

Happiness in Classical Confucianism: Xúnzǐ

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ABSTRACT. This essay contributes to comparative inquiry concerning happiness through a case study of Xúnzǐ, a major Confucian thinker. Xúnzǐ's ethical theory presents values and norms that fill the role of happiness indirectly, through the ideal figure of the gentleman. However, his working conception of psychological happiness and individual well-being turns on aesthetic values that go beyond the universal prudential values to which his ethical theory appeals. Hence I argue that his implicit conception of happiness actually revolves around a way of life grounded in what Susan Wolf has called "reasons of love."

I. INTRODUCTION

A striking fact about the topic of happiness in classical Chinese—the thought of the early fifth to late third centuries BC—is how little the texts have to say about it. Whether in the descriptive sense of a positive psychological state or the evaluative sense of well-being or flourishing, happiness is not a prominent theme in the major Confucian, Mohist, or Daoist texts.¹ The *Analects* famously depicts Confucius remarking that there is pleasure or happiness (*lè* 樂) in a simple, plain lifestyle, provided it conforms to ethical norms; such a life is preferable to wealth and status obtained immorally (7:16; Lau 1979, 88). A pleasurable or happy

psychological state is thus associated with the ethically good life, but neither this state nor an explicit notion of well-being is a conspicuous topic in the text—not in the way that ritual (*lǐ* 禮) or good-heartedness (*rén* 仁) is, for instance. Mòzǐ and his followers advocate a sophisticated brand of indirect consequentialism while hardly mentioning happiness or well-being. Their basic goods are instead economic prosperity, sufficient population, and social order.² Even the Daoist anthology *Zhuāngzǐ*, probably the early text most congenial to the standpoint of the individual, is concerned primarily with the agent's adroitness in fitting into and flowing along with changing circumstances, not happiness or well-being under any conventional understanding.³

Issues such as how individuals can enjoy a happy mental state or what constitutes a life that is good for the individual *qua* individual have at best a secondary or subsidiary role in early Chinese ethical discourse. To be sure, these topics are not wholly absent. Scattered passages in the philosophical texts discuss positive emotions we associate with happiness, such as joy, pleasure, and contentment. The various ethical traditions also clearly offer rival conceptions of the excellent or flourishing human life. However, these topics are not structurally central or pivotal in the way that *eudaimonia* is in Greek thought, that psychological happiness is in classical utilitarianism, or that the search for happiness is in much contemporary pop psychology. Classical Chinese ethics generally does not focus on the individual's happiness, whether in the psychological or well-being sense, nor treat it as a central or highest good.

This point can be attributed to several factors. Early Chinese ethical thought generally has a social or collective orientation. The happiness or well-being of the individual is subordinated to questions concerning proper social organization, effective government, and the individual's role within the community. In many classical Chinese ethical writings, the most salient value is not an analogue to psychological happiness or *eudaimonia* but *zhì* 治, social order and control. Another factor is that early Chinese ethics is not structured around pursuit of a unifying end or good but around practicing a *dào* 道 (way or path). A *dào* can be thought of as a set of norms covering not just what we do but how we do these things—our conduct, practices, and habits, but also our style, attitudes, skill, and reliability. Formally, the aim of ethical practice is not for the individual to achieve a certain state—such as happiness or flourishing—or to fulfill his or her capacities by engaging in virtuous activity, as an Aristotelian might propose. It is to perform the right *dào* in the proper manner. Of course, the practice of the *dào* may coincide with happiness: it may lead to a positive emotional state or a feeling of life satisfaction, and it may lead practitioners to develop their capacities and realize a range of virtues. But the ethical project itself and various issues stemming from it are framed in such a way that happiness is unlikely to emerge as a focus of attention. A third factor is that in early Chinese thought personal normative ideals tend to be articulated through role models or ideal types for the agent to emulate. Instead of pursuing happiness or well-being, the agent seeks to perform a role well or live

up to a role model. For these and other reasons to be developed below, ethical discussion generally is not framed around the topic of psychological happiness or individual well-being.

As with many issues in comparative philosophy, however, the fact that a topic or question is not addressed similarly in two different traditions does not preclude there being a shared frame of reference from which we can explore potentially illuminating comparisons and contrasts. Often, to find such a frame of reference we need only shift to a higher level of abstraction and consider whether there is some similar purpose filled by concepts or theories in one tradition that is filled by different concepts or theories in the other. Presumably, the point of discussing happiness in the sense of well-being is to investigate what the good is for the individual agent and by extension what sort of life counts as a good life specifically in being good for the agent whose life it is. The point of discussing happiness as a psychological state may be to understand what it is, to consider whether it is indeed valuable, and to see how it fits into the good life. Even if happiness per se is not a prominent topic in early Chinese thought, the texts present much material relevant to the issue of what sort of life is good for agents themselves and what role various mental states overlapping psychological happiness might have in the good life. Moreover, by considering what early texts say about the justification for and content of the *dào*, we may be able to plausibly attribute to them an implicit stance on happiness.

This essay aims to contribute to comparative inquiry along these lines via a case study of the ethics of Xúnzǐ 荀子 (fl. ca. 250 BC),⁴ who along with Confucius and Mencius was one of the three major classical Confucian thinkers. Xúnzǐ is an appropriate subject because of the richness and detail of his ethical theory and moral psychology and because Xúnzǐan writings strike a balance between treating the *dào* from a social perspective and considering the standpoint of the individual. Xúnzǐ had the most successful public career among the leading pre-imperial Confucian thinkers whose texts have come down to us, and his ethical system was highly influential during his lifetime and long afterward. He was the dominant figure shaping late classical and early imperial Confucian philosophy, and so his views are representative of a vital, significant strand within the Confucian tradition.⁵

While Xúnzǐ employs no concept with a theoretical role that maps neatly onto happiness as either well-being or a psychological state, we will find that to some extent his ethics does address happiness in both senses, although it is admittedly a peripheral subject for him. By contrast with Aristotle, for instance, for Xúnzǐ the happy life or well-being of the individual is not a central good or end but more of a byproduct of his ethical and political concerns. The same can be said of the concepts in Xúnzǐ that overlap most with psychological happiness. Nevertheless, he clearly does present a cluster of concepts and theoretical commitments that fill the place of happiness, mainly through his view of human excellence and of a good life grounded in the normative ideal of the gentleman (*jūnzǐ* 君子). I will argue that

we can justifiably infer a tacit view of happiness in the sense of well-being from his ethical theory and that this view may be instructive for contemporary reflection on happiness. My discussion will mainly treat happiness in the well-being sense but where indicated will also touch on happiness in the psychological sense.

The next section surveys Xúnzǐ's ethical theory in order to elucidate the theoretical background to his view of the good life and human well-being. The following section sketches the dimension of well-being with which he is primarily concerned: social or collective well-being. Section 4 then examines various aspects of individual well-being implied by his discussions of the individual agent and the *dào*. This examination reveals a surprising feature of Xúnzǐ's implicit conception of individual well-being: his working conception of the good or happy life for the individual emphasizes aesthetic values that are not salient in his ethical theory. Section 4 proposes that the prudential, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of Xúnzǐ's view of well-being unite in the ideal figure of the gentleman. To better illustrate his view of a life that is good or happy for the individual, then, section 5 collates various descriptions into a general portrayal of the gentleman's lifestyle. This portrayal calls attention to a puzzling gap in Xúnzǐ's ethics, which is considered in the penultimate section: his implicit conception of well-being or happiness significantly outruns anything his explicit ethical theory can justify. I conclude that this gap signals an intriguing divergence between Xúnzǐ's "official" ethical theory and his actual view of happiness or well-being. His actual view, I suggest in the Conclusion, has general features that may remain illuminating to us today.

II. THE STRUCTURE OF XÚNZǏ'S ETHICS

Xúnzǐ's ethics is structurally similar to rule consequentialism,⁶ although he conceives of his ethical system not as a body of rules but as a *dào* (way). The central norms of Xúnzǐ's *dào* are articulated in "the system of ritual and propriety" (3/37),⁷ which he considers "the ultimate human *dào*" (19/34). "Ritual" or "ceremony" (*lǐ* 禮) refers to an extensive framework of ritualized patterns of conduct ranging from everyday norms of etiquette and personal comportment, such as handshaking practices and courteous speech, to rites of passage, such as weddings and funerals, to state ceremonies and political protocol. It stipulates not only proper actions but appropriate speech, dress, accessories, decor, gestures, posture, and expressions. Particular ritual norms may sometimes be expressed as rules, but often they are more like dance choreography or implicit present-day norms governing how and when to shake hands or how far to stand from the other passengers in a lift. "Propriety" (*yì* 義) refers to the responsibilities or duties associated with various roles in the system of ritual—what is considered proper for agents occupying various roles to do in various circumstances. Ritual provides a formal guide to proper conduct; propriety refers to the status of appropriateness

or rightness associated with ritually correct activity. In classical Chinese thought generally, *yì* refers also to “right” or “duty” and has a connotation overlapping that of “ethical” or “moral.” So for Xúnzǐ the normative sphere that we label “ethics” or “morality” is not fully distinct from etiquette, decorum, sacred rites, civil ceremonies, and courtly protocol.

The norms of conduct embodied in the system of ritual and propriety are not something people can discover for themselves, whether through reason, intuition, or experience. Neither a faculty of reason nor intuition has any role in Xúnzǐ’s philosophical psychology. Nor are these norms the subject of divine revelation. Xúnzǐ is a rigorous naturalist and atheist and expressly states that the *dào* is not something found in nature but the product of human activity (8/24, 19/78–79). Specifically, the *dào* of ritual and propriety is the invention of an elite group of cultural heroes: the ancient sage-kings, especially the founders of the Zhōu dynasty, who lived around 1046 BC, more than seven centuries before Xúnzǐ’s time. The sage-kings instituted these norms to rectify the social chaos resulting from an original ethical and political state of nature. For Xúnzǐ and other classical Chinese thinkers, values are typically conceptualized through a pair of contrasting positive and negative terms. The fundamental value on which the sage-kings acted—and thus the value by which the system of ritual and propriety is justified—is “order” (*zhì* 治, also “control” or “govern”), which contrasts with “disorder” or “chaos” (*luàn* 亂). To Xúnzǐ, order seems to have both intrinsic and instrumental value. It is a good, in and of itself, and it is also a crucial means of securing other goods, such as economic welfare and the objects of people’s material desires. Thus Xúnzǐ explains the origin of ritual (*lǐ*) in this way:

From what did ritual arise? I say: People by birth have desires. Desiring something without obtaining it, they cannot fail to seek it. Seeking things without measures or boundaries, they cannot fail to come into conflict. Conflict leads to disorder and disorder to poverty. The former kings abhorred such disorder, so they instituted rituals and propriety to divide (*fēn* 分) them, so as to provide for (*yǎng* 養) people’s desires and give them what they seek. They ensured that desires would not be deprived of goods and goods would not be inadequate for desires. The two support each other and develop together. This is how ritual arose. (19/1–3)

This brief excerpt expresses many core features of Xúnzǐ’s ethics and moral psychology. As a matter of their biological functioning—here expressed by the word *shēng* 生, referring to birth, growth, and life—people have desires or wants, which prompt them to seek the objects they desire. Xúnzǐ focuses on brute desires stemming from our inherent nature, or *xìng* 性, which refers to “that by which *shēng* (birth, growth, life) is so” (22/2). These include desires for sensual gratification and for food, warmth, and rest, along with a preference for material benefit and an aversion to harm.⁸ If people’s desires go unsatisfied, then without education or supervision they tend to pursue what they desire without restraint or regard

for “boundaries”—divisions or limits that would regulate their actions and determine which agents should receive which goods. Such unchecked “seeking” brings people into conflict, yielding disorder and hence collective destitution. Unlike the more familiar Hobbesian scenario, in Xúnzǐ’s imagined state of nature individual agents do not band together and contract with a sovereign to resolve the pervasive chaos, which they recognize as detrimental to everyone’s interests. Rather, epochal cultural heroes intervene, rectifying the conflict and securing good order by establishing a system of ritual and propriety that “divides” or “apportions” (*fēn*) people, assigning them social roles, duties, and corresponding allotments of material resources, thereby subjecting their seeking behavior to measures and setting boundaries for it.

The concept of “divisions,” “portions,” or “parts” (*fēn*) is tightly interwoven with Xúnzǐ’s conception of ritual and propriety and their function in constituting social order. As he uses it, the term “divide” or “division” (*fēn*) can refer to roles and ranks, powers and duties, and allotments or shares. It is thus shorthand for various roles and jobs within the community, different statuses and relations to others, and each person’s allotted share of society’s material resources. It is coextensive with what Xúnzǐ calls the “grading” or “ranking” of people (*rén lún* 人倫, 4/77, also “human relations”), or each person’s rank and role within the clan and the state. The implicit model of organization is a collective endeavor such as the performance of a symphony or ballet. Good order is achieved when everyone is assigned a part—a “division” or “portion”—to perform within a coherent, interlocking system of roles, their collective activity being coordinated under the direction of a leader. Xúnzǐ’s conception of order (*zhi*) is thus not simply the absence of conflict, violence, or crime and the existence of social cooperation and coordination. It involves a specific, thick conception of social organization and individuals’ roles and conduct within the organizational structure.

Central to this conception is that the social structure established by the system of ritual and propriety is steeply hierarchical, apportioning greater power and wealth to some than to others. For Xúnzǐ, hierarchy is an essential ingredient of sociopolitical order. Unless some people have rank and power over others, any scarcity of material goods will lead to conflict, disorder, and poverty.

If divisions (*fēn*) are equivalent, then no one is favored; if power is equal, then people are not united; if the masses have equal rank, then they cannot be commanded. There being heaven and earth, there is a difference between superior and subordinate. Only when an enlightened king is established is the state governed according to proper regulation. That two people of equally high rank cannot serve each other, that two of equally low rank cannot command each other, this is a formula of nature. Power and status being equal and desires and dislikes the same, if material goods cannot satisfy everyone, there will surely be conflict. Conflict surely leads to disorder and disorder to poverty. The former kings abhorred such disorder, so they instituted rituals and propriety to divide (*fēn*) them, making there be the ranks of poor and

rich, noble and lowly, sufficient for everyone together to be supervised.
This is the basis for providing for (*yǎng* 養) all under heaven. (9/15–18)

Conflict over limited resources is prevented by instituting a social and political system in which different individuals have different degrees of power and status. Those with greater status and power command the rest, thereby unifying everyone's efforts under their direction. The system determines the distribution of goods, allotting more and finer goods to those of higher status, fewer and poorer goods to those of lower status, but ensuring that everyone has enough to meet basic needs. Presumably, those of low status and power cooperate with this arrangement either because, through persuasion or indoctrination, they accept that general conformity is needed to maintain the good order that stands between them and destitution or because of the threat of coercion. (Xúnzǐ enthusiastically advocates mutilating punishments for nonconformity, 15/97–98.)

The passage just cited closes with a pivotal claim: the system of ritual and propriety is purportedly “the basis for providing for all under heaven” (that is, everyone in the world). Consistent with his theory about the origin of ritual and propriety and the system's role in preventing economic destitution, Xúnzǐ repeatedly ties ethical norms to the concept of *yǎng*, “providing for,” “sustaining,” or “nurturing.” The word “*yǎng*” can refer to raising and caring for children, providing for aged parents, or raising or keeping domestic animals, including pets. It can also refer to developing, cultivating, or maintaining something, as when Xúnzǐ speaks of cultivating and maintaining (*yǎng*) harmony among the populace (10/100). So “*yǎng*” probably connotes providing for people's purely material needs while also nurturing their overall welfare. The implication of Xúnzǐ's claim, then, is that ritual and propriety are an indispensable means of fulfilling the economic needs of all members of society while also caring for them so that they grow into and sustain a healthy, flourishing state. One obvious way the system aims to do this is by preventing conflict and maintaining social order and stability, thus allowing people to devote themselves to economic activity rather than worrying about personal security. Beyond this, however, the hierarchical structure of social ranks and roles coordinates people's activities so that they function effectively as a unified community. It establishes a division of labor by which people can cooperate in jointly providing for all far more richly than any could provide for themselves as individuals.

Without a sovereign to regulate subjects, without superiors to regulate subordinates, all the harms under heaven arise from indulging desires. People desire and dislike the same goods; desires are many but goods are few. If goods are few, there will surely be conflict. So, the products of the hundred crafts are needed to provide for (*yǎng*) just a single person. But no competence can cover every craft, and no person can fill every office. If people reside separately and do not depend on each other, they will be impoverished; if they live in a community but lack divisions (*fēn*), they will come into conflict. Poverty is adversity; conflict

is misfortune. To relieve adversity and eliminate misfortune, nothing is better than employing the community by clarifying divisions. (10/4–7)

The “divisions” that are the crux of the system of ritual and propriety are thus the key to human social and economic life. They are what enable people to live as a community and to “provide for” and “develop” themselves. As Xúnzǐ says, “The *dào* of collective sufficiency for all under heaven lies in clarifying divisions” (10/43). Indeed, he holds that forming communities organized by “divisions” based on norms of propriety is a distinguishing characteristic of human life. In a striking passage, he states that what sets humans apart from other animals is not our greater cognitive capacities, nor indeed any aspect of our capacities or lives as separate individuals. It is our collective capacity as social creatures to realize norms of propriety or morality (*yì*).

Water and fire have *qì* 氣 but no life;⁹ grass and trees have life but no cognition; birds and beasts have cognition but no propriety (*yì*); people have *qì*, life, cognition, and also propriety, so they are the noblest among all under heaven. Their strength does not equal oxen, their speed does not equal horses, yet oxen and horses are used by them. Why? I say, people can form communities, those animals cannot. How can people form communities? I say, by divisions (*fēn*). How can divisions be put into practice? I say, by propriety (*yì*). So if propriety is used as a basis for divisions, there will be harmony; if there is harmony, there is unity; if there is unity, there is much force; if there is much force, there is strength; if there is strength, people can overcome things, so they can reside securely in palaces and homes. So people can arrange the four seasons in sequence, control the myriad things, and inclusively benefit all under heaven for no other reason than that they obtain these things from norms of propriety concerning divisions.

So people from birth cannot lack a community. If they have a community but lack divisions, there will be conflict. If there is conflict, there is disorder; if there is disorder, there is separation; if there is separation, there is weakness; and if there is weakness, they cannot overcome things, so they cannot reside securely in palaces and homes. This is what is referred to by “ritual and propriety cannot be abandoned even for a moment.” (9/69–74)

To live a flourishing human life, maintaining good order and promoting material prosperity, people must combine their strengths into a harmonious community. The key to such communal life, according to Xúnzǐ, is to impose the appropriate scheme of “divisions”: members of the community must be allocated roles, duties, and corresponding emoluments according to standards of propriety (*yì*). Without “divisions,” conflict and disorder will arise, people will “separate” from one another, and they will fail to live fully human lives. But only a single scheme of divisions can ensure harmony and social unity: the rituals and propriety of the “former kings,” which constitutes “the *dào* of dwelling in a community and harmonizing as one” (4/74). Hence it is critical to abide by ritual and propriety, lest the uniquely orderly and effective social structure it institutes collapse. Elsewhere,

Xúnzǐ underscores these points by asking, “What is it by which people are people?” His answer is that “they have distinctions (*biàn* 辨) Of distinctions, none are greater than divisions (*fēn*); of divisions, none are greater than rituals; and of rituals, none are greater than those of the sage-kings” (5/23–28). The characteristic feature of humanity is that we draw normatively significant distinctions. Unlike other animals, we have not only the biological differences between parent and child or male and female, for instance, but norms of propriety governing how fathers and sons or men and women are to treat one another. In principle, according to Xúnzǐ, there could be a plurality of systems of such distinctions, but the greatest are those embodied in the norms of ritual and propriety handed down from the Zhōu sage-kings.

Against this background, Xúnzǐ actually equates ritual with provision or sustenance: “So ritual is provision (*yǎng*)” (19/3). Partly he is referring to how ritual and propriety sustain people’s basic material needs by preventing disorder and poverty. Partly he has in mind how rituals allocate various goods to “provide for” the senses—foods and flavors for the mouth, scents for the nose, decorations for the eye, musical instruments for the ear, and buildings and furniture for the body (19/3–5). But beyond these points, he also means that people who commit to ritual and propriety will find that their needs are provided for, while those who disregard these norms will generally find themselves in distress. Ritual and propriety constitute the only sustainable, regulated system for “providing for” people’s desires in the long run (4/67–68). So whole-hearted devotion to ritual and propriety is actually the most effective means of fulfilling the desires that arise in all of us spontaneously due to the “feelings” (*qíng* 情, affects and preferences) that issue from our nature (*xìng*). These include the desire for life, wealth, security or ease, and sensual gratification:

Who knows that maintaining proper measure even in the face of death is the means of providing for (*yǎng*) life? Who knows that expenditure is the means of providing for wealth? Who knows that respect and deference are the means of providing for security? Who knows that ritual, propriety, and good form and order are the means of providing for one’s feelings? So if people have in view only life, they will surely die; if they have in view only benefit, they will surely come to harm; if they take security to lie in indolence and idleness, they will surely endanger themselves; if they take pleasure to lie in delighting their feelings, they will surely be destroyed. So if people devote themselves to ritual and propriety, they gain both. [They fulfill the norms of ritual and propriety while also providing for their desire for life, material profit, ease, and enjoyment.] If they devote themselves to their feelings (*qíng*) and inborn nature (*xìng*), they lose both. (9/9–12)

Society as a whole can survive and flourish only by collective conformity to ritual and propriety, and individuals will regularly attain a higher level of material provision by devoting themselves to ritual and propriety than by directly pursuing what they desire.

Xúnzǐ's claim here is not that ritual and propriety deliver delayed gratification of desires, although in practice delayed gratification may result. Nor is he claiming that the system of ritual and propriety will fulfill everyone's desires. To the contrary, he holds that the "apportioning" imposed by ritual and propriety is required precisely because the supply of goods is never sufficient to satisfy the desires of all members of the community. Not even the emperor's desires can be fully satisfied; nor do the desires of a lowly doorman subside merely because they go unfulfilled (22/64–65). The point of ritual and propriety is to provide a way to "manage," "guide," or "control" desires even when they cannot be satisfied (4/64, 22/56). Regardless of what desires we do or do not have, we can learn to conduct ourselves according to ritual and propriety and thus achieve harmonious and productive outcomes (22/60–62).¹⁰ Xúnzǐ is not even claiming that ritual and propriety will definitely satisfy each individual's desires better than any alternative *dào* the person might follow. In exceptional cases, he admits, virtuous conduct may fail to yield security and vicious conduct may go unpunished. However, the gentleman guides himself by what is "regular" or "reliable," not by exceptions (4/41–42). Xúnzǐ's claim is that community-wide adherence to ritual and propriety will provide for people's desires more consistently and reliably than any alternative.

The *dào* of ritual and propriety functions this way for several reasons, Xúnzǐ maintains. First, in practice, when we make choices on the basis of what we desire or dislike, we never only obtain what we desire or avoid what we dislike. The outcome is always mixed, and judging whether the advantages of some outcome will really outweigh the disadvantages can be difficult. The *dào* provides a reliable "scale" by which to determine what courses of action will genuinely prove fortunate or misfortunate (22/71–74). Another reason is that people who neglect the proper "patterns" (*lǐ* 理) embodied in ritual and propriety "make themselves slaves to things," investing too much in external things and placing themselves in dangerous situations. This path leaves them anxious and fearful, rendering them unable to appreciate whatever abundance of goods they manage to obtain. Thus they fail to genuinely "provide for" (*yǎng*) themselves. By contrast, those who follow the *dào* are so peaceful and contented that even goods of less than mediocre quality are enough to "provide for" them (22/78–88). A third reason is that, according to Xúnzǐ, ritual and propriety simply suit human tastes better than any alternative *dào* would. Given a taste of gourmet cooking, he claims, even someone who had previously eaten only a crude, rough diet would immediately prefer it. Analogously, anyone who experiences social life according to "the *dào* of the former kings" will prefer it (4/52–56).

What explains this purportedly unique effectiveness in providing for people's desires? Xúnzǐ implies that the norms of ritual and propriety are efficacious because they correspond to patterns in the natural world. The *dào* is a human *dào*, created by the sage-kings, and not the *dào* of heaven above or earth below (8/24). Yet it organizes and sustains society successfully because of how it "responds" to the "regular" processes of heaven or nature: "There is regularity in the processes

of heaven If you respond to them with order, good fortune follows; if you respond to them with disorder, misfortune follows” (17/1). Hence Xúnzǐ can claim that ritual and propriety are a cultural construct, the product of the sage-kings’ “artifice” (*wei* 偽), while also claiming that the social distinctions they articulate are “of the same pattern as heaven and earth and the same duration as a myriad generations” (9/67) and that the hierarchical social structure they incorporate is a “formula of nature” akin to there being heaven above and earth below.¹¹ The natural world does not come prepackaged into normatively significant divisions: these must be created by the sage-kings (19/78–79). But the scheme of divisions that functions most effectively does so because it “aligns into a triad” with heaven and earth—that is, the natural world. “Heaven has its seasons, earth has its resources, humanity has its order (*zhi*)—this is what’s called “being able to align” (17/7–8).

This last remark also helpfully reflects the priority of the concept of order in Xúnzǐ’s thought. Xúnzǐ repeatedly contends that the *dào* of the sage-kings yields material prosperity and provides for people’s desires. Hence he often appears to give consequentialist justifications for his *dào* that appeal to prudential goods supposedly achieved through ritual and propriety. However, these goods are not the basic values of his ethical theory. He does not contend, for instance, that whatever system of norms maximizes prosperity and desire fulfillment is thereby justified. Rather, his view is that the *dào* is justified because it brings about good order (*zhi*), which then, additionally, facilitates the provision of various prudential goods. Indeed, in practice he sometimes seems to equate ritual and propriety with order. Hence it is difficult—and perhaps misguided—to classify his normative theory conclusively as either consequentialist or deontological. Order for him could be a prudential good achieved through the practice of ritual and propriety, in which case his theory would be a brand of indirect consequentialism. But he might regard order as an ethically admirable state of affairs constituted by collective adherence to ritual and propriety, in which case his view could be deontological. I will reconsider the exact role of order for Xúnzǐ and the relation between order, ritual, and propriety again in the penultimate section of the paper, where these topics will prove crucial in interpreting how his ethics relates to happiness.

III. SOCIAL WELL-BEING

Xúnzǐ’s ethical and political theory presents a conception of social flourishing founded on establishing and maintaining proper sociopolitical order. Order is constituted by a hierarchical social system in which each person has a role or part—a “division”—along with corresponding duties and rewards, as stipulated by the norms of ritual and propriety. Such a system yields social unity, since the division of labor it institutes enables all of society to act in coordination. According to Xúnzǐ, cooperative social endeavor according to a shared conception of propriety

is what raises humanity above all other living creatures and enables a distinctively human form of life. Proper social order brings human activity into alignment with the regular patterns of nature, thus facilitating agricultural and economic prosperity. Maintaining order prevents conflicts over resources, while employing a division of labor in cooperative projects yields prosperity and security. The result is that all members of society are materially “provided for” better than they would be without the system.

As this summary indicates, the fundamental form of human well-being or flourishing in Xúnzǐ’s ethics and politics is a collective, cultural achievement. It is secured through the unified efforts of the community under a hierarchical leadership, following traditional models of conduct established by ancient geniuses. It is inherently social, constituted by community-wide performance of a set of interdependent roles, much as the performance of an opera or a drama is.¹² It is also inherently cultural, in that Xúnzǐ insists it is in no respect a product, development, or realization of people’s *xìng*—their inherent nature or innate, spontaneous tendencies. Nor is it immanent in “heaven and earth,” the natural world. Rather, social well-being was initially achieved through the artifice or action (*wei*) of the sage-kings, who imposed orderly form and pattern on nature—including people’s nature—to regulate or control it.

A fully human life for Xúnzǐ is thus not a development or an extension of naturally occurring tendencies, dispositions, or capacities of the individual. It is a distinctively cultural form of life that takes us beyond anything furnished by nature alone. Given only our natural endowment from birth, according to Xúnzǐ, we would be vulgar, petty people concerned only with our own benefit (4/49–50). Fortunately, however, we can be transformed into something other than mere nature (*xìng*). Xúnzǐ’s explanation of such transformation (*huà* 化) is that behavior is a matter of action or artifice (*wei*), movement arising from the heart’s selecting things (22/3–4) on the basis of an attitude of approval (22/55–63). What people approve can be modified through education, practice, and habituation. Their character is thus the product not just of their inherent nature and abilities but of the choices they have “accumulated” (*jī* 積) and the practices they have followed. A major function of government for Xúnzǐ is to shape these practices through ritual and propriety, laws and administration, and penalties and punishments so that people “accumulate” orderly, good habits (23/39–41). Competent leaders seek to “transform them by clarifying ritual and propriety” (23/40, 15/95) and so bring about what the Confucian tradition calls “transformation through education” (*jiào huà* 教化, 15/38). The orderly, virtuous individual’s character and conduct are thus also social products, the result not just of the individual’s efforts but of norms passed down from the sage-kings, the guidance of political leaders, the instructions of teachers, and the encouragement of mentors and peers.

Extending remarks offered in the introduction, we can now highlight several factors that help clarify why no notion roughly equivalent to happiness is prominent in Xúnzǐ’s ethics. His chief theoretical concern is with social order and the

flourishing of the community, not the individual, and thus not with individual happiness or well-being. What we might consider well-being he treats as a rough list of goods, rather than a single, overarching good, and he has no inclination to reduce or sum this list into a sole, unifying good or end. His core goods pertain to the material welfare of the community, not the psychological states of individuals—unlike happiness in classical utilitarianism, for example. Nor does he regard well-being as the good functioning of the individual's inherent capacities, as for instance Aristotle does in tying *eudaimonia* to people's inherent *ergon* (work, function). To the contrary, for Xúnzǐ, ritual and propriety exist to help people control the disorderly, self-destructive behavior that follows from indulging the spontaneous responses of their "ugly" nature (*xìng*).¹³ The aim of ethical development is to transform people away from their natural functioning and toward "artificial," cultural refinement. To be sure, Xúnzǐ contends that the *dào* of ritual and propriety is what makes us distinctively human, and so in some respect it represents the fullest realization of human capacities. But the characteristic features of human life on which he grounds this contention are attributes of communities, not individuals, and thus do not map easily onto our conception of happiness as either a psychological state or well-being.

IV. INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

Insofar as "happiness" and "well-being" are labels for a state that provides a coherent, overarching end in life—a criterion by which to judge a life good for the agent whose life it is—Xúnzǐ does not employ an analogous term. He does not measure the goodness of a person's life or the degree of well-being it achieves as a matter of how happy it is. As we have seen, however, he does discuss how well different paths a person might follow yield what he calls "provision" (*yǎng*). His claims about ritual and propriety seem to imply that since they are the key to providing for people effectively, they are the path to a good life for the individual. Xúnzǐ's concept of provision thus may offer a fruitful starting point from which to explore his implicit view of individual well-being.

We can infer a loose, preliminary conception of individual well-being from the goods that Xúnzǐ contends ritual and propriety provide members of the community. These include life, material wealth, security, the sensual gratification of the mouth, nose, eye, ear, and body, and the enjoyment of the feelings or affective states (19/3–12). Other goods he mentions are honor (4/33) and high social status (4/72). He explicitly states that all of these are goods that everyone seeks. I suggest, then, that he implicitly regards them as jointly contributing to what we would consider individual well-being. Indeed, the emphasis he places on how ritual and propriety are the most effective means of providing (*yǎng*) such goods strongly hints that they jointly play a role roughly comparable to happiness. Suppose, for

instance, we think of happiness along Aristotelian lines as an ultimate good or end pursued for its own sake, rather than for the sake of other goods. By comparison, Xúnzǐ repeatedly expresses sentiments such as that “for people nothing is more valued than life, nothing more enjoyable than security; as to the means of providing life and finding security in enjoyment, nothing is greater than ritual and propriety” (16/46–47).

Xúnzǐ refers to his conception of propriety, duty, or right as a “propriety of divisions” (*fēn yì* 分義)—a system of norms associated with different social roles, such as ruler or subject, officer, farmer, merchant, artisan, father or son, elder or younger brother, and male or female. Among the various roles or types he recognizes, one stands out as especially relevant to understanding individual well-being or the happy life: the resolute, refined “gentleman” (*jūnzǐ*). The gentleman is a cultivated, admirable person who has trained himself to consistently practice the norms of ritual and propriety.¹⁴ Xúnzǐ follows the Confucian tradition in presenting the gentleman as an idealized exemplar that many of us could potentially live up to through education and practice. The gentleman contrasts with the vulgar “little person” or “petty person” (*xiǎo rén* 小人), a crude, uncouth character who indulges his nature (*xìng*) and rejects or ignores the proper *dào*.¹⁵ Beyond the gentleman is the “sage,” the perfected virtuoso of ritual and propriety, who exercises unerring judgment and superlative practical competence. Xúnzǐ encourages us to pursue the sage ideal, affirming that anyone could in principle become a sage. In practice, however, few have the dedication and talent to do so, whereas many of us could realistically achieve the status of “gentleman.” Hence I will focus here on the figure of the gentleman.¹⁶

Xúnzǐ stresses that the gentleman and petty person share the same basic values. The difference between them lies in the different paths they follow in pursuit of these values.

So if a person knows to be prudent in his practices and careful in his customs and to expand accumulation and training, he will become a gentleman. If he indulges his feelings and nature (*xìng*) and does not esteem learning, he will be a petty person. Being a gentleman, one is consistently secure and honored; being a petty person, one is consistently endangered and disgraced. All people desire security and honor and detest danger and disgrace. So only the gentleman is able to obtain what he prefers; as to the petty person, he meets daily with what he detests. (8/116–118)

Xúnzǐ’s descriptions of the similarities and differences between the gentleman and the petty person help confirm that his general conception of personal well-being or of life going well for the individual lies in the goods that ritual and propriety supposedly provide—which contribute to the person’s “security”—plus the social or ethical status of “honor.” The above passage is typical in extending the consequentialist argument for ritual and propriety from the social sphere to the personal. In this passage and others—many of which have a pedagogical tone—Xúnzǐ

seems to be affirming to pupils or potential converts that commitment to the gentleman ideal is the most effective path to achieving what everyone would consider a good, happy life.

Such remarks may seem to frame the *dào* of the gentleman instrumentally, presenting it as an effective means of pursuing self-interest. Positioning the gentleman ideal this way could help motivate the uncommitted or justify Xúnzǐ's ethics to those who share values such as security and honor but are as yet unconvinced that ritual and propriety are the proper *dào*. I suggest that Xúnzǐ's underlying point is more subtle, however. Everyone will agree, he expects, that security and honor are features of the good, admirable, or happy life. Yet only the gentleman can reliably or consistently enjoy these features. The life of the gentleman is thus by anyone's standards a good one—what we would label a happy life, in the well-being sense. The message Xúnzǐ aims to drive home is that this life is not attained by aiming directly at widely shared goods such as security and honor. It is attained by devoting oneself to the *dào* of ritual and propriety.¹⁷

The passage quoted above emphasizes security and honor rather than satisfaction of material desires. Like many of Xúnzǐ's key terms, the word rendered "security" here, "ān 安," has no convenient English equivalent. Besides security, it connotes ease, calm, comfort, tranquillity, and peace of mind. It can refer to physical safety, bodily comfort, psychological contentment, and a sense of belonging or being at home. Indeed, although "ān" is clearly distinct in content from our vague, commonsense notion of happiness, it may be the concept in Xúnzǐ that most extensively overlaps the psychological sense of "happiness," and it is clearly a substantial component of a Xúnzian view of well-being.¹⁸ Hence it is instructive to observe further how Xúnzǐ uses it. For instance, one passage describes the feelings (*qíng*) of a person who consistently conforms to ritual as being "secure (*ān*) in ritual" (2/38). The person has so habituated himself to ritual that he feels fully at home in and content with it. Another passage contrasts the gentleman and the petty person by remarking on how the gentleman's habits render him secure and at home (*ān*) in the elegant culture of ritual and propriety.

In material and nature (*xìng*), knowledge and ability, the gentleman and the petty person are one. Preferring honor and detesting disgrace, preferring benefit and detesting harm, these are respects in which the gentleman and the petty person are the same. As to the *dào* by which they seek them, it is different. ... So, by thoroughly examining the knowledge and abilities of the petty person, one can know he has more than enough: it's possible for him to do what the gentleman does. To give an analogy, people of Yuè are secure (*ān*) in Yuè, people of Chǔ are secure in Chǔ the gentleman is secure in refinement. It's not that his knowledge and ability or material and nature are so; it's that how he moderates his practices and customs is different. (4/32–41)

In Xúnzǐ's view, people all have the same inborn dispositions and abilities and the same starting point for ethical development. They all value honorable status and material benefit. The reliable path to obtaining these goods is that of the

gentleman. One becomes a gentleman through habits and practices that effect a cultural transformation, by a process like that by which one assimilates to a new culture. The culture in which the gentleman dwells is “refinement” (*yǎ* 雅, also “elegance” or “urbanity”). In refinement, he is secure, at ease, content, and at home—the various connotations of “n”—just as inhabitants of various lands are at home in their native culture. The gentleman thus enjoys well-being or a happy life partly in that his *dào* more reliably provides goods that everyone values, but also in that he enjoys a distinctive source of security, contentment, and belonging—in effect, a new home culture of “refinement.”

“Refinement,” I propose, expresses the crux of Xúnzǐ’s implicit view of the good life for the individual. Refinement (*yǎ*) is one of a cluster of aesthetic notions Xúnzǐ associates with ritual and propriety, the others including *wén* 文 (good form), *lǐ* 理 (proper pattern or organization), *shì* 飾 (decoration, ornamentation), *měi* 美 (beauty), *chéng* 成 (completion, perfection), and perhaps also *zhì* 治 (order). These notions jointly indicate a further dimension of personal flourishing associated with the gentleman, a dimension that runs parallel to Xúnzǐ’s account of social order and extends beyond the goods he includes when discussing material provision (*yǎng*). For Xúnzǐ, social flourishing lies in realizing the ideal of social order articulated through ritual and propriety. Ritual and propriety impose a normative cultural pattern on a chaotic state of nature and set humanity apart from animals. Society thrives by becoming orderly, prosperous, and realizing a characteristically human form of communal life. One aspect of individual flourishing is to perform one’s role well within this social order. But additionally, according to Xúnzǐ, dedication to and habituation in ritual and propriety also render the individual *qua* individual orderly, refined, and beautiful and thus realize a distinctive ethical-aesthetic ideal of the good individual life.¹⁹ Just as society flourishes collectively through ritual and propriety, so too does the individual *qua* individual—or at least so too does the gentleman, the individual who most fully embodies the system. The gentleman thrives partly through provision of his basic needs and through his contribution to collective flourishing. But a further respect in which he flourishes is that, through the study and practice of ritual and propriety, he transforms himself from an ignorant boor who indulges his ugly, inborn nature to a beautiful, elegant person who has patterned and decorated himself to perfection.

Xúnzǐ’s aesthetic descriptions of the gentleman, I suggest, present a view of the happy or excellent life that transcends his basic view of well-being as lying in adequate provision of goods such as life, wealth, security, sensual gratification, honor, and social status. The gentlemanly life of refinement and culture purports to sustain the individual’s basic material and psychological needs, but its paramount concerns are lofty ideals of personal order and beauty. The aesthetic aspect of the gentleman ideal evokes the sage-kings’ original reason for establishing ritual and propriety: they “loathed” or “abhorred” the disorder of the primal state of nature and thus found it not just prudentially detrimental but ethically or

aesthetically repugnant. Again, although he seems genuinely concerned with fulfilling people's prudential needs, Xúnzǐ's fundamental value remains order (*zhì*), which may be partly or even predominantly an aesthetic notion for him.

These reflections on Xúnzǐ's conception of individual flourishing enable us to develop further our explanation of why his ethics does not explicitly emphasize happiness. As I suggested in the introduction, he conceives of the excellent life as a matter of emulating an ideal role model—the gentleman—which we now see is defined by its relation to a conception of social flourishing. Rather than focusing on the flourishing of the individual *qua* individual, he considers the consequences for the individual of a wholehearted commitment to the social *dào* of ritual and propriety. The gentleman ideal is characterized mainly by the individual's relation to the *dào*—his devotion to, embodiment of, and finding security and peace in it—instead of by any inherent feature of the individual himself. Xúnzǐ would surely contend that the gentleman enjoys a high degree of individual well-being. But this well-being stems from how the gentleman's life manifests the *dào* of good social order. Even the aesthetic features of the flourishing individual life derive from the orderly patterns of social interaction instituted by the sage-kings.

V. THE LIFE OF THE GENTLEMAN

For Xúnzǐ, the analogue of the happy life is the life of the gentleman. To get a fuller picture of Xúnzǐ's ethics, then, it is crucial to consider just what the life of the gentleman is like. For the good life according to Xúnzǐ may surprise contemporary readers by its stringency, complexity, and obsessive devotion to minutiae.

Xúnzǐ explains that one becomes a gentleman through extended training and practice—his term is “accumulation” (*jī*)—in ritual and propriety (8/114), along with the classical Confucian syllabus of poetry, music, and history (1/28–30). The foundation of the gentleman's life is an absolute, all-consuming dedication to the study and practice of this body of expertise in the company of like-minded fellows under the instruction of a teacher (1/34, 2/37). The study of ritual and propriety “stops only with death” and “can never be abandoned even for an instant,” since “to undertake it is to be human, to abandon it is to be an animal” (1/27–28). The aim is to habituate oneself to the norms of ritual and propriety, repeatedly drilling in them until eventually becoming keen on or fond of them (9/64–65). They provide a disciplined regimen by which to guide all thought and action: one follows ritual in “all employment of the blood and breath, intention, and thought,” “diet, clothing, dwelling, and activity,” and “countenance, bearing, movements, and stride” (2/7–9). Eventually, what the gentleman acquires through study “becomes stable in his heart, is distributed throughout his limbs, and is manifested in his movements” (1/30–31). As a means of managing our unruly inborn nature, ritual also provides orderly, elegant forms by which emotions such as love and respect

can be expressed. For instance, it regulates how joy or sorrow are expressed in one's countenance, voice, diet, dress, and dwelling (19/69–73). To fully “beautify” himself, the gentleman seeks to become “whole” or “complete,” “pure,” and “perfected” or “fully formed” in embodying ritual and propriety, such that he sees, hears, speaks, and thinks only what conforms to them, his commitment to the *dào* being resolute and unshakeable.

The gentleman knows that anything incomplete or impure does not qualify as beautiful. So he recites [what he has learned] repeatedly so as to penetrate it; ponders it so as to comprehend it; emulates those who personify it so as to dwell in it; and eliminates what harms it so as to nurture it. He makes his eyes have no desire to see anything not right, makes his ears have no desire to hear anything not right, makes his mouth have no desire to state anything not right, makes his heart have no desire to think anything not right. He reaches the point of being fonder of it than anything: his eyes are fonder of it than of the five colors, his ears are fonder of it than of the five tones, his mouth is fonder of it than of the five flavors, his heart considers it more beneficial than possessing all under heaven. Thus power and benefit cannot sway him, the masses cannot shift him, nothing under heaven can shake him. To live by this, to die by this—this is called “controlling one’s moral power.” Once he controls power, he is capable of stability; once capable of stability, he is capable of responding to things. Being capable of stability and of responding to things, this is called “a perfected person.” Heaven manifests its brightness, earth manifests its breadth; as to the gentleman, we value his completeness. (1/46–51)

The outcome of the gentleman’s exhaustive self-discipline and habituation is a wholehearted keenness or fondness (*hào 好*) for the *dào* of ritual and propriety. He prefers it to alternative paths of action and so becomes settled in it, such that he automatically responds to changing circumstances in accordance with it. Just as heaven is characterized by its light and earth by its vastness, the gentleman is characterized by his completeness or wholeness in embodying the *dào*.

Ritual and propriety stipulate detailed guidelines for conduct in circumstances ranging from routine everyday settings to major occasions such as weddings and funerals. Xúnzǐ does not spell out the various rituals of everyday life, although his remarks about regulating one’s diet, countenance, clothing, and even gait give an idea of how elaborate they must be. He does mention ritual norms for sacrificial feasts, funerals, and other events, including such particulars as the types of offerings, placement of vessels, order in which offerings are served, style of music, and number and type of musical instruments (19/19–25). Ritual norms prescribe the sorts of ornamentation and music used to acknowledge peace and good fortune, as well as the garments and weeping that acknowledge bad fortune (19/64–65). They specify the minutiae of funerary customs, such as the size of the tomb, the number and type of coffins, the dressing of the corpse, and the type of grave goods. They stipulate precise details of mourning rituals, such as that on the loss of one’s father, one is to hold a wake lasting fifty to seventy days,

followed by burial and then mourning rituals lasting at least twenty-five months (19/57, 19/93–94). During mourning, the survivors move from their home into a small hut, wear sackcloth mourning robes, walk with a cane, eat only thin gruel, and sleep on a mat of twigs with an earthen pillow (19/48–63). As these examples indicate, the content of the ritual norms is concrete and often exhaustive.

Such details illustrate distinctive features of Confucian ethics and the psychological processes by which ritual guides action. Rather than abstract principles or general rules, ethical norms are formulated as particular procedures of ritual etiquette, such as “Remove your hat and bow deeply before ascending the stairs.” This relatively concrete orientation reflects a conception of moral agency as lying in competent performance of repeated patterns of skill-like activity, instead of more abstract processes of reasoning, judgment, or feeling. The actions of the gentleman spring from a complex of concrete habits and skills. Action is understood along the lines of performance of an art or a skill, akin to playing a Beethoven piano sonata or refereeing a football game. For the adherent of Xúnzǐ’s *dào*, nearly all activity is ritualized to some degree, and character development largely amounts to acquiring virtuosity in performing the rituals, much as one acquires competence and eventually artistry in a musical instrument or a sport.²⁰

Alongside these positive descriptions, Xúnzǐ highlights activities the gentleman avoids. The gentleman is uninterested in scientific investigation, attending only to management of the proper social order and efficient use of resources (12/25). Nor has he any interest in logic or metaphysics (8/23): they contribute nothing to understanding the profundity of ritual (19/30), and ignorance of them does not interfere with becoming a gentleman (8/35). Those who pursue such fields are “crazy louts” guilty of “the highest stupidity” (8/37). The gentleman avoids such vulgar people, along with any others who might challenge his path, shunning anyone not committed to the *dào* (1/41). In conduct and thought, he devotes himself exclusively to what promotes good order and right pattern (8/31–32).

How does the gentleman sustain himself economically? Typically, a gentleman such as Xúnzǐ himself would seek a career as a government official—perhaps a bureaucrat, magistrate, or court official—or as a retainer to a regional nobleman. He could also become a tutor or teacher. An alternative career path might be in ritual itself: as a specialist in ritual protocol, including music and dance, the gentleman could find employment in court ceremonies or in private ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. Such ceremonies were often complex and large in scale and so offered extensive employment opportunities.

VI. XÚNZǏ AND HAPPINESS

Xúnzian ethics offers an implicit conception of the good or happy life centering on the figure of the gentleman, the personification of Xúnzǐ’s social, collective ethical

and political norms. In light of his overall normative theory, however, Xúnzǐ's enthusiasm for the gentleman ideal presents a puzzle. The solution to this puzzle, I will suggest, is that his actual ethical stance diverges somewhat from his explicit normative theory. This tacit stance has intriguing implications for a Xúnzian view of happiness.

As we have seen, Xúnzǐ presents at least three potential justifications for his ethical and political norms. The system of social order established by the sage-kings purportedly has good material consequences, aligns human affairs with the patterns of the natural world, and enables us to live a characteristically human form of social life. All three of these justifications carry over to his account of the gentleman. The gentleman's path is purportedly the most reliable way to provide for his basic needs, brings him personally into alignment with heaven and earth (9/65), and constitutes a refined, beautiful life superior to those of animals and the vulgar.

At an abstract, general level, these three justifications are potentially compelling. Humans inevitably invent norms of what in Xúnzian terminology we might call "cultural patterning," and Xúnzǐ's claim that this feature is characteristic of human life is intriguing and plausible. As he suggests, any sustainable norms must provide for our material needs, solve cooperation and coordination problems, and enable a division of labor and some measure of social unity. To do so, they must align with natural conditions on some general level—farmers must sow and harvest crops at the right times of year, for example.

However, when we consider Xúnzǐ's specific normative commitments, his arguments present a puzzle. At the social level, none of his justifications supports his deep attachment specifically to the Zhōu tradition of ritual and propriety, for surely the same justifications could also support any number of alternative systems of social order. No contemporary community follows Xúnzǐ's norms, for instance, but many seem to maintain social order and prosperity nonetheless. Nor, at the individual level, do his reasons justify the gentleman's absolute dedication to the life of ritual and propriety. Again, surely the discipline and self-control needed for a fulfilling individual and community life could be achieved through any number of less regimented, more relaxed ways of life. Classical opponents of Confucianism were not blind to these problems. Mohist writers considered elaborate Confucian rituals pointless, for example, and Xúnzian-style norms of comportment are parodied in the *Zhuāngzǐ* as a sign that a person is "deficient in understanding people's hearts" (1956, 21/7–12). Xúnzǐ's explicit ethical theory simply does not plausibly support the specific *dào* he so clearly loves and admires. None of his arguments justifies his contention that the *dào* of ritual and propriety passed down from the Zhōu sage-kings is the "greatest" (5/28) or "the ultimate" (19/34).²¹ What, then, grounds his commitment to this *dào*?

The same puzzle arises in a different guise when we consider the relation between order (*zhì*) and provision (*yǎng*) in Xúnzǐ's theory. His official account is that the sage-kings instituted the *dào* to remedy an original state of disorder

and poverty caused by people's unconstrained pursuit of what they desired. He repeatedly claims that the orderly *dào* of ritual and propriety is the best means of providing for people's desires. Yet he never explains precisely how the specific tradition of ritual and propriety he advocates can be expected to provide for everyone more effectively than any alternative system of social organization. To anyone not already indoctrinated into his ethics, the claim that providing for people's needs requires precisely the regimen of ritual that he advocates is wildly implausible. Indeed, the Mohists, his ancient rivals, contended that the Confucian ritual tradition was actually detrimental to order and prosperity, because the rituals wasted time and interfered with productivity. Although Xúnzǐ explicitly ties the value of the gentleman's *dào* to how it provides for the individual's needs, then, "provision" seems too tenuous a justification for such a stringent ideal of the good life. Does Xúnzǐ's explicit rhetoric really reflect his underlying position?

Of course, as we remarked earlier, Xúnzǐ repeatedly states that the sage-kings instituted ritual and propriety because they loathed disorder, not because they sought to provide for people. His stance is that the proper norms of conduct are justified by their efficacy in securing order, not in maximizing material provision. Order, as articulated through ritual and propriety, is his fundamental value. Provision is secondary, part of his explanation of how order yields a flourishing society, since once order is achieved, adequate material provision will follow. Inquiry into his conception of order, I suggest, resolves the puzzle of what actually drives his ethical ideals. As mentioned in Section 2, "order" (*"zhi"*) for him probably entails not just harmonious social relations and the absence of violence, conflict, or crime, as our commonsense conception of public order might. It likely also refers quite specifically to the patterns of individual conduct, social interaction, and political organization specified in the Zhōu cultural tradition. To Xúnzǐ, ritual and propriety may not be instrumental to order so much as constitutive of it. This idiosyncratic conception of good social order is of course unlikely to appeal to any audience who do not already share Xúnzǐ's views. Ultimately, then, I am suggesting, Xúnzǐ's normative arguments do not seriously aim to support his ethics by working from common ground that potential critics might share. They simply explicate his *dào* to those already attracted to it. Xúnzǐ habitually preaches to the choir.²²

Accordingly, I suggest that his esteem for the Zhōu tradition of ritual and propriety is rooted only partly in the explicit reasons he gives for his views. At least as important is his profound personal identification with this cultural tradition—a tradition that in his eyes effectively defines "order." To Xúnzǐ, the patterning and ornamentation of the gentleman's life are probably intrinsically good and beautiful apart from their purported efficacy as a means of provision.²³ For he sees them as the most perfect embodiment of good order—an order that embeds natural events and human affairs in an authoritative normative structure and thus bestows a sense of security and meaning on individuals' lives via their place in a greater, intelligible whole.²⁴

These conjectures about Xúnzǐ's underlying ethical and aesthetic stance suggest several tweaks and extensions to our interpretation of the Xúnzian view of happiness. Xúnzǐ's rhetoric emphasizes how his *dào* provides for material needs and yields security and honor. These are surely elements of what he would consider well-being or a happy life. But the more distinctive features of the gentleman's life are the beauty, patterning, and sense of achievement derived from his dedicated practice of ritual and propriety. For Xúnzǐ, it seems that well-being or happiness lies above all in a deep, even all-consuming engagement in a *dào* that, from the agent's standpoint, satisfies several features. It is authoritative, either because it derives from an unquestionable source of authority—such as the ancient sage-kings—or purports to stand in a special relation to the cosmos—as Xúnzǐ also claims his *dào* does. It promises a high degree of control and efficacy, yielding success or mastery in practical tasks. It situates individuals within a historical tradition and a community, providing a sense of shared, collective identity and a basis for social status and respect. Above all, the *dào* is of sufficient complexity, richness, and depth that mastering it is an achievement requiring sustained discipline and practice. Its performance can be a source of lasting personal fulfillment and the object of ethical and aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment.

In the end, for Xúnzǐ himself, the life of the gentleman may rest in various ways on the prudential, ethical, and political grounds he cites, but above all it seems rooted in what Susan Wolf has called “reasons of love” (2010, 4). The gentleman might devote himself to the *dào* because he sees doing so as congruent with prudential self-interest, as required by an impersonal standpoint from which the interests of all of society count equally, and as resolving issues of political organization. Most fundamentally, however, what makes his life good for him seems to be his admiration, appreciation, or love for the *dào*, paired with the conviction that it is a valuable, beautiful path that he can actively engage with and help the community put into practice.²⁵ These attitudes, I suggest, form the core of a rough Xúnzian counterpart to what we would call “happiness.”

VII. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Central formal features of Xúnzǐ's conception of well-being may well have been shared by other classical Chinese thinkers. The Daoist anthology *Zhuāngzǐ* provides an intriguing example. *Zhuāngzǐ* writers reject many substantive aspects of Xúnzǐ's ethics, above all his emphasis on ritual and propriety. Yet a well-known *Zhuāngzǐ* story addressing how to “provide for” (*yǎng*) life converges with Xúnzǐ's conception of well-being in several respects. Cook Dīng is an astoundingly skilled butcher whose movements while chopping up oxen are as graceful as a ritual dance and so efficient that he has gone nineteen years without dulling his blade (3/2–12). When his employer, Lord Wén Huì, marvels at the heights of his skill,

Dīng explains that what he's keen on is *dào*, which "goes beyond skill." He sketches his approach to his craft, including the long, gradual development through which he learned to work by "encountering things with my spirit, rather than looking with my eyes." His descriptions are a metaphor for the well-lived life, as the story concludes with Lord Wén Hùi exclaiming that from Dīng's words he has learned how to "provide for" or "nurture" life. The formal parallels between Dīng's testimony and the Xúnzian conception of well-being are extensive. Both depict the happy life as resting on engagement in a *dào* that the agent has become keen on or fond of, using the same word, "*hào* 好." Both place the agent's activity in the context of a long-term path of self-improvement and practical mastery requiring commitment and perseverance. Cook Dīng's actions are portrayed as graceful and beautiful, and the text playfully mocks Confucianism by implying that the filthy, bloody work of a lowly butcher can be every bit as splendid and elegant as the ritual performances of cultured gentlemen. Dīng's *dào* yields practical skills of preternatural efficacy, which he attributes to his responsiveness to what is "inherently so" in the natural structure or pattern (*lǐ* 理) of the oxen. As in Xúnzǐ, then, *dào*-following putatively delivers practical success by meshing with natural conditions. Where Xúnzǐ depicts the gentleman enjoying feelings of security or ease in his life of refinement, Dīng describes the exhilaration and satisfaction that follow from overcoming challenges in his work. The main difference between the Zhuāngist and Xúnzian perspectives is that the Cook Dīng story claims no special authority for its *dào*. Dīng does not imply that his *dào* effects order and control or leads to a state of completion or perfection. To the contrary, he stresses that his skill is never perfected: he continually encounters new difficulties in his work, which he overcomes by extending his existing abilities without really knowing how he does so. The *dào* he describes is partly an approach to problem solving. Instead of an ideal of order or control, the *Zhuāngzǐ* presents one of endless adaptiveness to changing circumstances.²⁶

As this comparison illustrates, the plausible aspects of a Xúnzian conception of happiness will probably be largely formal. Xúnzǐ's specific, substantive normative commitments, such as to the Zhōu tradition of rituals, are unlikely to win converts among a contemporary audience, but we may find structural features of his view illuminating. Without presuming to argue for his position, I suggest that it offers worthwhile material to ponder in refining our own understanding of happiness. From a Xúnzian perspective, happiness is multifaceted. It incorporates at least a moderate level of material welfare, along with a positive emotional condition. The pivotal emotions may not be those we typically associate with happiness in the psychological sense, such as pleasure and joy, but instead feelings of contentment, ease, security, or peace of mind. Happiness for a Xúnzian also has a significant social or cultural dimension. It lies partly in belonging to a community and cultural tradition, holding an honorable social status, and identifying with certain normatively charged social roles and relations to others. Above all, Xúnzǐ's ethics implies that happiness stems from devotion to and engagement in a *dào*,

driven by the conviction that the *dào* is objectively worthy of esteem and commitment. Among the factors that might justify this conviction are the richness and beauty of the *dào*, its efficacy and alignment with nature, the practical challenge of mastering it, and the fulfillment that issues from its competent performance. The centrality of such a *dào* in the Xúnzian view is distinctive and intriguing, and I suggest this characteristic fits well with a vague, commonsense understanding of happiness that many of us share. Inquiring into what we ourselves regard as happiness, we may find that aesthetic appreciation of and engagement with some *dào* have a central role. My main reservation about the stress the Xúnzian view places on *dào* is that a happy life could involve engagement not just in a single, authoritative *dào*, as Xúnzǐ would have it, but in a plurality of *dào*, which may shift or evolve throughout one's life.

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NOTES

1. I will follow (Haybron 2011) in distinguishing two commonly used senses of "happiness." As used in the psychological sense, happiness is a descriptive notion referring to a mental state variously characterized as a positive emotion, pleasure, or life satisfaction. As used in the well-being sense, it is an evaluative notion referring to a person's well-being, welfare, or flourishing. The commonsense, folk conception of happiness seems to be an unstable blend of these two senses.
2. Later Mohist writers explain beneficial consequences by appeal to the joy (*xǐ* 喜) they produce, but their ethical theory does not treat happiness or joy itself as a good to be pursued.
3. For an attempt to develop a Zhuangist view of the good life for the individual, see Fraser (2014).
4. "Xún" is pronounced roughly like the second syllable of the English "tissue" but adding a final "n" sound. It is pronounced with a rising tone similar to that used in English to indicate a question. "Zǐ" sounds roughly like "dz."
5. Much later in Chinese history, in the Táng (AD 618–906) and Sòng (960–1279) dynasties, influential Confucians came to regard Mencius as the pivotal Confucian thinker of the classical period. Mencius's ideas resonated with their own intellectual concerns and provided resources by which they formulated a response to the philosophical challenge presented by Buddhism. Historically, however, Mencius was a relatively marginal figure in his own day, while Xúnzǐ held important government posts and is said to have counted among his students Lǐ Sī 李斯, chief political architect of Qín, China's first imperial dynasty.
6. Although it has become common to assimilate Confucianism to various brands of virtue ethics (see Angle and Slote 2013, for an overview), I doubt the appropriateness of such a label for Xúnzǐ. I follow Slote (1992, 89), Griffin (1996, 113), and Hursthouse (1996) in taking "virtue ethics" to refer to ethical theories that treat virtues as not simply important or vital but normatively fundamental, in that aretaic notions and the evaluation of agents are more basic than deontic notions and the evaluation of actions. Hence that Confucian ethics stresses character formation (Cua 1998), takes proper moral judgment to be uncodifiable (Hutton 2001), or addresses the

topic of a flourishing life (Van Norden 2007) does not support its designation as a specifically “virtue” ethics. Although the virtues of the gentleman and the sage play a major part in Xúnzǐ’s ethics, they are not normatively fundamental. As this and the next two sections will explain, they are derived from the *dào* of the sage-kings, which articulates a conception of social flourishing grounded in “order.” For an important critique of virtue ethics interpretations of Confucianism from a different starting point, see Ames and Rosemont (2011).

7. Citations to the Xúnzǐ give chapter and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance (Xúnzǐ 1966). These indices can be conveniently accessed at <http://ctext.org/>. All translations are my own.
8. See 4/43, 5/24, 11/46–47, and 23/24–26. Xúnzǐ explains that people’s “nature” (*xìng*, inherent dispositions) refers to what is bestowed in us by the natural world (*tiān* 天, also “heaven”), in the sense that it requires no learning or undertaking (23/11). Anything that arises spontaneously from our inherent functioning or dispositions, without any “action” or “artifice” (*wéi* 偽), is our “nature” (22/3). Examples include the eye’s ability to see and the ear’s ability to hear (23/13). Anything that requires learning or endeavor is “action” or “artifice” rather than “nature.”
9. Qì is the “vapor” from which early Chinese thinkers believed everything is formed.
10. In Xúnzǐ’s psychology, desires for benefit, social status, and sensual or material satisfaction arise spontaneously from our nature (*xìng*) and so cannot be eliminated or reduced. However, our actions issue not from desires but from the heart’s attitude of “approval” (*kě* 可), which is independent of desire. (Xúnzǐ holds a “distinguish-and-response” model of action, not a belief-desire model. For details, see Fraser 2009.) In Xúnzǐ’s view, we routinely undertake actions despite having no desire to do so and refrain from pursuing objects even though we desire them (22/55–62). The focus of ethical development for him is not on reshaping desires but on training the heart to approve the proper things and direct action accordingly.
11. For further discussion of Xúnzǐ’s appeal to natural regularities to justify his cultural *dào*, see Ivanhoe (1991) and Hansen (1992, 311–13). Ivanhoe aptly refers to the purported relation between Xúnzǐ’s *dào* and the natural world as “a happy symmetry.” For a detailed consideration of whether Xúnzǐ’s claims commit him to a realist stance (as, for instance, Van Norden 1993 argues) or only a “constructivist” one (as Hagen 2007 contends), see Fraser (forthcoming).
12. The distinctively social orientation of Xúnzǐ’s ethical theory is frequently overlooked, especially in work that adopts an individualist approach to his moral psychology (as, for instance, Wong 2000 tends to do). Hansen’s treatment provides a helpful corrective by stressing the centrality of “social well-being” for Xúnzǐ (1992, 313).
13. Xúnzǐ famously contends that people’s nature is “ugly” (è 惡). His term “è” has unfortunately been widely interpreted as “evil,” but its inferential role has more in common with “ugly,” “lousy,” or “loathsome.”
14. Since the gentleman is explicitly a male figure, I will refer to him using masculine personal pronouns. Doing so accurately reflects the orientation of Xúnzǐ’s thought, which devotes minimal attention to the roles of women.
15. Like the English “gentleman,” the words “*jūnzǐ*” and “*xiào rén*” originally referred to social ranks—“princeling” and commoner—but by Xúnzǐ’s time their connotation was almost wholly ethical.
16. Although I will not pursue the comparison here, readers will notice interesting partial similarities, along with important differences, between Xúnzǐ’s ideal of the cultured gentleman and Aristotle’s figure of the *kalokagathos*.
17. Ivanhoe insightfully teases out the nuances of Xúnzǐ’s stance here when he explains that for Xúnzǐ only by devoting oneself to the *dào* and grasping both how it organizes society and relates to the natural world can one genuinely achieve contentment in life (1991, 312–15).
18. Two other candidates are *xī* 喜 (joy) and *lè* 樂 (pleasure, enjoyment). Both overlap the use of “happy” to refer to a positive, pleasurable emotional state, but both are relatively ephemeral and do not correspond with a conception of happiness as life-satisfaction, for instance. Neither would usually be used to refer to being happy with one’s situation or to a happy life. Nivison rightly notices the central but generally overlooked role of *ān* (which he renders “tranquillity”), commenting that for Xúnzǐ it is a “common-sense good ... that makes simple goods enjoyable” and

- that Xúnzǐ's discussion of *ān* aims "to make it obvious that the *Dao* ... is the best way of life I can choose" (2000, 181).
19. Nivison captures this aspect of Xúnzǐ's thought well, remarking that for Xúnzǐ's brand of Confucianism, "inner peace" (that is, *ān*, "security") is attained through social involvements reflected in loyalty and love, once one comes to see them as "essential to a complete humanity" and their expression through ritual decorum as "fitting and beautiful" (2000, 184). Hagen too notes that for Xúnzǐ "the accomplished person achieves an *aesthetic* perfection" (2007, 137, his italics)
 20. For further discussion of the points in this paragraph, see Fraser (2009).
 21. Several previous writers have called attention to this gap between Xúnzǐ's arguments and his ethical commitments. It is driven home most forcefully in Hansen (1992, 312ff.). For an informative summary, see Robins (2007, section 7). Even Hagen, an enthusiastic advocate for Xúnzǐ, acknowledges that his "justifications fell short of showing that only those precise norms would do the job" (2007, 112). I discuss the discrepancy between Xúnzǐ's arguments and his dogmatic commitments at length in Fraser (forthcoming) in the context of the debate over whether he should be considered a realist or a constructionist about the status of his ethical *dào*.
 22. Hansen expresses a similar suspicion (1992, 312), as does Eno (1990, 144). Given what we know about the formation of the classical Chinese philosophical anthologies, this suggestion should not be surprising. With the exception of a few texts explicitly labeled otherwise—such as Book 15, "Debating Military Affairs"—it is plausible that Xúnzǐ's own school of protégés were the main audience for the writings collected under his name.
 23. As Ivanhoe remarks, for Xúnzǐ, "as one cultivates a deeper understanding of the rites, one begins to see them as *intrinsically* valuable practices worthy of profound respect and complete devotion" (1991, 310, his italics).
 24. I have discussed this aspect of Xúnzǐ's ethics previously in Fraser (2012) and (2013).
 25. Compare Wolf's characterization of meaning in life as arising from "loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way" (2010, 8).
 26. Fraser (2014) presents a more detailed exploration of the significance of the Cook Dīng story for a Zhuāngist view of the good life.

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