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# A Discussion of Xunzi's "Encouraging Learning" and Its Significance for Confucianism

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## Abstract

Much of Xunzi's philosophy can be characterized as a deepening of themes introduced by Confucius and, at the same time, a reaction against Mencius' brand of Confucianism. For Xunzi, the idea of learning was a critical concept in achieving both of these goals. In Xunzi's philosophy, learning is not simply the accumulation of knowledge but, rather, the process of coming to understand morality as a lifelong process of self-cultivation and self-improvement. Xunzi did not agree with Mencius that human nature was inherently good; instead he believed that human nature was bad, which is why individuals must actively learn to control their base desires. It is no coincidence that, in Xunzi's project of self-cultivation based on learning to overcome one's primal nature, chapter 1 of his anthology is "Encouraging Learning." Reexamining the respective moral philosophies of Xunzi and Mencius from the perspective of learning and its role in moral cultivation can provide a deeper understanding of their overall philosophy.

## Keywords

Confucianism learning – Mencius – moral philosophy – Xunzi

The *Complete Library of the Four Treasures* [*Siku quanshu zongmu* 四庫全書總目] says:

Xun Kuang's works aimed at illuminating the teachings of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius. He honored ceremony and valued learning. He believed that the nature of man is evil and that goodness is learned

through conscious effort. He feared that people would take to heart the theory of Mencius, that the nature of man is good, and would rely on their natural tendencies and neglect acquired learning. Thus in his writings, he claimed that nature is unreliable and that man should strive constantly to follow the teachings of the sage kings.<sup>1</sup>

Adding the phrase "changing the innate nature while engaging in self-cultivation"<sup>2</sup> to the line "[He] aimed at illuminating the teachings of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius" would yield a comprehensive description of Xunzi's 荀子 [340-245 BCE] philosophy.

Xunzi was a Confucian master of the late Warring States period [475-221 BCE], and his teachings can be best understood in the context of a dialogue with his contemporaries, among them scholars of Confucianism and other traditions within the Hundred Schools of Thought. In particular, many of Xunzi's teachings can be viewed as reactions to Mencius, such as Xunzi's belief that man's nature is evil. This paper seeks to examine the differences between Xunzi and Mencius from a new angle, based on Xunzi's "Encouraging Learning [Quan xue pian 勸學篇]."

### Encouraging Learning

"Encouraging Learning" is chapter 1 of 32 in *Xunzi*. This sequence was established by the Han dynasty scholar and author Liu Xiang 劉向 [77-6 BCE]. It is worth considering whether this ordering has a deeper meaning. In the ancient texts, special significance was generally attributed to the initial text in an anthology, such as "Fair, Fair Cry the Ospreys" in the *Book of Songs* "Tian Kun" in the *Yi zhuan*, chapter 1 of *Laozi*, and "Free and Easy Wandering" in *Zhuangzi*. Later scholars believed that these works highlighted the themes of their respective anthologies.

In fact, the structure of *Xunzi* is similar to that of the *Analects*. The *Analects* begins with "To Learn, and Then [Xue er pian 學而篇]" and ends with "Emperor Yao Said [Yao yue pian 堯曰篇]" while Xunzi opens with "Encouraging

1 況之著書，主於明周孔之教，崇禮而勸學。至其以性為惡，以善為偽，誠未免於理未融，然卿恐人恃性善之說，任自然而廢學，因言性不可恃，當勉力於先王之教 (Yong Rong 永瑢 et al., *Siku quanshu zongmu* 四庫全書總目 [*The Complete Library of the Four Treasures*] [Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1965], 770).

2 化性而起偽。Wang Tianhai 王天海, "Xing 性惡," in *Xunzi jiaoshi* 荀子校釋 [*Interpretations of Xunzi*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2005), 942.

Learning” and ends with “Writings of Emperor Yao [Yao wen pian 堯問篇].” This does not appear to be a coincidence: Because the order of the *Analects* was set before *Xunzi* was written, the compilers of the latter appear to have been deliberately imitating the *Analects*. In addition to having similar composition, both works emphasize the theme of attaining enlightenment through learning. The foundations of this philosophy emerged in the *Analects* and were later made explicit in *Xunzi*. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that “Encouraging Learning” appears at the beginning of *Xunzi*. With this sequencing, the book forms a complete and coherent philosophy based on the importance of learning.

From a critical perspective, “Encouraging Learning” has a distinct purpose. It highlights Mencius’ 孟子 [385-304 BCE] tendency to overemphasize thought or reflection [*si* 思]. It also displays Xunzi’s and Mencius’ differing interpretations of innate nature [*xing* 性] and *xin* 心 [a concept that is generally translated as heart, but which contains elements of the heart, mind, and intention]. Because of these conflicting interpretations, “Encouraging Learning” plays an important role in the history of Confucianism, an issue to which we return shortly.

Broadly speaking, “Encouraging Learning” is a discussion of learning [*xue* 學]. As the chapter unfolds, the reader realizes that Xunzi’s interpretation of learning is not simply the accumulation of knowledge but, rather, the process of understanding existence and morality. It is a constant, lifelong process of self-cultivation and self-improvement: “Thus, if wood is pressed against a straightening board, it can be made straight; if metal is put to the grindstone, it can be sharpened.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly: “If the gentleman studies widely and each day examines himself, his wisdom will become clear and his conduct be without fault.”<sup>4</sup>

If we understand wisdom as moral knowledge, and faultless conduct as the ability to act according to this moral knowledge, then this ability is not innate. Rather, it is achieved only through learning. Xunzi believed that man is the product of his environment: “Children born among the Han or Yue people of the south and among the Mo barbarians of the north cry with the same voice at birth, but as they grow older they follow different customs. Education causes them to differ.”<sup>5</sup>

3 木受繩則直，金就礪則利 (Burton Watson, *Xunzi: Basic Writings* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2012], 17).

4 君子博學而日參省乎己，則知明而行無過矣 (ibid., 17).

5 幹越、夷貉之子，生而同聲，長而異俗，教使之然也 (ibid.).

This is similar to Confucius' 孔丘 [551-479 BCE] maxim that "We're all the same by nature. It is habits that make us so different."<sup>6</sup> Xunzi and Confucius both emphasize the value of conscious activity, particularly learning. It is this acquired learning that determines the direction of man's development. This is not something that happens overnight. Xunzi viewed learning as a process of accumulation: "Pile up earth to make a mountain, and wind and rain will rise from it. Gather water to make a deep pool, and dragons will appear. Pile up good deeds to create virtue, and godlike understanding will emerge by itself; there the mind of sage will find completion."<sup>7</sup> This "piling up" represents not the accumulation of knowledge but, rather, the accumulation of virtue. As for the content of moral learning, it is found in the words of the sage kings: "If you do not hear the words handed down from the ancient kings, you will not understand the greatness of learning."<sup>8</sup>

According to "Encouraging Learning," learning has two layers.<sup>9</sup> The first layer deals with the sequence of subjects, beginning with a proper education in the Confucian classics and ending with the learning of ritual. By "classics," Xunzi means the *Book of Songs* and *Book of Documents*, generally considered the most important of the Confucian classics. The phrase "[learning] culminates in etiquette" indicates the proper sequence of study, while providing another opportunity to emphasize the importance of ritual. On the surface, this sequence seems to echo Confucius's exhortation to "be incited by the Songs, established by ritual, and perfected by music."<sup>10</sup> However, the two philosophies are quite different in spirit, especially in how they approach the intention of study: to transform oneself from a scholar into a sage.

According to Xunzi, cultivation is divided into three stages: scholar [*shi* 士], gentleman [*junzi* 君子], and sage [*shengren* 聖人]. The ultimate purpose of learning is to become a sage. At the end of the chapter, Xunzi describes the sage as a "complete man [*chengren* 成人]."<sup>11</sup> Mencius also described Confucius as a "perfect man,"<sup>12</sup> in the sense that his character was fully developed. Thus

6 性相近也，習相遠也 (David Hinton, *Analects* [Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2014], 154).

7 積土成山，風雨興焉；積水成淵，蛟龍生焉；積善成德，而神明自得，聖心備焉 (Watson, *Xunzi*, 18).

8 不聞先王之遺言，不知學問之大也 (ibid.).

9 See "Quanxue pian diyi 勸學篇第一 [Encouraging Learning]," in Wang, *Xunzi jiaoshi*, 22-23.

10 Hinton, *Analects*, 84.

11 Watson, *Xunzi*, 21.

12 孔子謂之集大成 (Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 [Collected Annotations on Sishu] [Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983], 315).

the purpose of learning does not lie outside oneself in the physical world but, rather, in one's own self. According to Xunzi:

The learning of the gentleman enters his ear, clings to his mind, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions. His smallest word, his slightest movement can serve as a model. The learning of the petty man enters his ear and comes out of his mouth. With only four inches between ear and mouth, how can he have possession of it long enough to ennoble a full-grown body? In old times, men studied for their own sake; nowadays men study with an eye to others. The gentleman uses learning to ennoble himself; the petty man uses learning as a bribe to win attention from others.<sup>13</sup>

The difference between the learning of the gentlemen and that of the petty man, then, is that the learning of the petty man is superficial. For the former, learning is something that is manifested throughout his entire being as the result of long and genuine effort. Because of this, the best way to learn is to “associate with those who are learned.”<sup>14</sup> Xunzi means that learning is not simply transmitted through words or objects. Through the complete man, such as the sage or wise king in ancient times, we can understand the character of the ideal man. In Xunzi's view, this is the best path. He believed that mindlessly adhering to the classics of the past is useless. They must be connected with life to be relevant.<sup>15</sup>

The most important element of Xunzi's school is honoring ritual [*longli* 隆禮]: “Therefore I say that in learning nothing is more profitable than to associate with those who are learned, and of the roads to learning, none is quicker than to love such men. Second only to this is to honor ritual.”<sup>16</sup> For Xunzi, the intention behind learning is key. It is only through honoring ritual that one can understand the subtleties of the ancient texts. Otherwise, even if a man spends an entire day studying, nothing will come of it. For this reason, Xunzi criticizes “those shallow scholars who are only able to explain the *Book of Songs* and the

13 君子之學也，入乎耳，著乎心，布乎四體，形乎動靜，端而言，蠕而動，一可以為法則。小人之學也，入乎耳，出乎口，口耳之間則四寸耳，曷足以美七尺之軀哉？古之學者為己，今之學者為人。君子之學也，以美其身；小人之學也，以為禽犢 (Watson, *Xunzi*, 19).

14 近其人 (ibid., 19).

15 See “Quanxue pian diyi,” in Wang, *Xunzi jiaoshi*, 18.

16 學之經莫速乎好其人，隆禮次之 (Watson, *Xunzi*, 19).

*Book of Documents*," "those who do not honor ritual," and "scholars without principles."<sup>17</sup>

Although Xunzi's philosophy initially appears to be a separate school of thought, its true character is Confucian. "Encouraging Learning" is intended for other Confucian scholars. We know that after Confucius died, his school split into eight branches.<sup>18</sup> Although Xunzi does not explicitly define what he often referred to as "false Confucianism," we can infer that he means the teachings of Mencius and Zisi, the grandson of Confucius. The unearthed Confucian text *Five Actions* [*Wuxing*] draws heavily from the *Book of Songs* [*Shijing* 詩經], as does Zisi's 子思 [483-402 BCE] *Doctrine of the Mean* [*Zhongyong* 中庸]. According to the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 [145-90 BCE], by studying these two books carefully, one can understand the entire philosophy of Confucius.<sup>19</sup> However, the quotations that Zisi cites from the *Book of Songs* and *Doctrine of the Mean* advocate the study of the heart, rather than the study of ritual, which was the focus of Confucius. For this reason, Xunzi considered Zisi one of the "false Confucians" who "do not follow rituals."<sup>20</sup>

"Encouraging Learning" includes several concepts important for understanding Confucianism. First, Xunzi's understanding of learning is not based on education or self-cultivation; rather, it is based on the fundamental nature of existence. Various sayings, from "one should not stop learning"<sup>21</sup> to "at death one finally stops learning,"<sup>22</sup> illustrate that learning begins with birth and ends at death. Learning is the way to attain a moral life. Therefore, learning can be seen as the central element of Xunzi's philosophy. Second, his emphasis on learning is based on the assumption that man is innately defective and needs to be reshaped through acquired effort.

As for the specifics of these "defects," interpretations vary. Xunzi believed that the nature of man is evil. Evil represents the flaws inherent in man, which must be improved through learning. Specifically, these defects are the areas in which man requires outside help to improve himself. Relying on his natural development is not enough to cure these defects, so learning requires

17 順《詩》《書》。陋儒。不隆禮。散儒。 See "Quanxue pian diyi," 25-26.

18 儒分為八。Zhou Xunchu 周勳初, "Xianxue pian 顯學篇," in *Han Feizi jiaozhu (xiu ding ben)* 韓非子校注(修訂本) [*Annotation on Han Feizi*] (Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing House, 2009), 568.

19 Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shi ji* 史記 [*Records of the Grand Historian*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2011), 2065.

20 不道禮憲。散儒。 See "Quanxue pian diyi," in Wang, *Xunzi jiaoshi*, 36.

21 學不可以已 (ibid., 1).

22 學至乎沒而後止也 (ibid., 22).

“excelling at the use of tools”: “A gentleman is not born with gifts but, rather, a talent for using the tools available to him.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, learning must have a clear focus. This is seen in Mencius’ axiom that “All the ten thousand things are complete within me. To turn within to examine oneself and find that one is sincere—there is no greater joy than this.”<sup>24</sup> Here, Mencius is also advocating thought or reflection [*si* 思]. Xunzi, by contrast, is suspicious of reflection: “I once tried spending the whole day in thought, but I found it of less value than a moment of study.”<sup>25</sup> If we consider this statement as part of a dialogue with Mencius, its meaning quickly becomes clear.

### The Work of Reflection

As noted above, “Encouraging Learning” has a clear purpose. It is intended as a commentary on Mencius’ teachings regarding reflection. Here it is worth distinguishing between learning and reflection. Confucius most famously compared the two concepts when he said, “To learn and never think—that’s delusion. But to think and never learn—that is perilous indeed!”<sup>26</sup> Confucius argued that one should love learning but also engage in active reflection, emphasizing both equally. But beginning with Zisi, reflection began to be emphasized over learning. The texts most representative of this phenomenon are the bamboo and silk manuscripts of the *Five Actions*, discovered in the past few decades. Most scholars believe that they were written by Zisi or another member of the school of Zisi. The silk manuscripts of the *Five Actions* contain both the canon [*jing* 經] and the explanations [*shuo* 說], while the bamboo manuscripts contain only the canon. This section explores the relationship of the five aspects of conduct—benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and honesty—to the heart. The Way of Heaven and the Way of Man described in the *Five Actions* are based on the concept of forming these concepts within the heart, and reflection is critical to this philosophy.

The *Five Actions* argues that if reflection does not succeed in attaining a certain state, it cannot form the basis for virtue. Here, virtue refers to a state in which the five aspects are formed within the self:

23 君子生非異也，善假於物也 (ibid., 9).

24 萬物皆備於我矣，反身而誠，樂莫大焉 (William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1999], 715-717).

25 吾嘗終日而思矣，不如須臾之所學也 (Watson, *Xunzi*, 17).

26 Hinton, *Analects*, 84.

When benevolence forms within your heart, it is called virtuous conduct. If benevolence is not formed within, it is called a mere act. When righteousness forms within your heart, it is called virtuous conduct. If righteousness is not formed within, it is called a mere act. When ritual forms within your heart, it is called virtuous conduct. If ritual is not formed within, it is called a mere act. When wisdom forms within your heart, it is called virtuous conduct. If it is not formed within, it is called a mere act. When honesty forms within your heart, it is called virtuous conduct. If honesty is not formed within, it is called a mere act.<sup>27</sup>

“Formed within” means to be rooted in the heart, mind, or inner being. Virtue is not a superficial state; it is dependent on the demands of the internal being. If these conditions are met, virtuous actions provide a sense of peace and joy. At the same time, virtue has been described as the Way of Heaven, as distinguished from the Way of Man, which deals with how to be a good person.<sup>28</sup> The difference between virtue and good, or the Way of Heaven and the Way of Man, depends on whether the object of virtue has a spirit.

According to the *Five Actions*: “If a noble man’s inner heart lacks concern, then he will lose his inner heart’s wisdom. If his inner heart lacks wisdom, his inner heart will lack happiness. If his inner heart lacks happiness, he will not be at ease. Not being at ease, he will lack joy and, without joy, he will lack virtue.”<sup>29</sup> Thus concern, wisdom, and happiness are necessary conditions for virtue, so internal reflection is necessary to achieve virtue and to form virtue within.

What interests us now is how the Zisi school interpreted the concept of reflection. First, it is clear that reflection is closely related to the heart. Second, since the heart has no fixed intention, the direction of the heart’s activity must be specified. As Confucius said, “The *Book of Songs* contains three hundred

27 仁形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之行；義形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之行；禮形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之行；知形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之行 (Kenneth Holloway, “The Five Aspects of Conduct: Introduction and Translation,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 15, no. 2 [2005]).

28 *The Five Actions*: “Goodness is the way of man, while virtue is the way of Heaven” [*Shan, ren dao ye; de, tian dao ye* 善，人道也；德，天道也]. Here, the Way of Man and the Way of Heaven are distinguished by the concept of “forming within.” Because of this, Heaven and heart are closely related. Following this logic leads to Mencius: “Sincerity is the way of Heaven” [*Cheng zhe, tian zhi dao ye* 诚者，天之道也] (ibid.).

29 君子無中心之憂則無中心之智，無中心之智則無中心之悅，無中心之悅則不安，不安則不樂，不樂則無德；君子無中心之憂則無中心之聖，無中心之聖則無中心之悅，無中心之悅則不安，不安則不樂，不樂則無德 (ibid.).



songs, but this one phrase tells it all: thoughts are never twisty,<sup>30</sup> that is, without direction. In the *Five Actions*, the five aspects of conduct determine the direction of thought. “Forming within” is not simply a process of rooting the five elements in the internal being; rather, it is also a process of giving direction to the internal being. In the *Five Actions*, reflection is separated into the directions of “clear,” “extended,” and “light.” What does it mean for thoughts to be clear, extended, or light?

According to the *Five Actions*, “fine” or “refined” thought is humane thought.<sup>31</sup> Through clarity and insight, man experiences the moral states of calm, warmth, happiness, grief, affection, and love. Then, man attains the “state of jade,” which is the external manifestation of these internal virtues.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, the state of jade is the external manifestation of benevolence. According to Confucius, “the superior man engages in nine types of reflection,” one of which is “laboring to have a warm expression on the face.”<sup>33</sup> According to the *Five Actions*, “jade” is a state in which the subject has undergone an internal transformation in order to manifest externally the state of being warm, gentle, and moist. It is attained through a series of subtle reflections. From the state of calm through the state of love, these are all subtle emotional changes in the inner soul. This is why humane thought is fine thought. Similarly, “extended thought” and “light thought” are intelligent thought and enlightened thought. “Extended thought” is thought that extends outside the self, as would be practiced by a sage. “Light thought” is thought that ascends as one understands the Way of the Gentleman. The same can be said of wise or ritual thought. For all five aspects of conduct, reflection is seen as the way to form virtuous actions within. It is only through reflection that these virtues can be connected to the heart and thus manifest themselves in the physical world.

The Master said: “Is humanity really so far away? We need only want it, and here it is!”<sup>34</sup> Most of Confucius’ teachings deal with human relations, but here he delves into the realm of reflection. This is the first time that this subtle distinction between different types of thought appears in the Confucian texts. It

30 《詩》三百，一言以蔽之曰：思無邪 (Hinton, *Analects*, 42).

31 See Li Ling 李零, *Guodian chujian jiaoduyi (zeng ding ben)* 郭店楚簡校讀記 (增訂本) [*Notes on Guodian Bamboo Slips*] (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2007), 101.

32 In traditional Chinese culture, precious stones were imbued with anthropomorphic qualities and virtues.

33 君子有九思。色思溫 (Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu jishi 論語集釋* [*Collected Interpretations of the Analects*] [Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1990], 1159).

34 仁遠乎哉？我欲仁，斯仁至矣！ (Hinton, *Analects*, 42).

is important to note that these distinctions refer to the internal world rather than the external physical world.

Echoing Confucius's teachings, in the *Five Actions* the capacity for reflection is analogous to humanity: "Ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and feet, these are the six that the mind employs. If the mind says yes, none dare not say yes. If it [says to] agree, none dare disagree. If it [says to] advance, none dare not advance. If it [says to] withdraw, none dare not withdraw. If it [says to] go deep, none dare not go deep. If it [says to] go shallow, none dare not go shallow."<sup>35</sup> Here the *Five Actions* draws a dichotomy between the heart and the five sensory organs: the heart is of central importance and directs the other organs. The Warring States philosophers, including Mencius, Zhuangzi 庄子 [365-290 BCE], Guanzi 管子 [723-645 BCE], and Xunzi all had similar philosophies. But from a historical perspective, these scholars were some of the earliest proponents of this philosophy. Since the concept of "forming within" is central to the *Five Actions*, it is only natural that the concept of the heart-mind is at the core of its philosophy.

The question of whether Zisi and Mencius constitute their own school of philosophy is still disputed. What is undeniable is that Mencius was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Zisi, to which he added his own ideas. Reflection was seen as an important function of the heart-mind, which is why he said that "the heart has the function of reflection."<sup>36</sup> From the perspective of reflection, Mencius divides the human spirit into two parts. The first is the heart-mind with the capacity for reflection, also known as the greater part [*dati* 大體]. The second part consists of the organs that lack the capacity for reflection, such as the ears and eyes, also known as the smaller part [*xiaoti* 小體].<sup>37</sup> The purpose of reflection is to allow one to separate the self from others. In separating the self from others, one can understand the essence of existence and confirm one's own independence and subjectivity. The eyes and the ears do not have the capacity for reflection, so they do not possess a "self" and do not have a sense of the distinction between the self and the other. Therefore, when the eyes and ears make contact with the outside world, they are incapable of resisting its influence. But the heart-mind is different; it can use reflection to confirm its independent existence and to comprehend that the five virtues are inherent within it: "Benevolence, righteousness, ritual,

35 耳目鼻口手足六者，心之役也。心曰唯，莫敢不唯；諾，莫敢不諾；進，莫敢不進；後，莫敢不後；深，莫敢不深；淺，莫敢不淺 (Holloway, "The Five Aspects of Conduct," 179-198).

36 心之官則思 (Zhu, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, 335).

37 Ibid.

wisdom, and honesty, these are not endowed upon me, rather they are inherent within me. If it does not seem to be so, it is only because we do not take note of them.”<sup>38</sup>

In the *Five Actions*, benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and sagacity can only be connected to the heart-mind through reflection. Mencius took this philosophy a step further: through reflection, the heart-mind realizes that benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and sagacity are inherent qualities. They are endowed by Heaven, so they cannot be rooted in the internal self even through conscious effort.

Here we find that Mencius' concept of the heart-mind is multilayered. The first layer, the conscience or the original mind, consists of the compassionate heart, the shameful heart, the deferential heart, and the heart of right and wrong.<sup>39</sup> The second layer is the subjective heart with the capacity for reflection. For Mencius, these two separate layers are contained within one heart. It is only through the reflecting heart that the conscience is manifested. Mencius quotes Confucius: “If you consciously employ it, it exists. If you unconsciously abandon it, it will be lost. It is hard to know whether it will turn inward or outward at any given time. No doubt this describes the heart-mind?”<sup>40</sup> Spiritual cultivation, then, determines whether one exists as a conscious being. For Mencius, to do is to reflect. Therefore, the goal of learning is to maintain and expand one's innate conscience through conscious reflection. “The Way of Learning is none other than to seek one's lost conscience,”<sup>41</sup> and the means of seeking is to embrace reflection and concentration. If one abandons reflection in favor of learning, the heart-mind will be lost.

Mencius used the same standard to distinguish the “heaven-appointed officer” from the “officer appointed by man,”<sup>42</sup> and to distinguish the noble from the lowly man. The difference lies in whether they have the capacity for reflection. Honors bestowed by Heaven are innate, while honors bestowed by man are external. Furthermore, if so-called nobility is bestowed by man, it can also be taken away by man. The fundamental character of the two can be understood only through reflection. Without reflection, there is no way to understand an innate morality that is more important than external honors.

38 仁義禮智，非由外鑠我也，我固有之也。弗思耳已 (ibid., 328).

39 Ibid.

40 ‘操則存，舍則亡，出入無時，莫知其向。’惟心之謂與？ (ibid., 331).

41 學問之道無他，求其放心而已矣 (ibid., 334).

42 天爵，人爵 (ibid., 336).

Studying Mencius, one finds that reflection is no longer confined to the realm of conscious effort. Rather, it has become part of man's fundamental nature. This is expressed most clearly in the statement "Sincerity is the Way of Heaven. Reflecting on sincerity is the Way of Man."<sup>43</sup> This represents the establishment of a new school that used meteorological phenomena to symbolize the Way of Heaven, thus distinguishing Mencianism from Daoism and other schools of thought. The essence of this new perspective was linking the Way of Heaven, which is sincerity, with the heart-mind. The reason was that the Way of Heaven is the sincerest state of being and the sincerest form of existence. Therefore, sincerity unites Heaven with man. The Way of Heaven represented by meteorological phenomena requires effort to be linked with the real world, but the true Way of Heaven does not require any outside medium to be brought into existence. This is because honesty is nothing other than a state or way of existence that is deeply rooted in the heart-mind. In this context, man and Heaven are united in one entity. Because of this, sincere reflection can be described as reflection on the Way of Heaven. This means reflection on the essence of life—benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and sagacity. In the process of reflection, one discovers that "the core of man has benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and sagacity as its base." Such reflection leads to the conclusion that "benevolence is the essence of man; combining the two, we can say that the benevolent man is the Way."<sup>44</sup> This is why man should strive first and foremost to lead a moral existence.

If the philosophy of the *Five Actions* links the four virtues with the heart-mind and the heart-mind with Heaven, then Mencius' philosophy further links the fundamental virtues, the heart-mind, innate nature, and Heaven. Thus, moral behavior is behavior that pleases Heaven. Mencius believed that only in this way can we establish a moral existence. This conclusion is not gained from the outside world through learning but, rather, internally through self-examination. This is the logical conclusion of the philosophy of reflection: Reflection is not attained by good intentions or even by the forming within of the four virtues. Reflection demands that the four virtues form the very essence of the heart-mind—the so-called original intention [*ben xin* 本心]. This original intention unites innate nature and the Way of Heaven. Only in this way can reflection attain its purpose, however briefly.

43 是故誠者，天之道也；思誠者，人之道也 (ibid., 282).

44 仁者，人也；合而言之，道也 (ibid., 367).

## The Debate Between Learning and Reflection

Although Xunzi and Zisi both belonged to the Confucian tradition, their philosophies are clearly opposite. In “Fei shierzi pian” and elsewhere, Xunzi criticizes Mencius and his theory of the nature of man. Thanks to the discovery of the *Five Actions* text, we know that the statement “studying the ancient system to create a new doctrine, this is known as the five aspects of conduct”<sup>45</sup> of Xunzi is analogous to Zisi’s theory of the four virtues. However, Xunzi does not criticize these virtues in themselves. Rather, he believed that Zisi did not correctly understand the relationship between these virtues, the heart-mind, and the nature of man. Zisi and Mencius constantly emphasize this relationship,<sup>46</sup> to the point that criticisms of the five aspects of conduct and criticism of innate good are fundamentally the same. Therefore, it is clear that Xunzi’s emphasis on learning is in opposition to Zisi and Mencius’ emphasis on reflection. The clearest expression of this is found in “Encouraging Learning”:

I once tried spending the day in thought, but I found it of less value than a moment of study. I once tried standing on tiptoe and gazing into the distance, but I found I could see much farther by climbing to a high place. If you shout downwind, it is not that your voice is any stronger than usual, and yet people can hear you much more clearly. Those who make use of carriages or horses may not be any faster walkers than anyone else, and yet they are able to travel a thousand *li*. Those who make use of boats may not know how to swim, and yet they manage to get across rivers. The gentleman is by birth no different from any other man; it is just that he is good at making use of things.<sup>47</sup>

The sense of opposition between reflection and learning is especially clear in the first sentence (“I once tried spending the day in thought, but I found it of

45 案往舊造說，謂之五行。See “Fei shierzi pian dili 非十二子篇第六 [Disavowing Twelve Philosophers],” in Wang, *Xunzi jiaoshi*, 206.

46 *The Five Actions* is considered a defining work on reflection, yet it only mentions the heart, and barely touches on the concept of innate nature. Mencius viewed the matter differently: man’s nature is good, and this good takes the form of conscience, so the heart and innate nature are already related concepts.

47 吾嘗終日而思矣，不如須臾之所學也；吾嘗跂而望矣，不如登高之博見也。登高而招，臂非加長也，而見者遠；順風而呼，聲非加疾也，而聞者彰。假輿馬者，非利足也，而致千里；假舟楫者，非能水也，而絕江河。君子生非異也，善假於物也 (Watson, *Xunzi*, 17).

less value than a moment of study”), which also implies judgment of the relative merits of the two activities. In Xunzi’s opinion, the essence of learning is relying on outside implements to expand one’s knowledge or to improve one’s abilities, such as climbing to a high place or shouting downwind. Although these activities do not increase the length of one’s arm or the volume of one’s voice, they are able to achieve the desired results. Reflection, by contrast, is limited to the qualities that one possesses inherently, such as standing on tiptoe to see farther. Ultimately, reflection cannot compete with the results achieved by using outside implements. In Xunzi’s opinion, a wider world exists outside the self that cannot be attained through mere reflection: “Without climbing a tall mountain, one can never know how high Heaven is. Without standing at the edge of the abyss, one can never know how deep it is. Without knowing the words passed down from the sage kings, one cannot know how profound knowledge is.”<sup>48</sup>

It is only through the external world that we can understand the vastness of knowledge and our own defects and limitations. Similarly, it is only through learning that we can improve ourselves: “Blue comes from the indigo plant but is bluer than the plant itself. Ice is made of water but is colder than water ever is.”<sup>49</sup> Outside knowledge is important because it provides a connection to the external world. Xunzi said: “It is better to have heard something than not to have heard it. It is better to have practical experience with something than to just be aware of something, and it is better to be aware of something than to have merely seen something. . . . Lacking the foundation of experiential knowledge, one acquires merely the appearance of benevolence.”<sup>50</sup> Reflection without learning is meaningless.

The chapter “Dispelling Obsession [Jie bi pian 解蔽篇]” contains an anecdote that is relevant in this context:<sup>51</sup>

There was a man who lived in a cave, named Ji. He was good at thinking up riddles and liked to meditate. But if his eyes or ears were aroused by any stimulus, his thoughts became distracted, and if he heard the

48 不登高山，不知天之高也；不臨深溪，不知地之厚也；不聞先王之遺言，不知學問之大也 (“Quanxue pian diyi,” 1).

49 青取之於藍，而青於藍；冰，水為之，而寒於水 (Watson, *Xunzi*, 17).

50 不聞不若聞之，聞之不如見之，見之不若知之，知之不若行之。不聞不見，則雖當，非仁也 (“Ruxiao pian diba 儒效篇第八 [Confucian Conduct],” in Wang, *Xunzi jiaoshi*, 324).

51 See “Jie bi di ershiyi 解蔽二十一 [Dispelling Obsession],” in *ibid.*, 856.

buzzing of mosquitoes or flies, it destroyed his concentration. Therefore he withdrew himself from all stimulus and went where he would be far away from the buzzing of mosquitoes and flies and there, living in quietude and calm meditation, he perfected his art.<sup>52</sup>

The man's name, Ji, is an allusion to Zisi, whose original name was Kong Ji.<sup>53</sup> Ji was a man who was good at reflection, and, because he feared the outside world would distract him from his reflection, he cast away the desire of his eyes and ears and the sound of the mosquitoes and the flies and went to live a solitary life, in which he was able to reach a state of comprehension. But what is comprehension? Comprehension should be the linking of the soul with the entire world,<sup>54</sup> not merely the soul's comprehension of itself. Being self-taught is an illusion. The problem is that we cannot avoid contact with the outside world: While living a solitary life, we are able to achieve comprehension (this is the moral of the story of the man who lived in a cave), but what about when we are in contact with the outside world? Xunzi asks: "If he had reflected as intensively on benevolence, would he not have achieved real subtlety?"<sup>55</sup> This is Xunzi's first mention of reflection on benevolence, and it seems to be aimed at Zisi. The *Five Actions* contains the statement that "reflection on benevolence is fine thought." Is fine thought, then, not the same as subtle thought? In Xunzi's opinion, relying on the casting away of outside objects in order to reflect on benevolence cannot truly be called subtle thought. In fact, calling it fine thought is no more accurate than calling it "dangerous thought," as did Confucius! He believed that sages do not rely on fleeing from their desires in order to control them, as seen in Mencius' exhortation that "if one cultivates the heart, one will have few desires." Instead, one should face his desires directly and, through understanding, control them. After the soul has achieved great clearness, one can confront his desires with a sense of calm. "The benevolent man practices the Way through inaction; the sage practices the Way through

52 空石之中有人焉，其名曰觚。其為人也，善射以好思。耳目之欲接，則敗其思；蚊虻之聲聞，則挫其精。是以辟耳目之欲，而遠蚊虻之聲，閒居靜思則通 (Watson, *Xunzi*, 82).

53 Peking University's *Xunzi xinzhu* 荀子新注 [New Annotation on Xunzi] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1979), 358. The compilers' note states: "This may be a means Xunkuang used to obliquely refer to Kongqiu's grandson Zisi." Liang Tao 梁濤, "Xunzi dui simeng wuxing shuo de pipan 荀子對思孟'五行'說的批判 [Xunzi's Criticism of Si and Meng's Five Aspects of Conduct Theory]," *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* no. 2 (2001), also mentions this possibility.

54 The state achieved after the "great clarity" described in "Dispelling Obsession."

55 Watson, *Xunzi*, 82.

the absence of striving."<sup>56</sup> It is never deliberate or forced. If one reflects sincerely, he will achieve a corresponding mental state: "The reflection of the benevolent man is reverent; the reflection of the sage is joyous."<sup>57</sup> The sage no longer has to engage in conscious activity in order to form virtue within.

Thus, Mencius and Xunzi are, in fact, advocating two completely different forms of reflection. Mencius emphasizes reflection while Xunzi emphasizes learning. But both believe that common people can become sages. Mencius says, "Every man can become a sage like Emperor Yao and Emperor Shun," while Xunzi contends "Any man on the street can become an Emperor Yu." Still, the two have different views on what is required to become a sage—that is, "to become sincere through conscious effort." In Xunzi's opinion, man's nature is evil, but through conscious effort, he is able to transform his abilities. We can categorize conscious effort into two types, representing two distinct branches of Confucianism: that which advocates becoming a sage through reflection and that which advocates becoming a sage through learning. The philosophy of becoming a sage through reflection relies on the notion that man's nature is good, because virtue cannot be sought in the outside world. Self-improvement through reflection is the fundamental means of establishing a moral existence. The philosophy of becoming a sage through learning is the reverse: man's nature is evil, there is no conscience, and man has to rely on the outside world to establish a moral existence. Because of this man has to rely on learning and on a heart that is focused on the single goal of following the Way.

Clearly, the concepts of reflection and learning can only be understood in relation to one another and as core concepts of the philosophies of Xunzi and Mencius. As we have seen, learning demands outside elements, while reflection emphasizes internal development. Yet this is a superficial characterization. More importantly, both offer an understanding of the fundamental nature of life. As Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 [1903-1982] said:

Mencius believes that the nature of man is good. As long as one has a heart, cultivates the self, and is conscientious, he will feel that within him lie all the ten thousand things. For this reason, Mencius emphasizes in particular seeking the cause in oneself instead of in others. But Xunzi

56 故仁者之行道也，無為也；聖人之行道也，無強也。（“Jie bi di ershiyi,” 856).

57 仁者之思也恭，聖者之思也樂。Here Xunzi's use of "reflection of the benevolent man" and "reflection of the sage" appear to have been influenced by *The Five Actions'* "reflection on benevolence" and "reflection on sagacity." While structurally similar, they have different implications. This serves as further proof of the relationship between Xunzi and Mencius.



believes that the nature of man is evil, so the only remedy is to strive to change oneself through conscious activity and to seek aid through outside things. Seeking to attain moral behavior through outside things depends only on the accumulation of experience. After accumulating experience, man can change his evil nature. Because a lowly man cannot become a gentleman, nor can a gentleman become a sage in a fortnight, Xunzi described learning as a process of gradual accumulation.<sup>58</sup>

This observation is correct. Because Mencius believes the nature of man is good, he is inclined toward inner reflection. Xunzi, by contrast, believes that man's nature is evil and can be changed only through conscious effort.

"Encouraging Learning" has previously received little attention by scholars of either Xunzi or the history of Confucian philosophy more broadly. The analysis above demonstrates that Xunzi's philosophy is markedly different from that of Mencius and other Confucian scholars. The concept of becoming a sage through learning expressed in "Encouraging Learning" also reflects the overarching arrangement of *Xunzi* and mirrors the sequential organization of *The Analects*, from "To Learn, and Then" to "Emperor Yao Said." In contrast, Zisi and Mencius represent the philosophy of becoming a sage through reflection. The difference between reflection and learning is not simply a question of different means of self-cultivation; rather, the difference has to do with the core elements of the two respective philosophies, including their views on the nature of man, the heart-mind, and the Way of Heaven. In this sense, the concept of learning espoused in "Encouraging Learning" offers a point of entry into Xunzi's branch of Confucianism.

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58 Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, *Zhongguo renxinglun shi* 中國人性論史 [*History of Chinese Theory of Human Nature*] (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Publishing House, 1984), 249.

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