is Bad’, human nature is bad, while according to ‘The Correct Use of Names’, ‘Harm to human nature is called disease’ (Xunzi, 2006-2022, Chapter 22). If the two statements are combined, then what is harmful to ‘bad human nature’ is also called disease. The fact that illness would be undesirable shows that Xunzi does not desire any change in human nature. Of course, if the word xing (性) here is thought of as the body structure that comes from nature, as in the chapter ‘Webbed Toes’ (pianmu骈拇) in the Zhuangzi book, this contradiction will disappear. A link to the Zhuangzi book is provided in the bibliography.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Nivison takes a similar view. The researcher defines Yi as an ‘unfilled’ capacity. He emphasizes that Yi is the capacity of people to feel and think morally (Nivison, 1996, p. 213).