

Responses to Hutton, Kim, and Loy

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1 To Hutton

I thank Hutton for pushing me to say more about the notion of self-realization. First, it is fair for him to say that I do not clearly specify the parameters of the notion of self-realization in the book. Hutton has partially answered the question on my behalf by saying that rather than measuring Xunzi 荀子 against some pre-established view of self-realization, we might do better to remain open to the possibility that Xunzi might alter our understanding of self-realization. I do think that Xunzi's explication of Confucianism and in particular his rich discussions of ritual do shed new light on the notion of self-realization. Hutton suggests near the end of his comments that Xunzi provides a powerful argument for how submitting oneself to the demand of ritual can be a crucial part of a person's self-realization. I fully agree with this point. Now another reason for not specifying in more details the notion of self-realization is that I do not think it necessary for my project. I am concerned with the relation between Confucian ethics and self-realization in the book. For this purpose I need only a very general notion of self-realization, a notion that Hutton has already pointed out in his comments, that is to live a good life for oneself and to achieve a full realization of one's potentialities. Such a general notion of self-realization can accommodate for different specific understandings of good life and also individual particularities and differences. I do not think it is necessary to lay out in further details the specific models of self-realization. Actually I think it undesirable to do so. At the level of individual self-realization, we should allow and welcome diversities, as long as all such diversities cohere with the central demands of ethics. Nonetheless it is fair to demand a general description of Xunzi's attitude towards individual particularities and differences. I shall have more to say on this point very shortly.

Second, I fully agree with Hutton that there are many rewards to be found in a careful study of Xunzi beyond the question of self-realization. I employ the notion of self-realization as a perspective to understand the relevance of Xunzi's thought to the modern world. I have two major reasons for doing so. First, at least since the late-Qing 清 period and until now, there is an overwhelming picture of Confucianism among general public (particularly of Chinese people) as a system of thought that often asks for individual sacrifice and stresses collective interest at the expense of individual interest. Through the book project I hope to rectify such a conception of Confucianism and argues that Confucianism has an equal concern for individual well-being. Second, there is a dominant trend in society to see morality or ethics and prudence as two relatively independent spheres of life, with their possible relations being either irrelevant to one another, or the demands of morality suppressing the demands of prudence, or prudence using morality instrumentally for its own ends. I intend to argue

in the book that Xunzi's version of Confucianism provides a fourth alternative, that Confucian ethics on the one hand is constitutive of prudential pursuits but on the other hand goes beyond individual well-being. Such a position is possible because Xunzi does not conceive ethics as an independent realm of concerns from prudential concerns. For Xunzi, ethics is first developed precisely to serve our prudential concerns, however not just for each of us as an individual person, but also impartially for all of us as social and communal beings. But ethics goes beyond even collective prudential concerns and creates its own rewards which are "cultured forms of expression for our nature in such a way that we live a good life," (Tang 2016: 137),¹ such as finding joy in helping others even when sacrificing one's own interests, or having the courage to insist on what is right even when facing appalling threat. Under normal circumstances, individual well-being and impartial concerns of ethics largely converge, but they might diverge in certain cases. Xunzi believes that in such cases ethical demands still have legitimacy for us because our very own self is structured by the ethical framework and also that we live as communal beings.

Now I come to Hutton's major challenge for me, that is, how Xunzi might respond to the modern concern for particularities and differences of individual self-realization. I agree with Hutton that Xunzi says very little on this point. However, at one point Xunzi does say something relevant to this concern. The relevant passage occurs in Chapter 12 of the Xunzi, where Xunzi suggests that the Confucian way of communal life enables everyone, up to the Son of Heaven and down to the ordinary people, to fully exercise his talents, achieve his intentions, and find comfort and joy in his undertakings (K12.6/H12.242 – 244).² It seems to me that talents (*neng* 能), intentions (*zhi* 志) and undertakings (*shi* 事) mentioned in this passage are necessarily different among people. Whether such differences, from Xunzi's perspective, are tied to roles and positions or to individual persons is certainly open to debate. I incline to see such differences as attached to individual persons but admit that I do not have substantial textual evidence in the Xunzi to argue for such an interpretation. Xunzi intends to argue in the passage that the Confucian way of communal life is aimed at the lasting prosperity of human beings and is designed to be good for everyone and to accommodate differential needs of people. Xunzi falls short of saying that such differences of people are a value in itself that is to be protected and promoted. However, it is possible to infer from the passage that Xunzi at least welcomes such differences and particularities.

If such a response fails to satisfy a modern defender of self-realization, then let me explain further what I intend to achieve by the arguments of the book. When I suggest that Confucianism needs to provide an answer to the demand of self-realization, I understand this requirement in a general sense, in the sense of giving a reasonable response to such a modern demand. I do not suggest that the Xunzi's version of Confucian ethics provides a full-blown justification for the modern ideal of self-realization. Instead I intend to make two suggestions. First, Confucian ethics is not contrary to but actually supportive of the modern

¹ All references to Tang 2016 will hereafter be cited with page numbers only.

² The number K12.6 refers to the section number of Knoblock 1988–1994. I also list the chapter number and line numbers of the corresponding passage of Hutton 2014.

ideal of self-realization. Second and more importantly, the normative framework provided by Confucian ethics, or a similar normative framework, is necessary for reflective agency and also self-realization. It is through such a normative framework that we learn to reflectively understand and assess our natural feelings and desires, and to make a reasonable decision and also to plan for our life. Any particularities and differences of individual self-realization are dependent upon a reasonable and reflective person who can choose and plan for himself or herself. I think an important lesson from Xunzi is that without a proper ethical training people might appear to live for themselves but in reality are living as petty persons who make themselves slaves for various external things. I also believe this is a corrective warning that Xunzi can give to the modern ideal of self-realization. I hope Hutton will agree with me on this point.

2 To Kim

Kim expresses doubts over my arguments for the badness of *xing* 性 (nature). I suggest that Xunzi's claim about the badness of *xing* should be understood in two ways. Actively speaking, (1) people's *xing* has a tendency to dominate people's judgments and lead them to act badly. Passively speaking, (2) people's *xing* is without an ethical framework. Kim takes issue with both the active and passive sense of the claim.

Regarding the active sense, Kim helpfully pinpoints that the force of my arguments hinges on how the "dominating force" of the natural inclinations and desires is to be characterized. Kim questions whether the dominating force of the natural inclinations and desires is really inevitable, and even if inevitable, whether such inevitability implies badness. Kim employs the analogy of kaoliang liquor to suggest that the intoxicating effect of kaoliang liquor is not irresistible and that even when kaoliang liquor does intoxicate people and lead them to behave badly, it does not mean that kaoliang liquor is bad in itself and as such. But there is an important difference between kaoliang liquor and natural desires. While the intoxicating effect of kaoliang liquor will affect us only when we do drink kaoliang liquor, there is not a corresponding choice of us with regards to the dominating force of natural desires. That is, we are necessarily under the effect of natural desires when they do arise. The dominating force of natural desires is constitutive of the very character of desires. It is in this sense that the dominating force is inevitable. Of course the dominating force of natural desires need not always succeed in controlling the heart-mind (*xin* 心) and subsequently the agent. But However, given such a constitutive tendency of natural desires, *xing* is bad in an important sense.

Thus the badness of *xing*, as I understand it, depends not primarily on any bad consequences it might bring about, but on the negative effect it necessarily brings upon human agency. Natural desires are chaotic by nature and because they come with a dominating force on the heart-mind, such a chaotic nature necessarily interferes with or worse, disrupts human agency. It is as if a sort of kaoliang liquor is naturally implanted in our body and is constantly making an intoxicating effect upon us. Desire satisfaction can be good, but only if and when we do exert ourselves and thus preserve and fulfill our agency.

The latter belongs to the sphere of *wei* 偽 (artifice) and that is why Xunzi also claims that goodness comes from *wei*. We are the kind of free agents we are in everyday life only because we have been brought up in and are still immersed in a sort of normative framework that we receive from the community and its cultural tradition. In my opinion, Xunzi intends to make a hypothetical argument of what it would be like living without a normative framework. He suggests that human beings would live like wantons in the sense intended by Harry Frankfurt, where our will is dominated by whatever first-order desires we have at the moment (Frankfurt 1971). With such clarification on hand, I think it should be clear that I have no need of Kim's suggestion of a consequentialist interpretation of Xunzi. Though I am open to such an interpretation of Xunzi's thought and welcome Kim to further develop his own suggestion.

Regarding the passive sense of the badness of *xing*, Kim queries whether the evaluative standards of *zheng* 正 (correct), *li* 理 (reasonable), *ping* 平 (peaceful), and *zhi* 治 (orderly) apply to *xing* other than in consequential sense. Kim points out that the textual evidence I employ to support my understanding is controversial and ultimately not compelling. I admit that I do not provide conclusive textual evidence to show that these evaluative standards apply to character traits or motives of actions as well, but neither is this my intention in the book. My aim is to show that such evaluative standards can apply to character traits or motives of actions and that the burden of proof is on critics who insist that badness of *xing* applies only in consequential sense. Through the textual evidence I provide in the book, I open up the possibility that for Xunzi evaluative standards apply not merely to consequences of actions, but also to character traits and motives of actions. Then I argue more positively that badness of *xing* refers, on the one hand to its chaotic nature and thus lack of an ethical framework (passive sense), and on the other hand to interference, disruption, and even domination of human agency by natural inclinations and desires (active sense).

Kim also suggests that a crucial connotation of *xing* has to do with the dynamic and continuing process of human life and that the core message of Xunzi's claim of badness of *xing* is the lack of power of natural growth towards goodness in the course of human life. In principle I have no objection to such an understanding and I applaud Kim for highlighting the growth and development aspect of both *xing* and human life. Indeed I also point out in the book that natural development and natural occurrences of life are also components of *xing* (Tang 2016: 17). Nonetheless I need to add that the reasons of *xing* lacking the power of natural growth into goodness are that *xing* is chaotic by nature and that *xing* has the tendency to dominate the heart- mind and interfere with and disrupt our reasonable judgments. Without such explanations in place the debate over the quality of *xing* will likely turn out to be obscured and esoteric.

3 To Loy

Loy similarly focuses on my book's arguments for taking Xunzi's claim of *xing* is bad at its face value. Loy suggests a distinction between two parts of my arguments, pointing out that

there is a first part aiming at explaining why it is *xing* rather than something else that is bad and a second part intending to establish *xing* is bad rather than good or ethically neutral. Loy does not object to the second part of my arguments but has concerns with the first. In essence Loy does not think that it is our having a bad nature that leads to badness, but rather that bad *wei* 偽 (artifice) leads to badness, or at the very least bad *wei* has to share part of the responsibility. Loy thus concludes Xunzi did overstate his case a little.

Now Loy's description of the first part of my arguments is actually ambiguous. It can mean either that *xing* solely by itself and without the need of something else, is bad, or that only *xing* and not anything else is bad. Judging from what Loy says in his commentary, I think Loy intends the former rather than the latter interpretation. On this I agree. For obviously Xunzi never says that *wei* cannot be bad. Indeed I have argued in the book that *wei* can be wrong and thus bad (Tang 2016: 74). Also, Xunzi admits the possibility that some people are not only passively controlled by but also actively embrace the chaotic *xing*. I believe that Xunzi has such cases in mind when he says that "human beings are originally petty people at birth, and if they meet with a chaotic age and acquire chaotic customs, then this is to couple pettiness with pettiness, and to get chaos from chaos." (K4.10/H4.204--206).

Granted that *wei* can be bad, the crucial disagreement remaining between Loy and I is whether *xing* can be bad by itself, or only through some sort of bad *wei*. Now Loy seems to raise an obvious and reasonable objection: if *xing* causes strife, plunder, disorder, and violence only when it is instantiated in human actions, and since human actions only take place through the heart-mind's deliberations, then necessarily *xing* cannot cause strife, plunder, disorder, and violence by itself. But I do not think the first premise is correct. As should be obvious from my responses to Kim, I do not think that *xing* brings about badness only with or through human actions; *xing* can cause strife, plunder, disorder, and violence to the heart-mind, to our will and to our agency, apart from any badness it might cause with or through human actions. Consequently, although I agree with Loy that when bad human actions take place, bad *wei* has to share part of the responsibility, I do not think his objection works. This is because *xing* can cause badness by itself, over and above any badness it brings about with or through human actions.

Loy also reinforces his objection to taking Xunzi's claim of *xing* is bad at its face value by reference to the respective roles of Heaven and humans that Xunzi highlights in Chapter 17 ("Discourse on Heaven [Tianlun 天論]) of his book. Xunzi suggests that order and disorder, and thus goodness and badness, are not due to Heaven but to human responses to Heaven's activities. Loy points out that since human *xing* is basically Heaven's endowment in human beings, goodness and badness should be seen as the results of human responses rather than *xing*, and that laying the full responsibility of badness on *xing* comes dangerously close to "complaints against Heaven" that Xunzi detests. As I suggest above, "full responsibility" here should not mean that any badness comes from *xing*, but rather that *xing* by itself can claim full responsibility for badness. As I see it, the crucial question is whether there is inconsistency between the claim that *xing* by itself is bad, and the claim that goodness and badness are due to human responses. Actually Xunzi also claims that "order or disorder rests with what is approved by the heart-mind and not with what is

desired by the feelings.” (K22.5a/H22.295—297). This claim is also mentioned in my book when I argue against the moral neutrality of natural desires (Tang 2016: 31). Now I think that the argument I make in the book is not completely clear. Let me explain more here.

Now of course *xing* does not cause badness independent of human responses, for human *xing* is inherently part of human beings and also part of our responses to the world. I argue that *xing* is bad primarily because it interferes with, disrupts, or even dominates human agency. Thus *xing* is bad precisely because it plays a negative role in human responses. However, it is not the case that *xing* is bad only when and because it brings about chaotic human responses. For there can be orderly human responses irrespective of the negative function of *xing*. Xunzi suggests that as long as we exert ourselves and actively employ the heart-mind, particularly with the help of education and culture, we can overcome the negative function of *xing* and put *xing* under control, and ultimately transform the ugly *xing* into something beautiful. Maybe for sages *xing* is so completely transformed that it no longer plays any negative function, and there might be no need to consciously exert oneself. But for ordinary people the dominating force of *xing* poses an everlasting threat. Xunzi’s claim of *xing* is bad means to remind and alarm us of such an everlasting threat. I suggest that when Xunzi claims on the one hand that order and disorder are due to human responses or the heart-mind’s approval, and on the other hand that *xing* is bad, he is referring to goodness and badness at two different levels and from two perspectives. The former claim emphasizes the importance of *wei* and the ever-present possibility of creating goodness. The latter claim emphasizes the negative function of *xing* and its everlasting threat to human agency and goodness. I believe such an overall picture justifies taking the claim of *xing* is bad at its face value; and such a picture also has the credit of accommodating two sets of seemingly incompatible claims of Xunzi. While I agree with Loy that a more rhetorical or propaedeutic account of the moral life might be important for Xunzi’s ethics as well, in terms of a theoretical account of Xunzi’s ethics we can nonetheless maintain that *xing* is bad.

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