

Article

Preferences and Consensus in the Philosophy of Xunzi

Yurui Yao 

Department of Philosophy, China University of Political Science and Law, Beijing 102249, China; yurui1018@pku.edu.cn

Abstract: To understand Confucian ethics as a “hierarchical mode of association” is to think that it is incapable of dealing with a society of strangers or to understand Confucian ethics as “authoritarian” or “collectivist”, and to criticize that it ignores human characteristics and freedoms is to mistake one part of Confucianism for the whole. The Confucian theory of the individual and community actually has a tightly woven structure wherein its recognition of the plurality of diverse individuals and its appeal the unity of a common consensus are combined. From an exploration into the relationship between Xunzi’s concepts of “preference” (teyi 特意) and “consensus” (gongshi 共予) and from the way he uses such concepts as “similarity and difference” (tongyi 同異), “one and ten thousand” (yiwan 一萬), and “unity and division” (tongfen 統分), I show how Xunzi included the diversity of individuals within a pluralist society in a unified community with a collective consensus where this community at the same time guarantees the freedoms and preferences of each individual member that belongs to it.

Keywords: Confucianism; Xunzi; preferences; consensus; theory of individual and community



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1. Introduction

Xunzi’s 荀子 political philosophy is not just an antique from the past, nor is it only meaningful within a Chinese text. In fact, Chinese philosophy as a whole has proven an important resource for thinking through many of the problems the modern world faces.¹ However, if we are going to make the best use of Xunzi’s political philosophy, then it is necessary that we properly understand its basic ideas. There has been much research on Xunzi and the various aspects of his political philosophy,² but not enough has been said to clarify one of its central components, that is, the relationship between individuals and their communities. Understanding this relationship is key to understanding Xunzi’s political philosophy. Xunzi’s view on this relationship is no doubt unique, and it allows the opportunity to think further on this idea basic to political philosophy. Nonetheless, this article can only deal with clarifying Xunzi’s understanding of the relationship between individuals and their communities and must leave a more detailed discussion of Xunzi’s contribution to solving modern political problems for another time.

There are different methods and perspectives that can be adopted in discussing the problem of individual and community in Confucian philosophy. We can either focus on such concepts as the collective, consensus, community, and unity, or we can focus on other concepts such as the individual, preference, difference, and disunity. An overall tendency of recent research more often than not focuses on one aspect to the detriment of the other and this has led to all kinds of conflicting positions. For example, a classical position says that Confucianism believes in the differential treatment of people through *li* 禮 (rituals) based on differences in kin relationships. This position emphasizes the “distance” between certain kin relations, that between civilized and uncivilized peoples, and even between human beings and animals. Thus, it is a kind of ethical particularism or a kind of ethical “differentialism”.³ This position even thinks that this kind of ethics is only applicable to the narrow scope of one’s kin or “inner circle” and that it is incapable of dealing with a society

of strangers. Contrary to this, another position has expended great effort in revealing the notions of collectivity and unity in Confucian thought emphasizing the communal belief that “all within the four seas are one family” and “the whole world is a great unity”.⁴ It even goes so far as to see this belief as the source of the characteristic of Chinese society that favors collectivity and authority over freedom and the individual.⁵

Both of these positions actually each express a partial truth of Confucianism but do not capture the whole picture. In different contexts it is acceptable to emphasize one aspect rather than the other, but it is not acceptable to use one aspect to completely deconstruct or eliminate the other. In the same way that Confucian thought is not only a “differentialism”, neither is it only a “collectivism”. It is only when we overly emphasize one aspect to the detriment of the other that we fall into all kinds of prejudices. To a certain degree, the ideas of “self” and “community” in Confucianism exist together within a tightly woven structure; neither can be taken as the basis for any kind of “ism” let alone be seen as oppositional. The Confucian recognition of a plurality of individuals and their preferences is correlative with its appeal for a unified community. Its belief in a plurality of culture and learning is unified with its political ideal of a “great unity” (Wang 2018, 2022). Confucianism has never maintained that consensus and unity are not the basis for differences and preferences, nor has Confucianism ever discussed the rationality of the individual in isolation from the collective. In fact, the opposite of this is the case: Confucianism believes that it is only when the individual and the collective exist together in a mutually regulated unity that justice and order can be realized (Beck 2011).⁶

In order to prove this point, this essay focuses on Xunzi 荀子 as a representative thinker of early Confucianism and explores his concepts of “individual preference” and “collective consensus” in order to see how Xunzi argued for the unity of preferences and consensus in the context of a society radically changing right before his eyes. Obviously, the terms “preference” and “consensus” are words that translate Xunzi’s own terms *teyi* 特意 and *gongyu* 共予 into our modern language; they do not necessarily correspond to any concepts with the same names in other philosophical traditions even if they share certain resonances. In addition to these two concepts, he also uses “similarity” (*tong* 同) and “difference” (*yi* 異), “one” (*yi* 一) and “ten thousand” (*wan* 萬), “class” (*lei* 類) and “the unclassified” (*za* 雜), “unity” (*tong* 統) and “division” (*fen* 分) to express similar ideas. Xunzi’s use of these terms is very complex and therefore a thorough investigation into their meanings will be beneficial to comprehending the Confucian “theory of the unity of self and community” (*qunjilun* 群己論).⁷

2. Diverse Individuals and Their Preference

Humanity is always faced with the problem of an infinitely diverse and plural world. This not only includes infinite physical objects, particulars, and phenomena, but also an infinite number of people and social activities. Like other pre-Qin philosophers,⁸ Xunzi confirmed the multiplicity and diversity of human society. For example, he said: “There is the knowledge of sages, the knowledge of rulers, the knowledge of petty people, and the knowledge laborers”. (“Xing e 性惡”) and “Exemplary persons and petty persons are the same in that they both delight in fame and despise humiliation, delight in benefit and despise harm. It is just the means by which they seek such things is different”. (“Rongru 榮辱”) It is not only that there is a great difference between exemplary persons and petty persons, but there is also great difference amongst the Confucians themselves, Xunzi says: “There are vulgar people and there are vulgar Confucians; there are elegant people and there are elegant Confucians”. (“Ruxiao 儒效”) and “One is a scholar of law who enhances ritual without understanding it; one is a common Confucian who can make differentiations but does not enhance ritual”. (“Quanxue 勸學”) Xunzi also provides this interpretation: “For what reason are Yao and Shun, are exemplary persons superior . . . it is because they can take command of others and none can take command of them. Thus petty people can become rulers but they do not end up so and rulers can become petty people but they do not end up so”. (“Xing e”) Because peoples’ a priori wishes and their external conditions

are different they end up with different levels of morality and behavior. Furthermore, this leads to the classification and ordering of different peoples in terms of value.

There exist differences between people and thus different individuals have different opinions, ideas, perspectives, and voices. It is important to notice that Xunzi did not try to eliminate the objective differences between people, nor did he ever try to eliminate individual preferences or their “unorderliness” (*buqi* 不齊). For Xunzi, in the same way that “the heavenly and the earthly differ in being high and low” and “the ten thousand things are ranked in superiority and inferiority”, each individual is its own unique existence, and if we eradicate their differences, then we will have betrayed the a priori basis for communal living. Xunzi criticized Mozi in this regard: “Mozi had certain insights regarding orderliness but not in things being out of order”. (“Tianlun 天論”). Xunzi’s point is that Mozi saw the “uniformity” (*qitongxing* 齊同性) of the world, but he did not understand that human experiences are expressed in the unceasing discovery of difference and diversity. Therefore, such methods that eliminate or betray individual differences do not match up at all with reality.

Rulers must respect individual differences and unorderliness because societal operations require order and vitality. Hence, Xunzi states:

What rulers call “worthy people” are not those who can do what all other people can do; what rulers call “intelligent people” are not those who know what all other people know . . . When it comes to taking the lay of the land, determining where is fertile and where is not, and planting the five seeds, the ruler does not surpass the farmer; when it comes to moving around goods, taking note of what is beautiful and ugly, and appraising things of good and bad quality, the ruler does not surpass the merchant . . . Now if their moral worth is determined and their proper place found and each person is given a job that accords with their capacities then those worthy and those not will each have their proper place and those capable and those not will each have their proper job. (“Ruxiao”)⁹

Because there is no single person who is omniscient and omnipotent, therefore the ruler must make use of the intelligence and capabilities of other people. Because there is a diversity and plurality in what people are predisposed to know and to do, therefore the ruler must assign different positions and jobs in accordance with people’s natural dispositions; because there are differences in local customs and habits between people in near and far lands, therefore, the ruler must arrange different implements and costumes and set up different institutions and allocations.¹⁰ Regarding this, Xunzi also states:

If the different jobs and positions are all equal then there cannot be hierarchy, if all political authorities are equal then there cannot be centralization of power, if social statuses are all equal then none will be commanded by anyone else. There is the heavenly and the earthly and they differ in being high and low. When the enlightened king first begins the state is managed through an institution of ranked hierarchy . . . When everyone is the same and there are no differences in what they like and dislike, then goods that are of a limited supply cannot satisfy all of their desires and this will lead to certain social strife. If there is strife then there will be chaos and if there is chaos there will be poverty. (“Wangzhi 王制”)

The “Wangzhi” chapter imagines a situation that is opposite that of difference, that is where everyone is the same. It thinks that if everyone is the same, that if there is no difference between ruler, minister, official and bureaucrat, then the state will not be efficiently governed, people will not work toward the same goals, and it will be impossible to establish political authority (Dongfang 2021). More importantly, if people lose their various preferences, then their human nature that seeks benefit and profit will compel them to seek the unlimited satisfaction of their desires and when “desires are many” and “goods are few” then the fair distribution of goods will be impossible and social conflict, poverty, and destitution of the whole world will be inevitable. Therefore, the problem with Mozi’s “praise of sameness” (*shangtong* 尚同) is not only that it incorrectly imagines that human

diversity can be eliminated thereby falling into an illusion completely devoid of reality, but more seriously, it ignores the rationality and necessity of the “differences” that exist between different individuals thereby eliminating the diversity and preferences that have an important communal value and function. The consequences of this include: (1) it eliminates the political hierarchy between ruler and ministers, thereby diminishing the former’s power and (2) it leads to the collapse of the economic foundation of the social allocation of roles based on individual capacities because it undercuts the motivating power of such a system. (Dongfang 2021) In Xunzi’s view, in a society where social welfare and reputations are not allocated through “difference” the people will have a weakened motivation to fulfil their wishes and desires. This not only fails to encourage people to work at creating wealth, but it also conversely creates a society that is “completely impoverished.”¹¹

If Mozi was able to govern a large state or even just a small one then the people would all wear coarse clothing, eat poorly, and have prohibitions against music. If things are thus then the state will be impoverished and being impoverished there will be no means to satisfy the desires of the people. If the desires of the people cannot be satisfied then there will be no means to offer rewards and exact punishments. If Mozi was allowed to govern the whole world or even just a small feudal state then the number of subordinates and court officials would diminish and because the ruler would favor those who labor he would be made equal with the common people, forced to undertake the same work. If things are thus, then the government has no authority, and if the government has no authority then rewards and punishments are not effective. If rewards are not effective then the worthy and capable cannot be put to proper use and if punishments are not effective then the unworthy will not be arrested . . . In conclusion, the ten thousand things will go out of balance and the many shifting affairs of the world will not find their proper resolutions; the heavenly will lose its timeliness, the earthly will lose its resourcefulness, and humanity will fall into disharmony. (“Fuguo 富國”)

Obviously, Xunzi not only affirms the existence of individuals and their differences; he also defends their rationality. For Xunzi, since “hierarchy” is an a priori fact of objective social existence, not only can people not eliminate their differences, but moreover they should respond to and utilize their natural differences in order to set up a human order and division of labor. More importantly, it is due to the existence of these different preferences and desires that the ruler is able to allocate different social goods based on individual preferences. It is also only the case that when the common people each find satisfaction of their desires and wishes that the ruler and his ministers will have their sympathy and that the people will readily carry out their orders, that regulations will be followed, and that the “great worry of the world” that is the contradiction between goods and desires that leads to conflict and struggle will be resolved.¹² The “Wangzhi” chapter says:

The former kings created rituals and duties to organize the people so that the poor and the rich, the inferior and the superior each have their place and that there is mutual accord between higher-ups and their subordinates. This is the basis of the care of the whole world. The *Shu* says: “It is only order that is not order”. This is what I mean.

It is only within the “order that is not order” that the orderly development of communal and public affairs can be ensured. Furthermore, it is only when rulers and ministers each fulfil their role, the literati and the military each fulfill their capacities, the common people all fulfill their own obligations, and that each and every preference and desire is satisfied and fully developed that the rational safety of each and every person can be realized thereby leading to a healthy and vibrant society.

Against the background of the collapse of the feudal society of the pre-imperial period, the Confucians certainly did tend towards a “great unity”. Nonetheless, this unity was not at the expense of the individual or the value of diversity. Such older perspectives as

that which saw Confucianism as being only concerned with the collective while ignoring the individual or which saw Confucianism as a collectivism or an authoritarianism did no more than unduly enlarge one aspect of Confucian thought. As long as we carefully read the text of the *Xunzi* it will not be difficult to discover that Xunzi the philosopher never denied the value of the individual and of diversity, nor did he ever believe in a vacuous collective that lacked personality and character. Conversely, Xunzi maintained that rather than separating people, diversity and division constitute the means for communal living. It is because there are differences that there is social order; it is because there are individual preferences and differences that society is effective and energetic. This is one aspect of Xunzi's "theory of self and community".

3. Collective Consensus, Standards, and Authority

However, to affirm the differences and preferences of individuals does not imply the denial of the consensus that exists between people. In the "Fuguo 富國" chapter, Xunzi says: "The ten thousand things are in the same space but have different bodies and that they can be put to use by humans without being designed for such a purpose is due to certain regularities. When people live together, they have different means to seek what they share in wanting and when they desire the same things their knowledge thereof differs: this is life. Whenever everything that is acceptable is the same then the foolish and wise are the same; when what is acceptable differs, then so do the wise and foolish". In other words, the ten thousand things each live in the same world and even though each has their own particular form, they nevertheless are all useful to human beings in their own way. The human world is the same as this. Humans all live in the same world and even though they are different in their value systems and modes of thought, there are still some things that they have in common. Such things as knowledge and capabilities, desires and needs, wishes and values that all people have in common is what we would refer to as social "consensus" in modern terms.

Now why is it that different individuals can come to a consensus? For Xunzi, this is because people have the same nature and similar desires. For example:

The eyes desire all kinds of colors, the ears desire all kinds of sounds, the mouth desires all kinds of flavors, the nose desires all kinds of scents, and the heart desires all kinds of comforts. These five are inevitable in terms of the human condition. ("Wangba 王霸")

He also says:

What all people have in common is that when hungry they desire food, when cold they desire warmth, when tired they desire rest; people delight in benefit and despise harm: this is what people all do as living beings without being dependent on anything else to do so. ("Rongru")

Both the wise and foolish, the exemplary and the petty all have the same human capacities and similar desires that find expression in the pursuit of benefit and avoidance of harm; these natural similarities can be summarized as "what all people have in common". In addition, the "Rongru" chapter also says: "Exemplary and petty persons are the same in their natural capacities and intellectual faculties". "Natural capacities" refers to *xing* 性 (i.e., "human nature") and "intellectual faculties" refers to *xin* 心 (i.e., heart, mind); they cannot be confused with each other. It is obvious that all people both have a nature of "delighting in benefit and despising harm" and a mind that is capable of deliberating and differentiating. Furthermore, the reason why humanity can become a "class" (i.e., *lei* 類) is due to their differentiating mind with its ability to "represent" (*zhengzhi* 征知). All of these things reflect humanity's shared "innate rationality" (*tianfu de lixingi* 天賦的理性) (Chen 2009).

Despite this, Xunzi not only saw shared human characteristics in terms of human nature but also saw them in terms of the mind. Even though human nature has the tendency to chase after the satisfaction of desires, Xunzi maintained that through the intellectual

faculties of the mind people could control and regulate their desires, even developing them, in accordance with the guidance of principles and rituals. Moreover, because of this, people could create a moral life out of their “adverse natural dispositions” (*xing e* 性惡). In this sense, even though Xunzi strictly differentiated exemplary and petty persons, these real differences are not enough to eliminate the natural commonalities shared across humanity let alone negate the moral “equality” of all people.¹³ Xunzi even criticized that “There is no a petty person who does not strain their neck and stand on their toes to get a glimpse of a worthy saying that ‘the natural capacities and intellectual faculties of the worthy are something only they have,’ but they do not know that there is no difference between them and worthy people in these regards”. Petty persons often mistakenly think that the difference between themselves and exemplary persons is in terms of the objective natures, but they are not aware that “nature does not treat Zengzi and Min Zisai preferentially on behalf of their filiality at the expense of all others” and that “nature does not treat the people of Qi and Lu preferentially at the expense of the people of Qin”. In terms of nature, the people are all the same when it comes to their natural dispositions and intellectual faculties. It is this equality and similarity of moral character that constitutes the fundamental universality of humanity.

Moreover, it is only due to the existence of this commonality that a universal social consensus is therefore possible. Regarding this, the “Zhengming 正名” chapter says:

All things of the same class have the same faculties of perception and intelligence. Therefore, as long as people are similar to each other they can understand each other through analogies and emulations. This is also why people require names and regulations to bind them together so as to ensure the convenience of communication.

It is because people are of the same kind and that they share intellectual faculties in terms of their mind and “representative knowledge” that people are able to achieve consistency in naming conventions and language usage thereby ensuring societal and communal interactions. Xunzi also used the term “common principle” (*tongli* 同理) to express such universal consensus and conventions:

To use a common principle to take command of the whole miscellany of things is to use a consistent standard to govern the ten thousand things . . . Rulers and ministers, fathers and sons, younger and older brothers, husbands and wives, from beginning to end and again from end to beginning, the ten thousand things all share a common principle that exists for all ages and can be called the “great root”. (“Wangzhi”)

Sages take measure of things based on their own experiences; they take measure of other people based on the commonalities of all of humanity; they take measure of other people’s emotions based on the commonalities of all people’s emotions; they take measure of the circumstances of things based on the commonalities of all things; they take measure of actual deeds based on a common discourse; they take measure of all things based on a comprehensive principle. This is the same in both the past and the present. As long as a thing belongs to a class, then no matter by what time two things are separated, they are nonetheless subject to the same rules. Therefore, as long as people understand this then when they face the many things of the world they will not misunderstand or become confused; when they encounter things that hinder their path, they will not become troubled. This is because they are able to take measure of all things with a common principle. (“Feixiang”)

The “common principle” that Xunzi mentions here refers to the shared “rationality” and “reasons” (in terms of legitimate and correct judgements) of all human beings. It also refers to the universally adhered to “principles”, “regulations”, and universal consensus and standards. Xunzi believed that there existed such a universal and unified “principle” that can be generally known and accepted by different groups of humans that transcends the limitations of time and space to become a belief or conviction common to all members

of society. It is because of the existence of this “common principle” that even though different members of society each have their own social and kin relationships they can nevertheless be consistent with each other when it comes to moral and ethical regulations. The different theories that people appeal to in their actual ethical practice does not influence the establishment of a shared moral consensus.¹⁴ Even though different methods and institutions of government exist in different times, the principles, rationality, and justice shared between all humans is nonetheless the same.¹⁵ That is to say, consensus and unity take shape within a cornucopia of diverging values and moral situations.

It is because of the existence of this “common principle” and consensus that a unified order and authority can be established for the whole of society. For Xunzi, sages (or sage kings) are those who grasped this “common principle” first and therefore can serve as models of morality and justice as well as the highest “authority” of government in their role as ruler. Furthermore, each individual member of society must emulate and acknowledge the authority of the sage otherwise society will lack a unified foundation and standard. Regarding this, the “Zhengming” chapter says:

It is only when the names for things are settled that they can be differentiated, that the intentions of the people can be communicated, and that the ruler can effectively govern the people and maintain unity . . . Thus, it is only when the common people all consistently follow the laws and when they conscientiously implement orders that the affairs of the state can be brought to completion and the whole world can achieve wondrous order.

It is because people are able to arrive at universal consensus and a common understanding that different members of society are able to connect and work with each other. This also makes it possible for the existence of collective life and social order. Xunzi repeatedly emphasized that the “the unclassified are ordered through classes and that the ten thousand are ordered through the one” (“Wangzhi”) and that one should “measure people with people, kinds with kinds” (“Feixiang 非相”). He also said that one should “Broadly know the things of the world with what is obvious and use the events of the past to deal with those of the present . . . always use a general principle to deal with whatever may happen”. (“Ruxiao”) and “Respond to things with consistency, when principles are consistent then there is no disorder”. (“Tianlun 天論”) What Xunzi means by all of this is that it is only through grasping “principles” and “classifications” that individuals have a standard with which to judge the right and wrong in the words and deeds of others. It is only through such comprehension that people will know what is right and wrong, what is appropriate and what “should” be done. In addition, such comprehension allows people to avoid confusion in the face of all kinds of different opinions and states of affairs and also to not get lost in a confusing and changing environment. Xunzi even directly criticized a so-called “saying of the world” (*shisu zhi shuo* 世俗之說):

A saying of the world says that Yao abdicated the throne to Shun. This is not so. The Son of the Heavenly is the most respected of positions, there is none who can challenge him in the whole world. Who is there that he could abdicate to? Complete in moral virtuosity, brilliant in wisdom, facing south listening to the whole world there were none who are not moved, submitting to his transforming influence. There were no hidden away scholars and no unnoticed good deeds. Those who are the same as Yao and Shun are right and those who are different are not. How could there be such a thing as abdication? (“Zhenglun 正論”)

For Xunzi, an ideal society cannot lack a Son of the Heavenly and their authority. Lacking this, the common people will not know what to submit to, what to follow, and what to believe in. If people cannot generally acknowledge and accept this kind of authority then not only will people lose their general standard of right and wrong but society will also fall into stagnation.

It should be said that in the face of the collapse of a unified ideology and the rise of a diverse and turbulent society, even though Xunzi affirmed the existence of different

individuals and their preferences, he nevertheless tried to find the unifying consensus that tied all of their differences together. This is one reason why people have previously thought that Confucianism emphasizes difference and denies “commonality” and “universality” even going so far as to say that Confucian ethics is ill-suited to deal with a society of strangers. Yet, this is only to see one aspect of Confucian thought at the expense of its other dimensions. In fact, for Xunzi, not only can individuals not remove themselves from society with its consensus, authority, and communal living, but moreover, it is only individuals who do live in such societies that words and deeds can find proper regulation and guidance. It is only within such a collective community that the disorder brought about by diversity can be overcome. This is the second aspect of Xunzi’s “theory of self and community”.

4. The Interdependence and Unity of Preference and Consensus

Since preferences and consensus are both necessary, the question then becomes how do we deal with their relationship? In the “Dalüe 大略” chapter, Xunzi says something quite interesting:

Each person in the world has their own preferences and yet there is consensus among them. In terms of taste people agree with the gourmet Yi Ya; in terms of sound people agree with the musician Shi Kuang; in terms of order people agree with the Three Kings. The Three Kings established regulatory standards and created music and ritual to pass onto later generations: what difference is there between altering the harmony of Yi Ya’s food and the melody of Shi Kuang’s music and having the inheritance of the Three Kings but not using it instead doing everything on one’s own? Without the laws of the Three Kings the world will fall into chaos and the state will perish.

The “preferences” here refers to each individual’s particular knowledge and opinion and the “consensus” here refers to everything that all people agree on and accept. For Xunzi, everybody has their own values and lifestyles that diverge from each other but this does not impede the formation of a general opinion. Conversely, the universal unity and consensus of society does not influence an individual person’s own preferences and opinions. If society ignores individual preferences, then it will lack a diversity and abundance of values; at the same time, if society lacks consensus, then political order will lack a unified standard and foundation. In terms of this, Xunzi said that even though people all have different tastes when it comes to food and music they nevertheless still all agree with the “authority” of the gourmet Yi Ya, the musician Shi Kuang, and the political institution of the Three Kings. Even though political systems and order change with the times, people in both ancient and contemporary times nonetheless acknowledge that the system of “ritual and music” is continuous in past and present. People cannot abandon the quest for consensus because without consensus there is no common standard or measure. At the same time, people cannot ignore their individual experience and preferences because without these there will be no motivating force for the development of society. If the ruler separates “consensus” from “preferences” then the state and society will not endure and its development will stagnate.¹⁶

However, Xunzi affirmed that people are similar in the values they hold, this is the consensus that they all agree on, and at the same time he also acknowledged that people each select different values, and this expresses the fact that individuals and their preferences are diverse. For Xunzi, the “preferences” of the individual and the “consensus” of the collective exist together. They do not form an oppositional pair; nor are they isolated from each other. In fact, the reverse is the case: both rely on each other to form an integrated unity.

“Preferences” and “consensus” in terms of the political realm are not separable from each other. Each member of society holds their own political opinion and viewpoint, but at the same time, society as a whole also constitutes a public opinion and collective will. Individual opinions and public will are interdependent. If the diverse opinions of society do not exist, then there cannot exist collective wisdom and political energy. Conversely,

if there is no public opinion or communal voice, then society as a whole will fall into dissidence and opposition:

All such heterodox theories as those that take leave of right principles and make up their own do so due to the three abovementioned confusions . . . therefore the enlightened ruler uses his authority to suppress such heterodoxies, uses the proper way to lead those who believe in them to the right path, uses the law to send them clear warnings, uses correct theories to guide them, and uses punishments to prohibit their behaviors . . . The enlightened ruler listens to and accommodates all theories and opinions with intelligence and measure but he is not arrogant or full of himself. He has a character that is tolerant and accommodating but is not haughty or brash . . . To use a unified way that is proper to differentiate what is improper is like using a plumbline to guide the straight and curved. Due to this heterodox opinions cannot bring about chaos and the hundred schools cannot make any falsehoods. (“Zhengdao”)

The function of political order is to both provide a space for the full expression of public and social opinions and a unified consensus as well as a standard for right and wrong for all of the diverse and competing opinions of each member of society. The role of the ruler is to listen broadly to what everyone has to say and to allow for and take into consideration criticisms of his performance. At the same time, the ruler also has to figure out what is “good” and eliminate what is “bad” and use the “proper way” to deal with deviants. True consensus is produced from the diverse debates of the public, therefore the public realm must allow for public criticism rather than suppressing public opinion. If there is place for the different opinions of all members of society, if there are no competing yet complementary opinions on what is right and wrong, then policies good for social order will be hard to achieve.

Of course, this is one place where Xunzi might encounter suspicion. That is, how is a consensus reached out of so many competing, often fundamentally opposed, opinions? Xunzi’s answer comes in the form of an appeal to music. He believed that people would be able to achieve “consensus” through the magical effect of music and ceremony. He discusses this in the chapter “Yuelun 樂論” (On Music):

As for music, it is that which harmonizes without changing; as for ritual, it is that which patterns without altering. Music brings together and ritual differentiates. The rule of music and ritual is to take charge of the minds of the people . . . Thus, when there is music in the ancestral hall, the ruler and ministers, superiors and inferiors all listen to it and none lack proper respect; when there is music in the inner halls then fathers and sons, brothers older and younger all listen to it and none lack familial affection; when there is music in the village, the old and young all listen to it and none lack amicability. Thus as for music, investigate what is uniform to make certain harmony, compare things to properly accessorize, and piece together music to make complete compositions of music. It is enough to take in one way and it is enough to govern the ten thousand changes . . . When the music is centered and even then the people will be harmonious and will not roam; when the music is serious and solemn then the people will be unified and not disordered . . . when it is like this, then none of the common people will not settle in their place and enjoy their village and will be enough for those above them.

For Xunzi, if we say that the purpose of ritual is to ensure the differences and uniqueness of individuals, then the function of music is to coalesce all of that diversity and individuality into a coherent harmony. In comparison with the ritual that emphasizes differentiating people into individuals according to their “differences”, music emphasizes the quest for social harmony and cohesion. Through music, no matter if it is in the halls of government or village squares, people will experience a sense of communal being that ties

them together. Through this is established the political order the includes and combines ritual and music.

The relationship between “preferences” and “consensus” does not only obtain in terms of values or politics. Instead, it is also reflected in the realms of learning and knowledge. For Xunzi, it is because each person has their own opinions and preferences that society is able to produce different viewpoints and competing ideas. At the same time, people are also interconnected in terms of the moral principle of right and wrong therefore they are also able to constitute an ideal “way of true kings”. To a certain degree, the relationship between Xunzi’s “preferences” and “consensus” is also the “great unity” of his ideal learning that merges with his spirit of accommodating diversity. This relationship is expressed in terms of “one” (*yi* 一) and “two” (*liang* 兩) in the “Jiebi 解蔽” chapter:

All problems come from people’s obsession with one thing preventing them from seeing the whole picture. It is only when the prejudices of the people are corrected that they can return to the proper way and wherever there is duality there will be confusion. There is only one way in the world and the sages are never of two minds. Today there are so many kinds of government and so many kinds of theories so that there is either rightness or wrongness, order or chaos . . . It is the natural capacity of the mind to know and in knowing there are differences; in there being differences the mind knows multiple things at once; knowing multiple things at once is to be “dual” (*liang*). Yet, there is so-called “concentration” (*yi*) and this means that this thing known does not interfere with that thing known.

Being “dual” means to know more than one thing at a time; and so-called “concentration” means being focused on one theory or principle. Xunzi not only criticized the “duality” that divides “concentration” but he also refuted the idea that “duality” is the foundation for “concentration”. Xunzi emphasized that both “sameness and difference are equally valid” and that “the many ideas of the masses can be learned from simultaneously”. This means that “unity” should be sought amongst “diversity” and that “difference” should be sought within “unity” and vice versa. It should be said that Xunzi both opposed people being overly invested in diverse debates and arguments that lead to disorder and confusion and at the same time did not think that there should be some kind of uniformity in what people think and believe thereby blindly eliminating the diversity of knowledge. For Xunzi, the correct method is to form one’s own opinion after broadly surveying as many opinions and ideas as possible, that is to say, one’s own opinion should be founded on the foundation formed through the assimilation of a diverse source of ideas and values:

There is none among the ten thousand things that does not have a shape to be seen; there is no thing that is seen and not discussed; there is no thing that is discussed that loses its proper place. Sit within your room and see the four seas, situate yourself in the present and discuss the distant. Take a broad perspective on the ten thousand things and know their exigencies; tally up historical instances of order and disorder to find a measure therein; weave together the heavenly and the earthly to appropriate the resources of the ten thousand things. (“Jiebi”)

It is only within the diverse world of the ten thousand things that the mind can transcend them; it is only in interacting with others and society as a whole that individuals can form a true communal unity. It is only when the mind embodies the way and truly comprehends societal consensus that people engage in the diversity of the world with greater openness and tolerance. It is also only when people liberate their minds from its fetters that they bring the various and diverse ten thousand things that are each involved in their own interrelated maturation into clear coherence and order. Thus, Xunzi constantly calls for rulers to “Lay out all of the ten thousand theories at once and balance them as if on the scales so that each different thing does not occlude anything else thereby bringing about disorder”. (“Jiebi”) This means that the ruler needs to lay out all the different opinions, ideas, and theories and through balancing them against each other establish a standard measure. Moreover, rulers need to judge and appraise each of the differing theories in

accordance with this common standard so as to seek out a true course amongst a dizzy array of options. To a certain degree, this is similar to what John Rawls calls “overlapping consensus” (Rawls and Wan 2000).¹⁷

Xunzi maintained that individual “preferences” should be unified with collective “consensus” in the face of the division and collapse of values, knowledge, and politics and the rationality of diversity of social competition during his contemporary times. He both opposed overly emphasizing “unity” at the expense of individuality and diversity and falling into “relativity” through an excessive search for “diversity”. For Xunzi, as long as people excessively emphasize one end of the spectrum they will lose the other end, that is, they will inevitably fall into negative one-sidedness and prejudice. In addition, it is only when “preferences” and “consensus” both exist simultaneously and are even interdependent that people will be able to resolve social divisions and the tension that exists between individual and community. This is the third feature of Xunzi’s “theory of individual and community”.

5. The Rational Allocation between Individual and Collective

There is still an unresolved problem regarding the emphasis on the unity of “preferences” and “consensus”. In actual situations the preferences of individuals and the consensus of the collective are not always consistent with each other. For example, in certain circumstances, people might be conflicted on whether or not to satisfy their individual needs or work toward the greater good of the community. How is this problem solved, then?

Xunzi was aware of this conflict, he said:

People desire the same things and when desires are many but the things to satisfy them are few there will certainly be struggle. (“Fuguo 富國”)

Even though Xunzi affirms the unity of the individual and community in most cases, he nevertheless acknowledged that as long as there is some kind of separation between the two then there will always be some kind of conflict. When a contradiction arises between “infinite desires” and “finite goods” or when people only chase after goods for their own personal satisfaction while ignoring the good of society, society will be brought to internal conflict that is wasteful of resources thereby leading to poverty and a “sickness of the public” (*gonghuan* 公患). Xunzi saw the possibility of the imbalance of benefit between individual and community as a basic problem that no normal society can avoid. The problem is how such conflicts are dealt with.

The method for resolving conflicts cannot simply be the elimination of individual desires but respecting individual desires does not conversely imply that the collective good should be ignored. In the face of such a quandary, Xunzi offers the following proposition in the “Bugou 不苟” chapter:

Study the principles of the unity of ritual and morality and differentiate what is right and wrong . . . A ruler as small as five *cun* can measure any distance in the whole world.

The so-called “unity of ritual and morality” here refers to the unity of all values as well as the most fundamental value system, its principles, and standards. The so-called “differentiate what is right and wrong” refers to the different opinions of the people on what is right and wrong. For Xunzi, these two are used in two different areas, each having their advantages and disadvantages, and can be used to rationally allocate goods to society. More specifically, the “unity of ritual and morality” is a universal and restrictive principle and each individual must accord with and respect it. Even though there might be conflict between different individual’s opinions and ideas; however, at the same time, behind all their differing views there must be a unified standard. Moreover, no matter what kind of changes take place or what kind situation occurs, an individual’s words and deeds cannot take leave of this standard: “It is the wisdom of sages to maintain a consistent standard even though they hear many theories and opinions and debate all day” (“Xing e”) and

“Their words and their actions are consistent with ritual regulations and they respond appropriately as the things around them change yet their principle with which they do so remains the same”. (“Rongru”) Regarding the “unity of ritual and morality”, Xunzi maintained that it was something fundamental and primary, or put in another way, he thought that it represented the “base level” of ethics, that is, it was the basic thing that all people need to satisfy before they can achieve greater ethical heights. Even though Xunzi affirmed that each person should seek the realization of their own goals, he did not therefore think that this was done without the limiting factor of collective principles and goals. When individual pursuits conflict with collective ones, people should first work toward achieving the latter. It is only when “public morality” and the ethical base line of the public realm are guaranteed that individuals should pursue their own goals. In addition, it is only when there is “unity of rituals and morality”, that is when collective principles and ideals are fully realized and promoted, that individuals are able to fully grasp and develop their own plans and ideals.¹⁸

It is clear that the reason why Xunzi proposes the notions of unity and division is because he wants to resolve the contradictions that exist between the need to allocate goods for individuals and goods for the community. Xunzi said:

The former kings despised disorder, this is why they created rituals to divide people up properly so that the rich and poor, superior and inferior each had their proper place so that the higher-ups and their subordinates all cooperated; this is the root of caring for the world. (“Wangzhi”)

The former kings despised disorder, this is why they created rituals as means to divide people up properly to nourish their desires and provide for their needs. They did this so that desires did not lack for the goods to satisfy them and that the goods desired did not run out of supply. When both of these situations are maintained for a long time then therefrom rituals rise. (“Lilun 禮論”)

What Xunzi means by “created rituals to divide people up properly” is that the former kings created a system that properly allocated whatever was necessary for both personal and social benefit. The “rituals” here has a double role. On the one hand, it guarantees that each individual person can acquire what they need for the satisfaction of their basic desires; on the other hand, it allocates different statuses and jobs based on the differences that obtain between people in any given circumstance. Xunzi’s ideal was to use ritual to rationally allocate goods in order to satisfy both individual and collective needs while at the same time preserving the heterogeneity of society.

It is important to note that just as conflict can exist between the individual and the collective in terms of values, conflict can also occur between individuals and the collective in terms of benefit. Xunzi thought that individuals should sacrifice a bit of their personal benefit on behalf of collective benefit when the two come into conflict. This is expressed in the “Rongru” chapter:

In terms of human circumstances . . . they do not dare have meat and wine . . . they do not dare wear silk garments . . . they do not dare travel by horse and cart. Why is this? It is not because they do not desire these things, but rather because if they for a second do not think of the future then how could it be possible that when they run out of goods they will be able to maintain any kind of stability for long? . . . Thus they think long and hard about the future and take into consideration the many generations to come.

Just as the “unity of ritual and morality” has a foundational and restrictive function for the individual, collective benefit in a certain sense takes priority over that of individuals. Even though Xunzi did emphasize that the needs of individuals should be met, he nevertheless thought that the needs of others should not be sacrificed for such ends, let alone should the safety and stability of society as a whole be risked. Even the ruler of the whole world who can enjoy infinite pleasures should not give free reign to his own desires and pursuit for personal benefit because if there is no “greater good” (*dali* 大利) then how

could that of the individual be maintained for any period of time at all? Hence, in the “Zhengming” chapter Xunzi says:

As long as the mind accords with the proper way, then even though desires are many no harm will be done to order . . . even though desires cannot be entirely eliminated, there will always be people who will want to regulate those desires that cannot find their satisfaction. Act in accordance with the proper way so that when it is possible the near total satisfaction of people’s desires can be designed and when circumstances do not allow for this then regulate the desires of the people. There are none who do not follow what they can do and distance themselves from what they cannot do.

“According with the proper way” and “regulating desires” refer to the method of guiding and regulating the people’s desires so that balance can be maintained between the individual and the collective whenever there is conflict. Specifically, this is to “supplement what is lacking” and “reduce what is in surplus”, that is, those who are lacking in terms of their basic needs need to be mobilized and stimulated to motivate them and those who have an overabundance of desires need to be regulated so that they “know enough” and cease to behave excessively. (“Zhenglun 正論”). The regulations provided by rituals might be short-term or long-term depending on the particular situation in question, but their goal is nevertheless to maintain balance between individuals and the collective so as to accumulate wealth and ensure the greater good.

Xunzi believed that it is only when individual “preferences” and collective “consensus” are rationally allocated and balance each other that both can be maintained for a long period of time. Furthermore, it is only when such a balance is maintained that the greatest benefit for society as a whole can be realized:

Thus order the activities of the four seasons, cultivate the ten thousand things, and bring benefit to all within the world: there is no other means to do so than by dividing people appropriately. (“Wangzhi 王制”)

The way of satisfying all of the needs in the world is in understanding the proper division of people. (“Fuguo 富國”)

Xunzi provided a supplement to his theory on the unity of the individual and collective in the face of the conflict that can occur between “preferences” and “consensus”. In order to realize their harmonious unity, Xunzi tried to find a rational method for properly dividing people. This includes making clear the distinction between individual preference and collective consensus as well as properly allocating goods to meet both individual and collective needs. Social justice is founded on the basis of the different needs of the members of society, a proper understanding of right and wrong, as well as the proper positioning of individuals within the collective. It is only when the distinction between preferences and consensus is made clear that their conflict can be truly resolved; it is only when goods are properly allocated to both individuals and the collective that balance and harmony can be achieved between them in addition to realizing a harmonious and unified social order. This is the fourth aspect of Xunzi’s “theory on “self and community”.

6. Good Persons and Good Societies

In the above four sections we have seen how Xunzi dealt with the relationship between diverse individual preferences and a unified social consensus. In the face of the collapse of society and the emergence of a diverse field of ideas and opinions, Xunzi was concerned with how to merge diverse individuals into a unified collective while preserving the characters and freedom of those individuals. Therefore, he both recognized that individual preferences and opinions led to societal division and that this reality had a certain rationality to it. However, he also maintained that there existed something—consensus—that transcended all individuals, groups, and schools of thought. For Xunzi, people should adhere to this universal principle and consensus and not become confused and obsessed by any one opinion or idea. The mind should accommodate many different opinions

and theories, but it should not let this lead them to any kind of relativism or nihilism. People must transcend their individual limitations on the foundation of the recognition of their own values and differences. They need to open their minds to be more tolerant and accommodating as well as try to experience the universal and transcendent truth. It is only in this way that a fractured and divided society can be fixed; it is only in this way that the tension between individuals and society can be resolved.

Xunzi said that this kind of relationship between preferences and consensus is, in a certain sense, a correlate with the relationship between “good persons” and “good societies” often seen in ethical discussions. Xunzi believed that good societies can only take shape when each and every individual can fully express themselves and develop their diverse goals:

When the ruler and lords do not waste resources, when the court officials do not engage in uncouth behavior, when the bureaucrats do not slack off on the job, when the common people do not follow all kinds of strange and weird customs, and when there are no thieves and bandits at all, this can be said to be when justice has spread across the land. (“Jundao 君道”)

It is only when the individual (no matter if it is the ruler or the common person) fully realizes their desires and wishes and strives with all their might in the pursuit of spiritual ideals and goals that society as a whole can achieve a kind of universal “justice”. Even though there might be inconsistency between individuals and the collective, it is nonetheless due to the existence of each person’s own goals that collective goals and ideals can exist. In other words, it is because each person strives toward realizing their own goals that the collective can come together with shared purpose and energy. Without the efforts of the individuals that make up the collective there will be no force binding society together as a whole, nor will there be any such thing as collective wisdom.

Yet, it is because there is a good society that there are good people:

Collect all of the wishes of the world and possess them all at once, lead the world and govern it as if it were your children and grandchildren. As long as someone is not crazy and confused then how could anyone not find joy in the sight of this? (“Wangba 王霸”)

Even though the self-realization of each individual is unique and diverse, as social products and members of a collective, they cannot take leave of their social relationality nor can they avoid evaluating themselves in terms of the value framework provided by society. Individual development and collective realization are mutually complementary: individual development cannot take leave of the division of labor and cooperation of others and, at the same time, individual goals can only be realized through their being placed within collective goals. If there is no common goal providing encouragement and motivation, if there is no unified guide or leader, then individual development and accomplishment is not possible. Regarding this, Xunzi said:

When the way of the community is right then the ten thousand things each find their proper place, the six domestic animals each grow as they should, and all living things live in accordance with their natural conditions. When each thing grows as it should then the six domestic animals will flourish; when things grow and die as they should, then the grasses and trees will flourish; when government orders are issued in the right way, then the common people can be unified and worthies will come to court in service. (“Wangzhi”)

It is because there is a common belief in and adherence to “consensus” that the actions of each member of society can be guided and assisted and that their lives can have direction. Xunzi did not believe in a communal order that is separate from what is shared or common to humanity, nor did he believe that an individual who lived isolated from the community would have freedom or fortune. He thought that the members of society could only find their proper place within the life of the community and that it is only within the rational

order of the community that individual freedoms can develop and diversity and justice can flourish. This is similar to what Plato (Guo and Zhang 1986) and Aristotle (Wu 1965) mean by justice.

Furthermore, the ideal form of society is also one where each person can practice a universal morality amongst a diversity of unique individuals. In other words, the common moral ideal and collective regulation is only obtained through the interaction of diverse individuals:

When in the presence of the ruler practice what is appropriate of a subordinate; when in the village practice what is appropriate to the young and old; when among friends practice what is appropriate in interpersonal conduct; when faced with the young and uneducated practice what is appropriate to guiding and accommodating them. There should be none who are not loved and none who are not respected, nor should anyone be fought with so that all are accepted like how the heavenly and the earthly encompass the ten thousand things. (“Fei Shierzi 非十二子”)

Xunzi did not believe in an individual freedom and fortune that were separate from the foundation of the community; neither did he believe it was possible for collective fortune and unity without the freedom of the individual and pluralistic creativity. Therefore, he both criticized Mozi for “praising sameness” because it eliminated individual diversity and a radical individualism that overly emphasized the self at the expense of the collective. For Xunzi, even though “I” am “I” and “you” are “you”, we are not mutually exclusive of each other, instead we both live on this same piece of land; even though the “individual” is the “individual” and the “collective” is the “collective”, it is only through the mutually beneficial interaction of individual and community that people can pursue a common future:

It is only what is not orderly that can become orderly, it is only what is not straight that can become straight, and it is only the different that can be unified. (“Chendao 臣道”)

These considerations that take account of several aspects of the relationship between individual and community provide us with certain inspiration regarding our modern circumstance. In our modern world with its unceasing tendency toward homogenization and globalization, human civilization has been no exception. Modern civilization has seen a high degree of the division of labor and separation and the problems of plurality and acceptance, the individual and the collective have become more and more important. Xunzi’s discussion on the concepts of “preferences” and “consensus” provide us with insight on the questions of how to ensure the rational safety and development of each and every individual, of how to use the rational division of labor and allocation of goods to positively organize each member of society, and of how to establish global justice between the diversity of individuals and unity of the collective.

Obviously, there is a great difference between ancient societies and modern society, and this is reflected in the concepts of individual and community. We can at least affirm that Xunzi’s reflections on “preferences” and “consensus” and the Confucian “theory of the unity of self and community” that they reflect undoubtedly makes a contribution to this important discussion. In the ideal society where “only not order is order”, Xunzi steadfastly believed in a world full of human diversity, in a unified and regulated political order, in a plural and open public opinion, in a common and universal consensus of values, in a flourishing of justice and diversity in terms of good individuals and societies. Furthermore, he also believed that all of these things could be unified. In other words, it is only when the same and the different, the individual and the community, preferences and consensus, plurality and consensus mutually interact with each other in harmony that people can finally establish a flourishing human society that is accommodating and orderly while at the same time providing for each of the ten thousand things so that they all find their proper place.

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Notes

- 1 For more in depth discussions on Xunzi philosophy and modern political theory, refer to; [Li and Ni \(2014\)](#); [Bai \(2020a, 2020b\)](#); [Bell and Li \(2013\)](#); [Bell \(2006\)](#); [Cline \(2014, pp. 165–75\)](#); [Zhang \(2009, pp. 483–92\)](#); and [Washio \(2009\)](#).
- 2 Erik Lang Harris' treatment of Xunzi's political philosophy in [Hutton \(2016\)](#) also address the relationship between individuals and their communities, however, he focuses on the question of "political legitimacy" through Xunzi's concept of "allotment" (fen 分) rather than the particularities of this relationship itself. See also Henry Rosemont's chapter "State and Society in the Xunzi: A Philosophical Commentary" in [Kline and Ivanhoe \(2000, pp. 1–38\)](#). For other treatments of Xunzi's philosophy, see [Kline and Tiwald \(2014\)](#); [Cua \(2005\)](#); [Goldin \(1999\)](#); [Sato \(2003, 2015, 2021\)](#).
- 3 For more on this view see [Fei \(1985\)](#), and [Brindley \(2010\)](#), [Bai \(2020a, 2020b\)](#) and [Zhang \(2007\)](#).
- 4 For more on this view see [Loewe \(1994\)](#); [Yao \(1997\)](#); [Pankenier \(2013\)](#); [Yang \(2011\)](#); [Zhao \(2006, pp. 29–41\)](#); [Zhao \(2007\)](#) and [Watanabe \(2021\)](#).
- 5 This criticism is perhaps not limited to Chinese society but can be extended to include traditional Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese societies, too.
- 6 The term "individual" might prove problematic for some who would prefer to talk of Confucian "persons" instead as it avoids the unnecessary baggage of individualism. However, this does not mean we cannot recognize that a Confucian person is the amorphous and porous complex that is both individual and their community or society. A forest may be an infinitely organic complex, but without individual trees (not to mention all the other organisms) to constitute it there would be no forest at all. Neither individual nor society should be reduced one to the other, but rather, room should be maintained for the perspectives of both while not setting up a hard and fast division between them. For treatments of "individualism" and "person" drawing on Confucian insights see [Rosemont \(2015\)](#) and [Ames \(2022\)](#).
- 7 "Unity" within the Confucian context has more to do with balance and harmony than with the subsumption of particulars in a transcendent or ideal principle. For the idea of harmony in Chinese philosophy see [Li \(2014\)](#) and for the problems of Western philosophy's notion of unity, see [Zhang \(2017, pp. 151–78\)](#).
- 8 For example, the *Mengzi* 孟子 also says "That things are arrayed with certain disorder is the circumstances of things" (3A4), the *Gongsunlong* 公孫龍 says: "differentiate what is the same and what is different" and "separate the hard and the white", and the "Zeyang 則陽" chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 says "When looking at things in terms of the differences then there are the liver and the gallbladder, the states of Chu and Yue". These are all affirmations of the objective existence of differences.
- 9 All translations of first-hand materials were done in concert with the author and with reference to both modern Chinese and English translations of the respective texts.
- 10 It needs to be clarified that even though Xunzi is speaking about diversity from the position of the ruler here, he nevertheless does not see diversity as a kind of "social utility". For Xunzi, maintaining the difference and individuality of a single person is rooted in their rights or even their essence. Even those of no remarkable intelligence and ability are still worthy of social respect. Xunzi, through the division of labor, hoped to allow those of society who did not match their peers in intelligence or ability to have the opportunity to participate in society. This does not mean that he wanted to "utilize" them for the benefit of the ruler. In fact, the opposite is the case: the work of the ruler is in maintaining the diversity of the common people.
- 11 This resonates with [Lucas \(1977\)](#) argument "against equality" that thinks "equality" has become a superstition of the modern world and something that people worship as a kind of skeleton key to understanding government and the only means to achieve social justice.
- 12 We can imagine with Xunzi that everybody can become a sage like Yao or Shun but still recognize that this is an optimistic ideal and is actually very difficult to realize and therefore such a pursuit will lead to the world being thrown into chaos.
- 13 None of the great Confucians denied that humanity possesses a "natural" commonality or that people are not equal in moral terms.
- 14 It should be said that even though Xunzi strongly believed in adhering to the Confucian ethics of kin relationships and ritual, he nonetheless emphasized that ethical and moral values are universal and common. Therefore, in this sense, no matter if its Confucianism in general or Xunzi in particular, neither can be summarized in terms of "particularism" or "differentialism". In fact, the opposite is the case where Xunzi's concept of "sameness" refers to true universality because it not only transcends the limits of time and space but also all classes and ranks of family and society. He believed that humanity constituted a "unified class" where human beings all had the same natural dispositions and intellectual faculties and held the same values and principles.
- 15 It is worth noting that Xunzi frequently uses the phrases "what the hundred kings all have in common" (*baiwang zhi suotong* 百王之所同) and "what the past and the present are the same in" (*gujin zhi suoyi* 古今之所一) so much so that they might even be considered technical terms.

- ¹⁶ Mengzi 6A7 makes a very similar argument that people are all alike in their moral preferences through analogy with their similarities in sensory preferences by appealing to the same historical figures as Xunzi. What these figures represent are social and cultural goods that have sedimented over time as common values that the majority of people consent to.
- ¹⁷ Of course, there is the possibility of suspicion here. That is, is it possible for what Xunzi or Rawls discovered or invented to be realized in today's society? Rawls himself acknowledges that much of what he said was merely theoretical. However, I do not think that the over idealization of a theory means that that theory necessarily loses its interpretive power in regard to reality. A theory is just a theory, and whether or not it can change reality might not be a question for the philosopher but instead is a question of the actual practice of politicians and social activists. It is possible there exists in today's society a better political theory and reality than in Xunzi's time, but we still should and must read Xunzi because he provides us with an alternative path for exploring the modern topics of "diversity" and "consensus". Or, perhaps put in another way, he allows us the opportunity to rethink the concept of "overlapping consensus" and provides further examples and evidences for this idea.
- ¹⁸ Xunzi's idea of a "unified standard" needs to be clarified. Xunzi is speaking from the perspective of the ruler and he thought that the ruler should provide a universal model for the common people and that this could serve as guide and reference for them in their words and actions. But this does not imply that the ruler was to force or demand that the people follow his example. The first task of the ruler is nothing other than preserving the preferences of the common people, guaranteeing that they are able to fully develop themselves, and safeguarding the meaningful realization of their lives. This is obviously different from modern democracies which want to use the people's name to justify a principle of restriction.

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