

## On the Politics of Pleasure

Oscar Wilde, the nineteenth-century English aesthete, once said, “Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about.”<sup>1</sup> The most important classical masters in the Warring States and Han periods would have agreed, for they saw pleasure as one of the best possible tools of persuasion to induce members of the ruling class to right action as the classical masters defined it. As yet, scholars of early China have paid surprisingly little attention to the topic of pleasure, despite the theoretical writings’ preoccupation with it during the classical period. So far as I know, a mere handful of recent essays of any length have taken up the topic, though the classical masters to a man took their separate theories of pleasure seriously. The problem discussed by nearly all of the thinkers was how to convert the consuming pleasures – pleasures that by definition required vast expenditures of wealth, time, and physical energy – into sustaining pleasures that would support rather than corrupt the state, the family, or the person. According to most classical theories, the sociopolitical order must either accommodate or transform humans’ basic desires for pleasure, if people are ever to be persuaded to desire the good and – what is even more difficult – to delay certain types of gratification when such a delay promises to yield more reliably long-lasting pleasures in the end. By such theories, the chief task of the ruler and his ministers is to devise appropriate policies on pleasure, since the pursuit of a given pleasure could increase or diminish the health of the body and the body politic, bind subjects more closely to the throne, or create dangerous disaffection among them. As the health of both the body and the body politic connotes stability and duration, more often than not the relative value accorded a particular pleasure was loosely gauged by its potential for prolongation of the act

<sup>1</sup> A number of people have shaped my thinking on this topic – often through lively disagreements. I would like to express my thanks to Anne Cheng, Griet Vankeerberghen, Steven Salkever, Jeffrey K. Riegel, Eric Hutton, Hui-chieh Loy, and Geoffrey Lloyd. Undoubtedly, there will be some modern philosophers who wish that I had analyzed Xunzi’s writings in terms of their four categories of psychological hedonism, psychological egoism, ethical hedonism, and ethical egoism. I choose, however, to pose different questions of the text – questions designed to allow me to capture more of a sense of the connections among concepts favored in the classical period. In making my choice, I have been much influenced by Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (London: Belknap, 2002).

of pleasure-taking itself, of the opportunities for pleasure-taking, or of the life of the individual or the state.<sup>2</sup>

The aims of this essay are threefold: first, to place the classical rhetoric about pleasure in its historical context; second, to sketch some few of the implications and manifest failures of the same rhetoric as applied to statecraft; and third, to show through a single study one of the many directions that pleasure theory could take. This essay represents a first attempt to try to bring together recent scholarly preoccupations with pleasure, commemoration, insight, and spectacle in a way that opens new avenues for research.

The classical masters mention many separate categories of objects or commodified persons that may yield pleasure, under the right conditions,<sup>3</sup> including: massive palaces, terraces, or parks; fine horses and dogs; lovely women; amusing dwarfs and jesters; sumptuous clothes; exquisite foods and wines; captivating music; fine rhetoric; and baubles and luxuries (what the *Huainanzi* calls “rarities and toys, pearls and jades”).<sup>4</sup> As lists like these do not distinguish between the phenomenon that gives pleasure and the pleasure-taking itself, they somehow situate pleasure in the act of making contact and finding it good. (For that reason, no purely sensory experience, absent the engagement of the evaluating heart–mind, is conceivable.) Judging from such lists, many pleasures were thought to entail either immediate sensual gratification or the feeling we call “pride of ownership” in first-rate possessions.<sup>5</sup> To the relatively direct experiential pleasures, however, the Warring States

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the first concern, a typical citation from the period says, “The essential task in the pleasures of [sexual] play is to be slow and prolonged.” See Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (New York: Kegan Paul, 1998), p. 438. Of course, some serious writers on pleasure have thought the possibility of “prolonging pleasure” to be a snare and a delusion, though the idea since time immemorial has been used to induce humans to “bear much suffering.” See Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書, “Lun kuaile” 論快樂, *Qian Zhongshu ji* 錢鐘書集 (Beijing: Sanlian, 2001), vol. 12, pp. 14–18.

<sup>3</sup> Though the term “commodified” may strike some as anachronistic for the Warring States period, the thinkers under review were mindful of the distinction between pleasures given, shared, or exchanged and those that were bought, traded, or acquired under the pressure of power politics. For a clear enunciation of the difference between a gift exchange and a commodified relation, see *Mencius* 5B.6–7. Note that in the foregoing, I have spoken of pleasure theory, but it would be more precise to state that each of the Warring States thinkers have a rhetoric of pleasure, and the most important of these thinkers develop it to the level of theory. All that follows shows the influence of Moises Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case* (Baker Books, 1996), which argues first, that a teaching can be coherent and systematic, even if it shows apparent contradictions (e.g., in its adoption of conventional phrasing); and second, that the first duty of textual scholars is to reconstruct the historical context that prompted the writing of a text.

<sup>4</sup> *A Concordance to the Huainanzi* (ICS Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series [hereafter, ICS], first series, 1992; hereafter, *HNZ*) 9.74.1.

<sup>5</sup> The master-persuaders of the past were not so crass, of course, as to think that having

thinkers added a third category, that of the relational pleasures, which require of the pleasure-seeker a greater awareness of the specific nature of the pleasure sought. Relational pleasures were said to include, for example: getting good men to serve in office through politicking; cultivating oneself in the arts of social intercourse; taking pleasure in virtue; taking pleasure in one's profession; and taking pleasure in heaven and its moral imperatives (*le tian* 樂天).<sup>6</sup> Far more than mere sensual gratification or pride of possession, the relational pleasures presuppose an ability to discern the *long-term* utility, operations, and value of things, circumstances, and people, and this seeing beyond the self takes more than a small measure of curiosity, wit, and courage. Sometimes to procure a relational pleasure the more immediate pleasures have to be delayed or even set aside. Gratifying one's taste for exquisite foods and wines in no way impinges upon one's pride of ownership in a fine stallion, but indulgence in wine, women, and song may hamper one's ability to take pleasure in virtue.

The word I translate as "pleasure" is *le* 樂, a term that implies an action (pleasure-seeking or pleasure-taking), rather than a state of being ("happiness").<sup>7</sup> To describe the the emotions, the drives, and the grati-

---

possessions always gives one pleasure. According to one anecdote, when Zichan was prime minister in Zheng, duke Jiang told him, "There is no pleasure (*le*) to be had in drinking wine... *I have a lot of things to look after.* And if my state is not secure, the noble families are not under full control." [italics mine] See *A Concordance to the Hanfeizi* (ICS, 2001; hereafter *HFZ*) 32.44.15.

<sup>6</sup> For *le de* 樂德, see, e.g., *Analects* 6/9; 16/5; *Mencius* 6A/16. In another anecdote, Confucius says that though driven by destitution to eat wild herbs, he is nonetheless genuinely happy, as the only true destitution is to be without virtue (Mark Lewis, p. 232). It is "taking pleasure in Heaven," in goodness, or in the "Way of Yao and Shun" (three synonymous activities) that allows men like Yan Hui, who subsist on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water, to remain unalterably happy 不改其樂 while enduring hardships that would make life unendurable to others. For *le tian*, see *Zhouyi yinde* (Harvard-Yenching Monograph Series, Supplement 10; hereafter *H-Y*), 40/Hsi A/4 (15). Related to these are the pleasures attendant upon hearing good advice (*Mencius* 4B.20).

<sup>7</sup> I have considered three possible translations for *le*: "pleasure," "happiness," and "joy." For four reasons, I have chosen not to translate *le* as "happiness": 1. the ubiquity of the Happy Face in America has ruined the word for most Americans – and worse, made them associate happiness with psychosocial normality; 2. for much of its history, "happiness" meant "favored by fortune" (a usage inappropriate in the Chinese context, as will be seen); 3. by 1725, happiness was associated (in Hutcheson and later writers) with the utilitarian concept of the "greatest happiness of the greatest number"; and most importantly; 4. "happiness" refers to a state of being, whereas "pleasure" implies always a sense of action (pleasure-seeking and pleasure-taking). "Joy" is not the best translation for *le* since it seems too interior; also it conveys a sense of emotions bubbling over that does not suit many Chinese contexts. Finally, "joy" as a verb, "taking joy in," cannot take objects like "rich food." "Pleasure" seems appropriate since it entails the senses without excluding the heart and mind; it is not necessarily of the moment, and it provides the obvious contrast with *ai* 哀, a sense of pain or loss. Aside from *le*, some of the key words used in classical Chinese to discuss pleasure are the following: *yu* 欲 ("desires" or "to desire"); *xi* 熹 (to "delight in" or "enjoy" X, usually for a short time); *ai* 愛 ("to love an

fiction of the senses, the classical thinkers used a host of terms running the gamut from “desire” to “delight,” from “joy” to “being fond of.”<sup>8</sup> For many (though by no means all) of the classical masters, I would say, the concern is to separate by vocabulary choice, as much as by logical argument, the pleasures that bring deeper, richer, and more enduring satisfactions than the fleeting emotions or the potentially destructive drives (for example, “excess” and “indulgence”). Warring States writings are hardly consistent in their use of *le* (and Harbsmeier’s linguistic theories on binomials go a long way to explain the variations), but there is no doubt that as time went on master-persuaders came more and more to pair the word *le* with important objects, as seen in the examples of *you* 友 (friends), *tian* (Heaven), *de* 德 (virtue), or *ye* 業 (one’s work).<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the word that most often appears in association with *le* in context is *an* 安, “to secure X or to feel secure in X, where X may be a state, a thing, or an action,” and the words most often used as antonyms for *le* are *you* 憂 (“to be anxious, worried, or concerned”), *wei* 危 (“to be in danger or to apprehend danger”), and *ai* 哀 (“to be grieved by a loss”).<sup>10</sup> This means that classical theory is more apt to contrast

---

object, for example, sexual partners”); *dan* 耽 or *yi* 逸 (“to indulge in or be addicted to X, an indulgence”); *yin* 淫 (“to go to excess”); *yue* 悅 (“to think well of, to be pleased by”); *hao* 好 (“to be fond of or to prefer X,” where X may be a thing, a person, or an action; *xiang* 饗 “to enjoy,” “to savor,” originally used of the relish the ancestors felt in receiving offerings of the finest sacrificial meats). I cannot begin to list all the possible binomes here.

<sup>8</sup> At the same time, I recognize that *le* appears as one of the “six emotions,” in a standard list (cited below). See, e.g., *Xunzi yinde* (H-Y22) 62/17/11. [Note that surprise does not appear on the list, though it is frequently remarked upon.] “Anger and delight” (*nü xi* 怒喜) seem to refer to the temporary external manifestation of one’s internal reactions to an agitated flow of *qi* within the body, whereas “concern and pleasure” (*you le* 憂樂) seem to connote lingering states of the heart-mind. In the *Huainanzi*, for example, it is said that “the constitution of humans is such that if something invades and violates [one’s person], one feels anger. When one feels anger, one’s blood is in full flow; when one’s blood is in full flow, one’s *qi* is aroused. When one’s *qi* is aroused, anger breaks out. When anger breaks out, then one has that which will release one’s dissatisfactions” (HNZ 8/62/10-66/2). The same text, by contrast, associates “concern” (*you*) with an experience of loss in the heart; and defines “pleasure” as “when in one’s heart one is content and one’s desires are fulfilled.” See Griet Vankeerberghen, “Emotions and the Actions of the Sage: Recommendations for an Orderly Heart in the *Huainanzi*,” *Philosophy East and West* 45.4 (1995), pp. 528-29.

<sup>9</sup> This list is hardly exhaustive. *Le dao* also occurs, for example. It is predominately the relational pleasures that the noble man is said to “attend to” or “be cautious about.” See, e.g., *A Concordance to the Jiayi* [sic] *Xinshu* (ICS, 1994) 9.3.68.15, which would have the noble man “attend to his companions” (*shen qi yu* 慎其與), as well as his own person (ibid. 1.2/4/9).

<sup>10</sup> For the earlier associations, see H-Y 39/11/51. Cessation from fear to can itself be seen a form of enjoyment. The sages were said to fashion representations of the fearful aspects of life (wild beasts, vengeful spirits, etc.), so that ordinary men might confront them and thereafter “enjoy ... a respite” from fear. See *Chunqiu jingzhuan yinde* 春秋經傳引得 (H-Y, Supplement 11) 182/Xuan 3/5 *Zuo*. By definition, pleasure taken to the point of excess leads to *ai*. See *A Concordance to the Yanzi chunqiu* (ICS no. 4, 1993) 1.11.5.11. The problem is, desire “hacks at one’s inborn nature” and “shortens one’s years” (*Hanshu* 漢書 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju,

pleasure and insecurity than pleasure and pain. (In fact, I have found no exact equivalent to the word “pain” in classical Chinese.)

Essentially, if the conventional objects of desire are to be fully enjoyed, many thinkers argued, the subject must know that they do not threaten his person, his livelihood, or his community, now or in the foreseeable future. Pleasure in the precariousness or ephemerality of pleasure – that seldom warrants an extended discussion. The Warring States treatises advocate several ways to increase one’s safety in pleasure-taking, none of which is particularly easy. The first is to reduce both the number of one’s desires and one’s degree of dependence upon others for their satisfaction. Reducing the number of desires should, by all rights, decrease the chances of being harmed by a panoply of seductions and allurements.<sup>11</sup> The second way to enhance one’s safety is to not so much to reduce as to refine and so redirect one’s desires, developing a taste for the “higher” (hence fewer) sorts of pleasures that stem from connoisseurship. If that is done, the subject may still depend upon others for his heart’s desire (if, for instance, he looks for career advancement), yet his greater single-mindedness of purpose renders him more likely to attain his goal.<sup>12</sup> A third proposal says that it is best to secure one’s pleasures by sharing the enjoyment of those pleasures with others, on the assumption that shared or commensal pleasures mitigate others’ envy and malice.<sup>13</sup> Simply by sharing their pleasures with their underlings, those in power may forge stronger bonds within the community, bonds that will, in turn, allow the powerholders to enjoy their

---

1970] 20, p. 2669, citing traditions on Mao ode no. 1, and possibly the “Bensheng” chapter of *Lüshi chunqiu*. See Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋 (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1984) 1, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> One theorist notes, “Some [ideal] people in the past eschewed the pleasures of high salary. Such people, when they saw profit, felt no special delight, so they were immune to blandishments.”

<sup>12</sup> The importance of single-mindedness, being fixed on a single, constant goal, is especially emphasized in chap. 1 of the *Xunzi* entitled, “Encouraging Learning.” However, single-mindedness of purpose is not sufficient to guarantee the ruler’s morality and safety. In one anecdote, the ruler of Jin ran into trouble when he “failed to take any pleasure in governing men,” preferring horses to his subjects; he was therefore faulted for “only planning for the pleasures of the eye and ear, without cultivating the glorious merit handed down from the former rulers.” See *Concordance to Yanzi chunqiu* 1.9/4/14 ff.

<sup>13</sup> *Mencius*, Book I, is certainly the most famous text to propose this, but *Concordance to Yanzi chunqiu* 5.14.44.11 ff. makes the same argument. Cf. *A Concordance to the Shuoyuan* (ICS, 1992) 14.6.113.6-14; 19.35.169/9-12. Pleasure-taking is only wrong when it is “selfish” (when it breaks community, because of its extravagant use of scarce resources or because it reduces human beings to the status of commodities or mere providers). When one speaks of “sharing pleasures,” the sharing has its limits. *Mencius* says that the ruler is to provide his people with opportunities for pleasure, but the ruler is not literally, for instance, to share his concubines with his subjects.

pleasures in far greater security. This rationale, whether expressed or not, underpins a great many political calculations in Warring States.

Why the sudden emphasis on careful or delayed pleasure-taking during the Warring States period? By my hypothesis, pleasure became a new focus of theorizing when the vast scale and unprecedented scope of sociopolitical and economic changes occurring at the time drew attention to two issues: what form of equitable distribution would best serve as foundation for a stable state? and what methods of rule would allow the expanding states to integrate new populations? Admittedly, the evidence for customary methods of distribution consists mainly of recorded pieties, but the early texts would have us believe that before the decline of the Zhou political order, the sumptuous sacrifices offered to the royal ancestors, followed by the divisions of the sacrificial meats among the descendants, had provided a method by which to distribute goods and prerogatives in ways that were generally conceded at the time— at least from the point of view of the political elite – to be equitable. With each member of that elite sharing in the life-force contained within the sacrificial meats, each sacrifice served as an outward visible sign of the inner commitments binding the partakers to the same clan or body politic, despite their potentially disparate interests.<sup>14</sup> But in the wake of the demise or usurpation of many aristocratic houses, the associated sacrificial orders no longer provided sufficient confirmation of the basic laws of hierarchy, reciprocity, and equitable exchange so vital to any cohesive community. Political elites had to devise entirely new modes of reliable yet fair distribution, if they hoped to secure for

<sup>14</sup> My hypothesis: that for blood sacrifice in ancestor worship, there is gradually substituted to a different model of sociability and rewards: the communal feast, which is less likely to entail a loss of human life. Also, loyalty to a superior or group of superiors within the clan (as in ancestor worship) gives way to loyalty to an ideal of larger humanity. For an interesting passage that describes the new order, in which “different gradations of sacrificial meat” become part of a much larger system to induce the common people to identify with the aspirations of their ruling elite, even as they are forced to prepare for war, see *Guanzi*, vol. 2, 12,35; trans. W. Allyn Rickett (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1998), p. 319. Xunzi posits a clear continuum from the old lineage-based sacrificial communities to the new, in his chapter “On Music”: “When music is in the temple of the royal ancestors, ruler and subject, superior and inferior, listen to it together, all of them attuned in reverence; when it is in the household, father and son, elder and younger brother, listen to it all together, all attuned in kinship; when it is performed in the neighborhood, elder and younger listen to it together, all attuned in obedience...” The *Zuo* supplies abundant evidence of the collapse of the old system for the distribution of sacrificial meats. Whole states are brought down when a Song commander Hua Yuan slaughters a sheep to feed his troops, but fails to give a share to his charioteer Yang Zhen, who then brings about Hua Yuan’s defeat by leading the Song army into Zheng territories (Xuan 2.1; *Shiji* 史記 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959] 14, p. 612). What begins as a squabble over food is also a contributing factor in state struggles in Qi: when ducks are substituted for chicken, and soup offered instead of meat, in the court meals served to the Qi noblemen Ziya and Ziwei, their anger sets off a series of conspiracies and counter-conspiracies that eventually result in the exile of the powerful usurper minister (Xiang 28.9).

themselves the necessary men and materiel.

There was the related problem of enforcing control and instilling allegiance within vast new populations not inclined by hereditary ties or local custom to uphold the relatively small kin, surrogate-kin, and cult groups associated with the court. The formal *ming* 命, or writ, recorded on Western Zhou bronzes formalized the obligations due the ruling house by a few allied families, and the Chunqiu blood covenants (*meng* 盟) involved far greater numbers of aristocrats and their dependents in binding agreements. But by Warring States times, any state determined upon conquest had to sponsor and direct much larger (even overlapping) networks of loyalty in the social, political, military, and economic spheres – networks that would then be capable of persuading important figures to contribute their best efforts and those of their men to the conquest-state. The usual justification advanced for this was disarmingly simple: supposedly the stability enjoyed by the central court represented the best guarantee of the stability of all other social units, public or domestic, without which pleasures could not be secured.

A solution for the anxieties, insecurities, and disaffection experienced in the sociopolitical order would prove viable only if it spoke to the ruling elites' strong desires to preserve and maximize their prerogatives, perquisites, and pleasures, calming their fears and insecurities in an era of rapid social change, and if it moreover assuaged the distinct sense of unease that beset many of the most successful in middle age. Talk of converting the consuming pleasures into sustaining pleasures succeeded so brilliantly at courts across the land because it precisely accorded with the ruling elites' own experiences and desires. Throughout their disquisitions, the Warring States and Han persuaders made much of a seemingly self-evident truth with more than a bit of paradox contained within it: most of our present delights merely taunt us with their brevity, condemning us to a life of gross suffering. Even in the midst of indulging in pleasures, we are anticipating their loss, given how fleeting they are. To satisfy the craving for pleasure proves impossible always, and the sense of frustration mounts as the unceasing competition grows more arduous with age. Sadly, those who have worked hardest to build constructive orders commonly expect to bask in the perquisites of their achievements, but fending off a stream of rivals in bloody contests over the material or fleshly goods requires the stamina of youth. Thus men can never attain as much as they desire, and before they have fully tasted life's delights, they die.<sup>15</sup> For good

<sup>15</sup> The Enlightenment thinkers were so aware of this that I have borrowed this pithy summation of the basic observations of John Locke and Alexis de Tocqueville from Andrew Del-



reasons, then, the persuaders, in proposing the careful use of pleasure as a way to resolve disorder in the state and in the person, addressed the strange melancholy that pervades the prime of life, especially where there exists a surfeit of material goods or power.

The classical rationales for constructive pleasure spurred the elaboration of two new major theories, the first being *ganying* 感應 (“stimuli-reaction”) and the second, human nature. Implicit in the basic rhetoric of pleasure in the classical period is the belief that pleasure occurs when certain physiological processes, stimulated by something outside the self (be it a sight, smell, or attraction to the moral Way), give rise to “motions” (*dong* 動) or “reactions” (*ying* 應).<sup>16</sup> Pleasure is accounted a kind of secondary perception of these basic physiological motions, as well as the chief motivating factor in human conduct.<sup>17</sup> The appropriate organ registers first the perceptible qualities inherent in the object (in the simplest examples, “black or white,” “sour or salty”), after which that organ, working in tandem with the powers of discrimination located in the heart–mind, assesses the value of the object or person contacted through the senses (for example, “beautiful or ugly,” “shrill or sonorous”). As any interaction between the object, the senses, and heart–mind involves successive acts of coordination, correlation, and categorization. Sensory appreciation is thus a complicated phenomenon, liable to get out of whack.<sup>18</sup> How, then, do persons learn to convert

---

banco, “Are you happy yet? If not, the problem may lie in how you define the term,” *New York Times Magazine* (May 7, 2000), pp. 44–48. On the strange melancholy that exists despite a surfeit of material goods, see “Advertisements for Autumn/2000 TV in America” showcasing the program, “Guilty Pleasures,” by the slogan, “Imagine, for the moment, that you have everything – but need more!”

<sup>16</sup> In *Zuozhuan* we read, e.g., “What resides in the interior of a man is the [basic] condition or emotions (*qing*) and it is these which provoke movement (action) and give rise to aspirations” (Zhao 25).

<sup>17</sup> This is reminiscent of one position enunciated by Aristotle in the *Physics* (see W. D. Ross [Loeb edn.] 247a7 ff., pp. 237–38). But the Chinese would not agree with Aristotle’s second proposition in the *Posterior Analytics* 87b5 ff., which says (after the proposition that “the man who feels pleasure undergoes change”) that “everyone who feels pleasure comes to be at rest” since pleasure restores the disturbed balance of the organism. This second proposition Aristotle develops in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985; hereafter *NE*), where he states that pleasure is not a process of change (i.e., a potentiality) but the most perfect actualization (see fn. 60 below). (Aristotle argued in the *NE* 1175a30–b24, pp. 278–79, that pleasure was “a sort of consequent end, like the bloom on youths.”) The Chinese thinkers were all too aware that pleasure-seeking and pleasure-taking often provoke disturbance, rather than restore balance. They were particularly interested in the notion that pleasure represents a “movement” and a “response,” and they hoped to induce responses of a specific nature in those reading or hearing their views.

<sup>18</sup> First, as seen above, the gratification of one pleasure may in some cases preclude the gratification of another. Devouring haunches of meat may make one too satiated for dessert, and dalliances with palace maids can cut down appreciably on the time left for hunting in parks. The Warring States thinkers remarked upon this conflict in numerous writings, for instance Hanfei’s report that the king of Yan was once offered an exquisite carving of a female monkey



the process of change rooted in the biological self into a steadier state? As Mencius phrased the problem, since “the sensory organs of hearing and sight do not think, they can be deluded by things.”<sup>19</sup> Prompted by the sensory organs, the heart–mind can think, of course, but it will be predisposed to evaluate things, persons, and events correctly only if it is trained and practiced in making categorical connections, if material conditions are conducive of good thinking, and if the will is present to make the effort of thinking. Distractions and preconceptions reflecting a multiplicity of desires must not be permitted to becloud the mind, since the inevitable result of wrong appraisals is human misery.<sup>20</sup>

This notion of the reactions became part of a larger classical theory of the human condition.<sup>21</sup> By the third century BC, there had evolved a basic consensus on man’s endowment that, brilliantly articulated in writings ascribed to Xunzi and Hanfei, informed nearly all the official

---

on a slender tip of a bramble thorn, on condition that he forego the pleasures of the harem and the banquet table for six straight months. (See *HFZ* 32.81.22.) Second, the attainment of short-term gratification may actually prevent one from obtaining one’s own long-term goals and benefits. In one justly famous anecdote, general Zifan is happy to be given wine instead of water to quench his thirst in the heat of battle. So drunk did he become in consequence that he was unable to command his troops, with the result that he lost the battle (and soon afterwards his life) (*HFZ* 10.14.2). Third, as the Zifan tale suggests, gratifying an immediate desire may deter one from carrying out responsibilities to the community, with disastrous consequences for oneself and others. And fourth, as each human seeks to attain his own desires, an aggressive competition for scarce resources arises, whether the “scarce resource” be the ruler’s time or the family’s property – competition which may end in the destruction or maiming of one or another of the competitors; it inevitably engenders much evil-doing (defined as the wanton destruction of others) and self-destructive behavior in the sociopolitical arena. (In such a vicious competition, even the apparent victor may lose precious resources, irreparably weakening himself in the end.) The dangers of indulgence in the palace pleasures, to take but one common theme, are clearly outlined in the *Hanfeizi*: “Fawning favourites and pretty ladies, these are the ones through whom the ruler is misled. Taking advantage of the pleasures of the feast and couch, availing themselves of the times when he is drunk or stuffed with food, [the underlings] seek for their own heart’s desire.” As the ruler controls immense resources, his potential to wreak havoc is correspondingly greater if he selfishly seeks to gratify his own desires. As Hanfei argues, “If a man has strong and insatiable desires, then the whole world is bound to be afraid of him... and he will not have a long life.” The wise person will rightly be wary of the conventional objects of pleasure, knowing that their attainment may present a trap, which can only be avoided if these objects of pleasure are enjoyed in the proper framework (*HFZ* 9/12/16).

<sup>19</sup> *Mencius* 6A/15; trans. D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 168.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., *Guanzi* 13,36: “If the mind is at rest in the Way,/ the nine apertures will function properly/ Should lust and desire occupy it to the full,/ the eyes will not see colors; the ears will not hear sounds” (trans. after Rickett, *Guanzi*, vol. 2, p. 71). Cf. *H-Y*2/1/22: “The eye cannot look at two objects and see both clearly; the ear cannot listen to two things and hear both distinctly.” One of the major illnesses of the classical period was “bewilderment.”

<sup>21</sup> I argue that there existed in Warring States and Han a single basic theory of the human condition, despite many disputes over the dividing line between “human nature” vs. “culture.” To my mind, the standard received texts of the “philosophers” are in line with the archaeologically recovered materials reflecting the mantic and medical traditions. I therefore reject the overly simplistic accounts that treat disputes over certain aspects of this theory quite anachronistically as reflections of sectarian, rather than individual philosophical differences.

and semi-official writings known from Qin and Han. According to versions of the theory most often cited, it is either “human nature” or the “human condition” that a) desires social ties with other human beings; b) craves spectacle, safety, and symbol, in addition to material goods; and c) experiences mimetic desires (that is, desires prompted by the realization that someone else has in his or her possession a potential object of desire). And while the human desire for companionship generally leads men and women to act in socially responsible ways, the other human drives tend to provoke destructive competition between individuals and groups, given the limited availability of sources of pleasure. In addition, all humans, being endowed with a range of contradictory senses and desires, will seek to gratify all their impulses at once, unless their urges are overridden by some more powerful drive or prohibited by some institution.

This is where many of the persuaders would have the ideal state intervene, for the ruler and his officials, armed with the knowledge of the internal human conflicts, can hope to motivate entire populations to act in conformity with the ruler’s dictates so long as material rewards and punishments are predictable and proportionate. When “those below” see an obvious advantage to acting in accordance with the ruler’s will (increasingly identified in treatises of the period as the “common good”), they will happily undertake to obtain their desires for wealth and status through the practice of the state-sponsored social virtues, that being the path of safety. The properly governed and instructed will learn to forgo the chance to act upon certain cravings in the short run, so long as forbearance increases their prospects of thereby achieving their final goals in the long run. In this way, those accustomed to this complex negotiation of desire have the potential to develop a “second nature” more reliable and discriminating than the first one, a second nature not coincidentally capable of the serene pleasure-taking so admired in classical times.<sup>22</sup>

Xunzi’s “Enrich the State” chapter, to take one elegant spin-off from this theory of human nature, envisions the state as the primary distributor of status items, including written texts. For Xunzi, regular ritual dispersals of high-quality material goods (many of them inscribed)

<sup>22</sup> Texts as various as the “Hong fan” chap. of the *Documents* and the *Hanfeizi* (“Two Handles” chap.) consider how to motivate subject populations through their natural desire for material goods; cf. the classic formulation by Xunzi in the essay, “On Ritual.” But thinkers like Yang Zhu refused to countenance the idea that the ruler’s will constituted the common good. Their rhetoric, of course, did not win out at many courts. As for second nature, when human beings are urged to reduce, alter, or refine their desires, they are offered the prospect that such a course will optimize their chances for such blessings as long life and fame.

represent the carrot to the penal code's stick. Of the two tools at his disposal, the carrot and the stick, the wise ruler knows that it is primarily the carrot by which he can manage to motivate his subjects to follow his lead, creating good order throughout the realm. Thus the wise ruler is eager to garner through taxation, tribute, and gift exchanges sufficient wealth in the form of grain and finished goods – not so that he can hoard this wealth, but so that he can freely disperse such goods among his subjects, making their homes in effect his own storehouses. The ruler's gifts and awards are more than worth their cost, however great, for the regular dispersal of boons tightly binds the ruler's subjects to him. Absent the bond between rule and subjects, rebellion and regicide may ensue. For this reason, the old Mohist arguments in favor of frugality, according to Xunzi, must be condemned as “exaggerated reckoning” (a counter-productive focus on the fiscal bottom line and willful disregard of the fact that material goods represent one of the best incentives at the ruler's disposal). No wonder the wise ruler keeps a close watch on the manner in which such conventionally powerful items as ritual objects, including texts, are meted out to those of lower rank.

In many classical theories, it was axiomatic that the ruler must appear to the public to be a model of generosity. Otherwise, the ruler's will would not be identified with the common good. Hence arose the widespread institution of what I call “display culture,” which offered several advantages from a ruler's point of view. “Sharing pleasures” through magnificent forms of state-sponsored display – rather than through prudent fiscal policies, as Yanzi 晏子 and Mencius had advised – kept the throne at the center of the public view, while obviating the need for strict self-restraint on the ruler's part. At the same time, the considered use of pleasurable display accomplished three tasks vital to the preservation of the state. First, in “making a standard [pun intended] of virtue,”<sup>23</sup> it let “those below” know what were the mandated “general,” “public,” or “common” interests; second, it advertised the utility of actively promoting those interests (though it provided no adequate mechanism by which to distinguish apparent conformity with

<sup>23</sup> See the Wu Ban stele (ca. 148 AD), cited in Rong Geng 容庚, *Han Wu Liang ci huaxiang lu* 漢武梁詞畫像史 (Beiping: Yanjing daxue kaoguxue, 1936), sect. *kaoshi*, p. 5b. A similar phrase used of state representatives is that they should “discern and display for commoners [right conduct]” (*Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965] 39, p. 1307). I had already devised the term “public display” culture when my colleague Gary McDonogh, at Bryn Mawr, recommended to me Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), esp. the Introduction, which uses the same term to explain the eventual creation of the modern public space.

communal interests from real commitment); and, third, it gratified those already inclined to identify with the prevailing hierarchies. The intended result was to generate in as many people as possible the distinctly pleasurable sense that they shared in the great honor bestowed by the edifying public or semi-public spectacle, even when they were excluded from direct participation and its tangible rewards, including the distribution of largesse by the ruler, community conferrals of honors upon the aged, village banquets, and mourning processions. Only such edifying spectacles, it was thought, could in effect grant suitably scaled pleasures to people of widely ranging standings and ranks, while highlighting the awesome authority accorded the ruler as giver of spectacles. Thus a number of Warring States and Han theorists, eager to introduce reforms with the ruler's blessing, envisioned display culture as one of society's most effective solutions for the fundamental contradictions embedded in the human condition, first because the socially constructive behavior reinforced by public display gives pleasure to the agent ("The noble man takes pleasure in his public expressions")<sup>24</sup> no less than to the onlookers; and second, because public display makes the social and state hierarchies seem not only inevitable but also just.

In this classical political rhetoric of pleasure-taking, then, rulers planning to unify the state are to exemplify the new virtues of fair dealing and self-restraint, and these virtues are to supplement the old aristocratic ideals of excellence (prowess in warfare, filial piety toward the ancestors, and practical shrewdness). Once the ruler's disinterested behavior is tied to public generosity, dispensing the proper share of access to pleasure becomes the key to the good rule that manages to naturalize the control of those in power. Hence the two dictums, "What defines a sage is his skill in giving people their proper share," and the true king "learns to take pleasure in the means by which he becomes king."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Liji* 23, pp. 15b-16a (SSJZS edn.). Both the *Xunzi* and the *Hanshi waizhuan* define the prince as one "who distributes largesse according to the rituals [including the sumptuary regulations]." See *H-Y* 44/12/17; *A Concordance to the Hanshi waizhuan* (ICS, 1992), 4.11/28/12. It is under this rubric of distribution of largesse that I would put the public announcements of amnesties. See Brian E. McKnight, *The Quality of Mercy: Amnesties and Traditional Chinese Justice* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 1982). Note also that *H-Y* 17/6/34 ff. identifies the noble *shi* of the good old days as one who loved to distribute largesse... being ashamed to be wealthy on his own."

<sup>25</sup> See *Guanzi* 1,5 (Rickett 1985: 124), for the first dictum, and for the second, *Lüshi chunqiu* 4, p. 40 (*Zhuji jicheng* edn., vol. 7). The second dictum continues, and one who "loses the throne for his part takes pleasure in the means whereby the throne is lost." The *Laozi* is one of many texts that envision the ruler fixing upon the proper number of goods to be apportioned to his royal person and to his subjects.

In the end, the ruler's *force majeure* could go only so far in stabilizing the state. The common people in perilous times could be controlled better and more easily if they perceived the ruler to be equitable in his dispersals and disbursements and judicious in expending his resources, including his bodily energies and the strength of his people.<sup>26</sup> It was not only that debauchery and extravagance smacked of the abuse of privilege, which tended to excite the scorn, envy, and malice of the lower orders – or, what could be worse – their fashionable aping of aristocratic ways, which ruined the finances of families and states. It was also that the common people withheld their allegiance unless the ruler “won their hearts” through the economies which contributed to their greater security. If the finite state resources were squandered in any way by gross pleasure-seekers of any rank, the state's ability to compete in the multi-state free-for-all was correspondingly weakened.<sup>27</sup>

Since the immediate sensation of pleasure might undermine pleasurable security at the end, many thinkers in the classical period (a notable exception being Yang Zhu 楊朱) weighed the proposition that the pursuit of the other-regarding pleasures (in contrast to the self-regarding pleasures) was usually the best way to both maximize and sustain one's own sense of pleasure.<sup>28</sup> And if we are not to think the classical thinkers naive or duplicitous, we must entertain for the moment an im-

<sup>26</sup> *Guanzi* 2,7 (Rickett 1985: 143) speaks of six impediments to good rule, all of which have to do with the dispersal of favors and the proper use of pleasures: “having favorites, the awarding of honors, the acceptance of bribes, beautiful women, clever sycophants, and indulgence in pleasure.” An addendum to that same chapter says that the good ruler “extends his benevolence to all in common.... so that it covers everyone,” so that all things will be content under his rule (*ibid.*, 147). This impartiality, we are quite clearly told, however, does not mean that the ruler has no “likes and dislikes.”

<sup>27</sup> Curiously, it was not until late Western Han dynasty, so far as I know, that a formal theory proposed that increased consumption might lead to expanded economic development (as articulated by the party of Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 in the *Yantie lun*, recorded in Western Han), but one wonders if all the railing against the “secondary pursuit” of merchants might be in response to such a discourse. In that case, the *ru* who opposed Sang were not unlike those English moralists who hastened to condemn Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees: Or Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1714), for its basic argument that every kind of expenditure – especially in vice – was necessary to the continuance of a healthy economy, while frugality was detrimental to prosperity.

<sup>28</sup> Zhuangzi, for example, advocates submission to parents and the ruler, as with fate. Of course, there must have been people in early China who retorted, as Eudoxus of Cnidus reportedly did, that pleasure can never be for the sake of something else; it has no whys and wherefores. See *NE* 1101b27 ff, pp. 28–29; 1172b9 ff, p. 267 ff. This explains Eudoxus' assertion that pleasure is prized, not praised (since we praise what brings benefits). Yang Zhu's position came close to that of Eudoxus, since Yang asserted (if his rivals' descriptions can be trusted) that he would never sacrifice one hair of his head (a certain good, since the life is the highest good) for the benefit of the state (a possible, secondary good). Yang Zhu's position hints also at another problem: How does the experience of one pleasure (e.g., an appreciation of music) relate to, let alone effect the experience of another (an appreciation of paintings)?

portant idea that lay behind their arguments: they saw that in most, if not all cases, a pleasure has at least three temporal aspects: the confident expectation of the pleasure, the sensory experience of it, and the pleasure memory of it. Memory is often the most powerful of the three, there being time after the sensation to savor and dwell upon the experience, incorporating, in retrospect, a well-considered appreciation of the act's social construction. To my mind, the classical persuaders rightly discerned that whether an action brings approval or disapproval from others is a major determinant of the actor's experience of the action. Given man's condition as a social being, when others can take pleasure in one's enjoyments, encouraging and naming them as pleasures, then one's pleasure in the process becomes surer and keener by virtue of society's approbation. Pleasure is something that humans must have at all costs, since it affords the greatest opportunities for self-articulation (we are most exuberantly ourselves when we plunge into our enjoyments, and least distinguishable when sunk in worry and misery). At the same time, all of our pleasures depend upon something or someone else.<sup>29</sup> Far from deploring this dependence, some classical thinkers hailed pleasure as the one vehicle whose inherent duality might allow less-than-ideal humans to gradually accustom themselves to a joyful acquiescence in their inevitable dependence on things outside themselves. Such an acquiescence, if fully developed, can lead to that recognition of the total interdependence of things which is taken to be the sign of the sage. As Mencius wrote, "The ten thousand sorts of things are complete in me. To reflect on myself and to find myself whole and integrated (*cheng* 誠) – there is no greater pleasure than this."<sup>30</sup>

No such abstract theory could have been imposed by a court on contemporary society unless it admirably suited contemporary conditions. As I see it, throughout the classical period, in order to feel properly protected, those at every level of society sought as best they could to place themselves firmly within a web of mutual obligations (*do ut des*) signified and cemented by regular formalized exchanges in the forms of gift, tribute, and sacrifice.<sup>31</sup> Such exchanges – rendered highly visible at intervals by specified changes in the forms the exchanges took – demonstrated to potential friends and allies, no less than to oneself,

<sup>29</sup> For pain as annihilation, see Elaine Scarry's influential work, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1985).

<sup>30</sup> *Mencius* 7A.4 (Lau, *Mencius*, p. 182). The standard translation of *cheng* as "sincere" does not really get at the early meaning attributed to it here and in the "Zhongyong," where "wholeness," "integrity," and "integration" are the goals.

<sup>31</sup> Poo Mu-chou, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

the reliable nature of the protection afforded those in the exchange circle.<sup>32</sup> And when the fully ritualized person by definition reaffirmed his exemplary perfection through public or semi-public acts, those outside the web were put on notice that it would be foolhardy to harm members in the display circle, since those could call upon the circle's collective strength. Obviously, no small resources were needed for the frequent ritual outlays, but status was then secured less through force or wealth than through the periodic, well-nigh automatic manifestations of public loyalty by family members, allies, and subordinates. Hence the continual reiteration in philosophical texts of the period that others constitute a person's chief security. Of course, when honor and "glory" (*rong* 榮) depended on the presence of the people before whom they were displayed, honor and glory could be withdrawn by those same people swiftly and absolutely (as Sima Qian's *Shiji* and the "Xici" tradition to the *Changes* so poignantly observed).<sup>33</sup>

It would be hard to overestimate the pervasiveness of the webs formed within and beyond polite society through public display, webs that bound not only the living and the dead, but also – what is infinitely more difficult – people of quite different statuses. From the court on down, provision was made for nearly all levels of society to experience, if only indirectly, some of the pleasures of public exchange and display. The extant writings of the period show the royal courts' intentional use of display mechanisms to render palpable the protective bonds ordering society, and the archeological record leaves no doubt about the sumptuousness of court extravaganzas, progresses, building projects, and spectacles. I cite here just one anecdote dating to the first years of the Han empire. Shortly before 200 BC, the new chancellor, Xiao He, 蕭何 set about building palaces, arsenals, storehouses, and gatetowers on a lavish scale, while war still raged outside the capital; Xiao defended his priorities on the grounds that "if the true Son of Heaven does not dwell in magnificent quarters, he will have no way to display his authority or establish a base for his heirs to build upon."<sup>34</sup> Throughout the period, the courts' lavishness was imitated by aristocrats and high officials at every level, who in turn became models for lower-ranking

<sup>32</sup> Su Yu 蘇輿, comp., *Chunqiu fanlu yizheng* 春秋繁露義證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992) 1, p. 19, gives the reason for altering the color of vestments, the form of the ritual music used, and so on, saying that such changes "make clear... and visible" the legitimacy of the authorities.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the judgment in *Concordance to Hanshi waizhuan* 9.19/69/11: "Troubles come from anger; disasters from trifles."

<sup>34</sup> *Shiji* 8.285-86. David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), p. 227: "They [the historiographers of the *Zuo* and *Guoyu*] were especially interested in the idiosyncratic architectural choices of ordinary men and the extravagant projects of powerful rulers."



members of the local elite.<sup>35</sup> After all, the prevailing theories and local mores together exhorted “those below” to sincerely emulate the example of their superiors. Furthermore, the mimetic desires imbedded in the human endowment led people to indulge their natural pretensions to grandeur, especially when such displays were accounted a major credit to the family or state. Perhaps the most striking change documented by classical archeology, then, is the shift from highly circumscribed rituals conducted for very limited audiences to increasingly public displays intended for ever larger audiences. (No less interesting is the change in genres analyzing the effects of the pleasures, but that is a subject for another essay.)<sup>36</sup>

The great social thinkers of Warring States, Qin, and Western Han combine theories of pleasure, human nature, and public display in a single, highly versatile package. The package could introduce a measure of reciprocity into the hierarchies they intended to restore; also, it could disseminate meritocratic slogans alongside modified aristocratic models. And, until about 150 AD, the capacity of this public display culture to conflate the rewards of public service with the pursuit of private pleasures and interests seemed a sufficient basis for a stable dynastic state. But, as Étienne Balazs pointed out long ago in his essay “Political Philosophy and Social Crisis at the End of the Han,” the hundred years from 150 to 250 AD “exerted on China’s future development an influence no less important than that of the third century BC.”<sup>37</sup> Both periods saw disorder, injustice, and monstrous disparities of wealth; an increasing articulation of the sense of crisis; and a great diversity of proposals on rectifying the defects and reversing the degeneration of

<sup>35</sup> For example, the compiler(s?) of *Yantie lun* (comp. after 81 BC) decry the usurpation by wealthy individuals of the privilege of using gold and silver mounts on their lacquerware. See *A Concordance to the Yantielun* (ICS, 1994), 6.1/40/19.

<sup>36</sup> For good reason, what began as analytical persuasions ends as ostensible entertainments in the form of prose-poems. Once the empire was united, there was only one court at which to offer advice, and from a sense of secure monopoly, the emperor was less likely to accept the bitter pill of open remonstrance. This state of affairs is something that the *fu* writers freely comment upon. Yang Xiong, for example, “portrays the Warring States as a time of greater freedom for the talented scholar, who finding himself unappreciated at one court could offer his services elsewhere.” For further information, see Gong Kechang, *Studies on the Han Fu*, trans. and ed. David R. Knechtges, with Stuart Aque et al. (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1997); and *Hanshu* (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1970) 87B.3570, and *ibid.* 57B.2582, for explicit references to the *fu* as substitute for remonstrance for those who do not “dare” offend the emperor. In Eastern Han, justifications for indirect remonstrance multiply. I recommend a recent work on one sort of indirect remonstrance, the *she lun* 設論 (“hypothetical discourses”): Dominik Declerq, *Writing against the State: Political Rhetorics in Third and Fourth Century China* (Leiden, Brill, 1998), esp. chap. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Étienne Balazs, *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy: Variations on a Theme*, ed. Arthur Wright, trans. Mary Wright (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1964), p. 188.

state and society. By late Eastern Han, the practical problems associated with pleasure theory and display culture had made a mockery of its theoretical perfection. For one thing, the spiraling costs entailed by competitive displays, each more dazzling than the last, caused elites to extract from their social inferiors ever greater sums, in this way undermining any potential the display mechanisms had to unify different segments of society. Meanwhile, the vast estates of the Eastern Han magnates, enclaves of mock-courtly life in a sea of worsening impoverishment, exacerbated perceptions of sociopolitical injustice and fomented rebellions on an empire-wide scale. The formation just at that point of religious organizations, both Daoist and Buddhist, rivaling as much as supporting the family and state, complicated notions of security and pleasure while adding new modes of public display.<sup>38</sup> From the standpoint of the ruling house, it was unfortunate that the same display mechanisms once emanating principally from the center could be appropriated by regional powers and local cults in a refeudalizing era in such a way as to challenge the singular authority of the capital. And so, the deluge.

This introduction has suggested the ubiquity of the pleasure-rhetoric in theoretical discussions and in public applications of the classical period. The following section will treat one classical thinker to show how well the pleasure-rhetoric lent itself, in the hands of an acknowledged master, to a consideration of compelling moral questions.

#### XUNZI AS CASE STUDY

That the impulse to seek pleasure is far more than a deplorable aspect of human nature, being the most suitable basis from which to construct sound theories about good (healthy and constructive) personal and social orders – that contention I will now examine here in connection with writings associated with Xunzi.<sup>39</sup> Of all the Warring

<sup>38</sup> In his essay, “More Joy on Earth than in Heaven,” Qian Zhongshu cites two passages from two different fourth-century AD works to “reveal the innermost thoughts of Daoists who pursue immortality”: the first is a question: “Could Heaven possibly contain such happiness as is found here on earth?” and the second a statement: “the search for immortality is actually based on attachments to the things one desires in the mortal world.” Both are attempts to prolong one’s earthly pleasures as long as possible. See Ronald Egan, comp. and trans., *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters by Qian Zhongshu* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asian Center, 1998), pp. 332–33. The paradises of popular Buddhism were envisioned, of course, as places where the earthly pleasures could be sustained *ad infinitum*.

<sup>39</sup> As a historian, I would emphasize the process by which a number of disparate materials were eventually made into a single compilation attributed to a historical figure, Xunzi (fl. 264–238 BC). This process of compilation was said to have been undertaken by Liu Xiang (77–6 BC), who reportedly in editing the materials dramatically cut a number of passages and

States persuaders, Xunzi undoubtedly left the largest mark upon Han political, social, and ritual theory. At the same time, Xunzi is probably the figure least associated in popular or scholarly accounts with an interest in pleasure-seeking and pleasure-taking, aside from one, oft-cited discussion based on the graphical identity of the written forms for “music” and “pleasure.” Let the following account of Xunzi’s preoccupation with nourishing (*yang* 養), satisfying (*man* 滿), refining (*xiu* 修), and gradually expanding (*duo* 多) the human capacities for pleasure attest, then, to the pervasiveness and the sophistication in the classical era of the pleasure topos, which bound together seemingly disparate disquisitions on human nature, state institutions, and cultivation.

Consistent pronouncements on pleasure scattered throughout the extant *Xunzi* form an eight-part argument. Logically, the argument begins with

1. a complex theory of desire-as-motivation, which argues that the innate desires (*yu* 欲) and dispositions (*qing* 情), as constituent parts of human nature, cannot be excised from human beings, in whose lives they can be employed for good or for ill. Xunzi therefore
2. not only denounces the many calls to “reduce desires” made by most of the rival persuaders of his day, but also casts one metadesire – specifically the desire to achieve and sustain pleasurable sensations for as long as possible – as the prime motivation spurring commendable personal cultivation and social improvement. Since humans by definition seek pleasure, then
3. the only substantial feature that distinguishes the noble man (*junzi* 君子) from the petty is the level of discernment (or “wisdom”) that the noble man commands in choosing between competing objects of desire, with the noble man correctly identifying what is, in fact, to his own long-term benefit, and giving total commitment to what he knows will best satisfy him. Xunzi, who is far less interested in defin-

---

devised chapter titles for the revised chapters. The titles attached to the extant *Xunzi* chapters often mislead the reader about the chapter’s contents. (I am indebted to Nicolas Standaert of Leuven University for this observation.) To take but one example: The “Zhengming” 正名 chapter discusses the issue of “rectifying names” only in its opening section, after which it moves on to a complex discussion of human nature, desire, and motivation.

As a historian, I generally look for coherence within each separate chapter (representing one or more persuasions on a topic), rather than in the book as a whole, since writings circulated in much smaller units during the pre-Han and Han periods. Still, I accept the philosopher Eric Hutton’s characterization of the *Xunzi* as sufficiently consistent across chapters to justify speaking of major themes threading through the extant text. For simplicity’s sake, then, I will hereafter use *Xunzi* and Xunzi as if these were unproblematic. I will also employ other book titles and person’s names (e.g., *Zhuangzi* and Zhuangzi) in a similar manner. Readers should note that Li Rongming 李均明 and He Shuangquan 何雙全, *Sanjian jiandu heji* 散見簡牘合輯, pp. 44–50, discuss a fragment attributed to the *Xunzi* compilation that was found in Bajiaolang 八角廊, Ding 定 county, Hebei.

ing humans by their condition at birth than by the drives and commitments they acquire through acculturation, notes that whereas the petty man pursues every momentary gratification in turn, thereby diminishing his chances of long-term happiness, the noble man coolly calculates the course of action most likely to produce and sustain the highest degree of pleasure over the long run, then pursues that course with absolute single-mindedness.

4. The ritualized Way, in Xunzi's reiterations, constitutes the single best course of action – indeed, the only conceivable path – by which to provide reliable satisfaction for the complex jumble of desires and longings (*si* 思) that are innate. This sense of satisfaction, in turn, is the prerequisite for the development of a new and better (that is, more satisfying) self, a self that is whole and integrated (*cheng* 誠).<sup>40</sup> Thus, the noble man, confident that “those who secure their benefits [by the Way] as a rule take pleasure [in life] and feel at ease,”<sup>41</sup> pursues the Way in the full knowledge that it maximizes his opportunities for serene pleasure-taking.
5. Partly because the noble man finds himself to be less frustrated and frantic than his counterparts (as nothing need thwart him in pursuit of the Way) and partly because he is more focused and steady (since he is fixed on ultimate, rather than fleeting, pleasures), the noble man's adherence to the Way, in preference to lesser, less satisfying ways, grows predictably over time. As a result, the contradictory impulses and drives with which he was born gradually yield to the single, highly self-aware compulsion to achieve an integrated self capable of giving maximum pleasure to the self and to others.
6. After achieving that integration, the noble man's adherence to virtue (*de* 德) invests him with a compelling grace (also *de* 德). His accomplishments in the social and cultural realms make his fully ritualized person a spectacular piece of art that is “beautiful and fine, whole and integral.”

<sup>40</sup> At points, the *Xunzi* in talking of the “self” or the “person” (*shen* 身) asserts that all humans have the potential to become divinely efficacious (*shen* 神) and compelling graceful (*de* 德), and then it seems to be making general propositions about the human race. At other points, however, Xunzi seems to imply that the “noble man” can only be drawn from the ranks of the cultivated members of the sociopolitical elite, men who are not themselves farmers, merchants, and artisans. As is often true of Warring States writings, the terms *jun* 君 and *junzi* 君子, *ren* 人 (human, man) and *gua ren* 寡人 (the ruler), tend to be conflated. It is possible, then, that Xunzi does not conceive of a real farmer who understands the Way, or enunciate a real theory of “human nature.” Certainly his rhetoric, by design (given its presumed audience) or by unconscious presumption, allows members of the sociopolitical elite to feel justly superior to their sociopolitical inferiors, so long as they employ worthy men (i.e., people like Xunzi). For Xunzi, the Way refers not to the cosmic way, but to the sociopolitical orders created by the sages in response to the exigencies of their times and adapted by their latter-day followers as needed. Chief among these sociopolitical orders are the ritual orders, orders of nobility and precedence, and the penal code. See below.

<sup>41</sup> *H-Yg/A/24*: “Those who are secure in [their] benefits are always pleased and relaxed... those who are pleased and relaxed always live to a great age.”

7. As a remarkable work, he naturally attracts others' interest and emulation. It is the singular grace and power with which he deftly handles his social situation (his final achievement) – more so than the keenness of his mind (which some of his accomplishments presuppose) – that ultimately proves so compelling to others. No less importantly for Xunzi,
8. The freedom with which the *junzi* pursues his ends and thereby realizes his best self marks him out for superior status. As a man who radically transforms himself and others, he is said to be divine (*shen* 神). Above all, he has escaped the slavish condition (in the twin senses of subordination and mediocrity) to which the vast majority of humans are subject.

None of the standard labels applied to Xunzi, including that of Legalist, encompasses the dominant role that pleasure plays in Xunzi's system. Xunzi's pleasure theory, as presented here, has major implications for the study of classical thinking, among them that Xunzi and Mencius share far more common ground than is usually thought; that Xunzi takes very seriously the sorts of arguments about pleasure posed in the *Zhuangzi*; that Xunzi, in characterizing the noble man as one who habitually takes care of what makes him singular (*shen qi du*), is far less focused on interior states than on effective social constructions; and that Xunzi begins to articulate an aesthetic theory from which later thinkers in the Han, such as Yang Xiong (53 BC–18 AD), drew inspiration.<sup>42</sup>

*Desire as Motivation; Metadesire as Motivation for Deliberate Conduct*

“All men possess one and the same nature. When hungry, they desire food; when cold, they desire warmth. When exhausted from toil, they desire rest. And all desire benefit and hate harm.”<sup>43</sup> Many a passage in the extant *Xunzi* casts the inherent human dispositions to evaluate what is more or less desirable (*qing* 情) and the resultant desire (*yu* 欲) for an object, person, or event as the chief catalysts for all human activities. The catalyzing force of these dispositions and desires is taken to be intuitively obvious. The urges for food and sex are employed

<sup>42</sup> Xunzi's insistence on the aesthetic delights of moral charisma, both to the charismatic figure and to the beholders – this is decidedly at odds with the conventional view of Xunzi as a strict law-and-order man. Recent scholarship (e.g., that of Herbert Fingarette, Roger Ames, Henry Rosemont, and Li Zehou) has sought to highlight the importance of the aesthetic to distinctive developments in Chinese thought. While I believe accounts of those developments to be somewhat skewed by East/West generalizations that can be traced back to early modern methods of Biblical interpretation, I accept the notion that “art and the more ‘practical’ side of life came to be profoundly interdependent, enfolded like pleats in fabric.” See Pearce, Spiro, and Ebrey, eds., *Culture and Power*, p. 3; For the usual East–West contrasts, apparently derived from Biblical interpretation, see James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1962).

<sup>43</sup> *H-Y*10/4/33, 43; 13/5/24.

as shorthand illustrations for the entire range of possible desires and dispositions. Since all humans have known the urgent, indiscriminate desire for food or sex, not to mention yearnings for a specific food or person, Xunzi the rhetorician can move all persons to acknowledge the compelling force of such desires and dispositions.<sup>44</sup> As Xunzi puts it, “Now, as we all know, humans intend to have what they desire, regardless of the great distance and difficulties [it may take to procure the object of desire]...”<sup>45</sup>

The particulars of Xunzi’s pleasure theory rest upon the initial premise that it is the function of the sensory receptors endowed at birth (usually listed as the ear, eye, nose, and body as locus for touch, but sometimes including the heart–mind) to crave pleasurable contact with external phenomenon. The sensory, the emotional, and the cognitive – all these are inextricably tied up in the craving. Only with death does this craving stop. So long as the person lives,<sup>46</sup>

The eye likes colors and sex appeal; the ear likes sound, the mouth likes flavors, the heart–mind (*xin* 心, as the seat of feeling and thinking) likes anything of benefit and profit (*li* 利), and the body in its constituent parts likes ease. These are all born of the human nature and condition (*xing qing* 性情).... They do not await an effort before being born.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> For a typical analogy between food and sex, where “the sage when conjoining male and female” takes the model upon eating, since eating is “what assists life,” see “Tianxia zhidao tan,” one of the Mawangdui medical texts, translated in Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, p. 432. Also, the frequent discussions that “use a minor desire [like sex] to illustrate a major desire [like ritual],” as in the “Wuxingpian” commentary on lines 4–6 of Mao ode no. 1. For the “Wuxing pian,” see Ikeda Tomohise 池田和久, “Maōtai Kanbo shutsudo Rōshi kōhon kangokoshitsushuo Gogyōhen yakchū” 馬王堆漢墓出土老子甲本卷後古佚書五行篇譯注, *Nisho Gakusha Daigaku Ronshū* 學社大學論集 32 (1989)–35 (1992); *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu* 馬王堆漢墓帛書 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1976), vol. 1; and Pang Pu 龐僕, “Boshu Wuxingpian jiaozhu” 帛書五行篇校注, *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 (1979), pp. 47–69. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p. 21, comments that those who find these urges “intuitively obvious” could hardly articulate the defining character of sex or food.

<sup>45</sup> *H-Y* 10/4/42; 85/22/67. The passage continues: “and certain things they eschew, even though the distance and difficulties [to procure them] are slight... Humans in general all pursue what they think will do [in a given case] and reject what they think will not do.” Ellipses are used to break the passages, but I have reversed the order of the passages within the quote as it then makes better sense to the reader.

<sup>46</sup> *H-Y* 85/22/56 ff.: “As a general rule, those who contend that ‘order requires that we first reduce the number of our desires’ are those who lack the means to moderate the desires.... ‘Having desires’ and ‘lacking desires’ belong to different categories: those of life and death, not those of order and disorder [i.e., only the dead lack desires]....”

<sup>47</sup> *H-Y* 87/23/25. Xunzi says of the “Tian guan” (e.g., ear, eye, nose, mouth, and bodily form corresponding to sight, smell, taste, and touch) “that they can, each of them, have what they make contact with” (*neng ge you jie* 能有接). See *H-Y* 62/17/11; cf. *ibid.* 81/21/62, which

Furthermore, when several choices are available, it is always toward the most pleasurable experiences that the sensory receptors propel the person:

It is the essential condition of man that his eyes desire the richest of colors, his ears the richest of sounds, his mouth the richest of flavors, his nose the richest of aromas, and his mind the highest measure of relaxation and repose. The propensity for these Five Extremes is unavoidable.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the sensory organs do much more than merely register external phenomena. They also assess them and create a hierarchy of values, at least in a preliminary way. As Xunzi puts it,

The eye distinguishes black and white, holding some colors to be beautiful and some ugly; the ear distinguishes tones and sounds, holding some to be pure and some muddled; the mouth distinguishes sour from salty, sweet from bitter; the nose distinguishes what is fragrant and rank....<sup>49</sup>

Given that the evaluative impulses are endowed at birth, the self inevitably seeks that which it accounts a satisfaction, supplying what it perceives itself to lack. A human has no “value-free,” “neutral” response. Instead, a preliminary assessment of a particular phenomenon’s value to the self disposes the person to want to secure or to shun the phenomenon. These dispositions are classified by level of intensity: if a person finds a particular phenomenon pleasing, she may feel a liking or preference (*hao*) for it, a frisson of delight (*xi* 喜), or a more lasting sense of pleasure (*le* 樂). On the other hand, if the phenomenon fails to please, she may feel dislike or distaste (*wu* 惡), a spurt of anger (*nu* 怒), or a more profound and lasting sense of pain and loss (*ai* 哀). These six basic dispositions (*qing* 情), endowed at birth, represent the initial, unmediated inclinations to act.<sup>50</sup> Thus, all action, however deeply con-

---

talks of the “ear and eye’s desire to make contact.” My vocabulary differs slightly from that adopted by Despeux and Santangelo, coming closer to that of Anne Cheng. While I prefer to use the translation “dispositions” for *qing*, in this following Eric Hutton, they identify the “liking and disliking, delight and anger, concern and pleasure” (*liu qing*) with the “feelings.” The emotions refer, by their account, to the movements produced by our responses; sentiments to the sensory response itself; and feelings to an intermediate state, prior to action, but more deeply imbedded than the sensory response. I am not at all sure that Xunzi observes these distinctions consistently, or whether, indeed, these distinctions are his. The length of the reaction to and result of the phenomenon seems to determine Xunzi’s choice of vocabulary, not the relative imbeddedness of the sensation.

<sup>48</sup> *H-Y* 39/11/45 ff.

<sup>49</sup> *H-Y* 10/4/44.

<sup>50</sup> *H-Y* 83/22/2 ff. As other accounts mention the six dispositions, Xunzi seems to adopt the conventional account.



sidered, starts from a “spontaneous reaction which is caused rather than considered.”<sup>51</sup>

In addition to the sensory organs with their range of dispositions, humans – unlike the beasts – come equipped with another faculty: the heart–mind (*xin* 心), whose function it is to process the contacts made by the sensory receptors, and correlate those with the stored memories of preceding encounters, so as to make deliberate “choices on behalf of them [the dispositions].” These choices can inform and affect the very dispositions prior to the self’s taking action.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the initial dispositions to act are by no means synonymous with acts taken after mature deliberation (*lü* 慮). A child’s instinctive reaching out for a dazzling light is likely to be tempered in later years by her knowledge that the fire’s flames can hurt.<sup>53</sup> Certainly, the more intense the pleasure derived regularly from certain contacts, the clearer and more deliberate the later commitment (*zhi* 志) to procure experiences and the stronger the contrary drive to avoid any repetition of less-than-pleasurable experiences. As a result, over time, the heart–mind’s deliberations come to reflect quite sophisticated calculations gauging the likelihood that a particular phenomenon will or will not supply the self’s needs in the short or long term.

What the sensory organs and the heart–mind regard as gratifying or distasteful is to a large extent, of course, a matter of experience and custom, as Xunzi readily acknowledges.<sup>54</sup> In one passage reminiscent of Zhuangzi, Xunzi says, “The frog in the well cannot speak ... of the pleasures of the Eastern Sea.”<sup>55</sup> In another, a hypothetical country bumpkin raised on the coarsest of grains, pulses, and vegetables is sud-

<sup>51</sup> A. C. Graham, “The Way and the One in Ho-kuan-tzu,” in Hans Lenk and Gregor Paul, eds., *Epistemological Issues in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 34, with reference to “ancient Chinese thought” in general.

<sup>52</sup> It is not altogether clear how the operations of the heart–mind relate to the operations of the dispositions: whether they somehow modify the dispositions or interpose themselves between the dispositions and the body’s move to act. The clearest statement on this comes in the “Zhengming” chapter (*ibid.*), but the passage there is liable to different construals.

<sup>53</sup> The crudity of a child’s understanding in the practical realm is matched by the crudity of moral understanding: “When humans are born, they are indisputably petty.... all they have an eye for is profit.”

<sup>54</sup> Hence the importance to the self’s development of acquaintance with the ZhuXia 諸夏 (“all the Xia”) customs, assumed to be infinitely better than those of the barbarian states and societies. “By analogy, that the man of Yue is comfortable in Yue, and the man of Chu is comfortable in Chu, and that the noble man seeks comfort in Xia-refinement... this is not because their knowledge, abilities, basic constitution, and natures make them so, [dramatically different]; this is because the principles by which they pay attention to faults and customs differ.” (See *H-Y* 10/4/40).

<sup>55</sup> *H-Y* 67/18/53.

denly served the very finest wines and meats. His first reaction is to exclaim “How strange these things are!” “But since the wines and meats would be pleasing to the nose when smelt and appealing to the mouth when tasted, and since they would be reliably good for the body when consumed, then every single person, once having tried them, would reject the old foods and choose the new instead.”<sup>56</sup> Presumably, the more refined the experiences to which a person is introduced, the more likely the person is to be aware that his choices are consequential. That explains why the most fortunate man is he who has grown up in the company of good teachers, friends, and parents in the cultured environment of the Central States. Nevertheless, Xunzi insists, the picture he paints of the human condition and its potential for careful ritualized social interaction holds true of all men in every age. As Xunzi’s “proof” for his propositions is quite intriguing, it is worth examining in some detail.

In every society at every time period, as Xunzi tells it, two aspects of the human condition work against the easy attainment of pleasures: externally, the basic human search for satisfaction of the senses in a world of limited resources leads to ruthless competitions over perceived goods, which only intensify to the degree that the perceived goods are scarce (for example, the highest ranks, the sexiest women). Strife within and between social units in a virtual war of all-against-all breaks out, unless some person or institution intervenes to regulate the process. As if this were not bad enough, there exists within each person another series of contests that sometimes pit the needs for food, clothing, shelter, and sex against the even harder-to-attain desires for wealth, high rank, honor, long life, beautiful spectacle, social approbation, and a lasting fame. When each of these incommensurate goals may demand a different set of activities, attempts to obtain all one’s desires simultaneously lead invariably to frantic (*ji* 急, or 疾) efforts, no matter how correct the person’s estimation of “the good” in any one area of life. Some method must be found by which to prioritize the pursuits, if the person is not to deplete her limited resources of time, energy, and materials. A continuing failure to set such priorities ends in predictably disastrous consequences: disorder (*luan* 亂) in society and anxiety (*you* 憂) in the self.<sup>57</sup>

The phrases “frantic” and “fragmented” point to the basic insecurities that permeate the vast majority of human lives. Humans at every

<sup>56</sup> *H-Y*11/4/54. Note that Xunzi allows little for personal idiosyncrasy.

<sup>57</sup> *H-Y*75/19/101; 73/19/70-73.

level of society find it surprisingly hard to “nourish and satisfy” the senses as precondition to fashioning a “good life.” For to nourish the senses, humans need not only material security and opportunities for sexual, social, and symbolic interaction, but also a profound peace of mind. Lacking peace of mind, humans become too distracted to register their own sensations, even when the most exquisite objects of gratification lie ready to hand.

If the heart–mind is full of anxiety and fear, then the mouth may be crammed with grain- and grass-fed animals, but it will not recognize or appreciate (*zhi* 知) the tastes. The ears can be listening to the sound of bells and music, but they will not recognize or appreciate the sounds. The eye may alight upon embroidered patterns, but it will not recognize or appreciate their forms. And the body may be clothed in warm yet light garments and rest on soft mats, but it will feel no ease. In such a case, [even] when confronted by all the most excellent and beautiful (*mei* 美) of things, the person would still not be able to feel gratified. And were he to feel a moment’s gratification, he would still not be able to allay [his anxieties and fears permanently]... When it’s like this, does a person’s pursuit of things nourish his life or put his longevity up for sale to the highest bidder?... He may wish to attend to his pleasures but [anxieties and doubts] will assail his heart–mind...<sup>58</sup>

Clearly, provision for the immediate gratification of the basic biological needs is not enough to truly nourish the self. Insecurity diminishes the experience of pleasure and the failure to experience the self-as-satisfied can lead to such a serious state of deprivation that death, in very extreme cases, ensues. Among the ruling elite, at least, by Xunzi’s account, anxiety, born of the insecurities engendered by the frantic pursuit of a secondary or partial good, constitutes as large a problem as “giving free rein to the desires” (that is, acting in an excessive manner) or racing after a variety of conflicting pleasures. All three states essentially “harm life,” though they are brought about by (wrong-headed) attempts to secure pleasurable experience.

Absolutely fundamental to Xunzi’s larger argument is this claim that the person distracted by cares and concerns can never truly experience pleasure. For Xunzi, a true, profound, and lasting pleasure invariably entails the engagement of the evaluating heart–mind *at the*

<sup>58</sup> Before the ellipsis, *H-Y*86/22/81-86; after the ellipsis, *ibid.* 86/22/82. Note here that I have used two words to translate the terms *zhi* and *mei*, since I believe the semantic range in Chinese covers two meanings in English.

*time*. The heart–mind must be fully aware of the particular sensory experience of the object, person, or event, and it must consciously acknowledge that the experience meets its present needs. Unfortunately, the most satisfying of present experiences may only serve to awaken anxieties about the future. In the midst of sufficiency, the specter of a future loss of sources of gratification blocks the present enjoyment of pleasure. That paradoxical sense of death-in-life and destitution-in-plenty the best of the late Warring States rhetoricians ably communicated. As a phrase attributed to Zhuangzi would have it, “Man goes through life with worry as his companion. To be careworn for so long before dying – how bitter that is!”<sup>59</sup>

Xunzi is in full agreement with many rival persuaders of the late Warring States period regarding the pervasive anxieties of humankind. But Xunzi, drawing quite different conclusions about human potentials and final goals,<sup>60</sup> adamantly refuses to advocate the reduction of desire itself, let alone its elimination. According to Xunzi, neither the desires nor the dispositions can ever be reduced, since they are part of the original human make-up. “Humans are born with desires. When the desires are unattainable, then humans cannot but seek [to satisfy them].”<sup>61</sup> More importantly, the desires to attain the conventional “goods” of long life, wealth, social standing, and official rank constitute the first level of motivation for less cultivated human beings starting out on the learning process. Luckily enough, the impulse “to get what nourishes” the senses of sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch can do more than trigger (regrettable) acts that create conflict, since rites and music are of no help initially: “The rites and music provide models, but they do not persuade us [to practice them].”<sup>62</sup> Quickened by a love for patterns (*wen* 文) of inestimable beauty that is partly innate and partly learned, the heart–mind may be stimulated to exercise its “inclination to make proper distinctions” (*hao qi bie* 好其别), with the result that it can also make highly self-conscious and laudable choices on behalf of higher goals.<sup>63</sup> One of the most effective spurs

<sup>59</sup> *H-Y* index, 46/18/6. Ibid. 46/18/7–11 tries to uncouple the associations that appear in Xunzi between *shan* 善 (“what is good”) and *cheng* 誠 (“what has integrity and wholeness”).

<sup>60</sup> Zhuangzi, for example, seems to focus more on “keeping oneself [physically] intact” than Xunzi. See the arguments made in chapter 5 of the extant *Zhuangzi*. Xunzi, by the way, comes very close to the position on pleasure articulated in *NE* 1174a13–19, p. 273: that pleasure, like perception, is “complete” at any time, since it represents an unimpeded actualization (*energeiai*) achieved with full attention and vigor in accordance with one’s natural capacities or dispositions.

<sup>61</sup> *H-Y* 70/19/1.

<sup>62</sup> *H-Y* 2/1/34. Or, as one commentator says, “They do not explicate anything.”

<sup>63</sup> *H-Y* 70/19/6.

to action, it need hardly be said, is the example of the cultivated man whose patterns of behavior prompt admiration and emulation. Thus, the utility of human desire must never be underestimated, since it supplies people with a fine motivation to set aside self-interested activities and short-term profits in order to seek the cultivation of the relational as a way of achieving longer-lasting pleasure and security.<sup>64</sup> That being the case, only short-sighted thinkers like Song Bian 宋鉞, who are “blinded by [the concept of] desire, do not understand what is to be gotten” from the careful employment of desire-as-catalyst.<sup>65</sup> Xunzi, by such artful phrases about “what is to be gotten” from desire indicates to his audience that he may be the only one to know how to utilize the unchangeable aspects of the human condition – its desires, drives, and dispositions – so as to provide a sufficient measure of pleasure to each person such as will sustain, rather than consume him.

Xunzi’s persuasions, by a series of dazzling rhetorical turns, would convert the very severe constraints on human existence into major advantages promoting the success of the person’s search for long-lasting pleasure. And once again, Xunzi’s logic seems irrefutable, being well-grounded in the most ordinary of learned human experiences, that of delayed gratification. Given that the human condition is plagued both by an insufficiency of physical resources and the normal afflictions of the human psyche, even the least reflective of persons will, upon occasion, find his desires to satisfy his present needs offset by a more pressing desire to set aside sufficient “wealth in the form of surplus money and hoards of provisions” so that he will never want for anything in the future.

Now, the human condition is to want to eat grain- and grass-fed beasts, and to wear patterned and embroidered clothes.... In their lives, men may be known for raising chickens, dogs, pigs, and boar, and they may even raise oxen and sheep, and yet they do not dare to have wine and meat at mealtimes. And even with a surplus of knife- and spade-shaped coins and stores in cellars and storehouses, they may not presume to dress in silk.... It is not that humans do not desire to do such things [as give them immediate gratification]. It is rather that, taking the long view of things and calculating the

<sup>64</sup> See the concluding remarks to *Xunzi*, chap. 17, “Tian lun” (*H-Y*64/17/53), which says that humans are propelled to improve their conditions and themselves by their having many desires. This statement recalls Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, V, 6 (24), 5, 9 (Loeb), p. 213: “It is desire that engenders thought.”

<sup>65</sup> *H-Y*79/21/21. Similarly misguided are those who adopt the slogan “Regard nothing as pleasure” as a way of stilling their desires. Compare *H-Y* index 76/20/1, with *Zhuangzi*, “Zhile” chapter (*H-Y* index, 46/18/11).

consequences of their actions, they are apprehensive lest they lack the means by which to perpetuate their wealth.<sup>66</sup>

In this extended passage, Xunzi suggests that all human beings readily accept the notion that they cannot at any given moment have everything they desire. They see that the extension of their wealth and comfort depends at least as much upon self-restraint as upon any other single factor. (Mencius had already raised the case where the demands of ritual, backed by the natural desire for social approbation, dampened the urge to seek immediate gratification. The young man longing for sex is still unwilling to have sex in the presence of his elder brother or parents.)<sup>67</sup> In other words, humans, whatever their level of moral development, choose to moderate or (temporarily) ignore their most basic desires if that will improve their future prospects for enjoyment. In the simple matter of devising the household budget, ordinary humans are not only capable of such complex reasoning. They regularly do so reason. Thus all humans are capable of conscious behavior modification, even when it comes to their most basic drives for food and sex. Obviously, to obtain the higher desires (for example, those for a good name, honor, and identity) requires more complex calculations than the computation of the daily budget. But it may well be that the more ardent the pleasure-seeker, the more likely it is that he can be persuaded to calculate the future consequences of present actions and modify his behavior, as prudence dictates.

Of course, the specific answers to questions about how to attain and prolong satisfaction will vary a bit, depending on a given situation, but since all humans in all times and situations have operated under the same sorts of constraints, the man of discernment will find little difficulty in determining, at least approximately, the wisest course of action. The person can judge the merits of any particular experience by putting two simple tests to it: how it compares with previously known phenomena in satisfying the senses, emotions, and mind; and whether it provokes no ill reaction. (Witness the story of the country bumpkin above, which talks of the meats' being "reliably good" both at the time they were consumed and afterward.)<sup>68</sup> Through his rough apprehension of the correct causal connections, the person has learnt enough

<sup>66</sup> *H-Y* 11/4/62-64. The end of this translation follows Knoblock 1, p. 93.

<sup>67</sup> Mencius 6B/1, and the "Wuxing pian" citation of Mao ode 1, "Guanju" (lines 4-6). Cf. *H-Y* 87/23/18 ff.

<sup>68</sup> It is no less easy to accurately gauge another's responses to a particular experience, as the sage knows: "One uses one's own being to measure other humans; one uses one's own disposition to measure that of others" (*H-Y* 14/5/35).

about decision-making to proceed to assess by a balanced, rather than a skewed standard all the phenomena of the world.<sup>69</sup>

The key to Xunzi's persuasion is the phrase "reliably." If one wishes, with the experience of pleasure, to "keep it for long," "broaden it," and "secure it,"<sup>70</sup> the pleasure must remain pleasing over time. Repetition of the valid pleasure-act must not sate or disgust. (The person is likely to register the sense that she has had enough after three peaches, but there may be no limit to the pleasure derived from a wider range of friends or a deeper experience of friendship. Stolen fruit may taste sweeter at first, but will it continue to yield as much pleasure over time, given the risks involved?) It goes without saying that a sustainable pleasure must be attainable. For while desire is "not dependent on the object of desire first being obtainable," since it spontaneously erupts as the person makes contact with external phenomena, with the thinking person "what is sought follows what is possible... That we seek to satisfy our desires by following after the possible is what we receive from the heart-mind."<sup>71</sup> It is Expectation born of Memory – the sense "that certain notes will follow in sequence after certain others"<sup>72</sup> – that leads a person to select one path over the alternatives. With that in mind, a person can go a long way toward arriving at a healthy hierarchy of pleasures, such that the determined search for pleasure will not frustrate but satisfy the self over a lifetime. Anyone with even a modicum of intelligence and experience can see the rhetorical power of Xunzi's arguments here.

In Xunzi's view, it remains only for him to show that ordinary men assume – except, most inexplicably, in the case of their own lives – the operation of intelligible laws of cause-and-effect in the social sphere, no less than in the practical realm of household budgets.<sup>73</sup> Most men, for example, believe that those who contravene the social norms do not operate for long in safety. Though Xunzi worries that the egregious sophistries fashionable at contemporary courts jeopardize common-sense understanding,<sup>74</sup> they for the most part still see that bullies and

<sup>69</sup> For Xunzi on this weighing of conflicting goals, see *H-Y*79/21/29, where the key phrase is "to lay out together the myriad sorts of things and at the middle hang a balance for them."

<sup>70</sup> *H-Y*12/4/70.

<sup>71</sup> *H-Y*85/22/63 ff.

<sup>72</sup> Rose Tremain, *Music and Silence* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 484.

<sup>73</sup> For the slogan, see *H-Y*86/22/447, where the slogan appears with another slogan: "Let the desires and dispositions be reduced." Xunzi continues, "Even so, one is not necessarily made insecure with them. That being the case, the noble man speaks of [or is led by] what is the constant/or general rule, while the petty man speaks of [or is led by] miracles."

<sup>74</sup> See *H-Y*10/4/41-42, for the quotation. Xunzi laments the propensity for contemporary courts to celebrate sophisticated paradoxes (e.g., "High mountains and deep abysses are level"), since notions of ethical causation may weaken over time if an unthinking population is encouraged in the predilection for the bizarre and inexplicable.



tricksters do not feel secure enough in their possessions and powers to savor them (“Rudeness and aggression are techniques that bring constant danger”).<sup>75</sup> In due course, the supreme isolation of the ignoble person, his inability to keep allies, patrons, and friends, will impede his quest for ever-greater power, authority, and self-esteem.

Having witnessed this “constant rule” in operation, the observant man measures his own prospects by the same standard that he applies to others. And so he chooses, consciously and consistently, to adopt the socially constructive behavior that society deems “virtue” *de* 德, since he will thereby be able to savor his pleasures in perfect security and in good fellowship. The lesser man, by contrast, is inclined to trust to luck; he wagers he will be the single exception who manages to escape the consequences of evil-doing. Only in this single respect – this propensity to trust in the rational law of social consequences rather than in luck – does the noble man differ from the petty. As a key passage in the *Xunzi* states,

With respect to the basic substance and capacities for understanding, the noble man and the petty are one and the same. What the noble man and the petty share is a liking for glory and a dislike of shame, a liking for benefit and the dislike of harm. It is surely [only] with respect to the means by which they seek these things that they differ. The petty man is quick to self-aggrandize, and yet he wants others to trust him. He is quick to deceive, and yet he wants others to regard him as their nearest and dearest.... It is difficult [for him] to create security through his actions.... And if he goes on in this way to the end, he will never get what he would like and he will always meet with something awful.

The noble man, by contrast, is entirely trustworthy, for he also [like the petty man] wants others to trust him. He is entirely loyal and sincere, for he also wants others to treat him as their intimate. He certainly cultivates the right and rules in a discriminating way, for he also wants others’ approval.... He easily achieves security and peace of mind.... If he perseveres to the end, then he will surely get what he would like, and he will moreover *not* meet with what he finds most distasteful and distressing.<sup>76</sup>

As *Xunzi* puts it elsewhere, “In general, there is no man who doesn’t want safety and glory and who doesn’t abhor danger and shame. *But it is only the noble man who can get what he prefers.* The petty man just ‘happens to meet’ every day what he abhors.”<sup>77</sup> The decision to consider

<sup>75</sup> *H-Y*14/5/35-36.

<sup>76</sup> *H-Y*10/4/32 ff.

<sup>77</sup> *H-Y*25/8/117.

the moral and practical consequences of one's action becomes far easier when the person knows two things: that the attainment of conventional rewards, not to mention an enviable nobility of character, is generally due to volition rather than to accidents of birth or fate; and that in all but a few extraordinary circumstances beyond the person's control, the pursuit of long-term self-interest in conventional terms (for example, honor, rank, wealth, and physical security) and the pursuit of goodness are one and the same. Put another way, the noble man by definition is simply one who accepts the direct cause-and-effect relation between what a person pays attention to, what he works at (*zhu cuo* 注錯), and what he becomes. He therefore seeks what "in thought is easily understood [this understanding of cause-and-effect]; what in conduct easily brings security; ... what *in the end* necessarily brings what he prefers." He does not begrudge the effort to ascertain what is most likely to "secure glory and ease" without "injury to the self,"<sup>78</sup> knowing that the choice of any path or profession involves a certain amount of trouble.

Since Xunzi has proven to the satisfaction of his listeners that the "healthy" self invariably seeks satisfaction for whatever the self perceives itself to lack (as is evident when the belly senses a lack of food),<sup>79</sup> he goes on to postulate an analogous mechanism propelling the person toward more complex and profound goals, for instance, more satisfactory social relations:

Every man who wants to act so as to gain social approbation does so precisely because his [inborn] nature is not a pretty sight to see. It is the sense of his own meager accomplishments that leads to a longing for greatness and the consciousness of his own ugliness that leads to a longing for beauty. It is the feeling of being cramped that leads to a longing for breadth [in physical or psychic terms], of being impoverished that leads to a longing for abundance; and of being base that leads to a longing for honor and eminence. Whatever a person lacks in himself he feels compelled to seek outside. The rich do not want wealth. The high-ranking do not want power. What a man already possesses in himself he

<sup>78</sup> For the first quotation referring to *zhu cuo*, see 10/4/39-46; and 25/8/110; for the second, 10/4/37; for the third, 4/2/12, where the "evil person" is shown to be one who "injures himself." An important part of Xunzi's claims, however, is that we not only injure ourselves when we do evil, but we injure the society we live in. He speaks, for example, of, "the common calamity of all those in our world, and a great misfortune and harm to others" (11/4/57).

<sup>79</sup> *H-Y* 83/22/6. *Ibid.* /23/, p. 469: "Now man's nature is such that when he is hungry he will want to be satiated with food; when he is cold he will want to be warmed; and when he is weary he will want rest. That is the human condition" (*ibid.*, 87/23/18). (If the mouth and belly do not perceive a genuine lack, then they are termed "ill.") Cf. *ibid.* 83/22/6.

will not bother to seek outside. From this we observe that the motivation for men's desire to do good relates to the ugly aspects of human nature. Ritual principles are certainly not a part of man's original nature ... and so he forces himself to study and seeks to acquire them.<sup>80</sup>

There is no reason to believe that repeated deliberations premised on such insights will not then work to induce major changes in the dispositions themselves. Humans quite regularly accustom themselves (take as natural) many attitudes and things that strike them initially as odd or irksome – things that are, in fact, the artificial products of culture and habit. Discounting both the objection that virtue is “unnatural” and so harmful (made by Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Yang Zhu, among others) and the contrary notion that virtue is entirely “natural” (a position attributed to Mencius by Xunzi when he is tetchy), Xunzi would persuade us of a third possibility: that we may establish manifestly better propensities that become engrained in us, thanks to everyday experience as well as formal schooling, that they seem utterly “natural” to us.<sup>81</sup>

The question is, how is a person to get from here to there (from the original endowment, fraught with competing desires and inclined to rashness, to a second nature that is habitually “one” and “calm” in its deliberations)?<sup>82</sup> How is a person to progress from a first dim awareness of cause-and-effect to that exalted condition where he chooses consistently what will give him most pleasure (which happens to be the good), moving from a state of steady depletion (*qiong* 窮) of the self to the fullest state of well-being (also *qiong* 窮)? Those transitions even Xunzi, the master rhetorician, does not explain well, perhaps because the process varies so much, depending on the person's original endowment, the opportunities and obstacles met in life, and the level of commitment. What Xunzi does reiterate is that, first, the process is long and cumulative, rather than easy and quick; second, the process requires a keen ability to recognize what is categorically true and better; third, the senses and the evaluating heart-mind are adequate to the process, although, last, the process will proceed more smoothly and more quickly for those lucky enough live in a cultivated society, where good teachers, rulers, and friends abound.

<sup>80</sup> *H-Y*88/23/31 ff.

<sup>81</sup> For the citation, see *H-Y*37/11/1. The parallels here in the work of Xunzi and Bourdieu are strong.

<sup>82</sup> *H-Y*80/21/35-41. Xunzi's phrase is “empty [of preconceptions], one, and still [not inclined to precipitate action or premature fears].”

Much of Xunzi's discussion hinges upon the double-association of the character *si* 思, which means "to long for" as well as "to think about." As a person longs for a particular phenomenon, he thinks hard about the best method to attain it. Presumably, the more he thinks, the better he becomes at making connections; hence the shift in his appreciation of the choices before him. Gradually, the person of increasing cultivation comes to view pleasure-taking and relative advantage in more complex ways that insure pleasure's prolongation (enhancing both the ability to get the pleasure and to enjoy it).<sup>83</sup> As the heightened capacities of the senses and heart-mind cause radical reassessments of advantage and disadvantage and related readjustments to the desires, such readjustments over time prompt self-conscious choices that lead to a greater security of mind and a minimum of external dangers. That the person's sense of herself in the world has been substantially changed by the shift in habits of thinking and acting and also by the succession of experiences confirming the pleasures of goodness – that much is sure. The person can then act upon the new insights with a new steadiness of purpose and excellence in execution.<sup>84</sup> Or, as Xunzi says, "Seeing what is good, [the noble man] cultivates it, regarding it always as his means of self-preservation." "He honors what will bring him security."<sup>85</sup> Just as the archer's aim and the musician's pitch improve through long practice, the ordinary human going through life may hope to attain a greater proficiency in his deliberations and actions, if he works at doing so.<sup>86</sup> That explains why the most important factor in gaining proficiency is the commitment to continue an activity, regardless of setbacks.

<sup>83</sup> "It is simply what happens when one repeatedly decides in the same way – that is, when one's reasoning is consistent and coherent, and one finds that repeated deliberations turn up no reason to reverse one's view. The increasing consistency of behavior and response that builds up as this happens is thus not a non-rational force threatening the agent's next exercise of rationality." It is not merely the self-controlled. See Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1993), p. 48 ff.

<sup>84</sup> *H-Y*83/22/3-4 gives two definitions for *xing*. The first is "the wherewithal at birth." The second definition is: "the [first] *xing*'s harmonious accord with what was born [the endowment] and its fine coherence in response/reaction; what it does not work at but which is self-so." The commentators generally take the second definition to refer to the response of humans to external phenomena. The second definition is sufficiently ambiguous that it could refer to the second nature which now "naturally" [without "working at it"] chooses to act upon the desire that is right and practical.

<sup>85</sup> For the first quote, *H-Y*3/2/1; for the second, *ibid.* 5/2/40.

<sup>86</sup> *H-Y*3/1/43-44: "When a person misses one shot out of a hundred in archery, he cannot be called a good archer. When a person on a thousand-*li* journey breaks down a few paces from the destination, he cannot be called a good driver. When a person fails to make sense when categorizing things [evaluating them], when a person is less than whole-hearted in his pursuit of humaneness and duty, then he cannot be called good at learning."

The good farmer [by definition] does not give up ploughing because of flood and drought; neither does the good merchant stop doing business because of occasional losses. [By analogy,] the noble man of breeding does not neglect the Way just because of poverty and hardship.... A sage is defined in terms of what he accumulates and lays store by. If a person does ploughing, over and over again, then he is a farmer; if he does carving over and over again, then he is an artisan; if he accumulates wealth, then he becomes a merchant; if he performs the rites and acts dutifully, over and over again, then he becomes a gentleman.... So whether a man becomes a sage or villain, a laborer, an artisan, a farmer, a merchant, it all depends upon nothing more than an accumulation of instances where one makes an effort to perfect one's habits.<sup>87</sup>

Goodness is well within the reach of anyone, by this theory. It rests only upon what the person is willing to do.<sup>88</sup> The sage, however far he seems beyond the ordinary man, is simply a man who "sought it [goodness] and later got it, who acted to achieve it and later was perfected, who accumulated it and later was elevated."<sup>89</sup> Without a doubt, each life choice entails some trouble, and all require persistence in the face of adversity. The farmer, for example, must toil, day in and day out, to secure his livelihood, and the merchant travel far from home. But oddly enough, the world deems the choice to farm or trade to be "practical," when the choices to ascertain the good, to school oneself to prefer it, and to abide in it are widely mocked as "impractical," "marginal," and "eccentric." Xunzi replies to critics in this way: the wisest and most gratifying choice is to become a sage, since it involves less physical trouble, avoids infamy, and maintains the person in a state of ease and happiness.

One can become a Yao or a Yu [that is, a sage], a Jie or a Chi [that is, a notorious man of violence].... To be a Yao or a Yu is to always find security and fame; to be a Jie or a Chi is to always create danger and infamy. If, when one is a Yao or Yu, one is constantly at ease and happy, and when one is a laborer, artisan, farmer, or merchant, one is constantly troubled and toiling, why do men work so hard at the one sort of endeavor and so little at the other?<sup>90</sup>

A commitment to the moral Way, by this view, requires no unusual measure of self-abnegation. To the contrary. That commitment entails, in the end, far less trouble than other courses of action while

<sup>87</sup> Before the ellipsis, *H-Y* 4/2/21 ff.; after the ellipsis, 10/4/47.

<sup>88</sup> *H-Y* 89/23/70.

<sup>89</sup> *H-Y* 25/8/113.

<sup>90</sup> *H-Y* 10/4/47.

maximizing one's sense of pleasure and ease. "The noble man seeks benefit and profit" (*junzi qiu li* 君子求利), and the determined search for what he knows to be pleasurable brings the thinking person to correct conduct, to health, and to all manner of honors, in death, if not in life.<sup>91</sup> Thus Xunzi as master-rhetorician arrives at moral necessity via such initial premises about pleasure.

Much of the "glossy appeal" (*runse* 潤色) of Xunzi's rhetoric derives, no doubt, from this insistence on a correspondence between the basic drives for physical pleasure and security and the deliberate choice of the moral course of action. But Xunzi was hardly alone in positing such a correspondence. By the Warring States, proverbs likened proper discrimination in evaluating objects, persons, and events to "liking sex" only with certain females.<sup>92</sup> And Xunzi's arguments, though they exhibit much more logical rigor, merely expand upon the claims recorded in Book One of the *Mencius*: that the ruler can reach sagehood through a slight "extension" of his love of music or his concern for a particular ox.<sup>93</sup> It is worth considering, then, why Xunzi, in company with a number of other master-rhetoricians, used the pleasure-rhetoric to such great effect to talk about two subjects that are quintessentially moral: choice and awareness.

Preachiness is likely to irritate the listener, and anecdotes from history and fable are frequently misconstrued. But when the subject is pleasure, one can easily talk about choosing a particular kind of action as a function of its predictable consequences, rather than as a moral imperative. Everyone has a sense of what constitutes "dissipation" – if not in one's own case, at least in the case of others – when it comes to drinking, eating, and having sex, though it is harder to establish "what is enough" or "how we will choose" when it comes to ruling a state, making war, or evaluating a person. And everyone can agree that one is roused to action by considerations of pleasure. Reaching for a peach for lunch or a pear for dinner – those sorts of acts embody a conscious preference built upon an anticipation of pleasure ("I prefer the peach,

<sup>91</sup> *H-Y* 6/2/45.

<sup>92</sup> *H-Y* 41/11/79. See Jeffrey K. Riegel, "Eros, Introversion, and the Beginnings of Shijing commentary," *HJAS* 57.1 (June, 1997), pp. 143–77. The new Shanghai Museum bamboo slips essay entitled "Kongzi Shi lun" relies on the same analogies as those at Mawangdui and Guodian discussed in Riegel.

<sup>93</sup> *Mencius*, Book 1, suggests to the ruler that it is fine – and furthermore – the basis for morality – to be predisposed to like sex (*hao se*), wealth (*hao huo*), music (*hao yue*; in Xunzi, *hao sheng*) and benefit (*hao li*); to *Mencius*' list, Xunzi adds an important motivation: a disposition to like or therefore want glory (*hao rong*), which greatly complicates the pleasure calculation. The most extreme expression of this view is to be found in *Mencius* 7A/15.

as it will give me more pleasure now”), though the choice in no way implies that a peach is always good or a pear always bad.<sup>94</sup> Being surfeited temporarily with respect to a particular taste or feel does not preclude the enjoyment of something similar (the pear for dinner instead of the peach) nor does it inoculate against a resurgence of the same old desire (e.g., sex with yesterday’s partner). Timing and situation play a large part in setting preferences in daily life. Thus, through the tangled notions of desire, longing, and pleasure the rhetorician can induce a keen awareness that the grounds for choice are complex and ever shifting; that the continuous succession of situations in time requires choices to be made over and over again (not once) with the fullest possible understanding of the situation; and that choices have consequences.<sup>95</sup> This attention to repetition, situation, timing, and consequence lies at the root of all morality, though it is not yet equivalent to the developed moral sense itself. It was the latter which Xunzi hoped to instill in the ruler and see institutionalized in the state.

*The Operation of the Ideal State – In Support of Pleasure*

Up to a point, Xunzi’s theory demonstrates pleasure-as-motivation and the necessity for forethought and self-restraint to secure all manner of pleasure, without ever once requiring that his audience believe in the sublime efficacy of ritual to secure the highest pleasures. A widespread disinclination among Xunzi’s contemporaries to adopt *ru* 儒 ideals and behaviors can be taken for granted. As Xunzi himself frames the rhetorical question, “Who would ever have known that the patterns and principles of rites and duties are the way to nourish the dispositions?”<sup>96</sup> So when Xunzi moves from his general description of the human condition to advise the institution of the ritual Way within the state, he continues to urge his case almost entirely on practical grounds. The ruler’s own pleasure-seeking will be best served if the state’s institutions provide for a way for all – ruler and subject alike – to sustain their pleasures. Notably, as with his analysis of the human drives, discussions of social policy are predicated upon the insight akin to Jameson’s that “Pleasure, like happiness or interest, can never be fixed directly by the naked eye, let alone pursued as an end; it is only

<sup>94</sup> As A. C. Graham, “Way and the One,” p. 41, says, “all classifications of value start by distinguishing the spontaneously desired and disliked.”

<sup>95</sup> A. C. Graham, “Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of ‘is’ and ‘ought,’” in Victor H. Mair, ed., *Experimental Essays on Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 1983), pp. 3–23, addresses some of these points from a different angle. Graham, p. 13, uses the example of the choice between pear and peach. The other examples are mine.

<sup>96</sup> See the opening lines to *Xunzi*, chap. 19, “On Ritual.”



experienced laterally, or after the fact, as something like the by-product of something else,” where the “something else” is often social approbation.<sup>97</sup> The wise recognize an added complication, as well: while to simply indulge the people will not necessarily bring them pleasure, the ruler ignores the people’s desires only at his peril.<sup>98</sup> Given such complex pleasure equations, the ideal state for Xunzi is one where the chances for serene and steady pleasure-taking are enhanced to the greatest degree possible for those willing to think precisely because the state through various means reliably demonstrates its approval of socially constructive behavior.

Critical also to Xunzi’s formulations on state policy is the single idea that the human condition is equally endangered when the basic sensory equipment is repressed or when it is over-indulged (see above).<sup>99</sup> Desires cannot be repressed, but were they to be extirpated, no motivation would remain for pursuing the “good” pleasures. Over-indulgence, on the other hand, overwhelms the human capacity for rational calculation: self-indulgent humans habitually snatch their pleasures without sufficient regard to the consequences of their behavior. The intelligent ruler, in order to help his subjects avoid the twin faces of calamity, sees that his subjects have both a material sufficiency (so that their desires are met) and a compelling model of prudent self-restraint (so that they disdain indulgence).<sup>100</sup> Wise subjects of the ruler will then wish to repay the ruler’s efforts on their behalf, since the ruler’s patterns of behavior

<sup>97</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Pleasure: A Political Issue,” *Formations of Pleasure*, in Fredric Jameson, Victor Burgin et al. (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 1. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) argues that time is principally perceived as anticipated and as reflected upon in retrospect, which makes the present largely a construction of these two perceptions. Substitute “pleasure” for “time” in Xunzi’s arguments, and you have the same idea.

<sup>98</sup> As *HFZ* 25/56/16–19 observed, “Now, as we all know, the people with always be concerned with the concerns of the person who is concerned with the people’s concerns. And the people will always take pleasure in the pleasures of the person who takes pleasure in the people’s pleasures.” On the other hand, as Jia Yi noted, if the ruler “allows the people pleasure [inappropriately], the people’s misery will only increase; [in some cases] one may [temporarily] cause the people misery but the people will find their pleasures increased [over time in consequence of wise policies].” See *Concordance to Jiayi Xinshu* 3.3.20.16–18. These observations, which seem to be implicit in Xunzi’s treatment of the pleasure problem, are drawn from thinkers who looked to Xunzi as inspiration.

<sup>99</sup> Hence Xunzi’s strictures in chapter 6 against both the bestial impulses (exhibited in the unrestrained passions and in an overbearing manner) and the *ru* impulses (exhibited in the failures to let oneself appreciate the pleasures afforded by convivial opportunities). Numerous passages in the *Xunzi* inveigh against over-indulgence in pleasure, luxury, and indolence. See *ibid.* 17/7/2.

<sup>100</sup> *Xunzi*, chapter 10. *H-Y* 32/10/19–20 speaks of the necessity for sufficient incentives to inspire the people to work hard on behalf of others; *ibid.*, 33/10/33 speaks of the necessity of inspiring the people to acts of generosity by generous acts on the part of their superiors.

produce the social order that allows their own preferred activities to flourish. Thus is the proper balance between hierarchy and reciprocity struck and “the hearts of the people made good.”<sup>101</sup> As we shall see, Xunzi’s remarks on matters of state, like those on human nature, therefore circle round and round the entwined themes of pleasure and desire, even as they encourage virtue and ritual.

The famous opening passage to Xunzi’s chapter “On Ritual” attributes the potential frustration of human desires to the scarcity of resources, but moves quickly on to assert that through the ritual institutions devised by sages can humans learn to satisfy their desires without exhausting available resources:

Humans at birth have desires. If their desires are not satisfied, then they cannot but seek [some means of satisfaction]. If they seek but there are no limits and degrees and barriers [to the seeking], then they will inevitably fall to contending. From contending arises chaos; from chaos comes exhaustion [of resources, including material resources and human energy]. The former kings disliked the chaos, and so they they institutionalized [ritual systems of] humanity and duty in order to provide a barrier, wanting to at the same time to nourish human desires and to supply what humans seek. They caused it to be so that desires were not exhausted by things, and that things were not destroyed by desires – that the two would support each other, and develop.

In the analysis of ritual that follows, spectacle, mourning, and sumptuary regulations are presented as the three main “ritual” institutions of state devised by the former sage-kings to forge stronger links in the populace’s mind between pleasure and choosing virtue, with the result that the people come to correctly identify ritual institutions as “what nourishes” them in their needs.<sup>102</sup> (Chapter 20 presents a fourth, musical performance, as a particularly powerful sort of spectacle.)<sup>103</sup> Human beings are predisposed to form societies by their very nature, so, unless they are “eccentrics or rogues,” they can be led, without the harsh punishments favored by some contemporary rulers, to the stage where they are mindful of the baleful consequences of social isola-

<sup>101</sup> *H-Y*77/20/22.

<sup>102</sup> *H-Y*70/19/5.

<sup>103</sup> What demonstrates to Xunzi’s satisfaction (the pun intended) the final coexistence of sublime pleasure with a strong sense of self-constraint is the fact of music performance itself (whose Chinese character not coincidentally, to Xunzi’s way of thinking, borrows the very sign for “pleasure”).

tion.<sup>104</sup> (If people live in alienation from each other and do not serve each others needs, “there will [always] be poverty ... and contention,” if only because “even the able find it impossible to be universally skilled, and it is impossible for a single person to hold every office.”)<sup>105</sup>

The institutions that Xunzi especially celebrates foster notions of shared community, permit the institution of long-lasting fame (as opposed to that dubious celebrity accorded the infamous), and facilitate the equitable distribution of scarce commodities by societal contribution. Accordingly, the institutions do far more than gratify the individual person’s senses, emotions, and mind.<sup>106</sup> They also strengthen the resolve of the heart–mind to engage in the complex deliberations that locate long-term pleasure in the most socially constructive forms of behavior. How do they do this? The ancient kings’ institutions “caused the various classes of people in the world to realize that what they desired and longed for was to be found via them [the institutions, rather than via anti-social behaviors], and this is why their incentives worked.”<sup>107</sup> Small wonder, then, that such institutions constitute the primary “methods (*fang* 方) by which the former kings established pleasure and music” (*le* 樂); that these institutions allow “the Hundred Pleasures to obtain their targets”; and that they put “the ruler of men in the most influential position of authority to benefit the world.”<sup>108</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Xunzi says that the greatest injury to the state comes from “petty men in positions of authority” who “inspire fear in the people” by inflicting unjust burdens on the commoners. “It injures the state for the ruler of a large country to be fond of receiving [i.e., exacting] minor profits. It injures the state for the ruler out a fondness for new sounds and colors, pavilions and archery courts, parks and gardens, to require increasingly more for his satisfaction. And it injures the state for the ruler not to be fond of cultivating rectitude in what he already has, but rather with an insatiable and ravenous appetite constantly to desire the possessions of others. When these three perversities lie within the breast of the ruler and to them is added a fondness for using men given to expediency and opportunism.... then the state’s influence will be trivial, its reputation shameful, and its altars of soil and grain certainly endangered” (p. 168).

<sup>105</sup> *H-Y* 31/10/5–32/10/24. (Note, however, that in chapter 23, on the deplorable aspects of human nature, Xunzi emphasizes that most people, comfortable with their own pettiness, cannot be induced through any means to make the effort to become sages, though such a possibility is open to them.) For humans’ necessity to form groups, see *ibid.*, 32/10/22. *Ibid.* 32/10/25 ff. makes the point that the work of many (in carving and polishing jade, in incising and inlaying metal, in embroidering fabrics, and so on) allows the ruler to give his full attention to the nurturance of his inner power, secure in the knowledge that others are willing to die in his defense.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 34/10/61–63 describes the powerful effect that great luxury items, such as bells, embroidered clothes, and carved jade have upon the lower orders. If ritual institutions are in place, the penal code then need only be applied to those benighted persons who are arrogant and foolhardy enough to think that they can operate entirely outside societal laws. Cf. chapter 19.

<sup>107</sup> *H-Y* 34/10/63–64.

<sup>108</sup> For the first quotation, see XY 76/20/05; 76/20/8, 11. (Where there is clearly a play on the two words, I use both to translate *le*.) For the second quote, see *ibid.* 39/11/47–50. For the third, on targets, see *ibid.* 39/11/47–50.

Reviewing these institutions one by one, spectacle by its very definition performs important human functions: it appeals strongly and simultaneously to the senses of sight, hearing, and smell (and sometimes taste as well), while addressing the human cravings for symbol, safety, and security. Moreover, as is evident from the king's progresses and musical performances, the two most powerful spectacles mentioned by Xunzi, spectacle renders palpable the good society's balance of hierarchy with reciprocity. For while spectacle invests an "awesome authority" (*wei* 威) in the giver of spectacles, all those who participate in the spectacle – whether they prepare, participate, or merely watch – come away with a sense of shared community through the spectacle. (That the ultimate satisfaction of the interior human needs are predicated upon identification with a larger imagined community, just as the senses move inexorably toward external phenomena, is an observation critical to Xunzi's final analysis.)

Mourning, as a specialized form of spectacle, also gratifies the senses. Yet its significance for Xunzi is that, in substantiating the non-material, it

1. draws attention to human commonalities, since all humans experience death;
2. reiterates the reliance of one generation or group of humans upon the next;
3. reaffirms the importance and continuity of imagined communities to the person's most fundamental sense of self and well-being; and
4. assures the living that they will, despite the absence of a physical afterlife, live on after death in reputation and in ritual, thanks to the commemorations offered the dead at regular intervals by those in their debt.

Members of the community in mourning learn to look beyond present experience to anticipate *post facto* assessments when performing the pleasure-calculation, which has the effect of broadening the basis for judgment, increasing the imaginative powers, and strengthening the propensity to consider the long-term consequences of one's action.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> See chapter 19. Since Xunzi repeatedly states first, that the dead are not conscious; and second, that the ideal person should be free of slavish reliance upon others, his insistence on the pleasures to be derived from commemoration after death seems downright bizarre at first. After all, building and keeping a collective memory depends upon others. But he is not on this one point alone merely acceding to time-honoured societal preoccupations. The establishment of a good name, in effect, represents at once (for the person) a triumph over death and obscurity and (for society) an assertion of justice. This assertion seems like common sense; even many of us who identify ourselves as agnostics or atheists work to secure a good reputation. Nearly all of Xunzi's points are made in a modern work by Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1999), esp. p. 451.

Sumptuary regulations operate in a manner analogous to the penal code in that they deter aspirants from encroaching on others' rank and prerogatives, lest they imperil self and society in their avid pursuit of gratification. But judging from Xunzi's comments, sumptuary regulations are mainly important to the health of a society because they help the ordinary person identify for himself those aspirations most likely to bring long-lasting pleasure. For when those most worthy of emulation (defined as those most willing to contribute to the social order) possess the best material goods in the greatest quantities, as happens in an ideal state, the link between inner deliberations and outer rewards is made clear to all. The ruler dangles the prospect of noble rank and big rewards to induce men to take the path of goodness.<sup>110</sup> Persons of lesser insight will in consequence seek to imitate the worthy models, prompted by their self-interested desires to attain a comparable level of material enjoyment.<sup>111</sup> With the judicious use of sumptuary regulations, the person can even be persuaded to set aside selfish considerations in the interests of serving a larger social good, for such regulations advertise the paradoxical notion that he who would most profit from his own actions had better profit his ruler and his fellow countrymen first. As Xunzi says,

Who would have known that the fearless rush to confront death [on the battlefield] is the way to nourish life [while cowardice spells death]? Who would have known that expending resources [on behalf of the general good] is the way to build up wealth? Who would have known that to be respectful and yielding is the way to improve security?... [The regulations teach us that] a person whose only goal is life will surely meet death and one whose only

<sup>110</sup> *H-Y*<sub>47/12/80</sub>.

<sup>111</sup> *H-Y*<sub>11/4/51-52</sub>: "If a noble man has no leverage or position by which to approach them, then he has no means to open their minds and hearts and influence them. How, then, should men's mouths and bellies come to know ritual and duty? And how would they come to know how to yield to others or feel shame? By what avenue would they come to accumulate [good deeds]? All they would do is jabber and feed themselves; all they would do is sniff out good smells and stuff themselves. If men have no teacher and no rules by which to live, then their hearts and minds will act like their mouths and bellies [i.e., they will be indiscriminating]. If men have no teacher and no model, then their hearts and minds must [contrive somehow] to rectify their mouths and bellies." (Cf. chap. 12: "They model themselves upon the superior's will, and are encouraged by his deeds, and they come to find security and pleasure in him.") It is not clear whether addresses one problem that Yang Xiong fully recognizes: What is the dividing line between imitation (which cannot transform the nature) and emulation (which does)? See *Concordances to the Fayan, Taixuan jing* (ICS no. 18-19, 1995) 2/3/27, which describes the case of someone "whose family name is Kong and whose style is Zhongni, who enters his [Confucius'] gate, who ascends to his hall, who leans on his armrest, who puts on his clothes," but fails to emulate Confucius in more substantial matters. [All references to *Fayan* and *Taixuan* below refer to this concordance].

goal is profit will surely meet harm. A person who equates indolence and ease with real security will surely be endangered, and a person who mistakes short-term delight for long-term pleasure will surely be destroyed.<sup>112</sup>

With the help of these state institutions, the ruler instills the desire to consistently choose the path of virtue over other courses of action, so that practical and moral considerations can converge. The average man learns that he can best achieve most of his personal goals through considering others' advantage. This is a very useful insight, since nearly all forms of pleasure-taking entail a dependence, albeit temporary, of the self upon others. And when the people go about their daily lives trusting (correctly) to the justice of a system that allocates resources according to societal contributions, each person feels confident that he will receive his due share of the goods that have long been accounted "good" by ordinary men, as well as by the wise: long life, wealth, rank, a good name, social standing, beauty, honor, and freedom.

With the support of such ritual institutions, premised on the ruler's "art of calculating what fits each respective station,"<sup>113</sup> each and every person in the ideal state "experiences pleasure" (*zhi le* 知樂) in his own characteristic activities. Lyrical passages in the *Xunzi* describe the ideal state in terms of the happiness it gives one and all, promising that "each and every one of the commoners finds security in his place and takes pleasure in his locality."<sup>114</sup> In the ideal state, "The ploughman takes pleasure in tilling his fields,<sup>115</sup> the soldier feel secure in his labors, the many clerks like their methods and laws (*fa* 法), the court exalts ritual, and the high-ranking ministers cooperate in their deliberations," so the state is definitely well-governed. Where "a benevolent person is in the top position," upholding the right institutions,

The farmer uses every ounce of his strength to till the fields the best he can; the merchant uses all his powers of scrutiny to create as much wealth as possible, the artisan uses all his know-how to craft the very best implements, and the court counsellors (*shidaifu*) on up to the members of the aristocracy employ humankindness, liberality, knowledge, and skill so as to execute their responsibilities to the fullest extent.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>112</sup> The use of the formula *shu zhi* 孰知 here ("who knows...?" "who would have known?") seems simultaneously to direct our attention to the straightforward question ("Who [in the group or as ruler] knows [the obvious]?) and to emphasize the apparent – but not real – paradox.

<sup>113</sup> *H-Y* 51/13/44. <sup>114</sup> *H-Y* 76/20/17. <sup>115</sup> *H-Y* 35/10/92. <sup>116</sup> *H-Y* 12/4/75.

In the well-governed state, then, it is not just that each unit in society admirably fulfills its specific functions like cogs in a wheel. It is rather that the person experiences a zest for his profession, sensing that it is well suited to his capacities and predilections. All humans, “from the Son of Heaven on down to the commoner,” want to “maximize their capacities, attain their goals, and take secure pleasure in their activities.”<sup>117</sup> Like a fish in its element (a metaphor employed by Xunzi, as well as by Zhuangzi), each person is pleased with his situation, since his particular position “is not too much [nor] ... too little for him.”<sup>118</sup> Thus are “the Hundred Pleasures born of a well-ordered state.”<sup>119</sup>

But, as Xunzi readily acknowledges, many do not live in an ideal state where they can enjoy their work and perform it with some sense of security. Then no one, however virtuous, “can make others necessarily honor, ... trust, ... and employ him.”<sup>120</sup> And though “humane and dutiful conduct constitute the method by which to bring about long-term security,” no guarantee exists that the good person will always escape danger and sorrow.<sup>121</sup> Good men will sometimes meet with misfortunes, due to poor fates, natural disasters, social disorder, or the warped judgments of petty people afraid to be shown up. “The allure of a beautiful woman is a calamity to the repulsively ugly; a knight of public-spirited rectitude is a veritable ulcer to the common people; a man who conforms with the Way is a villainous traitor to the vile and perverse.”<sup>122</sup>

If no mode of conduct can ultimately assure the agent of conventional rewards, why choose virtue over other modes of conduct, when the process by which one habituates oneself to virtuous conduct is so manifestly slow and strenuous? Xunzi answers with the stunning claim that, even lacking conventional success, the virtuous man is the happiest of men. For the good wrest from life a kind of certainty that allows them to derive a sense of profound pleasure from the self, whatever the present situation.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>117</sup> *H-Y* 46/12/52.

<sup>118</sup> *H-Y* 9/4/20: “The *tiao* and *qian* are fish that float on the surface of the water. If they are stranded on the beach, should they long for (*si*) the water, then they have no way to get there” (following Knoblock). Zhuangzi’s famous metaphor of the fish in its element (not out of it) comes from chap. 2. For the second quote, see *ibid.* 12/4/76. Cf. the famous distinction between (humdrum) tasks and (engrossing) work, as drawn in the book *Life Work* by the poet Donald Hall (Boston, Beacon Press, 1993). One senses that Xunzi would have felt comfortable with a distinction proposed by a modern poet, that between a task and (all-consuming and edifying) work.

<sup>119</sup> *H-Y* 39/11/49. In any case, such an ideal state “is the most powerful instrument for benefit in the world.”

<sup>120</sup> *H-Y* 17/6/39. <sup>121</sup> *H-Y* 10/4/41. <sup>122</sup> *H-Y* 47/12/71–72. <sup>123</sup> See, e.g., *H-Y* 12/4/71.



*On the Ultimate Happiness*

The foregoing treatment of Xunzi, while restoring the proper emphasis on pleasure, can be reconciled with standard accounts of the thinker. Important as Xunzi's premises and policy proposals are to an understanding of the masterwork attributed to him, the most powerful of Xunzi's persuasions are found in the passages devoted to the topic of integrity and wholeness (*cheng* 誠), passages framed, quite uncharacteristically for Xunzi, in the language of the common religion. The logic of such rhetorical appeals would surely falter if it did not rest on two concepts well grounded in classical culture: the honor accorded the noble man by virtue of his lack of reliance upon others for his pleasures and his standing as an extraordinary work of art.<sup>124</sup> As Xunzi tells it, under any circumstances, the *junzi* takes pleasure in the admirable grace he exhibits in social situations, confident that this grace acquired by training and practice will earn him a good name that will live long after him. In adverse, even dire circumstances, the noble man, knowing his own mettle and also "what would constitute a real setback"<sup>125</sup> (his own lack of virtue), does not panic. As he is not panicked, he looks for no one to blame. He remains at ease, unhurried and constructive to the end.

Perhaps the place to begin is Xunzi's lengthy description of the noble man's integrity and wholeness – a description that leaves the mundane world of Realpolitik far behind. The passage states,

Nothing is better than integrity (*cheng* 誠) when nourishing the heart–mind. With the highest form of integrity, no other task exists [but that nourishing]. Only humaneness is held fast; only duty is performed. Now when the heart–mind (*xin*) of integrity holds humaneness fast, it becomes manifest in the body. Being manifest, it assumes the daimonic qualities of the gods in heaven. In so acting, it is capable of transforming [others, as anything divine is, by standard definition]. And when a heart–mind of integrity performs a duty, then it appears as deep pattern. Being patterned, it assumes the illumined qualities of the gods on earth. In so acting,

<sup>124</sup> For the lack of slavish subordination to the will of others, see below. The appeal to honor was strong with Xunzi's contemporaries and students, but note the potential conflict (which Xunzi as a good rhetorician minimizes) between this independence of mind and the requirements of the well-ordered state under the ruler's will. For similar examples that define beauty as "what does no harm" and focus on the occasions for good or ill presented by the ritual drinking banquet, see Schaberg, pp. 227–29.

<sup>125</sup> I have borrowed this phrase from Zhang Heng (*Hou Hanshu* 59.1898–99, note 1), which constitutes a pastiche of several lines from the *Xunzi*. For the *junzi*'s disinclination to lay blame on Heaven (or fate) or other people, since he "knows himself," see *H-Y* 9/4/21.

it is capable of effecting change. When change and transformation follow one after the other in smooth succession, this we call “Heavenly virtue or grace.”

Heaven does not speak and yet men deduce its [incomparable] height. Earth does not speak and yet people deduce its [incomparable] breadth.... Now, that each of these has a constant character is what gives it its “integrity.” The noble man of supreme grace and virtue (*zhi de* 至德) is silent yet understood [by the people]; before he has extended himself, people regard him as their intimate; and before his anger erupts, people credit him with awesome authority. That they follow his decrees is due to his attention to [preserving what makes him] singular and remarkable. What we can say well is this: if a person has no integrity, then he is not remarkable; and if he is not remarkable, then he will not be notable, and if he is not notable, then even though [his goodness] be decided in his heart–mind, displayed in his countenance, and uttered in his words, the people still will not follow him. Or, if they do follow him, they will always have their doubts.

Heaven and Earth are great, certainly. But if they were not whole and one, they could not transform the myriad sorts of things. The sage is wise, certainly. But if he is not whole and one, then he cannot transform the myriad people.... Now, integrity is what the noble man holds fast to, and it is also the basis of state affairs. Being the only place where he abides, the noble man uses it to bring like-minded men [to his aid]. To grasp it is to obtain it.... When one grasps and obtains it, then things become easy. And when things become easy, then one acts in remarkable manner.<sup>126</sup>

Calling up the powerful associations of the common religion of his time, which saw the divine in unseen forces that effect major change, Xunzi builds parallel constructions that depict the marvelously transformative influence of the noble man’s integrity, which makes him an utterly compelling model of emulation. With the gods of heaven and earth perceived as self-sustaining patterns of unalloyed brilliance and beneficence,<sup>127</sup> Xunzi stresses the pleasurable and edifying spectacle

<sup>126</sup> *H-Y* 7/3/26 ff. Cf. *ibid.* 99/27/84, for the correspondence of inner and outer; 108/32/2. The notion that “integrity and wholeness and fineness” are preconditions to “moving others” is explicit in a very late chapter in *Zhuangzi*, HY index, 87/31/33–34, which attributes it to Confucius. For the sagely Way as a “display” of humaneness (as below), see A. S. Cua, “The Possibility of Ethical Knowledge: Reflections on a Theme in the *Hsün tzu*,” in Lenk and Paul, *Epistemological Issues*, pp. 159–84 (esp. p. 160).

<sup>127</sup> *H-Y* 2/1/18.

presented by the noble man's life: the noble man's activities display his inherent humaneness, and his dutiful acts appear as strikingly patterned as the veins in jade. Because inner and outer, above and below, correspond, this comprehensive model of cultivated wholeness works his magic on lesser humans as easily as the gods are wont to do. His compelling quality stems from the thoroughness with which the noble man develops his own potential by working to elevate his feelings and thoughts. For him, "no other task exists." Hence, the distinction between the noble man and the petty, who is a patchwork of diverse and unconsidered impulses.

The learning of the noble man, having entered through the ear, then shines in the heart, and spreads through the four limbs, taking form in activity and rest. His modulated words, his subtle movements, one and all can be used as exemplary model. The learning of the petty man is such that, having entered through his ears, it is blurted out through his mouth. As the space between mouth and ears is four inches only, how could it ever be enough to lend beauty to the six-foot body?<sup>128</sup>

Such sarcasm about the petty man, which hardly would have been lost on Xunzi's privileged listeners, contrasts sharply with Xunzi's frequent remarks on the subject of the noble man's beauty – his existence as "perfect and ultimate pattern" for self and society. Xunzi stakes such claims about the noble man with high seriousness. What seems most important to Xunzi is that the noble man's singular power derived from his integrity manifests itself in his whole body, not just in his words or in his heart-mind. For that reason, "analyzing the heart-mind is less good than choosing techniques" – ways of acting – that in gratifying the self imbue it with the desired grace and beauty.<sup>129</sup>

As noted earlier, such techniques must be practiced before they can be understood. One does good and through doing it, learns to apprehend it. But undoubtedly the techniques are best honed through ritual interactions, even at the lowest level, for example, the village wine ceremony. Performances at the village wine ceremony reiterate, confirm, and instill in the body the teachings that Xunzi has tried to advocate in his rhetoric, as is clear from his description of the wine ceremony:

The host goes in person to greet the chief guests and their attendants. All the other guests follow afterward.... [After an exchange of ritual bows, the host] presents the wine cup in pledge.... Then

<sup>128</sup> *H-Y*<sub>2/1/31</sub>.

<sup>129</sup> *H-Y*<sub>12/5/2</sub>.

the performers enter, ascend the stairs, and sing three pieces, at the conclusion of which the host presents them with the wine cup.... [After several sections of the orchestra have performed, the end of the musical performance is formally announced, and the performers have left], two men are designated by the host to raise the horn tankard in a toast to the guest of honor, after which another is made master of ceremonies. *From this we know that it is possible to be congenial and to enjoy oneself without dissipation.* The chief guest pledges the wine cup to the host; the host pledges it to his attendant; and the attendant pledges it to the other guests. Young and old quaff a drink from it in order of age.... *From this we know that it is possible for junior and senior to drink together without anyone being left out....* At the end of the formal ceremonies, [the participants] descending the stairs, remove their sandals. Ascending again, they resume their places. Now they “prolong” the wine cup, putting no limit on the number of drinks.... Moderate and patterned are they, to the end of it. *From this we see that it is possible to take one’s ease yet in no way be disorderly....*<sup>130</sup>

That noble men interact gracefully, aided as they are in this by the age-old institutions established by the sage kings, so that their every formal action embodies the polite arts— that claim does not startle, given the prevailing assumption in early China that cultivation makes for charisma and harmony. Not for a moment does Xunzi hesitate to excoriate those vulgar classicists who in their arrogance disdain such meaningful social interactions as the banquet. Yet Xunzi’s vision of unforced conviviality wherein the entire assemblage finally drinks “long” from the cup shows a quality of the grace that goes beyond a deft handling of social situations.<sup>131</sup> Men having this grace perceive themselves and others performing as actors in meaningful dramas, and their whole lives are made up of such artful constructions at once highly patterned, usefully prolonged, and free.

Before turning to a related passage in the *Xunzi*, it may be useful to review the usual associations of art, in pre- and post-modern analyses. At the most fundamental level, “Art is art because it is not nature.” (Nature makes no intentional selection, nor does human nature, as

<sup>130</sup> *H-Y* 78/20/40 ff. Hence Xunzi’s criticisms of the insufficiently cultivated Ru who do not seem to appreciate the pleasures of the banquet, but sit dumbly and stare blankly. In Xunzi’s ideal, too, “being the pattern [for others], that is what will bring about substantive results.”

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Courtier* (1528). But whereas for Castiglione grace derives from “a certain nonchalance [*sprezzatura*] that conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does *seem* uncontrived and effortless,” for Xunzi, grace is the product of making one’s body and mind fully ritualized.

Xunzi insists.) Therefore, a compelling piece of art, as an artifact of intention, must:

1. work as a whole and thus be perceived to have a kind of integrity within it;
2. be consistently beautiful;
3. move men to “hold it before the mind” so that they may receive the message it would communicate;
4. have an impact that is repeatable and so independent of a one-time emotive transference or even a “sustained experience of mental synthesis” from artist to onlooker;
5. exist as an end in itself, a *sub specie aeternitatis* that cannot be really “possessed” by its nominal owner; and yet
6. thrill onlookers with intimations of a greater potential than they had hitherto known.<sup>132</sup>

All of these well-known associations for art appear in Xunzi’s descriptions of the noble man and his deliberate activities, for, as Xunzi puts it, the noble man’s goal in cultivation “is to beautify his person.”<sup>133</sup> Statements throughout the extant *Xunzi*, like the following, suggest that the noble man himself is a sublime work of art, whose final achievement of what is “beautiful and fine” transcends the ordinary, the haphazardly fashioned, and the fragmentary. Quietly ignoring the travails of slander, opportunism, and mishap, the noble man’s attention *in extremis* to form, cadence, and texture provides an avenue to heightened perception, and thence to a sort of salvation:

The noble man knows that whatever lacks completeness or wholeness and fineness does not deserve to be called “beautiful and fine” (*mei* 美). Therefore, he intones [phrases] over and over again, in order to make them penetrate [his whole being]; he mulls things

<sup>132</sup> For the first citation, see T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. By Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 4. For point 4, see Murdoch, *Metaphysics as Guide*, p. 3. Note that Plato (*Republic*, X) insists that “Goodness, being lucid and quiet and calm, cannot be expressed in art.” Xunzi’s explication of ritual makes it fairly obvious that the precise interpretation made of a given ritual can vary from person to person, though the power of reception does not. For point 5, cf. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Oct. 7-9 entries: “The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics.” For point 6, see John Berger, *Selected Essays*, ed. Geoff Dyer (New York, Pantheon, 2001), p. 8: an artwork gives us pleasure, he argues, because “it increases our awareness of our own potentiality, ... promises in some way or another the possibility of an increase, an improvement.” Finally, consider John Maynard Keynes, “My Early Beliefs,” VI 113, citing Moore, “By far the most valuable things which we know or can imagine are certain states of consciousness which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects.” Xunzi, of course, fails to address the presumption that there is an underlying unity among pleasures. This sort of problem intrigues Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1956).

<sup>133</sup> *H-T* 2/1/32.

over, in order to make them comprehensible; he becomes the proper sort of person so as to dwell in [integrity]; he excises harm so as to support and nurture [integrity]. He makes it so that his eyes have no desire to see anything wrong; that his ears have no desire to hear anything wrong; that his mouth has no desire to say anything wrong; that his heart-mind has no desire to think anything wrong. And when he has truly reached the point where he prefers [integrity to any other thing], then his eyes prefer it to the colors; his ears prefer it to the five notes; his mouth prefers it to the five flavors, and his heart-mind thinks it more profitable than possession of an empire.... This is what is called “grace resplendent” (*de zao* 德藻).

Only in the presence of grace resplendent can there later come a settling [of the heart]. And only with such a settling can there come an [appropriate] response. The capacity to settle and respond – this is what we call “a complete and perfect human.” Heaven reveals its bright stars; earth reveals its shining self [precious minerals and jewels?]; the noble man values that wholeness and completeness [in himself and others].<sup>134</sup>

Here Xunzi implicitly rejects two alternatives that have captivated many down through the ages: the allure of surface beauty and the fascination with the fragile and fragmentary. Unless cultivation pervades the entire person, he is flawed. At the same time, in this single passage Xunzi threads together with seeming artlessness a series of marvelous claims about the beauty acquired by the man of cultivation:

1. that any object is deemed beautiful (that is, desirable) insofar as it is whole and fine;
2. that the noble man endeavors to make his own conduct whole and fine (that is, without any admixture of coarseness in it), presumably because he desires to achieve the honorable state of “grace resplendent” and to move others toward the good by his actions;
3. that through that endeavor, he acquires a singular grace so robust that it cannot help but attract admiration, producing a wonderful effect that “settles” men’s hearts (his own certainly), freeing them from anxiety, after which they respond more suitably, so as to fulfill their potentials. But

<sup>134</sup> *H-Y* 3/1/46 ff. Knoblock 1, p. 142, reads this phrase as “being resolute from inner power.” On the basis of *Fayan*, chap. 2, and the *Taixuan jing*, I read *zao* with another radical, as “elegant, splendid, magnificent, gorgeous.” See *Fayan* 2/4/15; *Taixuan* 87/64/27; 90/69/5. Note also that Knoblock would make the entire passage a comment upon textual learning, whereas I take the passage to describe the noble man’s perfection as an embodiment of learning and an exemplary model of correct action. Cf. *ibid.* 16/6/31: *He is complete as Heaven and Earth*, which embrace the myriad things....All would submit to such a person.”

4. as with other remarkable sources of beauty and light (for example, the starry heavens and the shining earth), the special quality of the *junzi* – akin to divinity – exists independently of its reception by observers. “Gracious and splendid/ Like a jade baton/ Of good fame and good aspect”<sup>135</sup> is he.

The noble man himself is supremely aware of his own perfection. When he speaks of his own shining excellence, “he compares himself to Shun and Yu (the exemplary sage-rulers of the distant past), thinks himself a fit companion to heaven, and knows this is no exaggeration.”<sup>136</sup>

Thanks to his own circumspection (in both senses of the word, “seeing from all sides” and “prudential action”), the noble man finds himself in both “activity and rest” a serene source of satisfaction, though he is mindful of the hazards of social isolation and self-absorption.<sup>137</sup> And since the very “thoughts of the sage give pleasure,”<sup>138</sup> the noble man is less dependent on things outside himself for his physical and psychic sustenance.

If the heart-and-mind is serene and happy, then colors that are less than ordinary can nurture the eye. Sounds that are less than average can nurture the ear. A diet of vegetables and a broth of greens can nurture the mouth. Robes of coarse cloth and shoes of rough hemp can nurture the body. And a cramped room, reed blinds, a bed of dried straw, plus a stool and mat can nurture the body’s form. Thus, even without the most beautiful and fine things of the world [that come with high rank], a person can nurture his sense of pleasure....<sup>139</sup>

This lessened reliance on externals extends to the social and political spheres in Xunzi’s view, though Xunzi consistently exhorts humans as social beings to participate fully there and avail themselves of every opportunity. While “the petty man is enslaved by things, the noble man, by contrast, uses things.” He “is not overthrown by things.” “Power and profit cannot overturn him, nor the masses sway him. The empire cannot agitate him.” The noble man has too strong a sense of

<sup>135</sup> *H-Y* 84/22/44. For some examples of European fascination with the fragile and the fragmentary, see Elizabeth Wanning Harriest, *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: U.P. of Virginia, 1994).

<sup>136</sup> *H-Y* 6/3/13-14.

<sup>137</sup> *H-Y* 86/22/88: Such a man “values himself and makes other things work for him.” See the discussion below.

<sup>138</sup> *H-Y* 81/21/67.

<sup>139</sup> *H-Y* 86/22/85-86 (only slightly modified from Knoblock 3, p. 138).



his own honor and integrity.<sup>140</sup> He knows how to sustain himself and he knows, too, that he has the courage to meet every exigency.<sup>141</sup> Hence the couplet

When he has hordes [of supporters], then he feels in harmony  
But in isolation he [still] has pleasure enough.<sup>142</sup>

And “since everybody who outwardly attaches great importance to things is inwardly anxious,” the noble man’s relative indifference to externals serves him well as he seeks his own sorts of pleasure in daily life.<sup>143</sup> “This is why the noble man, even when he has not yet gotten [his rightful place in society, with all its perquisites], takes pleasure in what passes through his heart–mind.”<sup>144</sup> (As a later Han master, following Xunzi, would put it, the “sage takes pleasure in being a sage.”)<sup>145</sup> From this Xunzi concludes that one may say of such a man that he “is without an [extra] moment’s anxiety and concern (*you* 憂).”<sup>146</sup> Anxiety and concern, after all, are nothing more than deep-seated fears about a future deprivation of sources of pleasure. And the noble man is clear on this: there can be no real “poverty or misery where humaneness is found, and no riches and honor where it is absent.”<sup>147</sup> For all of these reasons, goodness (*de* 德) holds out the fairest hope he has of obtaining (*de* 得) his ultimate wishes in life,<sup>148</sup> for these wishes are complex, always: to make pleasure last long, to reach a state where one is “not divided against oneself,” and where the remarkable mastery of self lends an air of grace and valor to chosen activities.<sup>149</sup> As “the area of choice is small but real,” I suspect that Xunzi would have concurred with E. M. Forster’s summation: “It is not all gossamer, what we have delighted in, it has become part of our armour, and we can gird it on, though there is no armour against fate.”<sup>150</sup>

<sup>140</sup> For the first quote, see *H-Y*4/2/20; for the second, *ibid.* 3/1/49; for the third; *H-Y*63/17/26. Cf. *ibid.* 84/22/46; 86/22/88. Several passages in the *Zhuangzi* speak to the importance of “treating things as things” and “refusing to be turned into a thing by [other] things [or entities]” (*H-Y*index 28/11/66), translation from A. C. Graham, *Chuang tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 121.

<sup>141</sup> *H-Y*2/1/32.

<sup>142</sup> *H-Y*12/4/71.

<sup>143</sup> *H-Y*86/22/79. Cf. 4/2/19.

<sup>144</sup> *H-Y*105/29/32: the passage continues, “and once he gets [his rightful place] then he also takes pleasure in his administration of affairs.” *Ibid.* 86/22/87: “why he can be without the finest examples of the myriad sorts and still be able to be sufficiently nourished with respect to pleasure.” For another translation that makes this passage more abstract, see Cua, p. 161.

<sup>145</sup> *Fayan* 6/14/9.

<sup>146</sup> *H-Y*105/29/32.

<sup>147</sup> *H-Y*90/23/84.

<sup>148</sup> This is a standard pun in late Warring States and Han texts.

<sup>149</sup> *H-Y*80/21/47.

<sup>150</sup> The first quotation comes from Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*; the second from E. M. Forster, “A Note on the Way,” *Abinger Harvest: Essays on Books, People, and Places* (New York, Meriden Press, 1955), p. 70.

This summer I happened upon a brand new scientific study reporting that “the small, brave act of cooperating with another person, of choosing trust over cynicism, generosity over selfishness, makes the brain light up with quiet joy.”<sup>151</sup> This is interesting, if true. Still, the report was hardly the impetus behind this particular essay. The topic of pleasure in Xunzi, a master-teacher whose pupils looked to him to “utter words at once pleasing and helpful to life,”<sup>152</sup> naturally calls to mind my own teacher, Michael Loewe. “In learning, nothing is more advantageous than proximity to a man of learning.”<sup>153</sup> The love of ritual, the sense of integrity and honor, the boundless liberality of the man – how excellent in nature my teacher is. And so I dedicate this essay to him, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

#### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>HFZ</i>	<i>A Concordance to the Hanfeizi</i>
<i>HNZ</i>	<i>A Concordance to the Huainanzi</i>
<i>H-Y</i>	Harvard-Yenching Monograph Series
<i>ICS</i>	Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series
<i>NE</i>	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>

<sup>151</sup> Natalie Angier, “Why we’re wired to cooperate,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2002, F1.

<sup>152</sup> Horace (65–8 BC), *Ars poetica*. I am indebted to Martin Kern for this citation.

<sup>153</sup> *H-Y* 3/1/35.