CHAPTER ELEVEN

XUN ZI ON CAPACITY, ABILITY AND CONSTITUTIVE RULES

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1. Introduction

There is a persistent issue in Chinese Philosophy of how to understand the relation between certain alleged inborn features of the heart-mind,\(^1\) and their full intentional expression or manifestation. More specifically, this has to do with Mencius's (c. 371–289 B.C.) claims that we are all born with the capacity to be sensitive toward the suffering of others and that this sensitivity will manifest itself in compassion with an intentional object, given the appropriate circumstances. What exactly is the relation between the alleged sensitivity and compassion? In this paper, I shall describe the issue and some contemporary attempts to resolve it. Instead of resolving the issue, however, these attempts only serve to highlight it. The best solution, I think, lies in a distinction that Xun Zi (c. 298–238 B.C.) makes between 'capacity' and 'ability', and the connection between this distinction and constitutive rules. Although I have discussed this distinction elsewhere I shall attempt to get clearer about the philosophical import of the distinction here.\(^2\)

In contemporary Western philosophy, the term 'constitutive rules' has been established and is best known through the work of Professor John Searle.\(^3\) It refers to rules that do not merely regulate but create or define

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1 This is the English translation of the Chinese word xin. It is sometimes translated as 'heart' and sometimes as 'mind'. In ancient Chinese the xin is has both cognitive and affective functions. The translation 'heart-mind' therefore best reflects this dual function of the xin.


new forms of behavior. The aforementioned capacity/ability distinction will slide into a discussion of constitutive rules in the context of the construction of ritual. Searle has discussed constitutive rules through the structure of social objects such as money, property, governments, marriages, baseball, and so on. This idiom of constitutive rules helps us to appreciate how ritual and morality can be socially constructed. However, Searle has said little about whether the emotions—and in the present context, the moral emotions—can also be constituted through certain social/ritual forms. This possibility is explored in the following discussion of Xun Zi’s philosophy.

2. Sensitivity and Compassion—An Ambiguity

Let us first proceed with the issue mentioned in the first paragraph. According to Mencius, “No [person] is devoid of a [heart-mind] sensitive to the suffering of others.” In support of this statement he adduces the famous example:

Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the [heart-mind] of compassion is not human…

One reading of this passage is that compassion has, characteristically, an intentional object. Its intentionality is such as to make salient the imminent suffering and at the same time identifies the suffering as a reason to act. This reading emphasizes that the emotion of compassion is cognitive in that it frames the salience of the situation in terms of the


5 Ibid. As we shall note later, a different translation is possible for “He would certainly be moved to compassion.”