

**Xunzi and Hobbes: Subduing Evil Natures in The East
and The West
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17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes is most notably known for his bleak characterization of human existence in a state of nature as being “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” and, above all, locked in “continual fear, and danger of violent death,” as he writes in section XIII of *Leviathan* (Somerville and Santoni 143). Hobbes’s grim outlook on human nature was based on empirical assumptions of the inherent competitiveness of life without government (Lloyd and Sreedhar). Having been written at a time when the Natural Law Tradition in ethics played a prominent role in the development of contractarianism in political philosophy, Hobbes’s formulation of the state of nature attracted a great deal of attention (Murphy). However, he was not the first to conceive of human nature in such an ugly manner.

Nearly two thousand years before Thomas Hobbes’s publishing of *Leviathan*, another political philosopher, the ancient Confucian thinker Xunzi, was hard at work in the Eastern hemisphere developing his own argument for a government system aimed at reeling in what he too depicted as an inherently competitive and dangerous state of nature (Elstein). Despite their physical and temporal distance, the political philosophies of Xunzi and Hobbes share many

similarities in their accounts of human nature, but notably differ in their proposed approaches to governing the natures they describe. While both Xunzi and Hobbes saw human nature as a competitive and chaotic beast, Hobbes suggested a government rooted in contractarianism would muzzle this chaos whereas Xunzi proposed a Confucian system aimed at deliberately declawing the natural, violent persuasion of humans. After comparing these philosophers' conceptions of human nature and their respective solutions for subduing an anarchic world, I will present an argument in favor of Xunzi's Confucian government as a more effective societal structure for achieving lasting stability.

Despite the distances in the time and place of their writing, Hobbes and Xunzi arrived at surprisingly similar accounts of human nature. Both saw human nature pre-government as a brutal, ugly state of conflict between individuals. Hobbes recognized this through his observation that humans in a state of nature are essentially equal in their ability to enact their will. He argued that although there are variances among individuals in physical strength and mental acuity, when considered comparatively across the population, these differences are relatively insignificant (Somerville and Santoni 141). Hobbes contended that this equality of ability meant each individual in nature had an equal right to pursue their desires. However, he argued that those who mutually desire un-sharable resources inevitably exist in opposition (Somerville and Santoni 142). Since early human survival depended on a battle over universally-

necessary scarce resources, Hobbes described the state of nature as a “time of war, where every man is enemy to every man” (Somerville and Santoni 143). This belief in the inherent competitiveness of humans is also found in the work of Xunzi, who said, “People’s nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 298). It is this inherent proclivity for profit that Xunzi says leads to conflict among individuals in a natural state. Even Hobbes’ more specific notion of nature as war-like is mirrored in Xunzi’s writing, which warned, “Try doing away with the power of rulers and superiors, try doing without the transformation from ritual...If it were like this, then the strong would harm the weak and take from them” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 302).

Xunzi’s mentioning of “transformation from ritual” reveals a key component of his take on human nature – the distinction between innate characteristics and deliberate effort. Xunzi defines human nature as innate characteristics, or “those things in people that cannot be learned or worked at” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 298). Conversely, he refers to things only acquired through learning and work as “deliberate efforts” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 299). Under these definitions, Xunzi saw the acquisition of stability and the denial of our innate fondness for profit as matters of deliberate effort only achievable through the transformation of our nature (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 299). This means that for Xunzi

becoming good, or peaceful, is a rebellion against our nature rather than an inevitable result of it. As an illustration of this belief, he compares humans to “crooked wood” in need of shaping and argues this shaping can only come from a dedication to rituals aimed at subduing our competitive tendencies and instilling standards of righteousness (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 298). Hobbes holds a similar view in that he claims there can be no such thing as right or wrong without the establishment of law and a common power to enforce it (Somerville and Santoni 144).

Although Xunzi and Hobbes present much of the same fundamental support for their positions on human nature, each philosopher provides unique arguments that the other neglects or leaves implicit. For instance, Hobbes relies more heavily on specific empirical support than Xunzi. He challenges those dubious of his characterization of human nature to examine their own actions for confirmation of his conclusions (Somerville and Santoni 143). In *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes of man, “when taking a journey, he arms himself...when going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house he locks his chests...Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions as I do by my words?” (Somerville and Santoni 144). The practices Hobbes identifies in this statement suggest that individuals in his society distrust the people around them and provide evidence of the public’s subconscious support for his account of human nature.

Xunzi does not appeal to empiricism as explicitly as Hobbes, but he does use some empirical observations about humans' desires to develop a unique argument for his account of human nature grounded in his distinction between deliberate efforts and innate characteristics. Xunzi's novel arguments for human nature being bad depend primarily on establishing the order and stability we see in the world as the results of deliberate effort. This would prove that the natural state of humanity is to be without such order and stability (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 274). To accomplish this, Xunzi proposes that the only course of action for humans with unfulfilled desires is to "seek some means of satisfaction" (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 274). He observes that the creation of Confucian ritual represents the implementation of such a "means of satisfaction," which in turn suggests that humans in their natural state possess an unfulfilled desire for the stability and order that Xunzi says comes from ritual (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 274). From this observation, Xunzi draws two conclusions in support of stability being a product of deliberate effort. First, he says order and stability cannot be inherent to a person's nature because one does not desire what they already have (Elstein). Second, he argues that since ritual had to be created, the order it provides is not inherent to human nature; if it was, ritual wouldn't have had to be created (Elstein).

Regardless of how they each support their strikingly similar conclusions, Hobbes and Xunzi's accounts of human nature form the foundations of their respective political philosophies and shape the way they each conceive of government. Both agree that the state of nature is to be avoided and that the establishment of some form of government allows us to escape it (Williams). However, the specific governmental structures each philosopher proposes differ significantly despite their common goals. For instance, Hobbes's conception of government revolves around his idea that in the state of nature we live in perpetual fear, constantly exposed to the threat of a violent, painful death, which he views as the worst possible fate (Williams). Hobbes suggests that this threat of a violent end arises from the fact that in the state of nature, every individual has complete freedom to make their own judgements and do anything they want, including inflict violence on others, because there is no ruling force to establish law and order (Williams). Since the danger of the state of nature comes from all individuals possessing radical freedom, Hobbes argues that the path to escaping these circumstances lies in the formation of a social contract in which people, out of fear, decide to transfer their complete freedom and "right to all things" endowed by the state of nature to a sovereign authority in exchange for protection from the threat of a violent end (Williams). The sovereign is able to provide this protection because, under

the social contract, it retains its full natural rights while the people who submit to it only maintain their right to protect themselves in the presence of immediate danger (Williams). Hobbes contends that the most effective sovereign to fulfill this role is a powerful monarch due to the inherent stability in having a sole leader with planned rules of succession (Williams). This monarch rules over all of the public, a public composed of citizens with equal rights from having transferred all of the same freedoms to the sovereign (Sungmoon 302).

This transfer of rights from individuals to one master-entity via the social contract constitutes the general framework of Hobbes's system for escaping the perils of the state of nature. Under this system, the right to rule arises entirely from the social contract, and in particular, the mutual upholding of the promises made within it (Williams). As Hobbes explains, in order to maintain the legitimacy of the union created by the social contract, there must not be any "breach of covenant" on the part of the sovereign or the subjects (Somerville and Santoni 153). This means that if the sovereign cannot protect the people, it has no right to rule, and that if the people do not honor the authority of the sovereign, they have no right to its protections (Williams). However, this notion of holding the sovereign accountable is difficult to enforce since in Hobbes's social contract the sovereign holds all the power and could likely crush any dissenters who speak out

against its performance. Despite the potential problems in holding a sovereign properly accountable, the ideal implementation of Hobbes's political theory serves his goal of harboring humans from the state of nature, thus rescuing them from perpetual fear.

In contrast to Hobbes's proposed form of government, the political system espoused by Xunzi is largely rooted in the typical Confucian political philosophy of his time, with the exception that his form of government takes into account the view of human nature as bad (Elstein). Although Xunzi shares Hobbes's same fundamental mission of using government to bring people out of the state of nature, Xunzi has a different conceptualization of what the achievement of this goal looks like. Hobbes's social contract system aims to achieve a peace held together by a mutual fear of the state of nature whereas Xunzi's Confucian model of government is directed at cultivating the goodness of individuals within a community by establishing standards of righteousness through the implementation of ritual (Sungmoon 300-301). This aim of government reflects Xunzi's view of humans as warped wood in need of shaping. Xunzi argues that a government's establishment of standards of righteousness through ritual creates an ordered society that can reign over nature and prosper (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 267). Xunzi says order, and the subsequent conquering of nature it allows, is only possible because of the human ability to

form communities with “social divisions” founded on Confucianism’s five cardinal relationships (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 267). The five cardinal relationships are, in ascending order of importance: friend to friend, younger sibling to older sibling, husband to wife, father to son, and ruler to subject (Woods and Lamond 673-674). Each of these relationships contains responsibilities rooted in ritual that define the order of traditional Confucian society.

The ruler-subject relationship is considered the most important of these five cardinal relationships because the ruler establishes the standards of righteousness from which all other relationships arise. In Confucian philosophy, the ideal ruler is supposed to be a “junzi,” or “gentleman” (Woods and Lamond 674). Xunzi describes a junzi as the highest of moral exemplars whose “slightest word” or “most subtle movement...can serve as a model for others” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 259). According to Xunzi, these individuals are suited to lead the state as monarchs because “rules are the beginning of order, and the gentleman is the origin of rules” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 269). Having a junzi as a ruler serves Xunzi’s goal of cultivating virtue in a community by providing an exemplar who will uphold ritual, thus creating the conditions necessary for the other cardinal relationships to take root and follow suit. Nonetheless, should rulers in Xunzi’s form of government fail to meet their responsibilities to the people, they risk losing their state by

losing the loyalty of the community (Elstein). In ancient Confucian society, the loss of loyalty posed a significant check on the the behavior of the ruler because disgruntled people would refuse to fight for their ruler, leaving them susceptible to attack (Elstein). Although both Hobbes' and Xunzi's forms of government are headed by a powerful monarch, Confucianism's cardinal relationships add depth to the power dynamic in Xunzi's model of society by increasing the constraints at play in maintaining order.

This added depth is one of the reasons Xunzi's Confucian governmental structure offers more stability over Hobbes's contractarianism in dealing with a dangerous, disordered state of nature. Hobbes's society is founded around a single formal agreement between a body of people and a sovereign power. As mentioned before, the persistence of this arrangement hinges on each side of the agreement's ability to uphold his or her end of the bargain. Although a strong sovereign could conceivably keep his or her people well defended into perpetuity, and a loyal public could remain in submission to this force for as long as it serves them, the fact remains that the only barrier standing between the people and the state of nature in this arrangement is their contract with a single entity – the sovereign. Hobbes's system provides no safety mechanism. If the contract fails, perhaps due to the unexpected death of a sovereign, the people are left to the lawless state of nature

until another contract is formed, and that is a significant risk to leverage on one relationship (Elstein).

Xunzi's Confucian government, on the other hand, employs multiple safety mechanisms in the form of the cardinal relationships that offer added stability while Hobbes's governmental structure lacks it. If a ruler was to perish, or fail to fulfill his or her duties, the remaining four cardinal relationships rooted in family and friendship would provide some semblance of order for the community until the ruler was replaced. By serving as added constraints on society, Confucianism's cardinal relationships act as a type of secondary social contract that provide structure to society beyond the fundamental relationship between ruler and subject. Even though Hobbes identifies the radical equality in a state of nature as the cause of its chaos, he maintains this kind of equality in civil form by lacking the societal divisions that give Confucianism its added resilience (Sungmoon 302).

Furthermore, the source of relational obligations in Confucian society also offers an advantage in stability over those in Hobbes's contractual structure. The standards of righteousness Xunzi says give rise to social divisions, the five cardinal relationships, and by extension, all of the order to be found in society, are rooted in the practice of ritual (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 267). The practice of ritual is central to the goal of becoming a junzi that Confucian political philosophy incorporates into its model of

government. As Xunzi describes, a junzi is one for whom learning “enters through his ears, fastens to his heart, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 259). It entails a cultivation of one’s self – the acquiring of goodness, rather than the masking of badness. With this pursuit of self-cultivation through ritual motivating the adherence to relational obligations in Xunzi’s Confucian society, fulfilling one’s responsibilities towards the community becomes engrained in the one’s personal growth. This union between serving the community and serving one’s self in Xunzi’s Confucian form of government provides a much stronger incentive than is provided by Hobbes’s political philosophy to uphold the relational obligations that give the society its structure and stability.

In comparison, adherence to the responsibilities of Hobbes’s proposed social contract is predicated on people’s fear of a violent death in the state of nature (Williams). By relying on fear to coerce people into submission, Hobbes’s form of government gets people to act orderly, but does not attempt to truly change their nature in the same way Xunzi’s Confucianism does. If the chaotic nature of humans is not altered, they remain susceptible to reverting back to the state of nature in the absence of a social contract. Xunzi’s approach to government reflects an understanding of this risk through his focus on trying to cultivate people’s virtue so that they live in harmony out of a sense of duty.

Under Hobbes's form of government, people arrive at harmony through a necessity of self-preservation. This difference represents another advantage for a Confucian government's stability because a sense of duty fosters a more harmonious society than a sense of fear, and as Xunzi claims of societies, "If they are harmonized, then they will be unified. If they are unified, then they will have more force. If they have more force, then they will be strong" (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 267).

Xunzi and Hobbes share strikingly similar accounts of human nature despite writing two thousand years and a continent apart. These philosophers' views on human nature play a significant role in the development of their respective political philosophies, where the differences in their beliefs widen. Hobbes sought to explain humanity's escape from the bleak state of nature through the establishment of social contracts between people and a reigning sovereign. Xunzi's approach to dealing with human nature was rooted in the application of Confucian political philosophy and his idea that government ought to promote the cultivation of virtue. Between these two philosophers, Xunzi's model of government offers the most stable outlet for escaping the state of nature due to its inclusion of multiple layers of social responsibility, its promotion of order through ritual, and its cultivation of harmony through a sense of duty towards virtue.

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