

Xunzi: Book 23 “Spontaneous Nature is Bad”

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23.1

People’s spontaneous nature is bad. Their goodness is artificial. As for people’s spontaneous nature: they grow and have a fondness for benefit. They follow this and cause bitter contention to arise and deference and yielding to be lost in them. People grow and have a hatred of badness in them. They follow this and cause vicious thievery to arise, and honesty and loyalty to be lost in them. People grow and have the desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for pretty sounds and colors, in them. They follow these and cause bitterness and chaos to arise, and ritual, duty, form, and pattern to be lost in them. In this way, if people go along with their spontaneous nature and follow their natural sentiments, they will surely exhibit bitter contention, unite in violating social divisions and throwing proper form into chaos, and return to brutal tyranny. So people must have the transforming effects of teachers and models, and the guidance of ritual and duty. Only then will they exhibit deference and yielding, unite in pattern and form, and return to order. If we look at it in this way, people’s spontaneous nature is clearly bad. Their goodness is artificial.¹

23.2

Crooked wood must wait for steaming and pressing on the straightening board and only then will it be straight. Blunt steel must wait for grinding and whetting and only then will it be sharp. Now people’s spontaneous nature is bad. They must wait for teachers and models, only then becoming corrected. [They must] get ritual and duty, only then becoming ordered. If people lack teachers and models, they will be one-sided, devious, and uncorrected. If they lack ritual and duty, they will be perverse, chaotic, and not ordered. In ancient times, the sage kings, since people’s spontaneous nature is bad, took people to be one-sided, narrow-minded, and uncorrected—perverse, chaotic, and disordered. Therefore, on the people’s behalf the sages

¹CTP *Xunzi* 23.1

established ritual and duty, and arranged models and guidelines, using these to straighten out and ornament people's spontaneous nature and natural sentiments in order to correct them, to tame and transform people's spontaneous nature and natural sentiments in order to guide them. From this point on, everybody exhibited order and united with the Way. People today who are transformed by teachers and models, who accumulate patterning and learning, who are guided by ritual and duty—these are gentlemen. Those who give free reign to their spontaneous nature and natural sentiments, who are at ease with indulgence, lack inhibitions, and violate ritual and duty are petty people. If we look at it in this way, people's spontaneous nature is clearly bad. Their goodness is artificial.²

23.3

Mencius says: “When people learn, their spontaneous nature is good.”³

23.4

I say: This is not so. This does not arrive at knowledge of people's spontaneous nature, nor does it recognize the distinction between people's spontaneous nature and artifice. As for spontaneous nature: it is given by Heaven, and is both unlearnable and unworkable. As for ritual and duty: these are what the sage kings created, and what people learn and are capable of, what they work at and only then master. What is unlearnable and unworkable in people—call it spontaneous nature. What is learnable to the point of ability, and workable to the point of mastery in people—call it artifice. This is the distinction between spontaneous nature and artifice. It's people's spontaneous nature for their eyes to be able to see, for their ears to be able to hear. The brightness that enables sight is not separate from the eyes, nor the discriminating that enables hearing separate from the ears. Clearly the eyes' brightening and the ears' discriminating cannot be learned⁴

23.5

Mencius says, “People's spontaneous nature is good. All who lose their spontaneous nature are thereby bad.”⁵

²CTP *Xunzi* 23.2

³CTP *Xunzi* 23.3

⁴CTP *Xunzi* 23.4

⁵CTP *Xunzi* 23.5. This line is ambiguous and perhaps corrupt. Given various emendations, we have two possible readings of Mencius' claim: 1) everybody loses their spontaneous nature, and 2) everybody *bad* has lost their spontaneous nature. Hutton opts for 1), while Robins and Li Disheng opt for 2). I follow Robins and Li here, since I think 1) is too weak of a claim to attribute to Mencius in context, as it is exactly the point *Xunzi* goes on to make. C.f. Robins, 2001-2002, p. 106, 李滌生, 1979, pp. 542-3, and Hutton, 2014, p. 249.

23.6

I say: This is a mistake. It's people's spontaneous nature to grow and to separate from their simplicity and from their original substance—certainly they lose it. If we look at it in this way, people's spontaneous nature is clearly bad. What's meant by "people's spontaneous nature is good," is that people don't separate from their simplicity but are instead made beautiful by it, that they don't separate from their original substance but are instead benefited by it. They suppose that both simplicity and original substance in their beauty, and both the heart-mind and intentions in their goodness, are just like the ability of sight in its brightness not being separate from the eyes, and the ability of hearing in its discernment not being separate from the ears. And so I say the eyes brighten and the ears discern.

It's people's spontaneous nature to get hungry and desire to eat, to get cold and desire warmth, to toil and desire rest. This is people's natural sentiments and spontaneous nature. When someone see an elder but does not dare to eat first, it's because of his having someone to whom he yields. When somebody toils but does not dare to seek rest, it's because of his having someone he is replacing. Sons yielding to their fathers, younger brothers yielding to their older brothers, sons replacing their fathers, and younger brothers replacing their older brothers—these two kinds of conduct both go against [our] spontaneous nature and contradict [our] natural sentiments. However, it is the way of the filial son, and the pattern and form of ritual and duty. So if you follow your natural sentiments and your spontaneous nature, then you will not be deferent and yielding, and if you are deferent and yielding, you will contradict your natural sentiments and spontaneous nature. If we look at it in this way, people's spontaneous nature is clearly bad. Their goodness is artificial.⁶

23.7

Somebody asks, "If people's spontaneous nature is bad, then how did ritual and duty arise?"⁷

23.8

Respond by saying: as for ritual and duty, these arose from the artifice of the sages, and did not arise because of people's spontaneous nature. The potter shapes clay to make his instruments. In this case, the instruments arise from the potter's artifice, and do not arise because of people's spontaneous nature. And the woodsman chops down trees to complete his instruments. In this case, the instruments arise from the woodsman's artifice, and do not arise because of people's spontaneous nature. The sages accumulated reflection and forethought, practiced artifice, and thereby gave rise to ritual and duty and set up models and guidelines. In this way, as for ritual,

⁶CTP *Xunzi* 23.6

⁷CTP *Xunzi* 23.7

duty, models, and guidelines, they all arose from the sages' artifice, and did not arise because of people's spontaneous nature. Like this, the eyes are fond of pretty colors; the ears are fond of nice sounds; the mouth is fond of flavor; the heart-mind is fond of benefit; the bones of our body and the form of our skin are fond of pleasant sensations—these all arise from people's natural sentiments and spontaneous nature. [For these sentiments], people are stirred and react spontaneously; they do not wait to work at them and only then make them arise. When someone is stirred but is unable to make [his sentiments] so, and he must wait to work at them and only then are they so—call this “arising from artifice.” These are the things that arise from spontaneous nature and from artifice and the marks of their differences.⁸

23.9

And so the sage kings transformed their spontaneous nature and set up artifice. When artifice was set up, they gave rise to ritual and duty. Once they gave rise to ritual and duty, they regulated models and guidelines. In this way, ritual, duty, models, and guidelines—these all are what the sage kings gave rise to. As for that by which the sage kings are one and the same with the masses, and are no different from the masses—it's spontaneous nature. That by which they are different from and go beyond the masses is artifice. As for someone being fond of benefit and wanting to get it—this is people's natural sentiments and spontaneous nature. Suppose there is someone who has wealth that he will divide up. If he follows his natural sentiments and spontaneous nature, he will be fond of benefit and seek to get it. In this way, elder and younger brothers will mutually swindle and steal from one another. But if he is transformed by the pattern and form of ritual and duty, he will thereby defer to the people of the state. And so: if you follow your natural sentiments and spontaneous nature, then elder and younger brothers will contend, while if you are transformed by ritual and duty then you will defer to the people of the state.⁹

23.10

All of those people who desire to become good, it's because their spontaneous nature is bad. The flimsy yearn for substance; the ugly yearn for beauty; the narrow yearn for breadth [of knowledge]; the poor yearn for wealth; the lowly yearn for honor—if they lack it in themselves, they surely seek it from without. Similarly, the wealthy do not yearn for riches; the honored do not yearn for positions. If they have it in themselves, they will not seek it from without. If we look at it in this way, all of those people who desire to become good, it's because their spontaneous nature is bad. Now people's spontaneous nature is originally without ritual and duty, so people struggle to learn and seek to have them. Their spontaneous nature does not know ritual and duty, so they must reflect and deliberate, and seek to know it. In this way, if people's sponta-

⁸CTP *Xunzi* 23.8

⁹CTP *Xunzi* 23.9

neous nature is all they have, they will be without ritual and duty, and not know ritual and duty. If people lack ritual and duty, they will be disorderly. And if they don't know ritual and duty, they'll become perverse. In this way, if people's spontaneous nature is all they have, there will have perversity and chaos in them. If we look at it in this way, people's spontaneous nature is clearly bad. Their goodness is artificial.¹⁰

23.11

Mencius says, "People's spontaneous nature is good."¹¹

23.12

I say: This is not so. From ancient times to the current day, what all those in the empire call good is correct, well-formed, level, and orderly. What they call bad is onesided, narrow-minded, perverse, and chaotic. This is the distinction between good and bad. If people sincerely take people's spontaneous nature to be originally correct, well-formed, level, and orderly, then what use would the sages be? What use would ritual and duty be? Even if there were sages, ritual, and duty, what would they add in terms of correctness, pattern, evenness, and order? Now, this is not so. People's spontaneous nature is bad. Therefore the ancient sages, because people's spontaneous nature is bad, took them to be onesided, narrow-minded, and uncorrected—perverse, chaotic and disordered. And so, on the people's behalf they set up the authority of the rulers above in order to oversee them. They made clear ritual and duty in order to transform them. They set up models and guidelines in order to order them. They used heavy punishments to restrict them, and so all under Heaven was ordered and united in goodness. This is the order of the sage kings, and the transforming effects of ritual and duty.

If you attempt to expel the authority of the rulers above, lack the transforming effects of ritual and duty, expel the order of models and correctness, lack the punishments which restrain, and, relying on these, observe how the masses proceed together—if you do this, then the strong will harm the weak, robbing them. The many will terrorize the few, oppressing them. The empire will become perverse and disorderly, and will together be lost. If we look at it in this way, people's spontaneous nature is clearly bad. Their goodness is artificial.¹²

23.13

So those good at speaking about ancient times must have a connection to the present. Those good at speaking about Heaven must have an application for people. All of those who debate:

¹⁰ CTP *Xunzi* 23.10

¹¹ CTP *Xunzi* 23.11

¹² CTP *Xunzi* 23.12

their value lies in their distinguishing and combining [things], and in their having tests and markers. They sit down and state it. They get up, and are able to demonstrate it. They bring it forth, and can put it into practice. Now Mencius says, “People’s spontaneous nature is good.”—but this [statement] fails to distinguish or combine [anything], and lacks tests or markers. He sits and he states it, but he gets up and he is unable to demonstrate it. He brings it forth but is unable to put it into practice—How is this not a great mistake! And so if people’s spontaneous nature is good, then reject the sage kings and put an end to ritual and duty. If their spontaneous nature is bad, then follow the sage kings and honor ritual and duty. The straightening board arose because of crooked wood. The plumb line was set up because of crooked [lines]. Establishing rulers above and making ritual and duty clear is on behalf of people’s bad spontaneous nature. If we look at it in this way, people’s spontaneous nature is clearly bad. Their goodness is artificial.¹³

23.14

Straight wood not waiting for the straightening board but being straight—its spontaneous nature is to be straight. Crooked wood necessarily waiting for steaming and pressing on the straightening board and only then becoming straight—it’s because its spontaneous nature is to not be straight. If people’s spontaneous nature is bad, then they must await the ordering of the sage kings and the transforming effects results of ritual and duty. Only then will they begin to exhibit order and unite in goodness. If we look at it in this way, people’s spontaneous nature is clearly bad. Their goodness is artificial.¹⁴

23.15

Someone asks, “Ritual, duty, accumulation, and artifice—these are all people’s spontaneous nature, and so the sages were able to give rise to them.”¹⁵

23.16

I say: this is not so. The potter mixes his clay to give rise to his pottery. In this way, how is the clay pottery people’s spontaneous nature? The woodsman chops down trees to make his instruments. In this way, how are the wooden instruments people’s spontaneous nature? And so the sages’ ritual and duty is just like clay pottery to which they give rise. In this way, ritual, duty, accumulation, and artifice—how could these be people’s original, spontaneous nature! All people’s spontaneous nature: Comparing Yao and Shun to Jie and Robber Zhi—their spontaneous nature is one and the same. Comparing the gentleman and the petty person—their

¹³CTP *Xunzi* 23.13

¹⁴CTP *Xunzi* 23.14

¹⁵CTP *Xunzi* 23.15

spontaneous nature is one and the same. How could [anyone] take ritual, duty, accumulation, and artifice to be people's spontaneous nature? If so, then Yao and Shun have what value? The gentleman has what value? The value of Yao, Shun, and the gentleman is that they are able to transform their spontaneous nature and are able to set up artifice. By setting up artifice, they give rise to ritual and duty. In this way, the ritual, duty, accumulation, and artifice of the sages are also like mixtures of clay when they are made. If we look at it in this way, how can ritual, duty, accumulation, and artifice be people's spontaneous nature! What's demeaned in Jie, Robber Zhi, and the petty person is that they go along with their spontaneous nature, follow their natural sentiments, and are at ease with indulgence, they will exhibit greed for benefit, fight, and steal. And so people's spontaneous nature is clearly bad. Their goodness is artificial.

Heaven was not partial to Geng San, Minzi Qian, or Xiao Ji at the exclusion of the masses of people, but these three alone were extraordinary in the substance of their filial piety, and whole in their reputation for it—how? It was because they excelled in matters of ritual and duty. Heaven was not partial to the people of Qi and Lu at the exclusion of the Qin people, but in the duties of fathers and sons, and the separateness of men and women, the Qin are not like the Qi and Lu in matters of filiality, respect, and patterning—how? It's because the Qin people go along with their natural sentiments and spontaneous nature, are at ease with indulgence, and are lazy with ritual and duty—how is it that people's spontaneous natures differ!¹⁶

23.17

“People in the streets can become a Yu.” What does it mean?¹⁷

23.18

I say: As for that by which a Yu becomes a Yu: is by making use of benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness. In this way, benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness have a knowable and doable form. But the people in the streets, all of them have the stuff for knowing benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness, and they all have tools for being capable of benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness. In this way, it's obvious that they can become a Yu. But what if you take benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness to be to be originally without an unknowable and doable form? If this is the case then even Yu would not know benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness, and would be incapable of benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness. This would mean the people in the streets would originally be without the stuff for knowing benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness, and to lack the tools for being capable of benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness, no?

¹⁶CTP *Xunzi* 23.16

¹⁷CTP *Xunzi* 23.17

In this way, the people in the streets, within [the home] they would be unable to know the duties of father and son, while outside [the home] they would be unable to know the correctness between rulers and ministers. But this is not so. The people in the streets, all of them inside [the home] are able to know the duties of father and son, and outside [the home] are able to know the correctness between rulers and ministers—this is the stuff for knowing, and the tools for being capable. These are clearly within people in the streets.

Now if people in the streets used the stuff for knowing and their tools for being capable root themselves in the knowable and doable forms of benevolence, duty, modeling, and correctness, their ability to become a Yu is clear. If the people in the streets put their abilities into learning, captivate their heart-minds with a single intention, reflected, inquired, and investigated, added up days throughout the passage of time, accumulated goodness and never ceased, then they would communicate with spirit-like clarity, and form a triad with Heaven and Earth. Therefore, as for those who are sages, what they accumulate makes them so.¹⁸

23.19

“The sage is able to accumulate and become [a sage]. However many cannot accumulate—how?”¹⁹

23.20

I say: They can do so, but they can't be made to. The petty person can become a gentleman, but he does not wish to become one. A gentleman can become a petty person, but he does not wish to become one. As for the petty person and the gentleman, I have not yet heard of one who cannot become the other, but those who don't change places, they can do so but they cannot be made to. So the people in the streets can become a Yu, and then become one. [But also,] the people in the streets can become a Yu, but do not necessarily become one. Even if they didn't have the ability to become one, this doesn't harm that it's possible for them to do so. One's feet could tread across the empire, though there has not yet been someone who has. A laborer, an artisan, a farmer and a merchant never could not exchange jobs with one another, but there has not yet been any able to do so. If we look at it in this way, that it's possible something can be done does not necessarily imply one's ability to do it. So even if one is unable to do so, this does not harm that it is possible for him to. In this way, ability or inability and possibility or impossibility—their differences are great, and their inability to be interchanged is clear.²⁰

23.21

¹⁸CTP *Xunzi* 23.18

¹⁹CTP *Xunzi* 23.19

²⁰CTP *Xunzi* 23.20

Yao asked Shun, “What are people’s natural sentiments like?”

Shun responded saying, “People’s natural sentiments are terribly ugly! Why would you ask about it? When someone has a wife or a son, his filiality to his parents declines. When his wants and desires are satisfied, his honesty to his friends declines. When his rank and title are sufficient, his loyalty to his ruler declines. People’s natural sentiments! People’s natural sentiments! They are terribly ugly! Why would you ask about them? Only for someone worthy is this not so.”²¹

23.22

There is the knowledge of the sage. There is the knowledge of the scholar and gentleman. There is the knowledge of the petty person. There is the knowledge of the servant:

When he makes many statements, he patterns and categorizes things, and to the end of the day can discuss that by which [it is so], his statements picking out thousands of the myriad transformations, his control of the various kinds remains unified. This is the knowledge of the sage.

When he speaks less, he is narrow and economical. When he discusses, he uses models, as a craftsman uses his plumb-line. This is the knowledge of the scholar and gentleman.

His statements are flattery; his actions are perverse; his recommendations and works are often regretted. This is the knowledge of a petty person.

He is sick with anxiety, quick and expedient, but without the proper kinds. He has various abilities and is broadly learned, but he has no use. He is quick-witted and refined, but careless, not thinking of right and wrong, not discussing the crooked and straight, but uses those who best him to form his intentions. This is the knowledge of the slave.²²

23.23

There is courage of the highest kind. There is courage of the middle kind. There is courage of the lowest kind.

The empire has its [moral] center, and he dares to straighten himself [in accordance with it]. The former kings had the Way, and he dares to conduct his understanding [in accordance with it]. When in power, he does not obey the rulers of chaotic ages. When among the people, he does not practice the customs of the people of chaotic ages. Where benevolence is without poverty or destitution. Where benevolence is lost is without wealth or value. When the empire knows him, he desires to be one and the same in taking part in their suffering and joy. When

²¹CTP *Xunzi* 23.21

²²CTP *Xunzi* 23.22

the empire doesn't know him, he stands alone would stand between Heaven and Earth and is not afraid. This is the highest courage.

He respects ritual and is frugal with his ideas. He is grand, equitable, and trustworthy, and he doesn't put much weight on material goods and wealth. As for worthy people, he dares to encourage and promote them. As for the unworthy, he is bold enough both to assist and to abandon them. This is courage of the middle kind.

He doesn't value himself, but heavily values material goods. He is quiet during turmoil, but goes to great lengths to free himself [from it], improperly avoiding it. He does not care about the essential substance of right and wrong, so and not-so. He uses those who best him to form his intentions. This is courage of the lowest kind.²³

23.24

Fanruo, Jushi were great, ancient bows. However, were they not straightened by the bow-making frame, they would have been unable to straighten themselves out. Duke Huan's sword "Cong," Duke Tai's sword "Jue," King Wen's sword "Lu," Lord Zhuang's sword "Hu," He Lu's swords "Gan-jiang," "Moxie," "Jujue," and "Pilu,"—these were all great, ancient swords. However, if they were not augmented with grinding and whetting, they could not be sharp, and without their wielder's strength, they could not slice. Hualiu, Qiji, Xianli, Luer—these were all great, ancient horses. However they must have been regulated by reins and bridles in front of them; they must have been dominated by whips and canes behind them, as well as have a Zaofu riding them—only then in a single day could they travel a thousand li.

Now people, even if their spontaneous nature and substance were beautiful, and their hearts were clever and perceptive, they must seek out worthy teachers and serve them, and select good friends to befriend. If they get worthy teachers and serve them, then they will hear of the Way of Yao, Shun, Yu, and Tang. If they get good friends and befriend them, then they will see loyal, honest, respectful, and yielding conduct. Each day you will proceed towards benevolence and righteousness, but not know it yourself. What you accumulate makes it so. If you stay with bad people, then what you will hear is cheating, fraud, trickery, and falsehoods, and what you will see conduct that is filthy, impure, and greedy for profit. You will daily bring yourself closer to punishment and execution, but not know it yourself. What you accumulate makes it so. A saying says, "If you don't know your son, take a look at his friends. If you don't know your lord, take a look at his retainers." Accumulate and that's it! Accumulate and that's it!²⁴

²³CTP *Xunzi* 23.23

²⁴CTP *Xunzi* 23.24

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