

# Xunzi on Ritual, Situationism, Transformation

Phil 210, Fall 2023

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## Overview of Today

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

For polls:

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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.

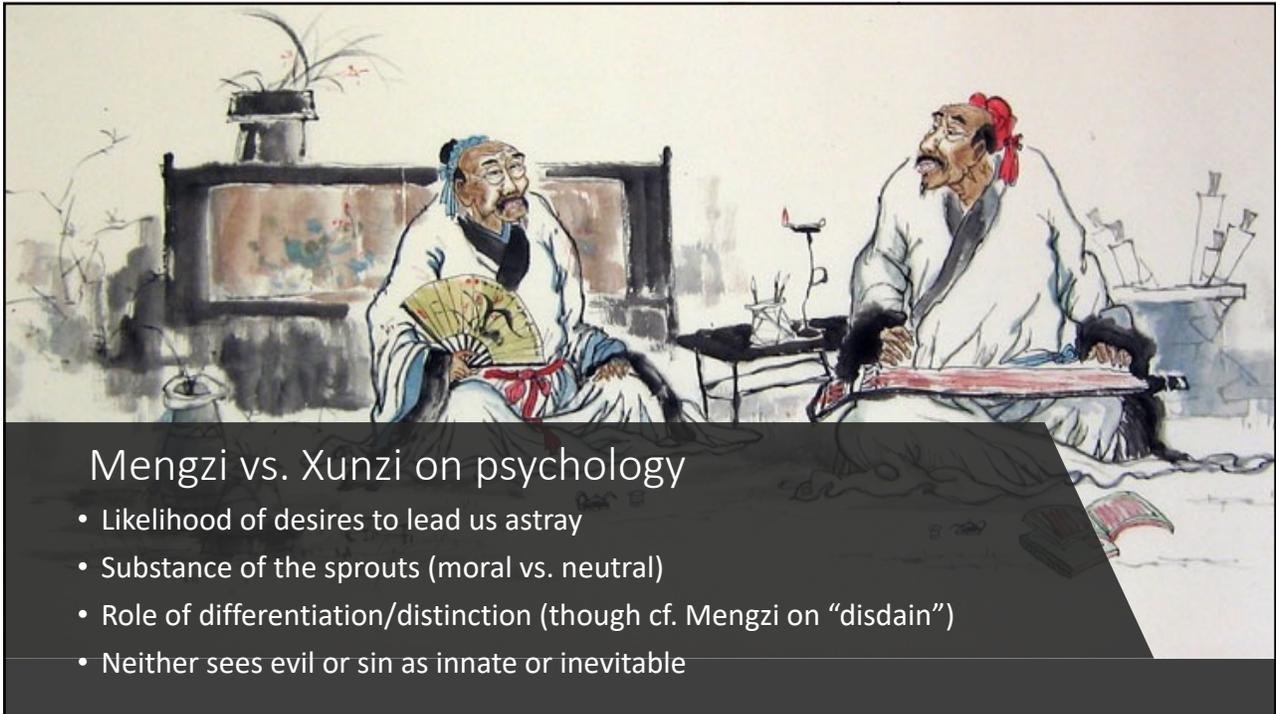
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## Not just physical desires...

- “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?



Mengzi



Xunzi

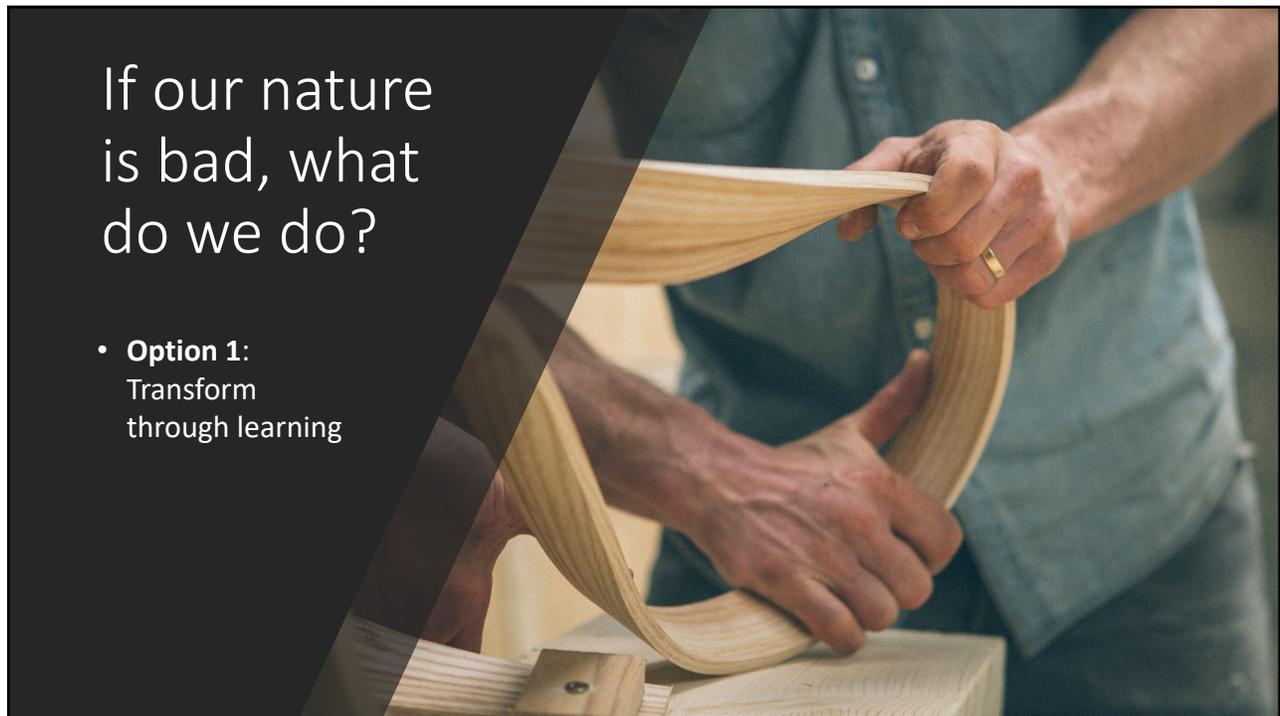
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If our nature  
is bad, what  
do we do?

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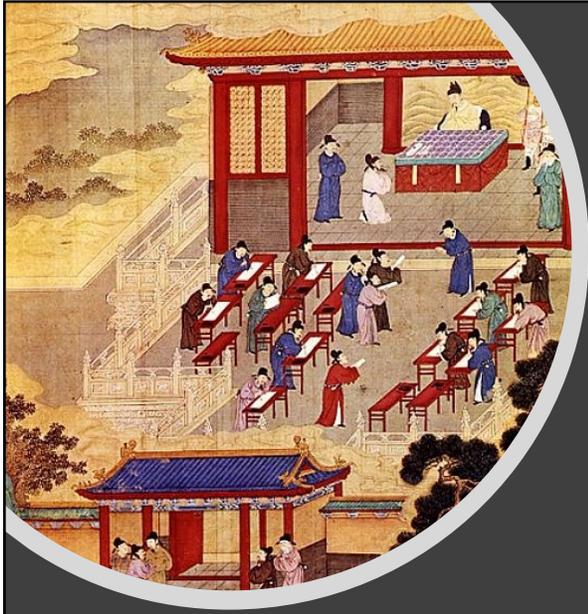


If our nature  
is bad, what  
do we do?

- **Option 1:**  
Transform  
through learning

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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



立身姿



会釈



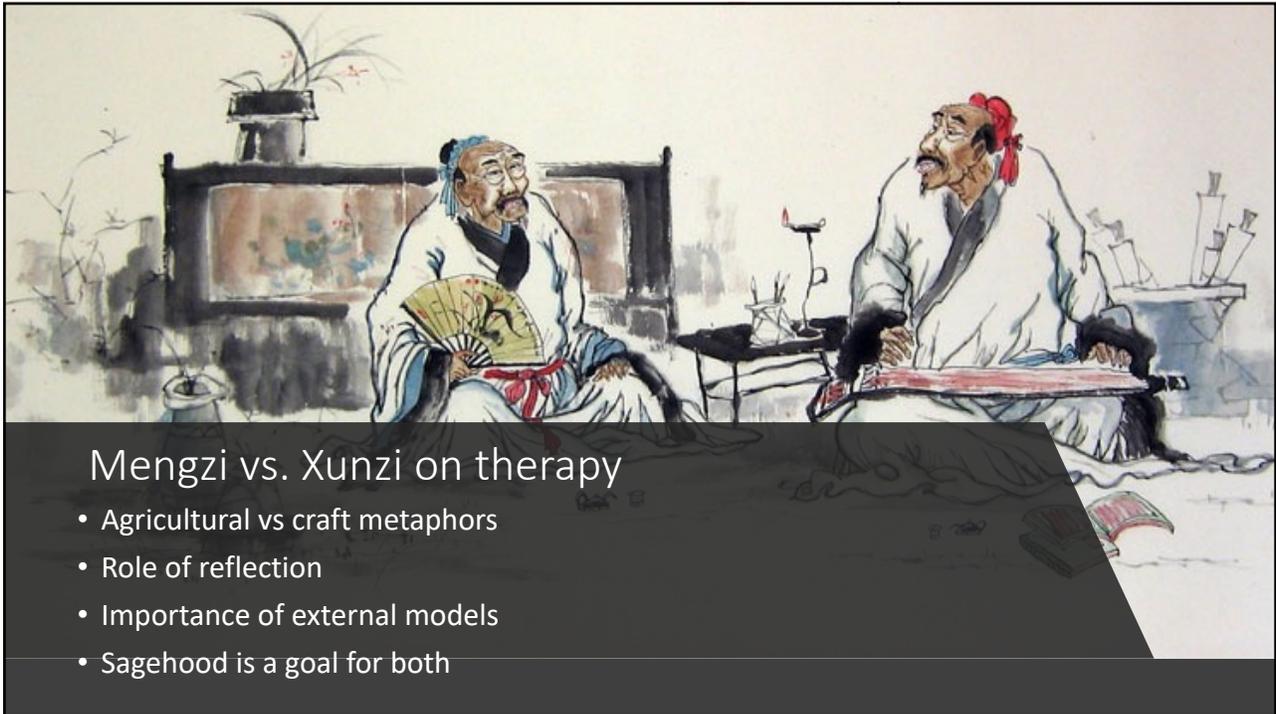
敬礼



最敬礼



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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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