

Xunzi

Kenny Pearce

Great Philosophers Lecture Series
Trinity College Dublin

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- 1 Historical Background
- 2 “Heaven’s ways are constant”
- 3 “The rites are the markers”
- 4 Xunzi’s Continuing Relevance

Historical Background

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- **220 BCE** — Qin Dynasty conquers Zhou and unites the formerly warring states.

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- **Xunzi (3rd cent. BCE)** — Further develops and defends Confucian philosophy.



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- **Heaven (Tien)** — Originally the name of the sky god in traditional Chinese folk religion.
 - But what does it mean in classical Chinese philosophy? God (with a capital 'G')? Nature? Something else?

Xunzi



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- Today we'll talk instead about Xunzi's view of the nature and purpose of religion.

“Heaven’s ways are constant”

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The Big Question

What are the consequences of this fact for our approach to life?

Responding to Heaven

Are order and disorder due to the heavens? I reply, the sun and moon, the stars and constellations revolved in the same way in the time of Yü as in the time of Chieh [Jie]. Yü achieved order; Chieh [Jie] brought disorder. Hence order and disorder are not due to the heavens. (p. 82)

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Respond to [Heaven] with good government, and good fortune will result; respond to it with disorder, and misfortune will result. If you encourage agriculture and are frugal in expenditures, then Heaven cannot make you poor. . . Flood or drought cannot make your people starve, extremes of heat or cold cannot make them fall ill, and strange and uncanny occurrences cannot cause them harm. But if you neglect agriculture and spend lavishly, then Heaven cannot make you rich. (p. 79)

Portents

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When stars fall or trees make strange sounds, all the people in the country are terrified and go about asking, “Why has this happened?” For no special reason, I reply. It is simply that, with the changes of Heaven and earth...such things once in a while occur. You may wonder at them, but you must not fear them. The sun and moon are subject to eclipses, wind and rain do not always come at the proper season, and strange stars occasionally appear. There has never been an age without such occurrences. If the ruler is enlightened and his government is just, then there is no harm done even if they all occur at the same time. But if the ruler is benighted and his government ill-run, then it will be no benefit to him even if they never occur at all. (pp. 83–84)

Portents

Among all such strange occurrences, the ones really to be feared are human portents. When the plowing is poorly done and the crops suffer, when the weeding is badly done and the harvest fails; when the government is evil and loses the support of the people; when the fields are neglected and the crops badly tended; when grain must be imported from abroad and sold at a high price, and the people are starving and die by the roadside—these are what I mean by human portents. When government commands are unenlightened, public works are undertaken at the wrong season, and agriculture is not properly attended to, these too are human portents. (p. 84)

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Rather than trying to change what Heaven does, we must focus on changing what we do!

Ritual

You pray for rain and it rains. Why? For no particular reason, I say. It is just as though you had not prayed for rain and it rained anyway. The sun and moon undergo an eclipse and you try to save them; a drought occurs and you pray for rain; you consult the arts of divination before making a decision on some important matter. But it is not as though you could hope to accomplish anything by such ceremonies. They are done merely for ornament. Hence the gentleman regards them as ornaments, but the common people regard them as supernatural. He who considers them ornaments is fortunate, he who considers them supernatural is unfortunate. (p. 85)

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“The fate of man lies with Heaven; the fate of the nation lies in ritual.” (p. 86)

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The Next Big Question

If Heaven's way is constant, how can ritual be so important?

“The rites are the markers”

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“The rites are the markers”

When men wade across a river, they mark the deep places; but if the markers are not clear, those who come after will fall in. He who governs the people marks the Way; but if the markers are not clear disorder will result. Rites are the markers. He who does away with rites blinds the world; and when the world is blinded, great disorder results.
(“A Discussion of Heaven,” p. 87)

The Regulation of Desire and Emotion

What is the origin of ritual? I reply: man is born with desires. If his desires are not satisfied for him, he cannot but seek means to satisfy them himself. If there are no limits and degrees to his seeking, then he will inevitably fall to wrangling with other men. From wrangling comes disorder. . . The ancient kings hated such disorder, and therefore they established ritual principles in order to curb it, to train men's desires and to provide for their satisfaction. . . This is the origin of rites.
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The beginnings of these two emotions [joy and sorrow] are present in man from the first. If he can trim or stretch them, broaden or narrow them, add to or take from them, express them completely and properly, fully and beautifully, seeing to it that root and branch, beginning and end are in their proper place, so that he may serve as a model to ten thousand generations, then he has achieved true ritual. (p. 102)

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Mourning and Funerals

Rites are strictest in their ordering of birth and death. Birth is the beginning of man, death his end. When both beginning and end are good, man's way is complete. Therefore the gentleman is reverent in his treatment of the beginning and careful in his treatment of the end.
(p. 96)

Accepting Death

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When the silk floss is held up to the dead man's nose to make certain that he is no longer breathing, then the loyal subject or the filial son realizes that his lord or parent is very sick indeed, and yet he cannot bring himself to order the articles needed for the laying in the coffin or the dressing of the corpse. Weeping and trembling, he still cannot stop hoping that the dead will somehow come back to life; he has not yet ceased to treat the dead man as living. . . . Therefore, . . . two days will elapse before the dead can be laid in the coffin, and three days before the family will don mourning clothes. (pp. 98–99)

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Grave Goods

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In the funeral rites, one adorns the dead as though they were still living, and sends them to the grave with forms symbolic of life. They are treated as though dead, and yet as though still alive, as though gone, and yet as though still present. Beginning and end are thereby unified. (p. 103)

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The funeral rites have **no other purpose** than this: to make clear the principle of life and death, to send the dead man away with grief and reverence, and to lay him at last in the ground. (p. 105)

The Mourning Period

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What is the purpose of the three-year mourning period? I reply: it is a form which has been set up after consideration of the emotions involved. . . . When a wound is deep, it takes many days to heal; where there is great pain, the recovery is slow. (pp. 105–106)

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The three-year mourning period comes to an end with the twenty-fifth month. At that time the grief and pain have not yet come to an end, and one still thinks of the dead with longing, but ritual decrees that the mourning shall end at this point. Is it not because the attendance on the dead must sometime come to an end, and the moment has arrived to return to one's daily life? (p. 106)

“Method Mourning”



Thomas Radice
Southern Connecticut State
University

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All rites begin in simplicity, are brought to fulfilment in elegant form, and end in joy. When rites are performed in the highest manner, then both the emotions and the forms embodying them are fully realized; in the next best manner, the emotional content and the forms prevail by turns, in the poorest manner, everything reverts to emotion and finds unity in that alone. (“Discussion of Rites,” p. 94)

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Smiles and a beaming face, sorrow and a downcast look... appear naturally in the countenance. (“Discussion of Rites,” p. 101)

Rites trim what is too long and stretch out what is too short, eliminate surplus and repair deficiency, extend the forms of love and reverence, and step by step bring to fulfillment the beauties of proper conduct. (“Discussion of Rites,” p. 100)

Xunzi's Continuing Relevance

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Xunzi as Naturalist?

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Xunzi as Naturalist?

Naturalism

The belief that everything that exists is natural (i.e., nothing is supernatural).

Heaven does not suspend the winter because men dislike cold; earth does not cease being wide because men dislike great distances; **the gentleman does not stop acting because petty men carp and clamor.** Heaven has its constant way; earth has its constant dimensions; **the gentleman has his constant demeanor.** **The gentleman follows what is constant;** the petty man reckons up his achievements. (pp. 82–83)

Xunzi as Humanist?

Humanism

“I use the term ‘humanists’ to denote those whose ethical outlook is non-religiously based. . . humanism is. . . about the value of things human.” (A. C. Grayling)

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- ‘Humanism’ is defined *positively*, whereas ‘atheism’ is defined *negatively*.

Xunzi as Humanist?

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- Like humanists, Xunzi believes that we humans need to solve our own problems because no supernatural help is coming.

The Problem of Petitionary Prayer



Eleonore Stump
Saint Louis University

The Problem

If the thing you pray for is good, God's going to do it anyway; if it's bad, God's not going to do it even if you pray.

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You pray for rain and it rains. Why? For no particular reason, I say. It is just as though you had not prayed for rain and it rained anyway. (Xunzi, "Discussion of Heaven," p. 85)

The Philosophy of Ritual



Ludwig Wittgenstein
(1889–1951)

I read, among many similar examples, of a Rain-King in Africa to whom the people pray for rain *when the rainy period comes*. But surely that means that they do not really believe that he can make it rain, otherwise they would do it in the dry periods of the year. . . Or again: toward morning, when the sun is about to rise, rites of day-break are celebrated by the people, but not during the night, when they simply burn lamps.

(*Remarks on Frazer*, p. 137)

The Philosophy of Ritual



Ludwig Wittgenstein
(1889–1951)

Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is obviously not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it aims at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied.

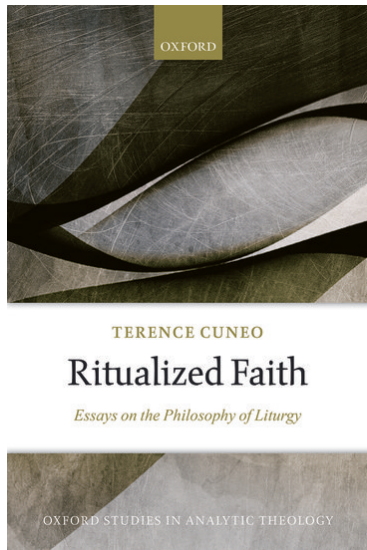
(*Remarks on Frazer*, p. 123)

The Philosophy of Ritual



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References and Suggested Reading

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