Language and Logic in the *Xunzi*

Chris Fraser

University of Hong Kong

1. Introduction

The *Xunzi* is among our most valuable sources for early Chinese philosophy of language and logic. Xunzi's views on language and dialectics are of great interest in their own right, but they also form an integral part of his broader ethical, political, epistemological, and metaphysical theories. In some respects, his philosophy of language and logic is a microcosm of his overall philosophical system. He himself implies as much when he says, in one passage, that the proper employment of language and dialectics is "the beginning of the kingly vocation" (HKCS 22/110/4, 147).

Xunzi's semantic and logical theories are largely consistent with those of the path-breaking Mohist "Dialectics,"[1] suggesting that their shared features, along with those of relevant discussions in the Confucian *Analects* and *The Annals of Lü Buwei,* represent the prevailing, mainstream approach to language and logic in classical China. Xunzi adopts much the same conceptual apparatus as the Mohists but develops and extends it in several respects. His semantic theory in particular complements the Mohist treatment by filling an important explanatory gap concerning the basis for kind distinctions and by helping to resolve certain conceptual puzzles that emerge from Mohist thought. This semantic theory is intertwined with a theory of perception that presents an intriguing counterpart to representational theories familiar from the Western tradition. Xunzi's views on language and logic present interpretive and justificatory problems of their own, however, which as we will see are in some respects indicative of fundamental difficulties in his ethical and political philosophy.

1.1 Background

To understand Xunzi's philosophy of language and logic, we need to understand several general points about classical Chinese thought. First, most philosophy in Xunzi's era had a deeply practical orientation, epitomized by a concern with and a conceptual framework centered on the notion of *dao* 道 ("way").[2] A *dao* is either an actual or a normatively proper way of doing something. A prevailing concern for most early thinkers was to identify and implement the proper *dao* by which to govern society and guide personal conduct. The project of formulating an accurate theoretical description of the world—what we might think of as a philosophical orientation centered on truth—was rarely if ever a concern, except insofar as it contributed to identifying the right *dao*.

Second, how we use language is an integral part of our practice of the proper *dao,* in two respects. One is that the content of the *dao* includes norms governing the proper

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[1] The Mohist "Dialectics" (*Mo Bian* 墨辯) are six books of the *Mozi* that present an extensive treatment of language and logic, among other topics. For detailed discussions, see Graham (1978), Hansen (1992), or Fraser (2005a).

[2] See, for example, Graham (1989: 3) and Hansen (1992: 3–5).

use of *ming* 名 ("names") and *yan* 言 ("statements"). (For early theorists, including Xunzi, "names" include all words—both nouns and verbs, singular terms and general terms—and "statements" or "sayings" comprise any utterance that conveys a thought, including commands and teachings.) To follow the *dao,* then, we must use language properly. The other respect is that language is a means of guiding people to perform the *dao*. Statements convey the *dao* by giving instructions or presenting teachings. Names guide action through norms of conduct associated with the roles they designate. To borrow a famous example from the Confucian *Analects* (Lau 1979: 114), calling someone a "*jun* 君" ("ruler") or "*fu* 父" ("father") places that person in a particular social role, subject to corresponding norms and expectations, much as a job title is associated with a job description. To be denoted by a particular name is to be subject to certain norms; conversely, only those who live up to the norms deserve the name. Names also determine how we should treat their bearers. Naming a person "ruler" or an object "scepter" invokes norms concerning how we are to act toward that person or object. For these reasons, to early Chinese theorists, including Xunzi, the most prominent function of language was not reporting facts or expressing the speaker's ideas, but guiding action, an aspect of language use that has attracted less attention in the Western philosophical tradition.[3] To guide people to follow the *dao* properly, language must be used properly.

A third general point is that the use of language was understood to be based on speakers' and listeners' practical ability to distinguish things into different *lei* 類 ("kinds") on the basis of their having or lacking similar features and to apply the same name to all things of a kind. This ability to draw distinctions also explains the mechanism by which names guide action. Distinguishing a particular thing as being of one kind or another triggers a norm-governed response to that kind. If we have been trained in the norms of *li* 禮 (ritual), for example, distinguishing a person walking toward us as an "elder" might induce us to bow to the person as we pass. To perform *dao* correctly, then, we must distinguish and respond to things in the proper way. Language functions and guides conduct through action-guiding distinctions.

A fourth helpful preliminary is that a paramount value in Xunzi's ethics and politics is *zhi* 治 ("order," "control"). The core of Xunzi's normative ethical and political theory is a system of ritual propriety and role-associated duties that he believed ancient sage-kings introduced to achieve social order and eliminate disorder. Because of the action-guiding functions of language, Xunzi sees regulating language as a crucial part of the overall ethical and political project of achieving social order. To bring about order, everyone in the community must distinguish the referents of the words used in instructions, the code of ritual propriety, the legal code, job titles, and political titles in a unified, consistent way. Otherwise, people may fail to understand their roles and duties and be unable to carry out commands or follow laws. Linguistic anarchy breeds political anarchy. Because of the role of language in practical politics, in Xunzi's era the issue of *zheng ming* 正名 ("right names"), or whether people distinguished the referents of words correctly, had become a major concern in mainstream philosophy of language, political philosophy, and moral psychology. A well-known passage in the Confucian *Analects* gives *zheng ming* (here a verb phrase, "rectifying names") a prominent role in governance (Lau 1979: 118). A pair of essays in *The Annals of Lü Buwei* are devoted to it (Knoblock and Riegel 2001: 400–403,

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[3] Hansen (1983) particularly emphasizes this interpretive insight, which he credits to Munro (1969).

405–409), and passages in texts as diverse as the *Guanzi* 管子, *Shangjunshu* 商君書, *Liji* 禮記, *Zuozhuan* 左傳, and the Mohist "Dialectics" touch on it. Meanwhile, Daoist texts attack the assumption that language can or should be a means of providing reliable guidance for action.

1.2 Right Names

Xunzi frames his chief discussion of language and logic, which forms the bulk of Chapter 22 ("Right Names"), around the issue of a ruler's need to ensure the right use of names. He contends that a true king regulates names, or words, by fixing their use to distinguish different kinds of things, so that the *dao* is put into practice, the king's intentions are communicated, and he can lead the people to unity (HKCS 22/108/4, 140).[4] When conventions for the use of names are carefully maintained, people are unified in conducting themselves conscientiously by the proper models. Thus the king's achievements endure, and enduring achievements and successful accomplishments are "the height of good order" (HKCS 22/108/7–8, 141). The main threat to such orderly regulation of language is miscreants who engage in the "great depravity" of "splitting phrases and recklessly inventing names in order to disrupt right names" (HKCS 22/108/4–5, 140). Xunzi here refers to those who, like Hui Shi 惠施, Deng Xi 鄧析, and Gongsun Long 公孫龍, are known for confusing, paradoxical sayings,[5] but also those who advocate ethical or psychological theses he rejects, such as Song Xing 宋鈃.[6] He is in effect claiming that a major factor explaining the mistaken doctrines of his philosophical opponents—whether frivolous, such as Gongsun Long's logic-chopping claim that a white horse is not a horse, or sincere, such as Song Xing's pacifist doctrine that a person can be insulted without thereby being disgraced—is that they muddle the proper referents of words. (Notice that Xunzi does not say they garble the *meanings* of words. Like the Mohists', his theory does not explicitly treat the meaning or intension of terms, but their reference or extension.) Such incorrect use of words confuses people, generating disputation and litigation concerning what does or does not conform to models or laws. The kings of old treated such "great depravity" as a crime comparable to tampering with tallies and measures, and as a result no one dared employ "strange phrasings" to disorder right names (HKCS 22/108/5–6, 140).

Xunzi laments that in his day, with the sage-kings gone, the relations between names and the objects they denote has fallen into disorder, so that the distinctions between what is "this" and "not-this"—or what is right and not right—have become unclear and even law-abiding officials or conscientious *Ru* 儒 ("erudites," or Confucians) cannot avoid disorder (HKCS 22/108/8–9, 141). Given the importance of regulating the use of names, were a true king to arise again, he would follow some conventional uses of old names while also creating some new names (presumably to

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[4] Citations to the *Xunzi* give the chapter, page, and line numbers in Lau (1996), followed by the page number in Watson (1963). For chapters not included in the Watson translation, I have given the section, volume, and page numbers in Knoblock (1988–1994), indicated by a "K." All translations from *Xunzi* and other Chinese texts are my own.

[5] These three men are associated with the "School of Names" and were known for their interest in language and dialectics. All had reputations for logic-chopping rhetoric and puzzling, paradoxical assertions. For discussions, see Graham (1989) or Fraser (2005b).

[6] Song Xing and his colleague Yin Wen 尹文 were anti-war activists who advocated non-aggression; a life of few, easily satisfied desires; and a tolerant, unbiased frame of mind. Their teachings are recorded in the *Xunzi, The Annals of Lü Buwei,* and chapter 33 of the *Zhuangzi*.

deal with new circumstances). To do so effectively, such a king would need to be familiar with three fundamental issues concerning naming, which Xunzi ties to three types of paradoxical sayings that disrupt the proper use of names: the purpose of names, the basis for distinguishing the different kinds of things that names denote, and the essentials in regulating names. The political imperative to regulate names, then, leads Xunzi to present an interesting theory about the purpose of, basis for, and functions of words, which he then marshals to refute the "strange phrasings" that he thinks incite linguistic disorder.

This sketch of Xunzi's introduction to his theory of names illustrates several of his key assumptions about language. His concerns are primarily practical: language is a means of guiding conduct and thus an important political instrument. By controlling the use of names, so that everyone understands commands, rules, and models in the same way, a ruler can minimize disputes, promote social unity, and ensure that people's actions conform to his intentions. The function of words is analogous to that of measurement standards, an idea found also in the Mohist "Dialectics." Using a certain word of something in effect gives the listener its measure, by conveying that it is similar to other familiar things conventionally denoted by that word. For Xunzi, a speaker's misleading a listener by using the wrong word of something is akin to a merchant's defrauding a buyer about the weight of a sack of grain. Yet it is not up to the speaker and listener to negotiate the referents of the speaker's words or to clarify for themselves the distinctions between what is right or not. Such distinctions are determined and promulgated by the sovereign, who enforces order in language as in other matters.

2. Xunzi's Theory of Names

2.1 The Purpose of Names

The first of Xunzi's three issues is the purpose of having names. He holds that the wise regulate the names used to refer to things, so as "to clarify noble and lowly" and "to distinguish similar from different," such that intentions can be conveyed smoothly and tasks accomplished effectively (HKCS 22/108/12–14, 142). The chief purpose of names, then, is to convey *zhi* 志 ("intentions")—not meanings or ideas, but most likely aims or ends of action—and thus carry out practical affairs. This purpose is fulfilled by enforcing regulations fixing the referents of names so that everyone in the language community distinguishes similar from different kinds of things in the same way and follows the same conventions for identifying the titles, holders, and responsibilities of social roles. Consequently, all members of the language community will understand instructions, commands, and rules in the same manner and can carry out practical affairs according to their superiors' expectations.[7]

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[7] Xunzi's emphasis on the action-guiding functions of language is frequently overlooked by contemporary scholars who take it for granted that his concerns must be representational and devoted to questions of descriptive truth. Goldin, for example, assumes that since "names represent *reality*" [original italics], Xunzi's concern must be that "their abuse results in a faulty characterization of the world" (1999: 97). The purpose of rectifying names, in Goldin's view, is "to distinguish lewd antinomies from truths compatible with the Way" (1999: 98). The assumption of a representationalist framework focused on true "characterizations" of the world misconstrues the orientation of Xunzi's philosophy of language and ignores his explicit statement as to the purpose of names.

The reference to clarifying social roles links Xunzi's theory of names to his ethics, specifically his theory of ritual propriety, which for him is the chief explicit guide to proper conduct. According to Xunzi, a basic function of ritual propriety is to establish social *fen* 分 ("divisions") (HKCS 19/90/3–5, 89), including specifically "the ranks of noble and lowly" (HKCS 4/17/1–2, K4.12, Vol. I, 195). These form the basis for social organization—delegation of responsibilities, division of labor, and allocation of goods—and are the key to ensuring social cooperation and coordination and in turn sociopolitical order. The scheme of *lei* 類 ("kind") distinctions demarcated by ritual propriety partly determines the right use of names. Conversely, regulating the use of names is an integral means of implementing the system of ritual propriety. To conform to ritual propriety, people must be able to use names correctly, distinguishing and naming various ranks, roles, and duties properly. Moreover, using names correctly by making statements (*yan*) that conform to the standards of the sage-kings is itself part of ritual propriety, to which the gentleman must attend conscientiously (HKCS 5/19/10–11, K5.6, Vol. I, 208).

2.2 Distinguishing Different Kinds

Xunzi's second issue is the proper basis for distinguishing things as similar or different and thus dividing them into the kinds (*lei*) denoted by various general terms. As in the Western tradition, this issue was a major point of controversy among early Chinese thinkers. Unlike in the West, however, no Chinese thinker appealed to theoretical notions such as abstract forms, universals, essences, or ideas to explain why some things are similar to others and thus take the same name. In this respect, Xunzi's position and those of other early Chinese theorists can be regarded as all falling under the broad label of "nominalism," the view that there are general terms or predicates but no abstract objects corresponding to them that explain their meaning or why they refer to the objects they do. A more helpful way of classifying Chinese views, however, is along a spectrum from what we can regard as a form of realism to various forms of conventionalism or relativism, depending on the extent to which these views treat distinctions between kinds as fixed and independent of human cognition or as determined by human practices, context, or perspective.[8] Classical Chinese thinkers took positions ranging from the view that nature in itself, independently of human activity, divides things into kinds to the view that kinds are arbitrarily determined by human judgment. Just where Xunzi stands along this spectrum is a matter of debate. Scholars are divided as to whether to classify him as a realist, who holds that ultimately *tian* 天 ("Heaven") or nature itself determines the proper *dao,* including the proper way of distinguishing similar from dissimilar things and thus identifying the extensions of general terms, or a conventionalist, who holds that the *dao* and the distinctions it entails are a product of human practices or institutions, among other factors.[9] As we

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[8] See Hansen (1992: 239) and Fraser (2005a, sect. 6.1).

[9] For an informative overview of this debate, see the exchange between Hagen (2007a, 2007b), who defends a "constructivist" interpretation, and Hutton (2007a, 2007b), who critiques it. (Hagen prefers the label "constructivist," rather than "conventionalist," to emphasize that for Xunzi human agreement is not the sole criterion of appropriateness for a scheme of distinctions [2007a: 33].) Schwartz presents a strong realist interpretation, on which for Xunzi the organizing activity of the sage-kings "make[s] manifest a universal pattern somehow already rooted in the ultimate nature of things" (Schwartz 1985: 316). Graham seems to endorse a conventionalist reading (Graham 1989: 243). Ivanhoe (1991) presents a nuanced view that acknowledges both the conventional elements in Xunzi's *dao* and his conviction that

will see, both sides of this interpretive debate capture aspects of Xunzi's views; the most defensible interpretation may be one that combines features of each.[10]

2.2.1 Background: Three Key Ideas

Parts of the *Xunzi* not specifically devoted to language present three key ideas bearing on the grounds for distinguishing things into kinds. First, some passages explicitly state that Heaven or the natural world in itself is not patterned or distinguished into the action-guiding kinds that are the foundation of ritual, righteousness, and other normative practices, including language. In presenting the grounds for his ethics, for instance, Xunzi explains that nature in itself is not organized into orderly patterns or distinguished into different kinds. It is the sage or gentleman who divides up the myriad things and imposes a coherent pattern on nature.

> Heaven can produce things but cannot distinguish things. Earth can bear up humanity but cannot order humanity. Within the cosmos, the myriad things and humankind await the sage and only then are divided. (HKCS 19/95/3–4, 103）
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> Heaven and Earth are the origin of life; ritual and righteousness are the origin of order; the gentleman is the origin of ritual and righteousness.[11] . . . So Heaven and Earth produce the gentleman, and the gentleman patterns Heaven and Earth. . . . Without the gentleman, Heaven and Earth would not be patterned, and ritual and righteousness would lack a coherent system. Above, there would be no ruler and subject; below, there would be no father and son—this is called the ultimate disorder. (HKCS 9/39/1–5, 44–45)

The implication is that the division of things into a coherent, systematic scheme of normatively significant kinds is a cultural artifact instituted by the sages or the gentleman. This view complements Xunzi's repeated claim that the former kings instituted ritual and righteousness because they detested the chaos that arose in circumstances before these norms were established (HKCS 19/90/4, 89; 9/36/2, 36). Without the activity of the sages, there were no such norms to point to. The natural world in itself provides no distinct *dao* for human beings to follow. As Xunzi elsewhere says, our *dao* is neither the *dao* of Heaven, nor the *dao* of Earth, but a specifically human *dao* (HKCS 8/28/15–16, K8.3, Vol. I, 71)—one instituted by cultural heroes such as the sages or "former kings."

The above passages refer to the patterns, distinctions, or divisions that underlie and are manifested in Xunzi's ethics. Yet they also bear on his theory of language, for as we saw in Section 2.1, Xunzi regards the right use of names as crucial to identifying

there can be only a single correct *dao*. Hansen (1992) presents a pragmatic, conventionalist interpretation, but contends that on many points Xunzi slides into dogmatism (which might reflect a more realist stance). For a polemic defending a realist interpretation against the conventionalist parts of Hansen's reading, see Van Norden (1993). Machle (1993) presents a carefully argued religious—and thus realist—interpretation. Goldin (1999) asserts a similarly religious and realist reading. Robins (2007) favors a pragmatic, conventionalist account, albeit one that acknowledges Xunzi's tendency to treat the value of ritual propriety as basic and not open to question or modification.

[10] I thank Eric Hutton for critical comments and suggestions that prompted me to expand and refine the discussion in the remainder of Section 2.2.

[11] *Yi* 義 ("righteousness") here probably refers to norms of conduct considered to be right, and thus one's duty, in various social roles and contexts.

social roles, guiding action, and thus following the *dao* and achieving a properly ordered society. The right use of names is both implicated in the system of ritual and righteousness wrought by the sages and is also a means of fulfilling that system in practice. One function of the patterns and distinctions mentioned in these passages is thus to guide the use of names.

The second key idea initially may seem to contrast with the first. It is that the natural world that the sages "pattern" and "divide" is not originally undifferentiated and formless but has an inherent structure. Although Xunzi depicts distinctions or divisions between things as a product of culture, he by no means endorses a "dough-and-cookie-cutter" ontology. He is not implying that the precultural world consists of amorphous stuff onto which the sage impresses structure, much as a baker cuts dough into shapes with cookie cutters.[12] He explicitly takes the natural world to comprise a myriad things divided into various *ti* 體 ("parts" or "bodies") (HKCS 10/42/12, K10.1, Vol. II, 120), which possess features that prompt our sense organs to differentiate them as similar or different in various ways (HKCS 22/108/15, 142). Some *Xunzi* passages use the word *lei* (kinds) of biological species and perhaps even of different types of causally interrelated phenomena (HKCS 1/2/3–5, 17), thus acknowledging naturally occurring groupings of things which obtain independently of human activity.

Why, then, does Xunzi hold that without the activity of the sage-kings, the natural world is "unpatterned" and lacks "distinctions"? Most likely, he is referring here to normatively significant action-guiding distinctions, not simply physical or biological distinctions obtaining in nature. Indeed, in one passage, he explicitly contrasts the biological difference between parent and child or male and female among animals with the normatively fraught distinctions (*bian*) between human fathers and sons or men and women, asserting that such distinctions are uniquely characteristic of human life (HKCS 5/18/16–17, K5.4, Vol. I, 206).[13] The point is not that the myriad things in the natural world lack structure or differentiation, but that their features allow for any number of organizational patterns. Nature fixes no specific orderly scheme of distinctions as a basis for organizing social roles and duties, prescribing ritualized norms of conduct and associated conceptions of righteousness, grounding communication, and undertaking cooperative tasks. In short, the natural world does not specify a *dao* for us to follow. The action-guiding distinctions that express and embody the *dao* are something that human cultural leaders must fashion from various natural features, including similarities and differences. It is in this sense that Xunzi depicts ritual as providing an authoritative guideline to distinguishing kinds (HKCS 1/3/10, 19) and the benevolent person as taking the proper grading of kinds as the pattern he follows (HKCS 13/65/19, K13.7, Vol. II, 203).

Xunzi's third pivotal idea provides a way of reconciling the first two. The *dao* by which we divide and organize things may be a cultural construct, but it is not arbitrary or unconstrained, purely a product of human invention or convention. It must satisfy practical constraints imposed by inevitable natural circumstances, including whatever structure and propensities are inherent in nature. Xunzi holds that a human *dao* must serve human interests by bringing about good sociopolitical order and economic prosperity, and the extent to which a particular cultural *dao* succeeds in doing so will

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[12] Hagen rightly points out that for Xunzi the natural world is unpatterned but not wholly unstructured (2007a: 55, n. 44). The sage groups things together as one kind or another on the basis of how preexisting, naturally occurring features interact with human interests (Hagen 2007a: 33–34).

[13] Eric Hutton called my attention to this point.

depend on how well it aligns with constant, regular natural conditions over which we have no control:

> Heaven's activity is constant…. Respond to it with order and good fortune follows; respond to it with disorder and misfortune follows. (HKCS 17/79/16, 79)

> Heaven has its seasons, Earth has its riches, humanity has its order. This is what is called being able to align into a triad [with Heaven and Earth]. (HKCS 17/80/2–3, 80)

Human beings must "align" with natural conditions by instituting a *dao* that successfully complements those of Heaven and Earth, such as by planting crops in the proper seasons and locations, wearing clothing suitable for the weather, and building cities near adequate water supplies. A *dao* that directs people to plant or harvest at the wrong time of year, mismanages a society's resources, or fails to meet basic human physical and psychological needs cannot be appropriate.

The second passage quoted above describes good social order as "aligning into a triad" with Heaven above and Earth below. Elsewhere Xunzi uses similar phrasing of the gentleman who imposes an orderly pattern on nature: he "aligns into a triad" with Heaven and Earth (HKCS 9/39/3, 44). This notion of alignment with the natural world can be given either a weak or a strong interpretation. On the weak interpretation, Xunzi is simply referring to the different roles of Heaven, Earth, and humanity.[14] Heaven and Earth follow their own, regular paths, regardless of what humanity does, and do not provide us with a ready-made *dao*. Human activity is a third, distinct component. Human societies must seek an appropriate three-way relation with Heaven and Earth by responding to them effectively, but there may be a plurality of ways to achieve such a relation. A stronger interpretation reads a deeper significance into the metaphor of the triad. The word Xunzi uses here, *can* 參, sometimes refers to a colinear alignment between three points, as when three gnomons, or marking poles, are placed in alignment to record the directions of sunrise and sunset on the horizon.[15] The implication might be not merely that human *dao* is a third aspect of the cosmos, along with Heaven and Earth, but that the *dao* introduced by the sage-kings or the gentleman achieves a privileged, uniquely accurate alignment or correlation with the other pair, which alternative *dao* do not. As we will see in section 2.2.3, a case can be made that the strong interpretation more accurately captures Xunzi's position.

To sum up, Xunzi's general view is that divisions between kinds are instituted by cultural leaders, who impose an organizing pattern onto preexisting natural features. They do so not arbitrarily, but in a way that effectively corresponds with regular, enduring natural conditions so as to fulfill human interests, specifically economic prosperity and sociopolitical order. An open question at this point is whether this view implies that only a single, unique human *dao* can achieve the right sort of alignment

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[14] Robins presents an interpretation along these lines (Robins 2007: sect. 5).

[15] In an ancient Chinese technique for identifying the four cardinal directions, first a central reference pole was planted, and then a second pole was planted a fixed distance to the east along the line between the central pole and the location of the sun on the horizon at sunrise. Next, a third pole was planted the same distance to the west along the line between the first two poles and the location of the sun on the horizon at sunset. The line formed by these three "gnomons" thus gives the directions of east and west. Planting two more poles to form a square of which the line formed by the three gnomons is the diagonal yields a line indicating north and south.

with nature or whether Xunzi would acknowledge that a plurality of *dao* might do so equally effectively.

2.2.2 The Grounds for Deeming Similar or Different

Xunzi's theory about the basis for distinguishing similarity and difference among the referents of names coheres well with his view that divisions between kinds are a cultural product shaped by interaction between human interests and natural conditions. Indeed, the theory can be regarded as providing a detailed theoretical foundation for his more general view. Distinctions are not wholly independent of our activity, but nor are they arbitrary or entirely determined by human convention.

The causal basis for distinguishing similarities and differences between things, Xunzi says, is the sense organs. The senses of creatures of the same species, with the same constitution, detect things in a similar way and so different parties can agree in what they take to be similar. This is the basis for shared naming conventions, by which people can reach agreement in what they are talking about:

> So then on what grounds do we deem things similar or different? I say: On the grounds of the sense organs. As to any creatures of the same kind, with the same affects, how their sense organs detect things is similar. So they converge in how they model things as resembling each other.[16] This is the means of reaching consensus on conventional names by which to indicate things to each other. (HKCS 22/108/14–16, 142)

The eyes, ears, mouth, nose, and body each provide a means of differentiating among their respective objects. The eyes, for example, differentiate among shapes, bodies, colors, and patterns (HKCS 22/108/16, 142). The heart too is among the organs involved in differentiation; it differentiates explanations, reasons, emotions, desires, and aversions (HKCS 22/109/1, 142), which Xunzi here apparently treats as features of the world analogous to objects of the senses.[17]

Although the heart is akin to the other organs in having a field of objects it differentiates, it also has a special capacity befitting its status, which Xunzi describes elsewhere, as the "natural ruler" of the other organs (HKCS 17/80/10, 81). The heart has a function called the "verifying knowing" (*zheng zhi* 徵知), which amounts to a capacity to attend to things and recognize or confirm what they are (HKCS 22/109/1–3, 142). The "verifying knowing" depends on the sense organs to "register" the features

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[16] The precise sense of this line is difficult to determine. Alternative interpretations might include, "so they converge how they compare things and model them as similar," "so different sides converge in how they model things as similar," or "so different things can be placed side by side, modeled as similar, and connected [as one kind]." Whatever the interpretation, the general idea is that the similarly functioning sense organs of members of the same species lead them to converge in how they group things as similar or different.

[17] For Xunzi, as for other early Chinese thinkers, the *xin* 心 ("heart") is the organ responsible for cognition, inference, and directing action. This passage seems to treat emotions and desires not as states of the heart, but states of the person that the heart differentiates and thus recognizes. Elsewhere, the *Xunzi* sometimes treats desires or preferences as states of the whole person (HKCS 23/114/2–3, 159), and sometimes as states of the sense organs affected, such as the eye's fondness for beauty or the mouth's for flavor (HKCS 23/114/12, 160). Other *Xunzi* passages depict the heart itself as the locus of such attitudes as desiring ease (HKCS 11/52/1, K11.4, Vol. II, 156) or being fond of profit (HKCS 23/114/12, 160). (I thank Eric Hutton for calling my attention to the latter contexts.)

appropriate to each—shapes for the eye, sounds for the ear, and so on—so that it can recognize them. To count as having perceptual knowledge of something, for Xunzi, an agent must satisfy two requirements. The sense organs having registered the thing, the heart must "verify" or recognize it, and the heart having verified it, the agent must be able to *shuo* 說 ("explain") what it is. This latter requirement is similar to the later Mohist view that to have perceptual knowledge of something, we must be able to characterize or describe it.[18] In both cases, knowing how to apply words to things seems to be a criterion of perceptual knowledge. Both Xunzi and the Mohists thus seem to agree with contemporary thinkers such as Wilfrid Sellars and Donald Davidson that perceptual knowledge is inherently linguistic and conceptualized. This latter requirement also makes perceptual knowledge dependent on human practices, as the correctness of the explanation given will depend partly on conventions governing the use of words.

A signal facet of this compact theory of perception—representative of early Chinese thought more generally—is that it depicts the sense organs as directly differentiating their objects, rather than producing mental representations of them that the heart or mind then distinguishes.[19] Unlike familiar Hellenistic and early modern theories of perception in the West, Xunzi's account of perception—like that of the Mohist "Dialectics"—ascribes no role at all to mental contents such as sense data, mental images, or ideas. The absence of such semantic or epistemic intermediaries is one likely reason that the distinctions between appearance and reality or between phenomena and noumena play no role in classical Chinese thought and why classical Chinese thinkers were not troubled by sense skepticism. Also significant is that in tying the right use of names directly to sense discrimination, Xunzi makes no appeal to intensional concepts. The use of words is explained completely by appeal to speakers' ability to distinguish their extensions according to shared norms. Indeed, nothing in Xunzi's theory corresponds to the notion of the meaning or intension of a word, although, as we will see, his treatment of *ci* 辭 ("phrasings") introduces a notion similar to speaker's meaning.[20]

[18] See Graham (1989: 140) or Graham (1978: 267).
[19] For further discussion of this point, see Geaney (2002) and Fraser (2011).
[20] Some interpreters contend that Xunzi recognizes both the intension and extension of words, but such accounts are typically circular, imposing an alien theoretical framework on the texts and then "discovering" in them the very concepts the interpreter has just injected. Li (2005) provides a textbook example. Without argument—and indeed without even any apparent awareness that Xunzi might employ alternative theoretical assumptions—he foists an Aristotelian theoretical scheme on two well-known *Xunzi* passages and then declares that in them Xunzi explicitly distinguishes between the intension and extension of a word and recognizes the theoretical notions of "concept," "intension," "meaning," and "essence." The first *Xunzi* passage contends that "that by which humans are human" is that unlike other animals, "they have [normative] distinctions" (HKCS 5/18/13–17, K5.4, Vol. I, 206). The second maintains that humans can make use of stronger or faster animals, such as oxen and horses, because unlike them, we are "able to group together" due to our system of social divisions and associated duties (HKCS 9/39/9–13, 45–46). Interpreting these remarks with minimal theoretical baggage, we might suggest that they simply represent an attempt to identify characteristic features of human life. According to Li, however, Xunzi here presents a concept of human "essence," namely that humans are rational animals, and commits himself to the view that the concept of "human" is that of a rational, social animal and that the intension of this concept is "having distinctions" and being "able to group together" (2005: 111–113; cf. 230–232, where Li repeats his account). Li reaches these conclusions by way of the dubious assumptions that for Xunzi the question of "that by which humans are human" can be answered only by appeal to a concept of essence (112), that the concept of *bian* 辨 ("distinctions") is equivalent to "rational knowing" (112), that intensions, essences, and concepts are the same thing (111–112), and that Xunzi's term *ming* ("names") actually refers primarily to concepts, not names or words (230). This

As a basis for distinguishing why certain things count as similar and take the same name, Xunzi's theory presents an intriguing, sophisticated alternative to either naive realism or unfettered relativism. Xunzi clearly excludes both the strong realist stance that nature in itself divides the world into kinds, independently of human activity, and the strong relativist stance that kind distinctions are determined purely by human practices or conventions. The "grounds for deeming similar or different" (HKCS 22/109/3, 143) are not simply the features of things in themselves, nor are they simply our practices. They are the shared responses of human sense organs to natural features, specifically how we tend to differentiate them. In spelling out this position, Xunzi resolves a major problem that arises in the Mohist "Dialectics." According to the Mohists' implicit realism, things cannot be divided into kinds merely on the basis of human practices. Oxen and horses are inherently two different kinds of animals, for example, and we cannot simply decide to treat the two as one, calling them by the same name, or we will encounter conflicts or contradictions in how we use words. However, the Mohists never gave a thorough explanation of why things are divided into kinds in just the way they are, nor of the grounds for picking out the features by which to distinguish kinds correctly.[21] Xunzi's theory provides a fuller account. How things divide into kinds and what general terms denote these kinds are determined by conventions adopted by the speech community as directed by sagely rulers. The proper distinctions on which to base these conventions are determined by three factors. The first is human-independent features of things, such as their shape, color, or pattern. These interact with the second factor, human sense organs, which differentiate objects as similar or different in ways that naturally tend to converge, since members of the same species have senses that function similarly. The third factor is success in achieving an orderly, flourishing society, due to our scheme of kind distinctions aligning with natural conditions effectively. The distinctions between kinds that underwrite the use of names are thus grounded in causal interaction between human psychophysical functions and interests and human-independent features of the world. They are a product partly of human agreement or convention, as instituted by wise rulers, and partly of how inherent features of the natural world impinge on our senses and affect the success of our endeavors.

2.2.3 Realism Versus Conventionalism

Xunzi's three-pronged account provides a credible explanation of how kind distinctions are grounded jointly in human activity and natural conditions. The account as sketched so far can plausibly be construed as supporting a pragmatic, conventionalist stance on which a plurality of conventional schemes of kind distinctions might be

question-begging interpretation actually has negative explanatory value, since it generates a series of unanswered puzzles. If this is indeed Xunzi's theory, why do the original texts here use no terms with a theoretical role corresponding to "intension," "extension," "meaning," or "essence"? If Xunzi has a notion of "concept," why would he use exactly the same word for it, *ming,* as he does for names or words? If Xunzi's theory is that what distinguishes kinds of things from each other is their different essences, why does he never state this theory explicitly? If for him sharing an essence or satisfying an intension explains why general terms apply to the things they do, why does the explicit discussion of language in Chapter 22 never mention these notions? Such questions cumulatively render Li's interpretation wholly implausible. To be sure, as Eric Hutton has suggested to me, Xunzi's view could be extended by incorporating a notion of intension and holding that a term's intension is determined by its extension. The point remains, however, that Xunzi himself takes no such step and shows no awareness of a theoretical notion akin to the meaning or intension of a word.

[21] For a more detailed discussion of these points, see Hansen (1992) and Fraser (2005a).

justified, depending on the practices and circumstances of a particular community. Even if human sense organs tend to differentiate things in a largely consistent way, and even if the scheme of kind distinctions must pass the practical test of achieving social order and economic sufficiency, considerable leeway probably remains as to which features a community—or its sagely leaders—picks out as decisive in distinguishing various kinds. Perhaps a range of schemes of kind distinctions might all be defensible, or perhaps the most effective scheme might shift over time, in response to changes in environmental, social, and historical circumstances. Even more, a critic might argue, the natural convergence in how our sense organs discriminate similarities might render the sage-kings' leadership unnecessary, as any human community will spontaneously tend to converge on a system of kind distinctions that meets its members' needs.

However, there is textual evidence that Xunzi himself would adamantly reject such a pragmatic, pluralistic interpretation of his theory. His rebuttal would probably appeal to the superlative wisdom of the sage-kings and the purportedly unique alignment of the system they instituted with nature. As he explains in discussing moral psychology, it is possible in principle for any human to become a sage, but in practice few of us actually have the ability (HKCS 23/116/17–23, 167–168). Perhaps only the sage-kings had the capacity to identify, from among a range of workable schemes of kind distinctions, a privileged one that aligns with natural conditions most effectively and thus produces the most perfect form of social order. Xunzi acknowledges that there are a plurality of *dao* a community might follow. Nevertheless, he insists, the *dao* passed down from the Zhou sage-kings is exceptional:

> Of human *dao,* none fail to have distinctions. Of distinctions, none are greater than social divisions. Of social divisions, none are greater than ritual. Of codes of ritual, none is greater than that of the sage-kings. (HKCS 5/18/17–18, K5.4, Vol. I, 206)

The normative distinctions instituted by the gentleman, such as ruler/subject, father/son, elder/younger brother, and husband/wife, are "of the same pattern as Heaven and Earth, of the same duration as a myriad ages" (HKCS 9/39/5, 45). The hierarchical political system associated with traditional norms of ritual propriety and righteousness is "a natural sequence"; just as there is Heaven above and Earth below, there must be superior and subordinate political statuses (HKCS 9/35/22–9/36/3, 36). To critics' objection that the *dao* by which to achieve good order will vary with changing historical circumstances, Xunzi responds that the sages provide a single measure appropriate for both ancient and modern times, for "the kinds do not contradict themselves; no matter what the duration, the patterns remain the same" (HKCS 5/19/4, K5.5, Vol. I, 207). The proper kind distinctions thus cannot be arbitrary conventions, as Hui Shi may have argued.[22] Nor are there a wide range of defensible grounds for different conventions, as parts of the *Zhuangzi* imply.[23]

These audacious claims are puzzling, as it is difficult to see how either Xunzi's account of the grounds for similarity and difference or his appeal to practical consequences such as good order and material prosperity can justify a privileged status for any particular *dao*—and *a fortiori* for the particular *dao* of traditional ritual propriety and the associated conception of righteousness that he advocates. It seems more likely that a plurality of *dao*—and thus a variety of schemes of kind

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[22] See Hansen (1992: 262–263) or Fraser (2005b).
[23] See *Zhuangzi* chapters 2 and 17, for example.

distinctions—could each succeed in producing a flourishing society. In any case, Xunzi offers no grounds for thinking they could not. He simply asserts, without argument or explanation, that the *dao* of the sage-kings is superior and stands in alignment with nature. Nor does he offer any grounds to justify his claim that the code of ritual propriety he advocates and the corresponding scheme of kind distinctions indeed go back to the historical sage-kings. One possible explanation for this dogmatic stance is that Xunzi is implicitly a realist. Perhaps he does hold, after all, that there are fixed, predetermined natural patterns to which the proper kind distinctions must correspond, and only the *dao* of the sage-kings aligns with them. When he claims, for example, that superior and subordinate political statuses reflect the structure of the cosmos, with Heaven above and Earth below, or that distinctions such as father/son and husband/wife are of the same pattern as Heaven and Earth, perhaps the implication is that there is a determinate, human-independent natural structure that fixes a certain code of ritual propriety and righteousness as the correct one (or limits the feasible alternatives to a narrow range). Still, realism conflicts with his depiction of the sages or the gentleman as imposing orderly patterns and divisions on nature, rather than discovering preexisting patterns inherent in it.[24] After all, the very same passage that asserts that normatively fraught distinctions such as ruler/subject and father/son are of the same pattern as Heaven and Earth also states that without the patterning activity of the gentleman these distinctions would not exist (HKCS 9/39/1–5, 44–45).

This conflict drives the interpretive controversy as to whether Xunzi's underlying stance is realist or conventionalist. A moderate conventionalist interpretation seems well founded, because he expressly states that distinctions and the *dao* as a whole are a product of practices instituted by the sage-kings, albeit constrained by how natural conditions affect our sense organs and our success in securing order and prosperity. The challenge for such an interpretation is to explain why Xunzi thinks this pragmatic-sounding theoretical framework justifies a single, traditional scheme of distinctions as uniquely appropriate—or at least why he embraces both this seemingly pragmatic theory and a doctrinaire stance about the *dao*. A realist interpretation provides a straightforward explanation of his dogmatism but clashes with his explicit theory about the grounds for distinctions.

To be sure, there is an obvious respect in which Xunzi might defensibly be construed as a type of realist, but this construal does not resolve the underlying interpretive issue. Earlier I characterized classical Chinese realism as the position that nature in itself divides things into action-guiding kinds and thus fixes a *dao* for us. This position—call it "strong" realism—Xunzi expressly rejects. However, suppose we instead treat realism as the view that, even though the *dao* is a cultural construct, natural conditions happen to be such that there is one and only one appropriate *dao* by which to achieve social order and economic prosperity. Nature does not provide ready-made action-guiding patterns, but natural features make it the case that exactly one unique scheme of such patterns is effective. For instance, when Xunzi implies that distinctions such as ruler/subject or father/son are as immutable as the patterns of Heaven and Earth, perhaps his claim is just that any successful human society will need to institute social roles corresponding to these distinctions. Since he does seem committed to a monistic view of the *dao,* perhaps Xunzi could be considered a realist in

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[24] This tension led Hansen to suggest that there are, in effect, two Xunzis—a pragmatist who defends his *dao* by appeal to its good consequences, and an absolutist who dogmatically claims a privileged status for his *dao* (Hansen 1992: 308). Perhaps Xunzi alternated between these stances in different contexts or for different audiences.

this attenuated sense. However, our interpretive challenge is to explain *why* Xunzi holds a monistic view, given that he depicts the *dao* as a cultural construct not fixed by nature. This weak form of realism offers no answer. It renders the monistic *dao* a happy coincidence.

A more promising explanation emerges if we consider Xunzi's broader psychological, ethical, and political views. Xunzi could be a thoroughgoing conventionalist who nonetheless is dogmatically committed to one particular scheme of conventions—so much so that he advocates treating it as "of the same pattern as Heaven and Earth." That is, he could be a conventionalist who is a monist about the *dao* and thus in a weak sense also a kind of realist. Xunzi is deeply invested in three positions, which for him jointly bestow a special status on his favored cultural tradition and its latter-day representatives. The first is that natural conditions in themselves are disorderly, whether the natural environment or spontaneous, untrained human dispositions. Only through culture—and thus artifice, invention, and education—can order and prosperity be achieved. The second is that the sage-kings of the Zhou dynasty were epochal cultural heroes who founded a consummate, gloriously successful cultural order. The third is that this cultural order is embodied in and preserved through a conservative, authoritarian political system governed by an autocratic sovereign and an elite class of gentlemen officials. These three views jointly make it understandable that Xunzi's underlying stance might be a dogmatic conventionalism. The latter two explain why he leans toward a conservative dogmatism, rather than associating a conventionalist stance with pluralism, as we tend to. All three help to explain why he embraces conventionalism rather than strong realism. Strong realism sits poorly with his view of nature as inherently disorderly. It tends to undermine the authoritative role of the sage-kings as the architects of a matchless, indispensable cultural tradition, and it offers potential grounds for questioning the authority of latter-day rulers. For a full-blooded realism entails that there is, after all, an inherent order in nature, waiting to be discovered and manifested, and that in principle others, not only a select group of ancient sages, could recognize it. Moreover, it offers a convenient, independent criterion by which critics could argue that contemporaneous authorities have strayed from the *dao*. To us, Xunzi's doctrinaire stance may seem to fit poorly with conventionalism, but the two are not fundamentally incompatible. Hence we need not appeal to an implicit strong realism to explain his dogmatism.

2.3 The Essentials in Regulating Names

The third issue around which Xunzi organizes his discussion of names is "the essentials in regulating names." These are several sets of guidelines concerning the use of names to refer to objects. Building on his account of the basis for distinguishing similar from different kinds, he says that similar things should take the same name, different things different ones. The key here is for the ruler to ensure that no different things fail to have different names, while no similar things fail to have the same name (HKCS 22/109/5, 143). However, Xunzi explains, there are cases in which more than one name can refer to something without creating difficulties. A single term (such as "horse") can be used of a thing when sufficient for communication; when a single term is not sufficient, a compound term (such as "white horse") can be used. If the single term and the compound term do not "preclude" each other, Xunzi says—referring presumably to their extensions being mutually exclusive—then both can be used of the thing without interfering with each other. The reason, the ensuing discussion implies, is that one of the terms is more general in scope. Sometimes we want to mention many

things together, and thus we use *gong ming* 共名 ("collective names"), or general terms, of which the most general is "*wu* 物" ("thing") (HKCS 22/109/8, 144). Sometimes we want to refer to only a portion of all the things there are, and thus we use *bie ming* 別名 ("separating names"), as when, from among the myriad things, we mention just *niao-shou* 鳥獸 ("birds-and-beasts") (HKCS 22/109/9, 144). There can be different levels of collective or separating names, Xunzi indicates, as some collective names combine the extensions of others, while some separating names mention only a portion of the extensions of others. Presumably, any terms whose extensions potentially overlap count as not "precluding" each other.

In remarking that single and compound terms can refer to the same thing without precluding each other or hampering communication, Xunzi is presumably alluding to claims such as Gongsun Long's contention that "white horses are not horses." (One of the paradoxical sayings Xunzi criticizes later in the text seems to be an abbreviated version of this claim.) Gongsun in effect argues that since the extension of "white horses" is not identical to that of "horses," the two terms cannot refer to the same animals, and so white horses are not horses. Xunzi's implicit rebuttal is that as long as they do not preclude each other, both terms can be used. There is no difficulty with applying both "white horse" and "horse" to white horses, because "horse" is a more general term, "white horse" a less general (or "separating") term, and their extensions do not exclude each other.

Xunzi's approach here could also be applied to resolve some of the concerns about compound terms that arise in the Mohist "Dialectics." The Mohists discovered that a simple "one name, one thing" model of the relation of names to objects, on which terms stand in a one-to-one correspondence with things, was untenable. When two names are strung together, the reference of the resulting phrase may change in unpredictable ways. Combining "*niu* 牛" ("oxen") and "*ma* 馬" ("horses") gives "*niu ma* 牛馬" ("oxen-and-horses"), a phrase denoting the sum of all animals that are either oxen or horses. But combining "*jian* 堅" ("hard") and "*bai* 白" ("white") to form "*jian bai* 堅白" ("hard-and-white") produces a phrase denoting things that are *both* hard and white, not *either* hard or white. Everything hard-and-white is white. But not everything falling within the extension of "oxen-and-horses" is oxen. In these and other cases, the Mohists struggled to give a systematic explanation of how combining terms affects the semantics of the resulting compound term and why the compound is sometimes more general than its constituent terms, sometimes less general. One point that impeded their efforts was that, unlike Xunzi, they recognized terms at only three levels of generality—names of individuals, names of kinds, and what they called "reaching" names, such as "thing," which can refer to anything. As a result, in some cases they confusedly treated compound terms that refer to things at different levels of generality as if the terms instead denoted different kinds at the same level of generality. A well-known instance of such confusion was their paradoxical assertion, which we will discuss further in the next section, that "killing *dao ren* 盜人 ('robber-people') is not killing *ren* 人 ('people')." The Mohists were attempting to express the plausible view that capital punishment for armed robbery is not murder. But they could have formulated their position less paradoxically had they pointed out that "people" has a more general extension than "robber-people" and that not all cases of killing people need be immoral killing.

Xunzi elsewhere introduces a refinement of his theory, according to which names not only may refer at different levels of generality, but may have distinct uses, grounded in what he calls different *duan* 端 ("starting points") (HKCS 18/88/24,

K18.9, Vol. III, 46). The different uses can be specified by compounding names so as to narrow their extension. In a response to Song Xing (to be discussed in section 3), he argues that there are two kinds of honor and disgrace, "moral honor and disgrace" and "social honor and disgrace." A person could be honored with high social status while being morally disgraceful or held in disgrace socially while being morally honorable. The Mohists could probably handle the robbers case similarly. Perhaps they could distinguish between "legal killing" and "criminal killing," for instance. Instead of propounding the paradoxical saying that killing robbers is not killing people, they could simply argue that although legal killing of robbers is killing people, it is not criminal killing of people.

A second set of guidelines concerns the specific names chosen to denote various things (HKCS 22/109/10–11, 144). Names in themselves, Xunzi says, are not inherently appropriate or inappropriate. What determines whether they are appropriate is simply whether they conform to the convention by which a certain kind of thing is dubbed with a certain name. Nor do certain names inherently take certain objects; again, a name takes a particular object because of a convention dubbing it the name of that thing. There is such a thing as inherently good names, however: good names are direct, simple, and do not conflict with each other. Elsewhere Xunzi explains that in establishing names for things, the sage-kings followed Shang dynasty conventions for the names of punishments, Zhou dynasty conventions for the names of official titles, and the Zhou code of ritual propriety for the names of cultural forms. As for the various names of the myriad things, they followed the established customs of the various Xia (Chinese) peoples (HKCS 22/107/21, 139).

Xunzi's final set of guidelines concerns how to individuate objects. Things that have the same characteristics but different spatial locations—such as two white horses standing in different places—are deemed two objects, "even though they can be merged" (HKCS 22/109/12, 144). What Xunzi probably means by this odd remark is that insofar as two similar things are of the same kind, they can be considered "one thing,"[25] but we nevertheless count them as two. By contrast, things whose characteristics change while they remain in a single spatial location—as when a caterpillar changes into a butterfly—are considered a single object, even though their features are now different from before. In this case, we say a single object has been transformed. These guidelines concerning individuation may have been intended as grounds for rebutting paradoxical sayings concerning number or identity, although Xunzi does not cite any such sayings or relate the guidelines to any controversies.[26]

3. Refutation of the Paradoxes

Xunzi contends that his discussion of these three issues—the purpose of having names, the basis for distinguishing different kinds, and the essentials in regulating names—explains the errors underlying three groups of paradoxical sayings propounded

[25] Xunzi may also take for granted a mereological worldview, by which the members of a kind are considered to form a concrete whole that constitutes the kind. For discussion, see Hansen (1983) and Fraser (2007).

[26] Classical Chinese generally does not mark nouns as singular or plural. Hence, as the later Mohists point out, "one horse is 'horse,' and two horses are 'horse.'" But if someone asserts "Horse four legs," the implication is that there is one horse with four legs, not two horses with a total of only four legs. (See the discussion in Graham 1978: 493.) One can imagine a prankster such as Gongsun Long formulating a paradoxical saying that trades on this sort of ambiguity of number, although there are no records of such a paradox.

by other thinkers. By testing these sayings against the points he identifies, Xunzi claims, a ruler can find grounds to prohibit them and thus prevent disorder in using names. Disappointingly, however, the text of the *Xunzi* neither explains nor argues for these contentions. In many cases, it is unclear why Xunzi diagnoses the sayings as committing the errors he claims they do or precisely how he thinks they are to be refuted.[27]

The first group of sayings are purportedly instances in which "confusion about using names causes disorder to names." Xunzi's examples of this sort of confusion are "to be insulted is not disgraceful," "sages do not care about themselves," and "killing robbers is not killing people" (HKCS 22/109/16, 145). He claims that if we test these sayings in light of the purpose of having names, we will find that they cannot be used coherently, as people's normal way of using words can. The first saying was a doctrine of Song Xing and Yin Wen, who advocated it as part of their campaign against war and aggression.[28] Apparently, a widespread opinion in early China was that a gentleman or official must respond to a perceived insult with aggression or else be disgraced. Song Xing and Yin Wen sought to eliminate this motive for belligerence by teaching that a gentleman could be publicly insulted yet turn the other cheek without thereby finding himself disgraced. Honor or disgrace rest in a person's conduct, not in whether he defends his name with violence. In a separate criticism of this teaching, Xunzi accuses Song Xing of failing to follow the model of the sage-kings in using the words "honor" and "disgrace" (HKCS 18/88/21–18/89/9, K18.9, Vol. III, 46). The sage-kings, he claims, distinguished between moral honor and disgrace, which are qualities of one's conduct, and social honor and disgrace, which are a matter of external, social circumstances. A gentleman can accept social disgrace but never moral disgrace. (Xunzi does not clarify how this constitutes a refutation of Song Xing. In fact, his discussion amounts more to a refinement or development of Song's view than a rebuttal.) So Xunzi's stance is presumably that because Song diverges from the purported model of the sage-kings in his use of the word "disgrace," he is confused in his use of the word and thereby disrupts its proper use.[29]

The provenance of the second saying is unknown, as are Xunzi's reasons for thinking it a result of confusion about the use of names. As we saw earlier, the third saying, "killing robbers is not killing people," is defended in the Mohist "Dialectics." The Mohists prohibited murder, and thus held that killing people is wrong, but advocated capital punishment for armed robbery. They also advocated all-inclusive moral care for everyone. Apparently critics attacked them for inconsistency, suggesting that killing robbers violated their prohibition against killing people and contradicted their tenet of all-inclusive care. In response, they argued by analogy that just as "disliking there being many robbers is not disliking there being many people," and "desiring there be no robbers is not desiring there be no people," so too "caring about robbers is not caring about people, not-caring about robbers is not not-caring about

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[27] Indeed, as Eric Hutton has remarked to me, one wonders to what extent Xunzi was aware of the arguments behind these sayings.

[28] These remarks about Song Xin and Yin Wen draw on *The Annals of Lü Buwei*. See Knoblock and Riegel (2001: 400–403).

[29] Xunzi also offers a second rebuttal of Song Xing on the grounds that insults motivate people to fight because they dislike being insulted, not because they find it disgraceful (HKCS 18/88/12–19, K18.8, Vol. III, 45). Hence convincing them that being insulted is not disgraceful will not modify their conduct. He does not consider the rejoinder that they may dislike being insulted precisely because they find it disgraceful.

people, and killing robber-people is not killing people."[30] In effect, the Mohists themselves are here rectifying phrases, asserting that since the extensions of "killing robber-people" and "killing people" are different, the two refer to distinct kinds of actions, and "killing people" should not be predicated of actions of the kind denoted by "killing robbers." As with the other sayings, Xunzi does not directly explain why he considers this is a case of disorder caused by confusion in the use of names, nor why it is to be diagnosed by testing it in light of the purpose of having names. As suggested above, it might as well be considered a case of violating the essentials in regulating names, since just as "horse" is more general than "white horse," "killing people" is more general than "killing robber-people." Perhaps Xunzi's view is that the Mohists' own "rectifying" of these terms is simply a confusion in the use of names, since executing robbers plainly is killing people.

The second set of sayings, Xunzi claims, are cases in which "confusion about using objects causes disorder to names." His examples are "mountains and gorges are level," "the inherent desires are few," and "fine meats do not add sweetness, great bells do not add enjoyment" (HKCS 22/109/17–18, 145). If we test these sayings against the basis for distinguishing similar from different things, he says, we will find that they fail to match. Presumably his point is that if we apply our sense organs to objects correctly, they differentiate things in a way that is plainly incompatible with these sayings.

The first of these claims Xunzi elsewhere credits to Hui Shi and Deng Xi (HKCS 3/9/2, K3.1, Vol. I, 174), and a similar claim is associated with Hui Shi in the *Zhuangzi* (33/71).[31] The point seems to have been that similarity relations between things are relative to scale or perspective, and thus things deemed different on one scale can be deemed similar on another. By some sufficiently vast perspective or standard, the difference between the height of a mountain and depth of a gorge is insignificant and the two are level. Xunzi's response—characteristic of his general lack of interest in conceptual or scientific issues without direct practical application—amounts to simply ignoring this point and insisting that, in any event, from the perspective of human sense organs, mountains and gorges are clearly dissimilar.[32] The second claim Xunzi elsewhere attributes to Song Xing, an ascription confirmed by the *Zhuangzi*. Song Xing and Yin Wen apparently contended that people's inherent, precultural desires are few, shallow, and easily satisfied, and thus a gentleman should not "put his person in hock for things" or contend with others for goods (Zhuangzi 33/40). This was the "internal," psychological side of their position, which complemented their "external," social stance of forbidding aggression and disbanding troops. In response, Xunzi asserts that people desire as much beauty and physical ease and as many mellifluous sounds, delicious flavors, and fragrant scents as they can get, and indeed this is why the sage-kings rewarded good conduct with wealth and punished bad conduct with deprivation.[33] In his discussion of names, then, his underlying point is probably that use of the sense organs shows that people naturally have many desires. Song Xing's confusion about this fact leads him to use names improperly, as he mistakenly applies the word "few" to

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[30] See Graham (1978: 487).

[31] Citations to the *Zhuangzi* give chapter and line numbers in Zhuangzi (1956).

[32] For evidence of Xunzi's lack of curiosity about conceptual or empirical issues, see HKCS 12/58/3, K12.3, Vol. II, 179; HKCS 3/9/3, K3.1, Vol. I, 174; HKCS 8/28/15–8/29/2, K8.3, Vol. II, 71; and HKCS 17/82/3, 85.

[33] Xunzi essentially just begs the question against Song here, denying his claim without argument. No doubt Song would agree that people have many desires. His contention is that most of these desires are unnecessary and not part of people's inherent nature, and so we can live well without them.

people's desires. The origin of the third claim is unknown. It could be related to Song Xing's views, insofar as Song and Yin also contended that "five pints of rice are enough" to live on (Zhuangzi 33/38–39). Apparently Xunzi's position is again that proper use of the senses reveals that fine foods and musical instruments obviously enhance enjoyment.

The final group of sayings cannot be interpreted with assurance, as the text appears corrupt. If Xunzi is again citing three preposterous sayings, these appear to be "visiting when it is not the case" [?], "the pillar has oxen" [?], and "horses are not horses" (HKCS 22/109/19, 145). These are supposedly instances of "confusion about the use of names causing disorder to objects." Instead of testing these against the essentials in regulating names, as we would expect, Xunzi instructs a ruler to check them against naming conventions, just one of the several items covered in his discussion of the essentials. After doing so, he predicts, the ruler will be able to prohibit these sayings on the grounds of inconsistency between what their proponents accept and reject. The first two sayings are so obscure and corrupt that discussion here is impractical. The third seems to be an abbreviated version of Gongsun Long's assertion that white horses are not horses, which we discussed earlier. The basis for Xunzi's case against it, as we saw, is that "horse" is a more general term than "white horse," so both names can apply to the same animal without precluding each other. Checking against naming conventions, we find that everyone, even proponents of "white horses are not horses," conventionally uses the word "horse" of white horses. What they accept, then, contradicts what they reject, namely that white horses are horses. Their confused use of these names disorders objects, in that they mistakenly claim that the objects denoted by "white horses" are not among those denoted by "horses."

Xunzi wraps up his sketch of how the paradoxical sayings relate to his theory of names by claiming that all deviant teachings and perverse statements that depart from the right *dao* inevitably manifest one of these three sorts of confusion (HKCS 22/109/20, 146). Hence the political application of his discussion: an enlightened ruler will know how to identify the type of confusion involved and will not bother disputing with proponents of such outrageous claims.

4. Theory of Disputation

According to Xunzi, given the theory of names he presents, a wise ruler can avoid debate concerning preposterous assertions and instead quickly identify the confusions on which they rest. But there remain occasions on which it is necessary to engage in disputation or dialectics to settle the proper use of names. So besides a theory of names, Xunzi also presents a concise theory of disputation.

"Disputation" or "dialectics" are rough translations of an activity early Chinese texts call *bian* 辯, which might more literally be rendered "distinction-drawing." Disputation (*bian*) overlaps the fields of semantics, logic, and rhetoric. In early China, it was considered a core aspect of conceptual and empirical inquiry, legal argumentation, and political persuasion. Typically taking the form of a public debate, disputation seems to have originated in the practice of litigation and in the rhetoric court advisors used in the *shuo/shui* 說 ("explanations" or "persuasions") through which they tried to influence political policy. Primarily a type of analogical argumentation, disputation, like much legal rhetoric, often took the form of citing a precedent, analogy, or model and explaining why the case at hand should be treated

similarly or not.[34] Xunzi emphasizes that this process should include an explanatory or justificatory component. In his most detailed discussion of disputation, he pairs it with "explaining" (*shuo*) to form a compound term, "distinction-drawing and explaining" (*bian-shuo*) (HKCS 22/110/7, 147). Elsewhere he states that disputation (*bian*) without giving explanations (*shuo*) is simply quarreling (HKCS 4/12/22, K4.2, Vol. I, 187).

In modern Chinese, *bian* 辯 ("disputation, debate") and *bian* 辨 ("distinguish, distinctions") are distinct, semantically related words that share the same pronunciation but are written with different graphs. Like several other classical Chinese texts, however, the *Xunzi* uses these two graphs interchangeably, suggesting that Xunzi may have regarded them as alternate forms of a single word with two uses. The implication is that, like the Mohists, he regards *bian* in the general sense of disputation, debate, or dialectics as concerned with *bian* in the more specific sense of drawing distinctions between kinds. The reason is that for him, as for the Mohists and other classical Chinese dialecticians, the outcome of what we would call an argument, debate, or piece of reasoning was to draw a distinction one way rather than another.[35] As we have seen, for Xunzi, the proper use of names depends on how we draw distinctions between similar and different things. When it is unclear or controversial how to apply names to objects, interlocutors may need to engage in disputation, construed as an explicit process of discussing or debating how to draw the relevant distinctions. Correct naming is an aim of conscientious disputation.

Here it is important to understand that when Xunzi discusses the use of "names," he is referring generally to the application of terms to objects, even when grammatically the term at issue might actually be a phrase. Moreover, again like the Mohists, he understands the act of applying a term to something as having the pragmatic significance of an assertion. Functionally, for early Chinese theorists, applying the name "horse" to an animal amounts to asserting that the animal is a horse. So what we might regard as the question of whether an assertion is true or not, Xunzi regards as the question of distinguishing whether or not a certain object is indeed of the kind properly denoted by some term. Thus although Xunzi, the Mohists, and other ancient thinkers frame disputation (*bian*) as a matter of drawing distinctions between objects that do or do not take a name, functionally disputation plays a role for them comparable to that of debating over and attempting to justify whether an assertion is true. Settling what takes a certain name is at the same time a matter of settling what is the case. For this reason, the later Mohists assign disputation a sweeping application, depicting it as a general process of inference and judgment employed in virtually all areas of inquiry, including politics, semantics, natural science, and ethics.

The *Xunzi* presents two contrasting views on disputation, which may have been intended for different audiences or may represent Xunzi's position at different times in his long career. One view is positive, addressing the role of disputation in the intellectual character of the gentleman. Xunzi twice states that the gentleman must engage in disputation (HKCS 5/19/12, K5.6, Vol. I, 208; HKCS 5/20/12, K5.9, Vol. I, 210). Besides emulating the sage-kings and following the code of ritual propriety and righteousness, the gentleman should enjoy discussing the *dao,* as all people are fond of discussing what they deem good, and the gentleman even more so. Xunzi describes several levels of skill in disputation. The sage is always on the mark, requires no prior

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[34] Cua (1985) calls attention to the parallels between the Chinese practice of disputation and legal reasoning.
[35] For a more detailed discussion of *bian,* see Fraser (2005b), sections 1 and 2.

deliberation or planning, and can respond to changes without end. The gentleman needs to deliberate and plan, but has the right form and reaches the fact of the matter. The petty person, by contrast, makes incoherent statements, misleads others without actually achieving anything, and fails to follow the enlightened kings or to bring the common people together (HKCS 5/21/1–5, K5.10, Vol. I, 210–211). Xunzi also presents a positive view of *yi* 議 ("argumentation"), a concept closely related to disputation (*bian*). *Yi* typically refers to giving grounds for a claim or judgment, as when presenting one's side in litigation or adjudicating how to apply a standard to a new case. *Yi* overlaps *bian* (disputation) and the two words are sometimes used roughly as synonyms (see HKCS 15/68/3, 56), although *yi* seems less antagonistic or eristic and has a less negative connotation among critics of *bian*. Xunzi holds that for government officials *yi* is crucial to the effective application of standards or laws. No standard directly covers every particular situation, and so analogical extension through *yi* is needed lest cases not specifically stipulated in the standards go unregulated (HKCS 9/35/16–17, 35).

Xunzi's other view of disputation (*bian*) is mainly negative. It reflects his distaste for rival doctrines and his conviction that open, free discourse interferes with the exercise of rightful political authority. The elaborate discussion in Chapter 22, "Right Names," depicts disputation as a necessary evil that the gentleman undertakes only because the sage-kings are gone and the world has fallen into disorder. Depraved sayings have arisen, and the gentleman lacks the political power to control people and punish them for improper speech. Ideally, Xunzi thinks, an enlightened ruler unifies the people through the *dao* but does not share the reasons for his policies with them (HKCS 22/110/1, 146). In such rosy circumstances, disputation is unnecessary. The ruler controls the populace by power, guides them by the *dao,* moves them with his commands, and punishes those who act contrary to his wishes (HKCS 22/110/1–2, 146). In Xunzi's own day, however, disputation is needed to prevent deviant teachings—such as those of Song Xing, the Mohists, or Mengzi—from causing disorder (HKCS 22/110/2–3, 146). Xunzi's repellent political and discursive stance here contrasts sharply with the Mohists'. They held that the populace must perceive their rulers to be acting in the public interest, according to open, objective standards that can be examined by anyone. If they do not, they may ally together against the ruler, and his rewards and punishments will fail to influence their behavior.[36]

Since in his degenerate era, disputation seems inevitable, Xunzi presents a discussion of four points that he calls the major "forms" or "patterns" of discourse (HKCS 22/110/3–10, 146–147). Intriguingly, instead of structural units, such as sentences or arguments, premises or conclusions, the forms he identifies are activities; he analyzes the basic components of disputation in terms of function, not structure. The four activities form a series, reflecting the remedial nature of disputation for him. Interlocutors move on to successive stages only if communication breaks down in earlier ones; otherwise, they are redundant. If we find ourselves unable to convey the matter we aim to communicate, we engage in the first stage, explicitly dubbing or naming things (*ming* 命). The function of names, Xunzi remarks, is for hearing them to communicate the objects referred to; they are our means of specifying different things. Names can be linked together into "forms" or "patterns" (*wen* 文).[37] If one is

[36] See Mozi (1986), 18/12/52–61.
[37] To refer to the "linking" of names into longer phrases, Xunzi uses a technical term (*li* 麗) also found in the Mohist "Dialectics." See Graham (1978: 326, 352).

competent in both the function and linking of names, one qualifies as "knowing names." Among the forms created by linking names together are "phrasings" (*ci* 辭), which "combine the names of different things to express one thought." This explanation of "phrasings" is the closest any early Chinese text comes to articulating a conception of the sentence or statement. However, rather than defining "phrasings" structurally or grammatically—as comprising a subject and predicate, for instance—Xunzi explains them functionally: a "phrasing" is simply a string of words that conveys a thought. The most likely reason he does not formulate a conception of the subject-predicate sentence is probably that in Classical Chinese grammar a complete subject-predicate sentence is not necessary to make an assertion or express a thought. A subjectless phrase standing alone is sufficient. Also intriguing is that although Xunzi does not associate names with thoughts, he does associate phrases or statements with them. His theory of names is purely extensional: names function to communicate because of shared conventions for distinguishing the objects they denote. But phrases convey the speaker's thought, an intensional notion probably similar to speaker's meaning.[38]

If explicitly naming what we are talking about does not enable us to communicate, we move on to a second step, reaching agreement in specifying what thing the name designates (*qi* 期).[39] This step presumably refers to clearing up potential misunderstanding as to precisely what object the interlocutors are talking about. If neither of these steps is sufficient for the two sides to communicate, we move on to "explaining" (*shuo*), or giving reasons for distinguishing the object as taking or not taking a certain name. If explaining fails as well—presumably because one party rejects the other's explanation—we move on to disputation proper (*bian*) and attempt to settle the correct use of names by debating how to draw the relevant distinctions. As Xunzi explains, the function of "disputation and explanation" is to clarify the use of names—to specify what things are referred to and what names are used of them (HKCS 22/110/7, 147). On this point, despite their different terminology, Xunzi's view converges with the Mohists'. For the Mohists, disputation is contending over converse terms, such as "horse" and "non-horse," to determine whether an object is of one kind or another. For Xunzi, the function of disputation is to reach agreement on the proper term to apply to an object. On both conceptions, disputation is a process of distinguishing whether a certain word or phrase fits an object or not.

Xunzi concludes by explicitly tying the entire four-step process to the action-guiding functions of language and his concern with social order (HKCS 22/110/7–10, 147). "Disputation and explanation," he says, is a matter of using the names of different things to convey "the *dao* of action and inaction." Indeed, "disputation and explanation is the heart's representing *dao*." The primary function of

[38] "Speaker's meaning" or "utterer's meaning" refers to the thought or content a speaker intends to convey by an utterance. It may diverge considerably from literal meaning. For discussion, see Grice (1989) and Schiffer (1972).

[39] Commentators differ on the significance of *qi,* the term Xunzi uses here, some suggesting that it refers to reaching agreement on naming conventions (Li 1979: 522), others to giving definitions (Cua 1985). Graham combines these ideas, suggesting that it refers to "concurring beforehand on the use of a name in debate, presumably by an agreed definition" (Graham 1989: 267). Xunzi himself uses *qi* to refer to the outcome of shared naming conventions (HKCS 22/108/16, 142) and to the relation between names and their referents (HKCS 22/110/5, 147). In the wider literature, *qi* may refer to having an agreement, coming to an understanding, communicating, or indicating something, as when the *Mozi* describes a burial mound as marking (*qi*) a grave (Mozi 1986, 39/25/85). I interpret *qi* here as reaching agreement on exactly what object the name in question is supposed to denote.

the heart is not to know truths or represent the world, but to manage our performance of the *dao.* "The heart is the work supervisor of *dao,*" which in turn is "the guideline of order." The ideal is for one's heart to conform to *dao,* for one's explanations to conform to the heart, for one's phrasings to conform to proper explanations, to reach agreement with others on the right names, and thus to communicate matters as they genuinely stand. We seek to distinguish differences without error, extend kind distinctions to new cases without contradiction, in listening to conform to what the other party says, and in disputation to thoroughly present the relevant reasons. Disputing depraved claims by means of the right *dao* is like applying a carpenter's line to distinguish what is curved from what is straight: the *dao* provides an objective standard by which we can easily determine what is right or wrong. Hence, Xunzi claims, deviant teachings cannot bring disorder. Again, by contrast with the Mohists, Xunzi here seems to regard disputation not as a method of inquiry, but as a tool by which to combat and suppress views he deems heterodox or "depraved."

The *Xunzi* presents one other brief discussion of the methodology of argumentation, which also converges with Mohist views. For the Mohists, a paradigmatic method of disputation was to propose a model or an exemplar of the kind of object at issue and then give reasons for distinguishing the case at hand as similar to or distinct from the model. As a prelude to his rebuttal of Song Xing's doctrine that to be insulted is not disgraceful, Xunzi presents methodological remarks along similar lines. "In all argumentation (*yi*), one must first establish paradigms of correctness, only then is it permissible to proceed" (HKCS 18/88/21, K18.9, Vol. III, 46).[40] The function of "paradigms of correctness" is comparable to that of the Mohists' models or exemplars. They stand as criteria against which to compare things in order to distinguish "this" from "not-this" and thus resolve disputation and litigation. Consistent with his ethical and political theory, Xunzi claims that the regulations of the sage-kings are the ultimate standard of correctness, providing "the boundaries of this and not-this" and "the origin of social divisions, responsibilities, names, and signs." Hence in all cases of making assertions and arguments, specifying the use of names, and distinguishing "this" from "not-this," we are to take the sage-kings as masters—that is, as models to emulate. The rebuttal of Song Xing thus proceeds by citing what Xunzi takes to be the model of the sage-kings—establishing two bases or "starting points" for the use of the words "honor" and "disgrace," social honor or disgrace and moral honor or disgrace—and then explaining how Song's doctrine diverges from them.

5. Concluding Remarks

Throughout this chapter, we have followed Xunzi's own lead in emphasizing the authoritarian political motivation and applications of his theory of language and logic. In Chapter 22, "Right Names," Xunzi presents his theory of names and theory of disputation specifically as tools to guide autocratic rulers in regulating the use of words for political ends. The objective is to achieve social order and unity, implement an authoritarian *dao,* ensure the intent of commands is followed, and prevent heterodox teachings from "confusing" people—and thus interfering with their obeying instructions, laws, and the code of ritual propriety. The aim of his three-way taxonomy of "strange phrasings" is to clarify the grounds by which the ruler should prohibit

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[40] The word rendered "paradigm" here, *long* 隆, is used frequently throughout the *Xunzi* as a verb to refer to exalting something as the highest standard to follow and as a noun to refer to the epitome or apotheosis of something.

"pernicious doctrines and deviant statements that, departing from the right *dao,* recklessly innovate" (HKCS 22/109/20, 146). As the text makes clear, the "pernicious doctrines" in question may include the substantive ethical teachings of philosophical rivals, such as Song Xing. As to disputation, for Xunzi it is not a constructive mode of inquiry, leading to knowledge, as it is for the Mohists. The well-educated gentleman should be capable of expounding his values through disputation. But the primary purpose of disputation is to refute "pernicious doctrines" and leave rival schools of thought "nowhere to hide" (HKCS 22/110/10, 148). Ideally, for Xunzi, there would be no disputation, as in an orderly society the political authorities would silence heterodox sayings with the threat of violent punishment.

Without question, clarifying the referents of names may help to promote a shared, consistent understanding of laws, instructions, or codes of conduct and thus may contribute to orderly political administration, much as setting public measurement standards does. This seems the main point of the brief passage on rectifying names in the Confucian *Analects,* which remarks that if names are not rectified, punishments and penalties will miss their mark and people will not know how to act without falling afoul of them (Lau 1979: 118). But Xunzi's position is far more draconian than this commonsensical point. He would curtail free speech and inquiry and prohibit competing philosophical views on the grounds that they disrupt the right use of names and thus induce anarchy.

A pivotal question to ask in evaluating Xunzi's philosophy of language and logic, then, is whether the regulation of words and speech that he advocates is in fact necessary for communication and social order. Most citizens of contemporary liberal democracies would probably contend that it quite obviously is not. Indeed, one might argue that the very existence of robust, stable liberal polities allowing free speech and widespread divergence in conceptions of the good life is a conclusive refutation of Xunzi's politics, including his politics of language and logic. For according to Xunzi, such societies should collapse into social and economic chaos—an unlikely outcome, if the trends of recent centuries continue. Interestingly, at least one ancient Chinese source presents views that contrast sharply with Xunzi's and tend to converge with contemporary political and linguistic liberalism. Whereas Xunzi maintains that a king should regulate language by *ding* 定 ("fixing") the names that refer to different things (HKCS 22/108/4, 140), a passage in the *Zhuangzi* questions whether "fixing" (*ding*) reference is necessary for statements to succeed in saying anything (Zhuangzi 2/23–24). The text makes the commonsense observation that speech is not just blowing breath; our statements do say something. However, since in fact no program of rectifying names has been implemented in our speech community, the content of what we say has never been fixed. The reference of our words is to some degree fluid or indeterminate. If names must be rectified for us to communicate smoothly, it seems we must fail to say anything. But surely this is wrong; we do succeed in communicating. So it seems that communication does not require that names be fixed after all. It may be enough for speakers to use names spontaneously and, if miscommunication occurs, simply clarify what they are referring to.

A Zhuangist critic would concur with Xunzi that nature in itself does not furnish humanity with a *dao,* nor does it come ready-organized into action-guiding kind distinctions. As Xunzi would agree, *dao* are formed by human practices, and divisions between kinds are established by our deeming them this or that (Zhuangzi 2/33, 2/55). But for precisely this reason, the *Zhuangzi* implies, no single organizing pattern can align with nature in a privileged way. Any *dao* or pattern we adopt through our practices neglects an indeterminate number of potential alternatives (2/35), some of

which may also align well with nature and be useful in various respects. Given the actual, observed diversity of successful customs and practices, it is unlikely that we could find objective, universal criteria by which to assign just some of them a privileged status as "right" (*zheng*) (2/64–70). Hence the most promising policy seems not to commit dogmatically to any single pattern, but to modify or shift among them as seems fitting. Rectifying names according to fixed standards ties us to a single, parochial linguistic *dao* at the cost of relinquishing other potentially fruitful ones. A thorough program of rectifying names might even hamper communication, by curbing the creativity and innovation that are a normal part of language use.

Xunzi's central argument for his doctrinaire ethical system is that it secures social order by preventing conflict and distributing resources in a way that provides for the needs of all (HKCS 19/90/3–5, 89). His doctrine of "right names" is also purportedly justified by its instrumental success in maintaining order. The *Zhuangzi* offers a different approach to social cooperation and coordination, which goes hand-in-hand with a liberal attitude toward names. For the *Zhuangzi,* values such as *he* 和 ("harmony") (2/39–40) and *shi* 適 ("fitting") the circumstances (18/39) supersede the Xunzian conception of holistic, unifying order (*zhi*). The sagely path is to harmonize interactions with others by adjusting how we draw distinctions in concrete contexts in order to find convergences between their *dao* and ours (2/38–40). Excessive fastidiousness about the use of names can only impede this process. To achieve harmony with others and good fit with our circumstances, we may need to rearrange which items are picked out by which names (2/39), and in any case the crux is how we handle the situation, not the names we use of it (18/39). This open-ended approach of flexibly seeking compromise, harmony, and good fit seems a promising *dao* for living alongside others while avoiding strife. If such a more liberal, accommodating *dao* could be as effective as Xunzi's in preventing discord, then the purported justification for his program of social and linguistic regimentation collapses.

Even if Xunzi's political stance on language and logic proves indefensible, however, the *Xunzi* presents material of great philosophical interest in these and related areas. Of special value are Xunzi's views on how language guides action, how terms function at different levels of generality, how language use rests on shared norms for drawing distinctions, how such norms are jointly rooted in natural conditions and human practices, and how perception grounds language use, communication, and empirical knowledge. Xunzi's discussions of these topics can be detached from the political context in which he sets them, and they constitute a major contribution not only to early Chinese philosophy but to the history of thought more generally.[41]

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