

# Xunzi on Ritual, Situationism, Transformation

Phil 210, Fall 2022

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## Overview of Today

- Xunzi's picture of psychology
- What we should do
- How this works
- Challenges

For polls:

When active, respond at [PollEv.com/tirani111](https://www.pollEv.com/tirani111)  
or text **tirani111** to **37607** once to join

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What one word best described Xunzi or his philosophy?

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## Human Nature is ... Bad?

- “Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos...” (Xunzi 19, ll. 1-5)



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Nature vs. Disposition

- Nature (*xing* 性): “that which is so at birth” (*Xunzi* 22)
- Disposition (*qing* 情): initially identical to *xing*, but can be changed.

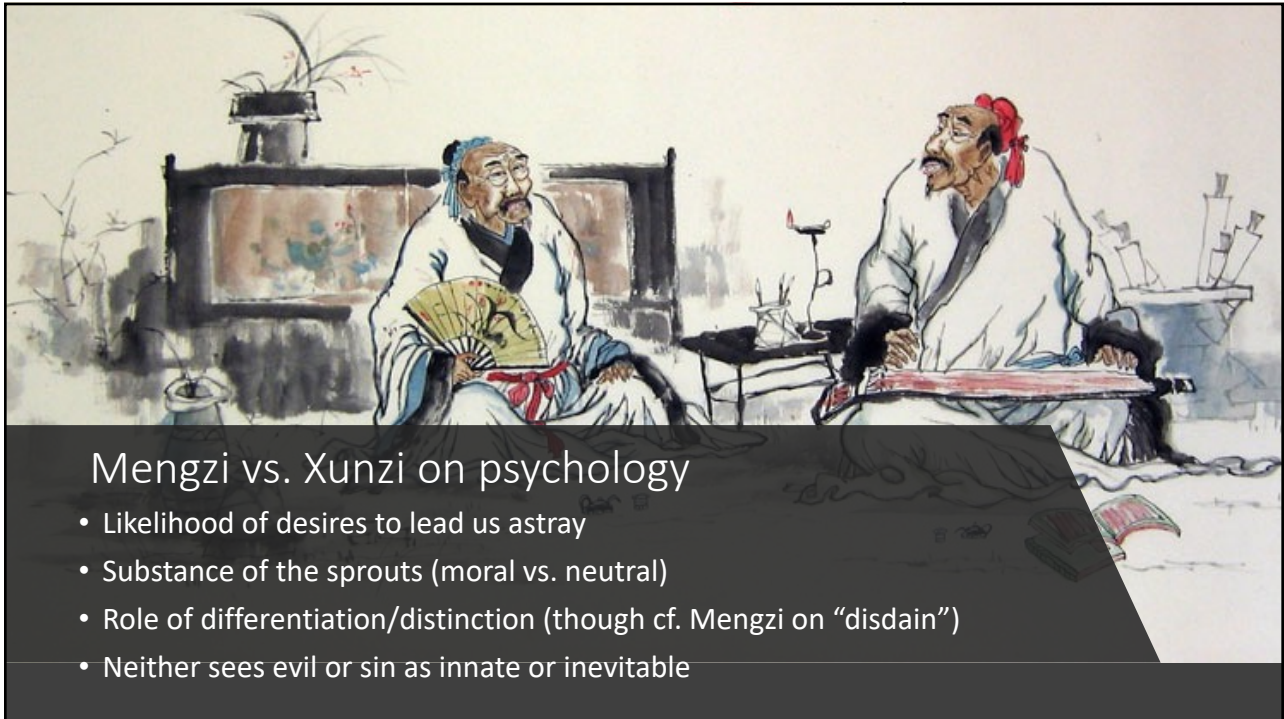
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Not just physical desires...

- “Sprouts” or “beginnings” (*duan* 端) of joy and sorrow (p. 210, l. 350)
- “Loving differentiations” (好其别) (p. 201, l. 19); see also *Xunzi* 9 on humans’ difference from “birds and beasts”: distinctions and communities
- Ability of heartmind to “approve” (*ke* 可) or “disapprove” (*Xunzi* 21)



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Mengzi vs. Xunzi on psychology

- Likelihood of desires to lead us astray
- Substance of the sprouts (moral vs. neutral)
- Role of differentiation/distinction (though cf. Mengzi on “disdain”)
- Neither sees evil or sin as innate or inevitable

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**Based on what you know so far, which Confucian thinker's views do you most identify with?**




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If our nature  
is bad, what  
do we do?

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- **Option 1:**  
Transform  
through learning

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## If our nature is bad, what do we do?

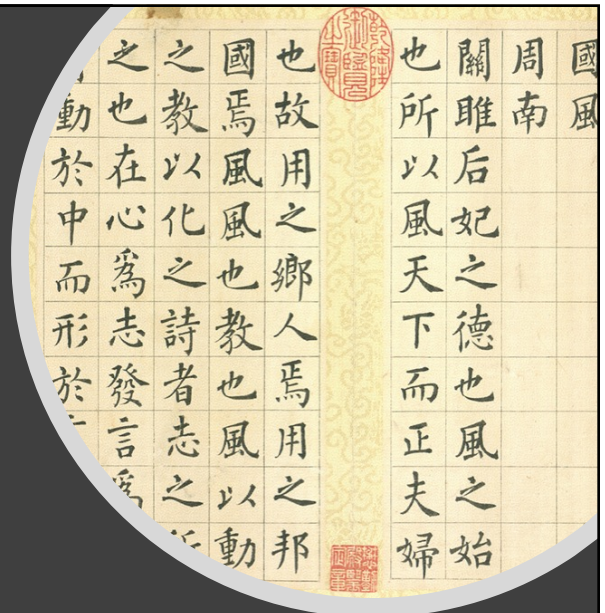
- **Option 1:**  
Transform through learning
- **Option 2:**  
Change one's situation



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## Learning: Role Models and Texts

- “Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts. The *Odes* and *Documents* contain ancient stories but no explanation of their present application.... However, if you imitate the right person in his practice of the precepts of the gentleman, then you will come to honor these things for their comprehensiveness and see them as encompassing the whole world.” (p. 6, ll. 160f)



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## Learning: Transformation

- (P. 8, l. 218f) Repetition, pondering, ...
- “He comes to the point where he loves it, and then his eyes love it more than the five colors...”
- “...power and profit cannot sway him, the masses cannot shift him, and nothing in the world can shake him. He lives by this, and he dies by this. This is called the state in which virtue has been grasped.”

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## Situations: Evidence from social psychology and behavioral economics

- Old models: individual character traits and egoistic interest-maximizer
- “Situationism” versus “virtue ethics”
- “Choice architecture” (Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*)



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## Rituals: Evidence from Xunzi

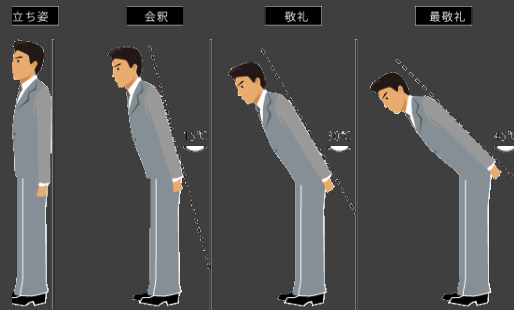
“Thus, the way that death works is that if one does not ornament the dead, then one will come to feel disgust at them, and if one feels disgust, then one will not feel sad.”

(*Xunzi* p. 209, ll. 289f)

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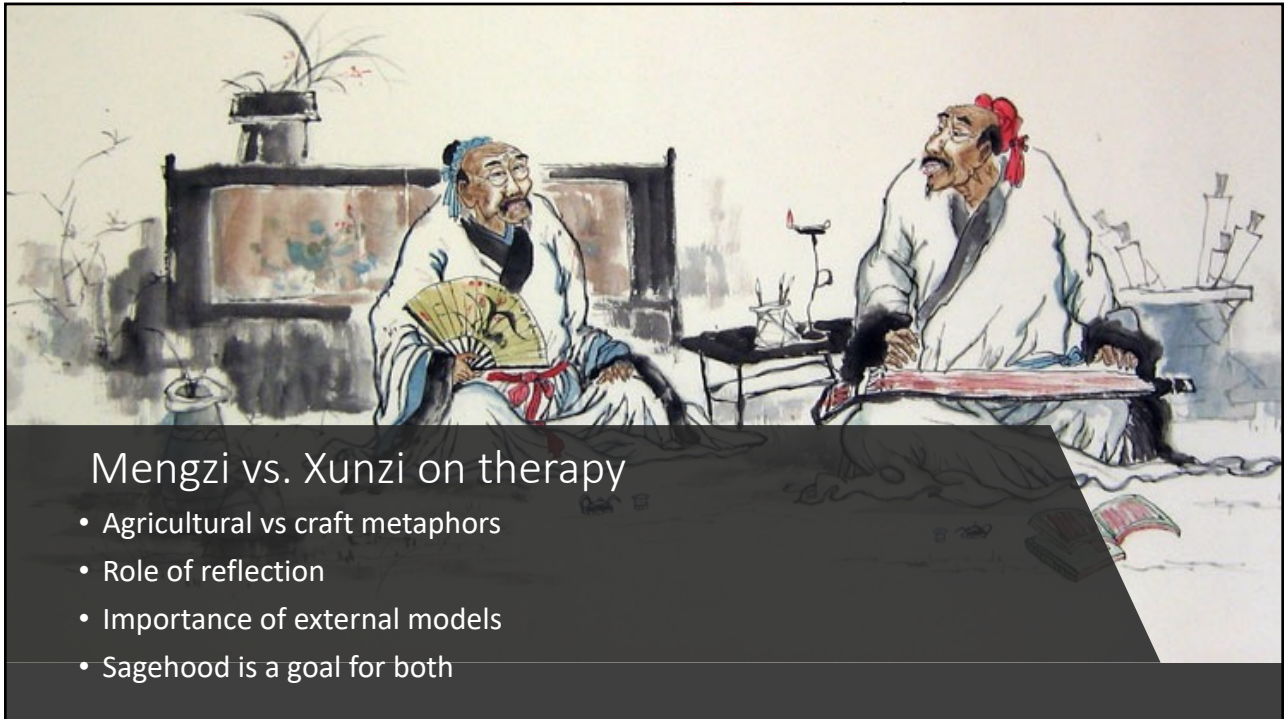
## The Functions of Rituals

- Using (or “nurturing”) “that which must be released” by “giving it proper form” (p. 204, ll. 119f)
- Discipline self and others (by shaping situation)
- Shorthand way of expressing feelings
- Basis for transformation



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## Challenges for Confucianism as a Way of Life

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# What is the biggest problem with Confucianism? Submit (optional) and then vote.

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Monday, October 17 – Sunday, October 23, 2022

## Live Like a Confucian Week

**Monday, October 17**  
**Day 1: Nurturing a Sprout**

- [Assigned Exercise](#)
- [Prompt for Evening Reflection and Dropbox for Journal Entry](#)

**Tuesday, October 18**  
**Day 2: Focusing on the Physical**

- [Assigned Exercise](#)
- [Prompt for Evening Reflection and Dropbox for Journal Entry](#)

**Wednesday, October 19**  
**Day 3: Ritual Control**

- [Assigned Exercise](#)
- [Prompt for Evening Reflection and Dropbox for Journal Entry](#)

**Thursday, October 20**  
**Day 4: Reflective Control**

Over the next seven days you will be putting some of Mengzi's and Xunzi's views of the good life into practice. The main goal is to engage in intentional work and then reflection on specific steps that Confucians teach. On each day of the week you will be assigned a particular activity to complete. Some of these activities will ask you to complete a task, reflect on a few questions, or engage in a thought experiment. Others will involve cultivating habits, changing your behavior with others in a certain way, or going about your everyday routine a little differently.

All of the philosophical exercises for this week are located on this page and you will need to complete them daily. This will consist of two steps:

1. At the start of each day in the morning, you should read the assigned exercises and carry them out—you can keep this assignment open on your phone throughout the day for easy access.
2. At the end of each day in the evening, you should submit in the designated dropbox a short private **journal entry** (1-2 paragraphs, about 250 words) on what you've learned.

Class periods and dialogue sessions that occur during the week will involve discussing and working on your exercises individually or in groups.

Readings for the assigned exercises and evening reflections this week are drawn from:

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