

# Chapter 4

## Ritual, Virtue, and Education: An Interpretation of Xunzi's Philosophy of Ritual



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### Introductory Remarks

By Duck-Joo Kwak

Ritual has been one of important topics in the fields of anthropology and religious studies, but not in the field of educational studies until quite a recent time when the body becomes a focus of educational interests. Before, school rituals were simply considered to be a medium of indoctrination, fixing youngsters into a set of behaviors mechanically and repetitively. They were defined merely in terms of their disciplinary power *as* domination. But, with the flourishing of educational scholarship from the post-structuralist perspective on the body triggered by Foucault's idea of disciplinary power, the educational function of rituals seems to be newly explored and examined: ritual practice as the formation of man, as opposed to the domination of man.

This essay is exactly in this direction in its attempt to trace the inherent nature of ritual back to the ancient view of it in the east Asian tradition. Kato tries to examine the Confucian theory of ritual as formulated by the ancient philosopher called Xunzi from the third-century BC in China; he was sometimes considered as the third of the three great classical Confucians (after Confucius and Mencius), known to the east Asian readers more for his misanthropic view that human nature is basically ugly or evil. Kato attributes our long disfavor of ritual as an educational topic to the modernist prejudices rooted in the prevalent dualism between the mind and the body, between the inner and the outer, and between reality and appearance. According to him, as a way of recovering our bodily nature and identity for the conception of the educated person, ritual as the heritage of pre-modern culture needs to be revisited from the post-modern perspective.

In fact, in Confucian tradition of humanistic education, ritualistic practice was considered one of the two main pedagogical approaches for self-cultivation; the

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other was to read classical books. What is ritual (禮, *li*) in the Confucian sense, then? First, it refers to institutionalized forms of rites, which people usually tend to take as a tradition, i.e., periodic or celebratory rites of royal courts or ancestral worship ceremonies as a set of formal procedures. Second, Confucian ritual (*li*) more commonly means some patterns of overt behavior of actions that are instructed on the way we carry our bodies and make physical gestures, as well as a set of specific rules of conducts that prescribes our *role-performances*, roles such as a king, a father, or a son. Lastly, *li* can be described as a set of more general rules of conduct that govern one's *personal relationship* with others, such as reciprocal respect, loyalty or good faith, which is almost synonymous to what we call today *moral norms of action* (Han 2001, 16). The reason this ritual tends to be negatively considered in modern education by most of liberal educators in the east Asian countries has to do with its authoritative demand to obey on the part of youngsters without raising any questions, since it is not exaggeration to say that Confucian education was traditionally all about obeying to the rituals, i.e., learning how to obey or conform to rituals in one's actions at the every corner of one's life.

However, Kato explores Xunzi's meta-theory of ritual, which has become unfamiliar to the most of contemporary modern educators. According to Kato's reformulation of Xunzi's theory, ritual is rather about (1) the (performative) *founding* of an order to remove a chaos by dividing things among people and controlling their desire, which has a political function as shown in establishing the state. It is also (2) to nurture our desires through arts (i.e., six arts of rituals, music, archery, riding, calligraphy and mathematics) that direct our senses to their appropriate objects, the value of which the members of the state share to form a community. Ritual is also to differentiate social roles or status between the lord and the subordinates, man and woman or the elderly or the young in their formal manners. Lastly, ritual has an ontological function with its three roots, while tying and disconnecting between heaven and earth, ancestors and the present generation, and lords and subordinates in the formation of the symbolic schemes of the world.

Kato introduces many educationally interesting aspects of ritual understood in the Confucian tradition, such as its relation to virtues, ethics and religion, or a comparative perspective on it with Aristotle's view of habituation. But, as I indicate above, what seems to be educationally controversial about ritual for modern educators would be its problematic relation to discipline. Kato mentions by passing in this essay that ritual is not a discipline since, unlike discipline, ritual requires a comprehensive knowledge of the classics about how the sage followed the rituals; for the Confucian sages, ritual practice was an ultimate point of learning. But in my view, Confucian ritual was also *a way of disciplining* young generation. The difference between the ancient 'discipline by ritual' and its modern equivalent lies in their views on the way (or the aspect) in which the discipline functions in the formation of self. While the ancient ritual effects youngsters in such a way as to make them *voluntarily* obey to the order founded by the repetitive performance of ritual, modern ritual forces them to obey in the form of self-domination. I think that both (ancient) ritual and (modern) discipline involve our conducts or the behaviors of our

body that is visible in the public domain, while effecting the formation of our self-relation. It may be said that the effect that the former makes is in its nature ontological, the latter political. Thus, we may even conclude that, while the former encourages us to cultivate oneself in the form of self-caring or self-overcoming, the latter in the form of self-controlling or self-efficacy.

This tentative comparison leads us into such educationally productive questions as what follows: What is the educational merit of ritual from the ontological perspective?; Can ritual be newly valued as a way of educating youngsters today? Catherine Bell, American anthropologist, summarizes several features common to all forms of ritualization: (1) strategies of differentiations through formalization and periodicity, (2) the centrality of the body, (3) the orchestration of schemes by which the body defines the environment and is defined in turn by it, (4) ritual mastery, and (5) the negotiation of power to define and appropriate the hegemonic order of the society (1992, 220). I think all these features are true of Confucian rituals. And her characterization stimulates us to reconceive it for its pedagogical possibility for the education of young people today; they often find themselves having trouble in responding to even *legitimate* authorities, which seems to be required to live their lives at all in an intelligible manner.

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## 4.1 Introduction

Ritual (禮) is one of the key concepts of Confucianism. The importance of ritual has been acknowledged throughout the history of Confucianism (Chan 2012; Fan 2012; Lo 2012; Zhang 2012). Ritual was a litmus test for distinguishing Confucianism from other schools in China, such as Mohism and Daoism. The importance of ritual for education distinguished the Confucian humanistic tradition from its Western counterpart (Kato 2014, 2016).

This does not mean that ritual is an exclusive product of Confucianism. The importance of ritual has been acknowledged by other world religions too. Even Zen Buddhism, which gives the impression of absolute liberty from custom, observes strict ritualistic procedures (Robson 2014).

Our modern life also retains many ritualistic elements, such as Christmas, New Year, and wedding and funeral ceremonies to name a few. Rituals punctuate our calendar and distinguish places. Moreover, schools are full of rituals. However, educational studies have not paid enough attention to this fact, treating ritual as if it were a special subject reserved for anthropology.

The reason for this neglect is a prejudice against ritual in modern society (Delkeskamp-Hayes 2012; Solomon 2012). This prejudice is nourished by a

dualism that separates mind from body, inner from outer, and reality from appearance. This dualism is connected with another dualism that separates the modern from the old and the civilized from the primitive.

Yet, with the demise of such prejudice in postmodern thought, ritual merits attention not only in anthropology but also in the field of philosophy of education. Indeed, recent years have seen the emergence of studies that examine the role of ritual for human cultivation. Further, Chinese and Western scholars are now shedding new light on Confucian ritual (Goldin 1999; Solomon et al. 2012; Kline and Tiward 2014).

This article intends to contribute to this trend. It has chosen Xunzi (荀子) as the subject. Xunzi was a Confucian scholar of the late Warring States period who was active in the middle of the third century BCE (Knoblock 1988). The *Xunzi*, the book attributed to him, contains many passages that concern ritual. He is selected not because he expanded the rules of rituals (for this, Zhu Xi offers more detailed information in his treatise on family ritual (朱子家禮)) but because he (probably for the first time in history) offered an elaborate meta-theory of ritual: He explained the fundamental characteristics of ritual and showed why ritual was necessary. He also expanded upon the role of ritual in moral education.

This article consists of the following parts: Part 1 examines four major features of Xunzi's meta-theory of ritual, which are expanded upon at the beginning of his discourse on ritual. This is the longest part, because we pick up on these features separately. Part 2 examines the place of ritual in Xunzi's educational theory as expressed in his discourses on learning and self-cultivation. Part 3 considers the relationship between ritual and virtue by examining Xunzi's discourse on human nature. Part 4 compares the Aristotelian theory of virtue with Xunzi's theory of ritual and considers the nature of the relationship between them.

The article closes by briefly considering the implications of this study regarding the role of religion in education.

## 4.2 Part 1: Xunzi's Meta-theory of Ritual

Xunzi's contribution is not limited to the fact that he gave an important role to ritual in his political, ethical, and educational theories. More important is that he gave a theoretical foundation to ritual (Machle 2014). In other words, his philosophy can be considered as a meta-theory of ritual (Berkson 2014).<sup>1</sup> The beginning of Chapter 19 of the *Xunzi* is the finest example of it. Let us examine the four main features of this theory.

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that many of the characters of rituals, which Engelhardt (2012) and Cherry (2012) mention without reference to Xunzi, were already formulated by Xunzi.

## 1. Ritual and the state

Chapter 19, titled “Discourse on Ritual (禮論),” begins with a consideration of the origin of ritual, which runs as follows:

T1: From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings (先王) hated such chaos, and so they established ritual and *yi* (義)<sup>2</sup> in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. (Xunzi 2014, p. 201)

Former kings established ritual in order to avoid the chaos that is caused by humans driven by desires. There are many points worth considering in the text cited above, such as the role of former kings, the function of division, and the nurturing of desires, which we will examine later. However, we must first consider the relationship between ritual and the state (國). Even though Xunzi does not use the word “state” here, he uses it often in related contexts.<sup>3</sup> It is the origin of the state that is at stake here.

The term “state” does not refer to a simple aggregation of people, a kind of herd of human animals, how good-natured they may be. Rather, it requires a certain order. Xunzi maintains that this order was established by ritual. Ritual is not a product of the state, as we tend to think. Rather, the state is a product of ritual.<sup>4</sup> It is made possible by a ritual that divides things among people and controls desires.

Here lie the roots of Xunzi's criticism of the Mohists as well as of a version of Confucianism represented by Mencius and the *Great Learning*. For them, the goodness of human nature is the basis of the state. If individuals are good, then the state is bound to be good. This is especially true of rulers. The first paragraph of the *Great Learning* expresses this thought in a clear and concise manner.

T2: The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. (Chan 1963, p. 86)

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<sup>2</sup> *Yi* can be translated as “righteousness” or “justice” that is based on social distinction. In this sense, it is nearer to the Greek concept of *dike* or *dikaioσύνη* than to the modern egalitarian concept of justice.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Chapter 10 (“Enriching the State”) and Chapter 16 (“The Strong State”) (Xunzi 2014).

<sup>4</sup> On the role of ritual in creating social reality, see Iltis 2012. Interestingly, anthropology of ritual comes to a similar conclusion (Rappaport 1999, p. 138).

For the *Great Learning*, there is continuity from the individual to the state, or from the ethical to the political. The ethical precedes the political temporally and logically.

For Xunzi, on the other hand, the political precedes the ethical. A political order of the state, which is established by former kings, comes first. Left alone, human nature and morality would remain powerless.

In Chapter 23, “Human Nature is Bad (性惡),” Xunzi, in his polemic against Mencius, asserts:

T3: So, ritual and *yi* and proper models and measures are produced from the artifice (偽)<sup>5</sup> of the sage (聖人); they are not produced from people’s nature (人之性). (Xunzi 2014, pp. 103–105)

Masao Maruyama, a famous Japanese political philosopher, in his influential book on the intellectual history of the Tokugawa period, called Sorai (1666–1728), an important Confucian scholar, the “discoverer of politics.” Maruyama here meant one who distinguished political philosophy from moral philosophy and insisted on the precedence of the former over the latter (Maruyama 1974, p. 83). However, it is important to keep in mind that a similar discovery of politics had already taken place in the thought of Xunzi, for whom (as for Sorai) ritual played a major role. In fact, Sorai valued Xunzi highly and wrote a treatise titled *Reading Xunzi* (讀荀子), one of the earliest treatises on this book in Japan (Sorai 1975, pp. 14–141).

Another point that deserves special attention in T3 is that Xunzi sets artifice (偽) against (human) nature (*xing* 性) and emphasizes the importance of the former over the latter. This may be the reason Xunzi used the controversial phrase “Human nature is bad.” This phrase does not mean that human nature is evil. It simply means that, left alone, human nature remains insufficient and powerless. Nature requires the powerful intervention of artifice. The pattern of thought that sets artifice against nature is similar to the Greek thought that sets skill (*techne*) and convention (*nomos*) against nature (*phusis*). And yet, there is a big difference. Greek philosophers, without exception, placed supremacy with nature and assigned a secondary place to *techne* and *nomos*. Both *techne* and *nomos* had to orient themselves to nature, which served as the standard and the model. Compared with this, the position of Xunzi that gives artifice precedence over nature is very unique in the history of thought. In the West, it was only after the seventeenth century that the precedence of making (*facere*) over the natural became a controversial theme in the work of thinkers like Giambattista Vico (Mondolfo 1969).

## 2. Ritual, desire, and the origin of art

The first paragraph of “Discourse on Ritual” cited above (T1) also emphasizes human desires as the origin of ritual (Neville 2014). It is therefore appropriate to proceed to an examination of the relationship between ritual and desires.

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<sup>5</sup> Here I follow Goldin (1999) and adopt the translation of 偽 as “artifice” instead of “the deliberate effort” of Hutton.

The examination may look quite familiar at first glance because controlling or subduing desires is a well-known theme in the Western history of moral and educational thought. The Greeks assigned a special virtue for this: *sophrosyne* or temperance. Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics discussed this theme. In the course of history, it has become a hackneyed and trite theme represented by the stern face of a Stoic philosopher. In a contemporary society dominated by liberal ideals, a society characterized by the precedence of justice to other forms of virtues, temperance has become a matter of personal taste, i.e., diet. There is probably no political theory that focuses on this theme except, perhaps, in the fields related to health insurance policy.

Seen from such a point of view, Xunzi's thoughts seem quite familiar. And yet, reading the original text further, we find that Xunzi is pointing at a quite a different direction.

First of all, when he talks about desires, he does not mean crude bodily desires related to food, drink, and sex. He instead covers diverse fields related to the senses. And, when dealing with the subject of food, he is far from providing general dietary advice. This is shown in the second paragraph of Chapter 19, which runs as follows:

T4: Thus, ritual is a means of nurture (養). Meats and grains, the five flavors and the various spices are means to nurture the mouth. Fragrances and perfumes are means to nurture the nose. Carving and inlay, insignias and patterns are means to nurture the eyes. Bells and drums, pipes and chimes, lutes and zithers are means to nurture the ears. Homes and palaces, cushions and beds, tables and mats are means to nurture the body. Thus, ritual is a means to nurture. (Xunzi 2014, p. 201)<sup>6</sup>

We are witnessing here the origin of arts. They are related to the diverse senses: taste (culinary arts), smell (cult of incense burning), sight (fine arts), hearing (music), and touch (architecture and furniture). Each art is meant to nurture the desire proper to each sense, such as the desire to taste, the desire to smell, etc.

Thus, ritual nurtures desire through arts that direct the senses to their appropriate objects. These objects have values that the members of a state share. Participation in a ritual ceremony, one in which foods are offered, perfumes burned, painting and sculptures displayed, music performed, and furniture provided, establishes a community (a state) that is different from a mere aggregation of human animals.

### 3. Ritual and differentiation

Following T4, Xunzi insists that nurturing goes together with differentiation:

T5: The gentleman not only obtains its nurturing, but also loves its differentiations (別). What is meant by "differentiations"? I say: It is for noble and lowly to have their proper ranking, for elder and youth to have their proper distance, and for poor and rich, humble and eminent to each to have their proper weight. (Xunzi 2014, p. 201)

Ritual not only unites people, but also differentiates them. The unity produced by ritual is the unity in differentiation.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>See also Chapter 10, "Enriching the State" (Xunzi 2014).

<sup>7</sup>This feature is also stressed in Chapter 10, "Enriching the state" (Xunzi).



It is this feature that makes ritual very complex. This is what makes ritual unpopular, too, as it contains a kind of formality inherited from feudalism.

However, such differentiation nonetheless exists. Many European languages, with the notable exception of English, use two expressions for the second person singular, such as “vous” and “tu” or “Sie” and “du.” In Japanese, 22 versions of the second-person singular may be counted in a dictionary of synonyms (Shibata and Yamada 2002). Even in English, probably the most egalitarian language, there are still many ways to express respect for an elder, a teacher, or a boss. This is also a matter of relevance in the educational context: Should we remove such formalities from school or should they be retained? The answer probably lies in the direction of accepting the educational power of ritual differentiation without contradicting our egalitarian aspirations (Bell 2012). We will not go into this question now. Instead, we will proceed to think more deeply about the idea of unity in differentiation.

#### 4. Three roots of ritual

The idea of unity in differentiation is not limited to social relationships. Indeed, it extends to space and time and establishes cosmological and historical dimensions. This is testified to in an important passage concerning the three roots (三本) of ritual.

T6: Ritual has three roots. Heaven and Earth are the root of life. Forefathers and ancestors are the root of one’s kind. Lords and teachers are the root of order. Without Heaven and Earth, how would one live? Without forefathers and ancestors, how would one have come forth? Without lords and teachers, how would there be order? If even one of these three roots is neglected, no one will be safe. And so, ritual serves Heaven above and Earth below, it honors forefathers and ancestors, and it exalts lords and teachers. These are the three roots of ritual. (Xunzi 2014, p. 202)

The term “*ben*” (本), translated here as “root,” originally means “the root of a big tree” (the Chinese character for “tree” being 木). From this it has also obtained a broader meaning, such as “origin” and “beginning” (Todo et al. 1988, p. 583). In T6, the metaphor of a plant seems quite appropriate. A tree can stand firm because of its roots, which are invisible. Without the root, a tree cannot exist. At the same time, without the visible parts of a tree, the root will remain unknown: the root will become a true root only when a complete tree grows from it. Thus, there is a mutual reference between a visible tree and the root. Ritual, like a tree, presupposes Heaven and Earth, forefathers and ancestors, lords and teachers. However, at the same time, ritual makes them visible; that is, ritual allows them to truly be what they are. Xunzi goes even further, remarking that it is only through observing the appropriate form of ritual that the harmonious union of Heaven and Earth can be maintained.

T7: By ritual, Heaven and Earth harmoniously combine;  
 By ritual, the sun and the moon radiantly shine;  
 By ritual, the four seasons in progression arise;  
 By ritual, the stars move orderly across the skies;  
 By ritual, the greatest rivers through their courses flow;  
 By ritual, the myriad things thrive and grow. (Xunzi 2014, pp. 204–5)



Ritual has the dual function of connection and division. Ritual connects Heaven, Earth, and Man through the service that Man offers to Heaven and Earth. At the same time, ritual sets Heaven as Heaven and Earth as Earth. Through ritual, Heaven and Earth are recognized as the sources of life and clearly distinguished as such. In this sense, ritual establishes and maintains the threefold relationship between Heaven, Earth, and Man.

Ritual also connects ancestors with the present generation. And, through this act of connection, ritual sets them apart. In this dual function of connection and division, the span of time that we call “history” comes forward. Ritual establishes and maintains history.

Finally, ritual connects lords with subordinates, and teachers with disciples. At the same time, ritual distinguishes the former from the latter, giving honor and precedence to the former. In this act, ritual establishes and maintains the state, aligning the political community with social order.

Thus, the three roots of ritual are not some kind of preexisting material. Rather, they become roots only through the founding act of ritual.

Heidegger, in his *Origin of the Work of Art*, emphasized that a work of art does not simply represent a given world but establishes and founds a world that consists of Heaven, Earth, and Man (Heidegger 1980, pp. 1–72). It is this aspect that makes art truly creative. This thought of Heidegger seems to fit well with Xunzi's thoughts about ritual. Ritual is the original creative event (Heidegger's *Ereignis*). It opens up the horizon in which Heaven and Earth meet Man, where ancestors and the living are tied together, and social order is established.

### 4.3 Part 2: Ritual and Learning

Given the importance of ritual in Xunzi's thoughts, we can easily infer that it played a crucial role in his theory of learning. Indeed, it did. The discourse named “An Exhortation to Learning (勸学)” (Chapter 1), testifies to this.

In the beginning of this chapter, Xunzi exalts the powerful effect of learning in a famous passage:

T8: Blue dye derives from the indigo plant, and yet it is bluer than the plant. (Xunzi 2014, p. 1)

Xunzi then stresses the role of “things (物)” for learning:

T9: The gentleman is exceptional not by birth, but rather by being good at making use of things. (Xunzi 2014, p. 2)

This expression may sound like the creed of modern educational theory, i.e., that we should learn from things instead of from words.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, “the education of things” in Rousseau's *Emile* (Rousseau 1967, p. 247).

However, for Xunzi, there is no dichotomy between things and words. Rather, things include words: they are what surround us in various senses. Shortly after the just-cited text, Xunzi adds:

T10: Therefore, the gentleman is sure to select the village where he dwells, and he is sure to associate with well-bred men when he travels. This is how he avoids corruptions and draws near to what is correct. (Xunzi 2014, p. 3)

However, the “things” that are most conducive to learning are classics and (above all) ritual:

T11: Where does learning begin? Where does learning end? I say: Its order begins with reciting the classics (誦經), and ends with studying ritual (讀禮). Its purpose begins with becoming a well-bred man (士), and ends with becoming a sage (聖). (Xunzi 2014, p. 5)

In this passage, ritual corresponds with “becoming a sage,” just as reciting the classics corresponds with “becoming a well-bred man.” This is an extraordinary assertion. Xunzi continues:

T12: And so learning comes to ritual and then stops, for this is called the ultimate point in pursuit of the Way and virtue (道德之極). In the reverence and refinement of ritual, the balance and harmony of music, the broad content of the *Odes* and *Documents*, the subtleties of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, all things between Heaven and Earth are complete. (Xunzi 2014, p. 5)

In order to come to this “ultimate point” of ritual, mere memorization of the classics is not enough. Such haphazard knowledge only produces a vulgar (or, rather, petty) *ru* (小儒) (Xunzi 2014, p. 6).

How, then, can one escape from being a petty *ru* and become a great *ru* (大儒)?<sup>9</sup> The answer lies in having a proper teacher.

T13: In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person. Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts. The *Odes* and *Documents* contain ancient stories but no explanation of their present application. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is terse and cannot be quickly understood. However, if you imitate the right person in his practice of the precepts of the gentleman, then you will come to honor these things for their comprehensiveness, and see them as encompassing the whole world. Thus, in learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person. (Xunzi 2014, p. 6)

The relationship between teacher and ritual is expounded upon in Chapter 2, “Cultivating One Self (修身),” as follows:

T14: Ritual is that by which to correct your person. The teacher is that by which to correct your practice of ritual. If you are without ritual, then how will you correct your person? If you are without a teacher, how will you know that your practice of ritual is right? (Xunzi 2014, p. 14)

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<sup>9</sup>I take the term “a great *ru*” from Chapter 8, “The Achievement of the Ru” (Xunzi 2014, p. 52). The contrast between a petty *ru* and a great *ru* comes from the *Analects* 6, 11, which uses the terms “a petty person *ru* 小人儒” and “a gentleman *ru* 君子儒.” According to Shirakawa and Kaji, “a petty person *ru*” refers to a shaman in charge of funeral ceremonies and “a gentleman *ru*” is an intellectual who is a master *ru*. A gentleman *ru* was not just a performer of rite but was a teacher of rite who understood their theoretical and historical background (Shirakawa 1991, pp. 72–81; Kaji 1990, pp. 56–58).

Through these passages, we can discern why, for Xunzi, learning and self-cultivation culminates in ritual. Ritual is not discipline. Discipline need not be accompanied by a comprehensive knowledge of the classics. Ritual, on the other hand, requires erudition. It has a basis in a thorough knowledge of Confucian scriptures, such as *Odes*, *Documents*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the subtle meanings of which must be taught personally by an exemplary teacher.

At the same time, Xunzi emphasized the moral character of ritual. Indeed, ritual is “the ultimate point in pursuit of the Way and virtue.” This leads to a further consideration.

#### 4.4 Part 3: Ritual and Virtue

We may now consider the relationship between ritual and virtue. This relationship is expressed in the words “this [ritual] is called the ultimate point in pursuit of the Way and virtue” (Xunzi 2014, p. 5). How should we interpret the relationship between the two?

This is a problem that is not specific to Xunzi but to the entire corpus of Confucian literature. In the *Analects*, for example, ritual and benevolence (*ren* 仁) seem to be closely related, even though the exact nature of their relationship is not clear. In the *Mencius*, on the other hand, ritual is described as one of the four cardinal virtues together with benevolence, righteousness, and wisdom (Mencius 1970, p. 83). Xunzi differs from Mencius in assigning a privileged place to ritual: it is not just one of the virtues but is the “ultimate point of Way and virtue.”

Now, the primacy of ritual should be understood with respect to its foundational character. If, as Xunzi asserts, ritual is not just a product of the state but establishes the relationship between Heaven, Earth, and Man, between ancestors and descendants, and between the elder and the younger, it is natural to think that it also establishes virtues.

The clearest example of this is the virtue of filial piety. Filial piety is not just a feeling that children have toward parents. Such an incipient feeling, important as it may be, is not yet virtue. In order for it to be elevated to the status of virtue, it must acquire a specific form. This is provided, among others, by funeral ritual (Yearley 2014). Funeral ritual, which, by the way, occupies the greatest part of Xunzi's “Discourse on Ritual,” not only provides a specific occasion for collective mourning but also establishes and commemorates the blood relationship that binds the present generation with the past generation.

In a similar sense, other virtues, too, can be traced back to their ritual origin. Benevolence toward others would be awkward and blind without the element of ritual that gives it proper form and orientation (Chan 2012). And righteousness requires social distinction that is established by ritual. In short, ritual provides a concrete form, orientation, and context without which no virtue in a strict sense is possible. Ritual, in this sense, not only gives birth to virtues but also nurtures them.

This is an important point that separates Xunzi from Mencius (Ivanhoe 2010, 2014; Lau 2010; Van Norden 2010). According to Mencius, human nature is good, and natural feelings are the origin of virtues. For Xunzi, on the other hand, natural feelings alone do not lead to virtues. There is so much self-centeredness in our natural feelings, such that, left alone, they would lead to conflict and confusion. This is the reason why former kings invented ritual. This thought, expanded upon in Chapter 23, titled “Human Nature is Bad,” is fundamental for understanding Xunzi’s theory of moral education. (We have already treated this theme briefly in connection with the precedence of artifice over human nature.) Xunzi not only rejects metaphysical speculation about human nature but also does not assign any value to the cultivation of the inner self, such as meditation in the Zhu Xi School. Instead, Xunzi places educational value on the “things” that surround us. Ritual is most conducive to moral education because it was specifically developed by former kings to educate people. To resume the argument we developed previously, ritual is the artifice par excellence.

The difference between Mencius and Xunzi was a watershed in Confucian moral and political theory. Whereas the followers of Mencius engaged themselves in the problem of cultivating the self, the followers of Xunzi, such as the Legalists and Sorai, directed their interests toward law and political organization (Kato 2014, 2016).

The history of Confucianism would be poorer if one of these two branches were neglected.

## 4.5 Part 4: Comparison with Aristotle

Until now, we have tried to reconstruct the meaning of Xunzi’s extraordinary assertion that ritual is “the ultimate point in the pursuit of the Way and virtue.” Hopefully, we have been able to show how this assertion makes sense to Xunzi. Does it still make sense to those of us living more than two thousand years after him? The answer is most probably “no.” Most of us probably think that ritual might have played an important role in the past but has already finished playing its role, having been replaced by moral theory or ethics. Against such a view, I would like to contend that ritual is still important, not because it can replace ethics but because it can support our moral life by supplementing it with an element of the body that we tend to overlook.

In order to argue this, I have chosen Aristotle as a point of reference. The reason is that we can find in Aristotle’s ethical theory features that show some affinity with the ritual theory of Xunzi. The comparison between Aristotle and Xunzi can invite us to reflect on the hidden relationship between ethics and ritual.

Aristotle was a founder of ethics in the sense that he was the first person to invent the word *ethike* to denote a branch of practical science. This word derives from the

common word *ethos*, which had the meaning of “habit.” For Aristotle, all virtues (not only ethical virtues like courage but also intellectual virtues like prudence) are *hexis*, dispositions acquired through habituation. This habituation, however, is not arbitrary but is enabled and encouraged by a community (*polis*) that shares the same values and the same way of life.

For Aristotle, morality is not a matter of innerness. Rather, it is intertwined with the network of a community with its rich tradition. Thus, an individual has to learn appropriate acts in different phases of life. These acts cannot be directed by the mechanical memorization of rules. Rather, it requires experience that can discern an appropriate way toward an appropriate person at an appropriate time. As Aristotle argues in Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1894), this experience, which is elevated to the status of practical knowledge, is called *phronesis* (prudence). The possessor is called the *phronimos*.

Aristotle's moral theory presents an interesting similarity with Xunzi's theory of ritual. Both admit an existing order of norms of action. These norms were established in the mythical past by lawgivers or former kings, and they have been inherited and cherished by certain communities. These norms cannot simply be set down by rules or memorized mechanically. Rather, they are context-dependent and require the interpretation and advice of a *phronimos* or teacher. Both Aristotle and Xunzi emphasize the importance of using the right measure (means) in the actual application of norms.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, there is also a difference: Aristotle talks about ethics, whereas Xunzi talks about ritual. Even though both ethics and ritual are context-bound, ritual is more context-bound than ethics. It is bound to a ritual ceremony that takes place in a particular place at a particular occasion. The context of ethical action is wider and looser. In this sense, ethics requires more individual judgment than ritual. This may create the impression that ethics is superior to ritual.

The impression of the apparent superiority of ethics may be further enhanced if we think that, historically, ethics came after ritual. It seems as if ritual completed its historical role when it was succeeded by ethics. (Some people might add that ethics, too, was replaced by liberal proceduralism.) However, things may not be so simple.

We will not discuss here this questionable assertion on the progress of history. Postmodern thinkers, such as Lyotard (1979) and Vattimo (1989), have already unveiled the weakness of such a position. We will instead point out that what seems to be a weakness and demerit of ritual, namely its context-bound character, can also be considered its strength and merit. In as much as it is bound to a specific context, such as funeral and many kinds of religious ceremonies, ritual requires a definite form of bodily composure and movement. We can think, for example, of dance performed within a religious ceremony. It requires a certain form transmitted from predecessors. And yet, it is never mechanical in the sense of something learned by simple memorization. Rather, it is an art that requires practice under the guidance of a teacher. Behind this importance of form in ritual lies wisdom that every thought

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<sup>10</sup>Aristotle 1894, Book 2; Xunzi 2014, p. 55, p. 206.

and emotion requires a form and a mind requires a body. If we forget this and place too much importance on the content, the content is bound to evaporate. If we place too much importance on the mind, the body will betray the mind.

The case of Aristotle is quite interesting in this connection. As a thinker who criticized Platonic ideas, Aristotle had a keen sense of the temporal, contingent world of men. And yet, he did not pay much regard to the body in his ethics. This is strange because the concept of the *ethos* requires habituation. And this habituation is never a matter of mind alone but pertains to mind and body together. Perhaps, Aristotle was still too Platonic to assert expressively the important role of the body in our moral life. This is the point at which Xunzi's theory of ritual can be helpful. It can teach ethics to pay more regard to the body, without which the talk of virtues runs the risk of becoming mere speculation.

We should, of course, not forget that there is also a danger on the side of ritual: the danger is that form can lose its content (its original thought) and become rigid and oppressive. This may be the reason why "ritual" evokes a negative response, even among many East Asians. And yet, it would be a great pity to discard ritual altogether on the basis of its negative consequences. This is the point at which ethical deliberation can come to help.

In sum, ritual and ethics are not exclusive alternatives. Rather, they can and should complement each other. Ritual reminds us of the importance of the form and the body that can be ignored easily by ethics. Ethical deliberation and judgment, on the other hand, may occasionally guard ritual from becoming mechanical, rigid, and even inhuman.

## 4.6 Closing Remarks: The Role of Religion in Education

Finally, we would like to point out that there is one more benefit to studying Xunzi: it reminds us of the role of religion in education.

By religion, we do not mean a creed in a transcendent entity named "God." It means, rather, the unity in separation that we observed in Xunzi's theory of ritual. Ritual separates Heaven, Earth, and Man, and at the same time, it unites them. Ritual separates generations and at the same time unites them. It binds together and at the same time separates social groups. This binding is the etymological meaning of religion that comes from the Latin *re-ligare* (to bind) (Derrida and Vattimo 1998). This character of religion is important in our world, characterized by the domination of man over nature, the hubris of modern rationality toward tradition, and the ever-growing disparity between different social groups.

Ritual may teach us to envision education in a larger context in which the mutual dependence between man and nature, between past and present, and between different social groups plays an important role. At least, it can hint at this direction.

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