

## XUN ZI ON DESIRING TO BE GOOD: DESIRE AS THE NECESSARY CONDITION FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF NATURE

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**ABSTRACT:** *There are various discussions on the role of desires in the Xun-Zi and how the transformation of nature takes place. Some scholars hold that the heart-mind can override inborn human desires, a view that is analogous to externalism; others maintain the internalism view that desires are essentially motivating in the Xun-Zi. This paper aims to resolve this seeming conflict between externalism and internalism. By introducing David B. Wong's model of being an internalist about duty and an externalist about reason, I will show that desires in the Xun-Zi are necessarily motivating because of their direction of fit, and that the heart-mind is impotent to move one to act because it is a cognitive organ responsible for generating knowledge. In addition, I will suggest that the transformation of nature involves a change in the objects of desire through the learning of the heart-mind and provide a possible explanation of how the sages were able to transform their nature and establish the rites. Lastly, I will reply to some of the possible objections to my interpretation of the Xun-Zi.*

**Keywords:** *externalism, desires, direction of fit, heart-mind, internalism, Xun Zi*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the *Xun-Zi*, it is suggested that human nature is bad (or evil) (*e* 惡). Nonetheless, sages are able to transform their inborn nature and establish their acquired nature to become moral (*hua xing qi wei* 化性起偽). They are also said to be able to establish the rites (*li* 禮) through conscious exertion (*wei* 偽). Most importantly, Xun Zi emphasizes that “a man in the street can become a Yu” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, section 23.5a<sup>1</sup>)<sup>2</sup>. In other words, being a sage is a state that is theoretically attainable by all

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<sup>1</sup> All section numbers of the *Xun-Zi* are taken from John Knoblock's English translation of the *Xun-Zi* text, Knoblock 1988. Unless otherwise stated, John Knoblock's translation of the *Xun-Zi* will be used in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> “塗之人可以為禹。”

humans through studying the rites.<sup>3</sup> Many scholars have discussed the possibility of such a transformation in the *Xun-Zi* and present the following common picture: humans are primarily motivated by their innate desires and lack innate incipient moral dispositions. Since they lack innate incipient moral dispositions, rewards and punishments are required to force people to learn and practice the rites. As they put effort into practice, humans learn to behave morally and become virtuous, thereby transforming their nature.<sup>4</sup>

Although many scholars agree that the humans described in the *Xun-Zi* are primarily motivated by their innate desires before the transformation and only become virtuous after it, they differ in terms of their understanding of the motivational force before and after the transformation, as well as the role of desires (*yu* 欲) and the heart-mind (*xin* 心) during the process. While some scholars see Xun Zi as an internalist throughout the entire process of transformation, arguing that the transformation of nature is only a modification of desires by the heart-mind,<sup>5</sup> some regard Xun Zi as an externalist and argue that desires are motivationally inefficacious. Hence, according to the externalists, it is always the heart-mind that initiates actions and even overrides desires.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I propose that both the externalist and internalist views are inadequate for understanding the transformation of nature described in the *Xun-Zi*, for an externalist view would undermine the significance of desires during the process of transformation, while an internalist view fails to acknowledge the necessity of external reasons. Also, an internalist view could not explain how such transformation is possible without innate incipient moral dispositions. Based on the theory of the internalist about duty and the externalist about reasons proposed by David B. Wong, I argue that desires in the *Xun-Zi* are the necessary conditions in motivating a person to act because of their “world to mind” direction of fit, without which no action could be initiated. Nevertheless, people are indeterminate in what they want despite the existence of innate desires. The transformation of nature is thus the transformation of the objects of desire so that they become determinate in particular intentional objects by considering reasons external to their pre-existing desires. In a later part of this paper, I provide an alternative explanation of how sages are able to establish the rites at the beginning through the acquisition of knowledge by the heart-mind. Lastly, I reply to some of the anticipated objections to my interpretation at the end of this paper.

## 2. EXTERNALISM AND INTERNALISM IN THE XUN-ZI

The distinction between internalism and externalism in the *Xun-Zi* is based on whether it is the desires or the heart-mind that moves one to act. To claim that one’s actions are motivated by desires is to say that an agent pursues what one desires. This is exemplified by actions such as the pursuit of food when one is hungry and the pursuit

<sup>3</sup> For Xun Zi’s discussion on this proposition, see *Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, “Man’s Nature is Evil.”

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan W. Schofer 2000, Joel J. Kupperman 2000, Bryan W. Van Norden 2000, and David B. Wong 2000. Also see Antonio S. Cua 1978.

<sup>5</sup> See Kurtis Hagen 2011 and Antonio S. Cua 1978.

<sup>6</sup> See Winnie Sung 2012 and Joel J. Kupperman 2000.

of warmth when one is cold, as mentioned in the *Xun-Zi* (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 4, sections 4.9; chapter 5, section 5.4; chapter 19, section 19.1a, and chapter 23, section 23.1e). Conversely, actions motivated by the heart-mind are those that are approved of (*sou ke* 所可) by the heart-mind (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.5a). In the *Xun-Zi*, it is asserted that the heart-mind is capable of learning (*zhi* 知) (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.2e) and deliberating (*lü* 慮) (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.b) and that it can override the actions initiated by desires (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, Section 22.5a).

An externalist view of Xun Zi can be illustrated by referring to Bryan W. Van Norden (2000), Winnie Sung (2012), and Joel J. Kupperman (2000). Bryan W. Van Norden states explicitly that “approval simply trumps desire” (Van Norden 2000, 124). Even though what one desires agrees with what one approves of upon the successful transformation of nature, it is essentially a process of retraining desires, which submits one to the practice of the rites in order to cultivate what one approves of and consciously override what one desires. Winnie Sung goes further and claims that it is always the heart-mind that motivates one’s actions. She suggests that when it comes to the interaction between the heart-mind and desires, although desires may be taken as a reason for actions, it is always up to the heart-mind to decide which reason moves one to act. She proposes that desires by themselves are motivationally impotent, and actions are always initiated by the heart-mind. Joel J. Kupperman also maintains that being moral in the *Xun-Zi* means being constrained both externally and psychologically. Externally, one’s action is constrained by various factors such as parents and teachers, as well as laws and customs, while psychologically, one’s desires are controlled and checked by the heart-mind. For these scholars, the heart-mind is able to take into consideration the reasons external to one’s desires and be moved by them and acts similarly to Kantian’s categorical imperative, which disregards an agent’s desires and emotions. In this sense, I claim that they hold an externalist view in terms of their interpretation of the motivational structure in the *Xun-Zi*.

An internalist view of Xun Zi can be illustrated by referring to Kurtis Hagen (2011) and Antonio Cua (1978). Both see desires as the basic motivating force of human actions and the transformation of nature as the formation of a new set of desires. Kurtis Hagen maintains that the transformation of nature is essentially the development of another desire-based auxiliary motivational system based on prudential calculation. Antonio Cua, likewise, explains the transformation of nature in terms of the formation of second-order desires and the exercise of second-order volition through the reflective capacity possessed by humans (Cua 1978, 49-50). These scholars offer a picture of motivation that is primarily based on desires, with the heart-mind taking the role of redirecting desires, forming new desires, or choosing which desires to effect. In this interpretation, all actions must be based on desires. For this reason, I classify these authors as internalists in terms of their interpretation of the motivational structure of the *Xun-Zi*.

Based on the above distinction, it is controversial whether Xun Zi can be considered an externalist or an internalist. One of the advantages of the externalist interpretation of Xun Zi is its agreement with the description of the heart-mind as autonomous in nature. The heart-mind in the *Xun-Zi* is portrayed as the “lord of the body” (*shen-ming-*

*zhi-zhu* 神明之主), which issues orders but does not take orders (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.6a). Moreover, the heart-mind is said to have the power to abrogate the motivation of desires if they are in excess (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.5a). The internalist interpretation, on the contrary, is valid in that Xun Zi does not deny the fact that humans are primarily moved by their desires (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.1a). He also asserts that the inborn nature, including desires, of both petty people and sage kings are the same (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 4, sections 4.9-4.10). However, if the inborn nature of petty people and sage kings are the same, externalists need to explain why sage kings are able to follow the rites effortlessly (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.7d). It is also clear that the sages are able to follow their desires after transformation, and no strength of will or endurance is required (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.7d). Nonetheless, internalists need to provide details on whether the transformed desires are a new set of desires added on top of the inborn desires or simply a replacement of those inborn desires. If a new set of desires is formed on top of the inborn desires, how is it possible for one to always act morally when conflicts of desires arise? Also, if new sets of desires are developed, then their interpretations would become inconsistent with Xun Zi's claim that the desires of the sages are the same as those possessed by the petty people. Internalists are confronted with a further problem, namely, how such a transformation is possible without relying on the existence of innate incipient moral dispositions while maintaining a consistent account of inborn nature in the *Xun-Zi*. If humans are not possessed with innate incipient moral dispositions, external reasons must be incorporated into one's motivational structure to see the need to transform one's nature. As a result, both views are inadequate because they describe only part of the transformation process. While externalists can account for one's state of mind before becoming a sage, and internalists can explain the state of mind after the transformation process, neither provides a comprehensive picture of the transformation of nature.

There are scholars who adopt the view that transformation is a process from externalism to internalism to reconcile the difficulties faced by either externalism or internalism.<sup>7</sup> Jonathan W. Schofer (2000) discusses the process of transformation as the cultivation of virtue and suggests that people would eventually come to appreciate the intrinsic value of the rites and desire them after learning to overcome their natural and spontaneous desires. His account, however, does not explain why the sages are able to install the rites at the beginning. Although I agree with Schofer that the process of transformation is essentially a process from externalism to internalism, in this paper, I aim to provide an alternative interpretation of the transformation of nature. Instead of cultivation of virtue, I examine the motivational structure presented in the *Xun-Zi*. David B. Wong (2000) has done a similar analysis. He adopts a Humean view of passion, stresses the motivational force of desires, and sees the transformation of nature

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<sup>7</sup> See Schofer 2000 and Wong 2000. In fact, Van Norden also adopts an Aristotelian view in his interpretation of Xun Zi. He suggests that after one's nature has been successfully transformed, one would whole-heartedly enjoy performing the rites and that what one desires would conform to what the heart-mind approves of, like the continent person described by Aristotle. Nonetheless, I consider him an externalist since he emphasizes the role and function of the heart-mind that takes the lead in one's action.

as the channeling and shaping of self-interested desires toward a concern for the interests of others (Wong 2000, 142). He likewise borrows David S. Nivison's interpretation that a sense of duty must be present in humanity's inborn nature to render the transformation of nature possible. But since no incipient moral capacities are available in humanity's inborn nature, this sense of duty is devoid of "any particular *content*" (Wong 2000, 147. Original italic.). In other words, humans possess the capacity to act morally, but they must invent their own morality. In the end, Wong also suggests that the transformation of nature is a practice that cultivates virtue through rites and music (Wong 2000, 148). In this paper, I aim to provide an alternative explanation by borrowing Wong's another article entitled "Moral Reasons: Internal and External" and to show that desires, as described in the *Xun-Zi*, are motivating and that the heart-mind is able to provide moral content to establish the rites because of its capacity to generate knowledge, an alternative interpretation to the cultivation of virtue. However, although I agree with Wong on the role of desires involved in the process of transformation of nature, I disagree with him on his relativist view of morality in the *Xun-Zi*. I will argue that moral properties do exist in the natural world and thus Xun Zi is a moral realist. Essentially, the rites are established with reference to rational principles found in the natural world through the cognitive functioning of the heart-mind. For this reason, Xun Zi cannot be a moral relativist.

### 3. EXTERNALISM AND INTERNALISM: A DICHOTOMY?

In his article "Moral Reasons: Internal and External," Wong (2006) suggests that the traditional dichotomy between externalism and internalism is deficient. He uses Stephen Darwall's story of Roberta as an example. Roberta grows up in a sheltered environment but is shocked after seeing a film on textile workers by how much they suffer. She then decides to join a boycott in order to destroy a union. Taking the externalist point of view, Darwall emphasizes that Roberta had no general desire to fight against injustice before watching the film, and thus her decision seems to be based solely on the recognition of the suffering of *other people* rather than her own suffering (Wong 2006, 539). In other words, Roberta has a justifying reason to act, and that reason is external to her own motivational structure. However, Wong adopts the Humean view of motivation of action and argues that if a reason is external to the motivational structure of an agent and is not related to the satisfaction of any pre-existing desires, it is impotent to move her to act (Wong 2006, 538-539). Hence, the externalist account is deficient in explaining why one would want to act morally without any desire to be moral. Likewise, Wong finds Bernard Williams' internalist model unsatisfactory, for Williams' account of a "subjective motivational set" includes belief-like components into the motivational structure, such as one's "dispositions of evaluation" (Wong 2006, 539-540). Despite Williams' incorporation of an evaluative element in his internalist model, Wong maintains that it is still worth looking at his model as it answers one important intuition of internalism, namely, "reasons attributed to an agent are pointless without the possibility of their motivating her" (Wong 2006, 540).

Considering both the need to recognize reasons outside the agent and the necessity for them to be motivationally efficacious, Wong argues, as an alternative analysis for the case of Roberta based on the Humean theory, that Roberta must have a motivational “propensity” within her prior to watching the film. Unlike desires with an evaluative component, this propensity “can take the form of a felt urge towards an intentional object,” yet “it need not have anything close to a determinate intentional object” (Wong 2006, 541). In other words, a propensity exists but may also be indeterminate in an intentional object. However, one could turn this indeterminate intentional object into a determinate one upon acceptance of certain reasons. In Roberta’s case, she must have some pre-existing propensities to fight injustice, such as empathy or an inclination to relieve suffering, though she is indeterminate regarding whom to help. However, after watching the film, she comes to recognize a reason to join the boycott. Thus, the film provides an experience or situation to “engage her recognition of such a reason so that it becomes motivationally efficacious” (Wong 2006, 544) and allows her to shape and channel her pre-existing propensities to acknowledge the suffering of *other people*—a determinate intentional object—and to act accordingly (Wong 2006, 544-545). Nevertheless, unlike the Humean theory, Wong emphasizes the indeterminacy and the plasticity of pre-existing propensities and how external reasons are able to shape and channel them.<sup>8</sup> The pre-existing propensities, according to Wong, are grounded in our physical being, a view supported by modern research in neurosciences by Antonio Damasio (Wong 2006, 549-550).

Wong’s analysis of Roberta’s case is a modification of the Humean theory of internal reasons; nonetheless, he does not deny the possibility that an agent could recognize certain features in a situation external to her pre-existing propensities. In his analysis, external reasons alone are motivationally inefficacious, and propensities are the necessary motivating force, without which no action can be initiated. External reasons “motivate” only by serving to shape and channel those propensities. Thus, Wong views Roberta as “an agent who has a duty has a reason to do it but that the reason need not be based in the agent’s motives”—an internalist view about duty but an externalist view about reasons (Wong 2006, 537). Wong’s view thus breaks the dichotomy between externalism and internalism and provides an alternative explanation of how the transformation of nature is possible in the *Xun-Zi*.

#### 4. TRANSFORMATION OF NATURE: APPLYING WONG’S MODEL IN THE XUN-ZI

In this section, I show that the desires discussed in the *Xun-Zi* are motivationally efficacious due to its “world to mind” direction of fit and are analogous to the pre-existing propensities described by Wong. Moreover, I show that the heart-mind is a cognitive faculty that is capable of learning and generating knowledge and has a “mind

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<sup>8</sup> Wong admits that his use of the term “desire” could be different from its ordinary use in the desire-belief model, where desires usually aim at some determinate intentional objects to be satisfied and beliefs provide the means for the satisfaction of desires (Wong 2006, 543).

to world” direction of fit, making it motivationally impotent. Although the heart-mind is also capable of deliberating, it only takes into consideration of features in the external world to form new objects of desire, which is analogous to the shaping and channeling of pre-existing propensities through providing external reasons.

#### 4.1 DESIRES AS THE MOTIVATING ELEMENT IN THE *XUN-ZI*

Desires, or propensities as suggested by Wong, are motivationally efficacious because of their “world to mind” direction of fit. Both beliefs and desires are intentional states that are directed at something; that is, they are about something (Searle 1983, 1). Beliefs are statements that have truth value and are said to have a “mind to world” direction of fit. For instance, if it happens that my beliefs are false, they must be corrected so that they correspond to or are coherent with the state of affairs. In other words, beliefs must “fit the world;” hence no action can be initiated by them. Desires, however, are said to have a “world to mind” direction of fit; that is, the world must be changed to bring about the desired state of affairs. For this reason, desires are regarded as motivationally efficacious.

Similarly, desires in the *Xun-Zi* have the “world to mind” direction of fit and are, therefore, motivationally efficacious. This can be illustrated using the following passage in the chapter “Man’s Nature is Evil”:

As a general rule, the fact that men [humans] desire to do good is the product of the fact that their nature is evil. Those with very little think longingly about having much, the ugly about being beautiful, those in cramped quarters about spacious surroundings, the poor about wealth, the base about eminence—indeed whatever a man [a person] lacks within himself he is sure to desire from without. Thus, those who are already rich do not wish for valuables nor do the eminent wish for high position, for indeed whatever a person has within he does not seek from without. (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, section 23.2b, my emphasis)<sup>9</sup>

The sentence “whatever a man [a person] lacks within himself he is sure to desire from without” (*gou wu zhi zhong zhe, bi qiu yu wai* 苟無之中者，必求於外) indicates that as long as the desires are not yet satisfied, a person would certainly be moved to pursue them, while another sentence “whatever a person has within he does not seek from without” (*gou you zhi zhong zhe, bi bu ji yu wai* 苟有之中者，必不及於外) further confirms that a person ceases to pursue after the objects of desire once they are possessed. Thus, I contend that desires in the *Xun-Zi* embed the “world to mind” direction of fit and are, therefore, motivationally efficacious. Indeed, Xun Zi emphasizes that people are motivated to pursue what they desire, as he says in “On the Correct Use of Names”: “when what is desired is judged to be obtainable, it will be pursued. That is a necessary and inescapable part of our essential nature” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.5b)<sup>10</sup>. Likewise, in the chapter “Discourse on Ritual Principles,”

<sup>9</sup> “凡人之欲為善者，為性惡也。夫薄願厚，惡願美，貧願富，賤願貴，苟無之中者，必求於外。苟有之中者，必不及於外。”

<sup>10</sup> “以所欲為可得而求之，情之所必不免也。”

he says that “men [humans] are born with desires which, if not satisfied, cannot but lead men [humans] to seek to satisfy them” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.1a)<sup>11</sup>, indicating that when one’s desires are not satisfied, one is born to pursue after them, eventually resulting in chaos. All these passages suggest that humans are necessarily moved by their desires, without which no action can be initiated.<sup>12</sup>

Humans are able to transform their nature because they possess the desire to do good (*yu wei shan* 欲為善) (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, section 23.2b), which provides them with the necessary motivational force. Xun Zi maintains that humans possess the desire to do good because they are bad in nature. ‘Good’ (*shan* 善) and ‘bad’ (*e* 惡) here refer to the consequences of human actions rather than to the inborn nature of human beings. As Yiu-ming Fung (2012) has pointed out, the only definition of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in the *Xun-Zi* is given in the chapter “Man’s Nature Is Evil,” where ‘good’ refers to “what is correct, in accord with natural principles, peaceful, and well-ordered,” and ‘bad’ means “what is wrong through partiality, what wickedly contravenes natural principles, what is perverse, and what is rebellious” (Fung 2012, 189). Based on this analysis, the desire to do good indicates that a peaceful and ordered society is not yet attained; hence, humans are motivated to bring about that desired state of affairs. This “world to mind” direction of fit thus provides the necessary motivating force to move people to bring peace and order to society and is analogous to the pre-existing propensities discussed in the theory proposed by Wong.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4.2 BIOLOGICAL GROUNDS AND THE MALLEABILITY OF DESIRES IN THE XUN-ZI

Wong contends that the pre-existing propensities can be grounded in the “drives and instincts” present in human nature. His theory of the internalist about duty and the externalist about reasons can be demonstrated by the studies conducted by Antonio

<sup>11</sup> “人生而有欲，欲而不得，則不能無求。”

<sup>12</sup> Claiming that desires are the necessary conditions for actions does not mean they are also sufficient conditions. In fact, I contend that desires are not sufficient for initiating actions, for we also need the heart-mind to judge which desires are obtainable. I shall discuss this in the later part of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that this “desire to do good” is not a kind of innate incipient moral disposition, as suggested by Mencius. In the *Mencius*, humans possess innate incipient moral dispositions in the sense that they are able to perform a moral act spontaneously. For instance, if a person saw a child about to fall into a well, the person would rush to save the child out of the heart of compassion (*ce yin zhi xin* 惻隱之心). Therefore, humans would know the right thing to do through the process of “reflection” (*si* 思). Thus, even though humans also possess other sensory desires, they are able to override them by reflecting upon their heart-mind and can thus choose the right thing to do (*Mencius* 6A:15). In contrast, in the *Xun-Zi*, this “desire to do good” does not mean humans would spontaneously do the right thing: Xun Zi asserts that the heart-mind would follow the sensory desires if it were not properly guided by teachers (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 4, section, 4.10), and if actions were spontaneously being motivated by desires, only chaos would result (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section, 19.1). For Xun Zi, the standard of morality cannot be found within the nature of humans, and good and bad are results obtained through discerning the rational principle (*li* 理) that can be found in the empirical world, which will be discussed in the later part of this paper. In this sense, external reasons must be provided if humans are to do good; for Mencius, such external reasons are not required.



Damasio (Wong 2006, 549-550). In one of his studies, Damasio describes a patient who lacked emotions but tested normal in his intelligence. The patient was unable to exercise his practical rationality and constantly made disastrous decisions, demonstrating that emotions contribute to one's rational judgments and help to modify one's actions. In sum, Damasio's research shows that one's biological drives and instincts provide the necessary motivating forces for one to act and can guide the higher reasoning faculties. One is, therefore, able to modify one's actions. Thus, Wong argues that this finding supports his theory.

Xun Zi also emphasizes that desires are present in human nature and that humans are born to pursue what they desire the most. Xun Zi asserts that desires are a response to feelings, which are essential components of human nature (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.5b). They are expressed spontaneously without considering whether the objects of desire are attainable or not (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 4, section 4.9; and chapter 22, section 22.5a). Furthermore, he states that petty people and sages possess the same desires, including the desire for food when hungry, warmth when cold, rest when tired, benefits over harm, hearing beautiful sounds, and seeing beautiful things (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 4, section 4.9; and chapter 23, sections 23.1a and 23.1d). Most importantly, desires cannot be eradicated, as Xun Zi asserts that only dead people have no desires (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.5a).

Although desires, as described in the *Xun-Zi*, are expressed spontaneously, like pre-existing propensities in Wong's model, they are malleable. Although it is often stressed that petty people and sages possess the same kind of desires, the objects of these desires can be modified and shaped. In the chapter "Of Honor and Disgrace," Xun Zi says that those who lack teachers and models are satisfied with simple food such as beans, coarse greens, dregs, and husks. However, if the sages present fine food such as meat, rice, and millet to them, they will reject their old food and choose the new one (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 4, section 4.10). In the same chapter, Xun Zi asserts that it is the nature of humans to desire fine things such as the meat of pastured and grain-fed animals, clothing decorated with patterns and brocades, and traveling by horse and carriage. However, they are also able to withhold these desires by taking into consideration prudential calculations (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 4, section 4.11), indicating that humans can modify their desires by taking into consideration factors external to their motivational structure.

In order to transform one's inborn nature to become good and act morally, one needs to modify the objects of one's desires with reference to the rites. As emphasized by Xun Zi, chaos would result if humans were motivated by their desires without limit. The ancient kings thus establish the rites to "nurture" (*yang* 養) human desires to sustain both the pursuit of desires and resources (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.1a). One of the functions of the rites is to make distinctions (*bie* 別) between members within a society for the allocation of resources. Xun Zi claims that distinctions should be made between people of different social and political statuses, family members, and the wealthy and the poor (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 10, section 10.3a; and chapter 19, section 19.1c). These distinctions are of moral significance since they define the appropriate objects of desire that people should pursue with reference to the rites and, in turn, allow

resources to be distributed efficiently to maintain a peaceful society. In the chapter “On the Regulations of a King,” Xun Zi says that if people were to have the same social and political positions and were identical in their likes and dislikes, there would not be enough resources and disorder would result. Thus, the rites are installed to “nurture” the wealth of a country (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 9, section 9.3). This implies that distinctions between people must be made to allocate different objects of desire in accordance with each person’s social and political rank.<sup>14</sup> However, it should be emphasized that the rites are not established to curb people’s desires but rather to modify them so that their expressions are appropriate. In fact, as Wong (2000) has pointed out, the practice of the rites helps to channel people’s natural feelings (Wong 2000, 149) and is said to have reached its highest perfection only when one’s emotions and the practice of the rites are fully realized (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, sections 19.2c and 19.3). This perfection can be exemplified by the burial rituals, where different coffins are used for different official positions so as to express loyalty in its fullest sense (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.4b). Likewise, the period of mourning differs according to various human relations to express one’s thoughts of longing and remembrance (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.4c). The practice of the rites, therefore, refines the inborn nature of humans rather than violates it (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.6). Xun Zi asserts that the practice of the rites enables people to satisfy their desires, and this practice distinguishes between the Confucians and the Mohists (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.1d).

To conclude, desires described in the *Xun-Zi* are motivationally efficacious because of their “world to mind” direction of fit, which corresponds to the pre-existing propensities in Wong’s model. They are grounded in the inborn nature of humans and that humans are born to be motivated by them as long as they are not satisfied. Nonetheless, those desires can be modified by the rites so that what people desire matches their social and political status to enable their flourishing and the flourishing of a country.

### 4.3 HEART-MIND AS A COGNITIVE FACULTY

While I have demonstrated that desires are necessarily motivating due to their “world to mind” direction of fit, in the following paragraphs, I argue that the heart-mind only acts as a cognitive faculty, taking into consideration reasons external to one’s motivational structure to modify one’s desires, while being impotent to move by itself.

In the chapter “Dispelling Blindness,” Xun Zi claims that “the mind [heart-mind] from birth has awareness (*zhi* 知). Having awareness, there is perception of difference” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.5d)<sup>15</sup>, where awareness refers to the capacity of learning. It is further explained in the chapter “On the Correct Use of Names,” where Xun Zi asserts that among all the sense organs possessed by humans, only the heart-mind has

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that, for Xun Zi, one does not born into a particular social and political rank. On the contrary, a person is able to move up the social and political rank through education and taking up official positions.

<sup>15</sup> “心生而有知，知而有異。”

the capacity of awareness (*zheng zhi* 徵知) (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.2e). With this capacity of awareness, the heart-mind is able to build knowledge through processing the information received by other sense organs. If the heart-mind is not made aware of the information received by other sense organs, no knowledge can be formed (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.2e). Both passages indicate that the function of the heart-mind is to process information from the external world and make decisions based on the information received. Xun Zi also emphasizes the importance of correctly evaluating a situation using the heart-mind. Again in “Dispelling Blindness,” Xun Zi describes several cases where an agent fails to judge a situation correctly because the cognitive faculty has been blinded. For instance, a drunk person may misjudge the width of a ditch and try to jump across it; or may have mistaken the city gate as the entrance of his room. Undesirable consequences may result from this false information and misjudgment, including death (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.8). Thus, I contend that the heart-mind is only a cognitive faculty that generates knowledge that must “fit the world,” a direction of fit that is contrary to that of desires; hence, it is motivationally inefficacious. My interpretation that the heart-mind is impotent to move can be further supported by another passage in “On the Correct Use of Names,” where Xun Zi claims that “the means of knowing which is within man [humans] is called ‘awareness’ (*zhi* 知). Awareness tallying with the facts is called ‘knowledge’ (*zhi* 智)” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.1b)<sup>16</sup>. In this sense, the heart-mind is impotent to move because it must “tally with facts,” demonstrating its “mind to world” direction of fit.

The knowledge generated by the heart-mind is of moral significance since it is analogous to the external reasons that help to modify the pre-existing propensities in Wong’s model. The knowledge possessed by the heart-mind allows an agent to judge which objects of desire are approved (*sou ke* 所可) to pursue. In the chapter “On Enriching the State,” Xun Zi says that “although they [humans] have the same desires, they have different degrees of awareness concerning them: this is due to inborn nature. In that both approve of things, the wise and stupid are the same (*jie you ke, zhi yu tong* 皆有可，知愚同); but since what they approve is different, the wise and stupid are separated (*sou ke yi ye, zhi yu fen* 所可異也，知愚分)” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 10, section 10.1)<sup>17</sup>. Xun Zi makes a distinction between what people “approve of (*ke* 可)” and “what they eventually approve (*sou ke* 所可).” Li Disheng (1979) interprets ‘approve of (*ke* 可)’ as the heart-mind’s capacity to make judgments, which is possessed by all humans, while ‘what they approve (*sou ke* 所可)’ refers to the correct judgments made by the heart-mind after learning, which is the difference between the wise and the stupid (Li 1979, 196). Li’s interpretation is consistent with the understanding of the heart-mind as a cognitive organ that chooses the appropriate objects of desire based on the knowledge it obtains and that humans are able to modify their desires through learning.

The role of the heart-mind in modifying the objects of desire can also be illustrated in the following passage that is widely discussed in the literature:

<sup>16</sup> “所以知之在人者謂之知；知有所合謂之智。”

<sup>17</sup> “同欲而異知，生也。皆有可也，知愚同；所可異也，知愚分。”

Desire does not depend on the object of desire first being obtainable, but what is sought after follows after what is possible. That the occurrence of desire does not depend on its object's first being obtainable is a quality we receive from nature. That what we seek to satisfy our desires by following after what is possible is what we receive from the mind [heart-mind] (*qiu zhe cong suo ke, suo shou hu xin ye* 求者從所可，所受乎心也). It is natural to our inborn nature to have desires, and the mind [heart-mind] acts to control and moderate them. The simple desires we receive from nature are controlled by the complex devices exercised by the mind [heart-mind] until it becomes inherently difficult to properly categorize what one has received from nature. ...Thus, when desires run to excess, actions do not reach that point because the mind [heart-mind] stops them. If what the mind [heart-mind] permits coincides with reason, then although the desires be numerous, how could there be harm to order! Although the desires are not strong enough to motivate a person, his actions may exceed his desires because the mind [heart-mind] has ordered them to do so. If what the mind [heart-mind] permits conflicts with what is reasonable, then although the desires be few, how could it stop at disorder! Thus, order and disorder lie in what the mind [heart-mind] permits and not with the desires that belong to our essential [inborn] natures. (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.5a)<sup>18</sup>

The passage above asserts that it is the heart-mind that determines which objects of desire are to be satisfied, where the term ‘approve of (*sou ke* 所可)’ is used. This is consistent with the ‘approve of (*sou ke* 所可)’ used in the chapter “On Enriching the State,” discussed in earlier paragraphs, where it is said that what one eventually approves of is determined by knowledge. Moreover, it is claimed that the desires after being modified by the heart-mind become completely different from those expressed by inborn human nature, which again is consistent with the interpretation that the heart-mind is responsible for modifying the objects of desire. Before the modification, people may aim at satisfying their immediate desires; For example, they may eat without considering the duty of deference to the elderly (*ci rang* 辭讓). But after the modification, they may desire the elderly to eat first (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, section 23.1d). Nonetheless, although the expression is different, the desire for food remains the same. Hence, my interpretation is consistent with Xun Zi's claim that petty people and the sages have the same desires.

The passage quoted above is often used by externalists to argue that desires are not motivating since it is stated that the heart-mind is able to move one to act even if desires are not strong enough. However, the passage above is also consistent with my interpretation that desires are necessary to move one to act, while the heart-mind is only responsible for modifying what one desires. Recall the story of Roberta discussed by Wong (2006). Wong (2006) maintains that Roberta does not have any desire to help textile workers before watching the film, though she may have pre-existing propensities to relieve suffering in general. The film, as an external reason, is taken into

<sup>18</sup> “欲不待可得，而求者從所可。欲不待可得，所受乎天也；求者從所可，所受乎心也。所受乎天之一欲，制於所受乎心之多，固難類所受乎天也。……故欲過之而動不及，心止之也。心之所可中理，則欲雖多，奚傷於治？欲不及而動過之，心使之也。心之所可失理，則欲雖寡，奚止於亂？故治亂在於心之所可，亡於情之所欲。”

consideration and helps Roberta to become determinate regarding whom she wants to help. Roberta's case conforms to the situation mentioned by Xun Zi above, where the desires (pre-existing propensities) are not strong enough, but the heart-mind is able to provide external reasons to determine what is the right thing to do through learning.

The knowledge that the heart-mind must learn to modify the objects of desire are the rites. As discussed in an earlier section, the rites describe the correct objects of desire in accordance with one's social and political position. Xun Zi asserts that all humans are capable of becoming sages since rational principles (*li* 理) are present in the use of humaneness, morality, the model of law and rectitude (*ren yi fa zhen* 仁義法正). He further asserts that all humans, be they sages or petty persons, possess in themselves the capacity for understanding (*ke yi zhi* 可以知) and practicing (*ke yi neng* 可以能) those rational principles. Hence, by putting effort into learning those rational principles, petty people can likewise transform their nature and become sages (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, section 23.5a).<sup>19</sup>

Besides the capacity for learning, the heart-mind is also said to be capable of deliberating (*lü* 慮), which is an important capacity that renders the transformation of human nature possible. In "On the Correct Use of Names," Xun Zi says,

The feelings of liking and disliking, of delight and anger, and of sorrow and joy that are inborn in our nature are called "emotions." The emotions being so paired, the mind's [heart-mind's] choosing between them is called "thinking [deliberating] (*lü* 慮)." The mind's [heart-mind's] thinking something and the natural abilities' acting on it is called "conscious exertion (*wei* 偽)." When thoughts are accumulated and one's natural abilities have been practiced so that something is completed, it is called "conscious exertion (*wei* 偽)." (*Xun-Zi*, Section, 22.1b)<sup>20</sup>

In the above passage and elsewhere, Xun Zi reiterates that emotions constitute our inborn nature (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.5b). This means that possessing them cannot be avoided, and, as Li Disheing has pointed out, they are manifested whenever humans make contact with the external world (Li 1979, 508). Nonetheless, humans can choose what emotions to express through the exercise of the heart-mind. There are two different senses of the term "conscious exertion" in the passage above. The first appearance of "conscious exertion" is used to describe the actualization of deliberations made by the heart-mind, as indicated by the word *neng* (able to 能). In the chapter "Man's Nature Is Evil," Xun Zi states that "conscious exertion" is not spontaneous but must be learned in order to be exercised (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, section, 23.1c). This contrasts the actions performed after the deliberation of the heart-mind, which are the product of learning, with those moved by inborn emotions. This capacity for

<sup>19</sup> Even though all humans possess the capacity to become sages, not all are able to do so, which is the distinction between ability (*neng* 能) and capacity (*ke yi* 可以). For a comprehensive discussion of the distinction between ability and capacity, see Kim-chong Chong 2003, who explained the difference between *neng* and *ke yi* clearly.

<sup>20</sup> "性之好、惡、喜、怒、哀、樂謂之情。情然而心為之擇謂之慮。心慮而能為之動謂之偽；慮積焉，能習焉，而後成謂之偽。"

deliberating allows the heart-mind to pick the correct objects of desire in accordance with the rites. As people continue to deliberate correctly and practice the rites they eventually transform their nature so that their pursuit of desires no longer causes chaos. Consequently, they become moral, which is the second appearance of the term “conscious exertion.”<sup>21</sup>

With the above interpretation of the desires and the heart-mind described in the *Xun-Zi*, the transformation of nature can be explained in terms of Wong’s model of internalist about duty but externalist about reasons: humans are born with various desires which are manifested as their senses make contact with the external world; nonetheless, their desires are indeterminate. They may desire numerous things to satisfy their inborn desires. Among the various desires humans possess, there is the desire to do good—a desire to bring about peace and order in a society. This desire provides the motivational force for humans to become moral (an internalist view about duty). Although the desire to do good provides the necessary motivational force to become a noble person and to maintain order in a society, one may remain indeterminate about what to do and which objects of desire to pursue. Consequently, the heart-mind must learn the rites to determine what objects of desire should be pursued (external reasons that modify the objects of desire). With constant practice, one eventually becomes a moral person.

My interpretation of the transformation of nature in the sages is consistent with Xun Zi’s definition of “transformation” (*hua* 化), which states that “where the appearance undergoes metamorphosis, but there is no distinction in the reality, yet they are deemed different, it is called ‘transformation’” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, section 22.2h)<sup>22</sup>. The word ‘appearance’ (*zhuang* 狀) here could be interpreted in terms of behaviors and outcomes, where human nature (the reality, *shi* 實) remains essentially the same, but the behavior is different, resulting in different outcomes. Instead of pursuing their desires without restraint and causing chaos, people seek after their desires in accordance with the rites and come to live in harmony.

## 5. TRANSFORMATION OF NATURE IN THE SAGES

As Xun Zi has emphasized in “Man’s Nature is Evil” that humans do not possess in themselves innate incipient moral dispositions, and that if they are allowed to pursue

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<sup>21</sup> Yiu-ming Fung has also argued that there are two different senses of *wei* (偽) in this passage. The first appearance of the term refers to the “natural dispositions, instincts, and potential capacities in[side] humans,” while the second appearance refers to the “actualization of these dispositions and capacities or the performance issued from these dispositions and capacities.” For Fung’s argument, please see Yiu-ming Fung 2011. My interpretation of the two different appearances of *wei* is different from that of Fung. I take the first instance of *wei* to be the actualization of the deliberations made by the heart-mind because Xun Zi claims that *wei* is something that must be learned and not part of the inborn nature of humans in the chapter “Man’s Nature Is Evil” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, section 23.1c). My first interpretation of *wei* is thus Fung’s second sense of *wei*. I take the second interpretation of *wei* as the transformed human nature through learning, which is consistent with the fact that to be good, a person needs constant practice, as mentioned in the chapter “Man’s Nature is Evil” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 23, section 23.2a).

<sup>22</sup> “狀變而實無別而為異者，謂之化。”

after their spontaneous desires, chaos would result, the problem which remains to be discussed is the transformation of nature in the sages, who are said to be able to establish the rites at the beginning, without relying on a pre-established set of the rites. The picture of human nature portrayed by Xun Zi implies that morality cannot be found within the nature of humans. Therefore, although the sages, like petty people, have within themselves the desire to do good, they might be indeterminate in what should be done in order to bring about the desired state of affair. I suggest that it is the role of the heart-mind to generate knowledge necessary to achieve an ordered society through establishing the rites, and that the sages are able to do so because of their exceptional capacity of “conscious exertion”<sup>23</sup> in discerning the rational principles found in the natural world.

The knowledge necessary for the establishment of the rites is the rational principle (*li* 理) that can be discerned in the natural world. In “Dispelling Blindness,” Xun Zi asserts that while humans possess the faculty of knowing, there are rational principles present in myriad things that can be known by humans, and sages are able to grasp those principles comprehensively (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.9). Moreover, Xun Zi further asserts that the difference between a farmer and the director of the fields lies in whether the person is good at the skill or the principle (the way) of governing the fields (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.6). In effect, Xun Zi implies that in order to govern a society, it is of most important to understand the rational principles behind how a society works, including both human relationships and the natural phenomena. In other words, the rites are established with reference to the rational principles found in the natural world.

This interpretation is supported by various passages found in the *Xun-Zi*. In the chapter “On the Regulations of a King,” Xun Zi claims that the hierarchy established in human society is found on a reference to Heaven and Earth. He observes that a society would not be functional if all its members were categorized equally in terms of profession and social status; rather, not only would resources not properly produced, but the consumption of resources could not be sustained as well (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 9, section 9.3). Moreover, in the chapter “Discourse on Nature,” Xun Zi emphasizes that constancy can be found in natural phenomena, and whether order or chaos would result depends on one’s ability to respond (*ying* 應) properly (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 17, section 17.1), which entails that one must be able to fully understand the natural world in order to establish the correct rites in response to various natural phenomena.

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<sup>23</sup> As discussed in the previous section, the term “conscious exertion” has two different meanings, one of which refers to the actions performed after the deliberation of the heart-mind, whereas the other refers to the transformed nature of humans. When Xun Zi asserts that the sages and petty people are the same in nature but different in “conscious exertion,” he is referring to the fact that the sages and petty people differ in the deliberation of their heart-mind (the first sense of the term ‘conscious exertion’). Since the heart-mind is the only organ that generates knowledge, I contend that the essential difference between the sages and petty people rests on the deliberation of the heart-mind and that the sages are able to establish the rites at the beginning because they are exceptional in generating knowledge for the heart-mind to deliberate upon.

I contend that the sages are able to establish the rites at the beginning because they are exceptional in using their heart-mind to discern the rational principles found in the natural world and establishing the rites with reference to those rational principles. In the chapter “Dispelling Blindness,” Xun Zi claims that the heart-mind can be blinded (*bi* 蔽) by various things and hence make biased judgments, a problem shared by his contemporaries, including the Mo Zi, Sung Zi, and even Zhuang Zi. Xun Zi asserts that they only know part of the way but not the whole of it (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.4). It is said that since the sages know the undesirable consequences of the heart-mind being blinded, they are able to deliberate with balance (*heng* 衡) (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.5a). This balance is the way; hence, it is most important for the heart-mind to understand the way (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.5b). The heart-mind is able to understand the way because of its capacity for emptiness, unity, and stillness (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21.5, section 21.5d). It thus can be argued that, the sages are motivated by the desire to do good in establishing the rites, while the content of the rites are generated by the exceptional ability of the heart-mind in clearing biases and discerning the rational principles found in the natural world.

My interpretation that the rites are established with reference to the rational principles found in the natural world is consistent with and supported by David Nivison (1996) and Bo Mou’s (2020) interpretations that Xun Zi sees the fundamental principles of the natural world as the basis of morality.<sup>24</sup> Nivison argues that rules are respected not because they are established by the sages based on their “superior intelligence,” for all people possess intelligence, and the sages cannot be justified to possess intelligence superior to those of the petty people unless an external objective standard exists (Nivison 1996, 327-328). In other words, even though the sages possess superior intelligence and establish rules and regulations, they must establish them with a basis that is external to human nature, just like a potter is able to create a pot out of clay, but she does not do so based on her own nature—she must have learned it from somewhere with her intelligence. My interpretation is thus consistent with Nivison’s in that, although I suggest that the sages are able to establish the rites because of their exceptional capacity of the heart-mind, they also need to be able to discern the rational principles found in the natural world correctly in order to establish the rites. Without knowing those rational principles to act as reference, the sages are unable to establish the rites that will correctly respond to the constancy found in the nature.

Mou further elaborates Nivison’s interpretation by proposing a “truth-concerning approach” in understanding Xun Zi (Mou 2020, 120-128). Based on Xun Zi’s criticism to Mencius’ view of humans, Mou argues that Xun Zi cannot establish the truth of morality based on the human nature. Instead, “Xun Zi takes it that the fundamental way of the natural world constitutes the due basis and foundation of human morality” (Mou 2020, 124). In effect, the sages are able to establish the rites because they are able to capture how things are organized in this world (the fundamental way of the natural world), or “*shi* (實 actuality) through which *tian* via *tian-dao* or *tian-ming* constitutes the basis of human morality as well as the basis of human beings’ understanding of

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<sup>24</sup> I am in debt to the two anonymous reviewers for pointing this out to me.



non-human affairs in the natural world” (Mou 2020, 126-127). For Mou, humans are part of the natural world, and hence *tian* (Heaven 天) is not completely separated from human affairs. Instead, humans need to understand the correct kind of human affairs, namely, the “*tian*-way-according-with ones,” in order to promote the flourishing of both humans and the society (Mou 2020, 125). My interpretation of the *Xun-Zi* thus agrees with Mou in that we both emphasize the importance of capturing the truth found in the natural world in establishing morality.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, Mou’s work implies that there is only one correct understanding of the natural world. As Xun Zi has pointed out in the chapter “Discourse on Nature” that it is only when one responds to the constancy with good government that there will be good result (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 17, section 17.1). In other words, the rites are correct not because it gives good consequences, but because it correctly represents the natural world, including human affairs. Based on this understanding, Xun Zi is less likely to be a relativist but more likely to be a moral realist, a non-relativist point of view of morality.<sup>26</sup>

Although the rites are established on the rational principles found in this world, it does not necessarily mean that the rites, once established, cannot be changed, and a change in the rites does not render Xun Zi becomes a relativist. As long as the moral principles are respected, different expressions of the same principles are often

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that, when I agree with Mou that “*tian* via *tian-dao* or *tian-ming* constitutes the basis of human morality,” and that *tian* (Heaven 天) is not completely separated from human affairs, I do not see *tian* as anthropomorphic in nature that rewards or punishes humans with respect to their behaviours. Indeed, in elsewhere, Mou makes it clear that *tian-ming* and *xing* “are distinct and cannot be conflated” (Mou 2020, 177). In other words, there is no inherent connection between *tian* and humans, and hence *tian* does not dictate what humans should or should not do. For this reason, humans do not have duty to “understand nature” (*zhi tian* 知天) and should not try to read omens into natural phenomena (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 17, section 17.2b). However, I do agree with Mou that *tian-ming* is “normative in the sense that it guides how the natural world, of which humans and the human society are parts, is to go” (Mou 2020, 177). For my interpretation, to agree that *tian-ming* is normative in the sense that it acts as a guiding principle is different from claiming *tian* is anthropomorphic in nature. In an anthropomorphic *tian*, *tian* is intentional in nature and actively participates in human affairs. Moreover, *tian* would respond to the behaviours of humans by giving rewards or punishments. To claim that *tian-ming* is a guiding principle does not imply that *tian* participates in human affairs. On the contrary, it represents a kind of moral realism, in which the truth of moral statements is found upon the fact of this natural world. It is only when one captures the fact of this natural world correctly, one is able to establish morality. This can be supported by Xun Zi’s claim that a hierarchical society is justified by the distinction between Heaven and Earth. Hence, for the sages to establish morality, it is of most importance not only to understand the truth of the natural world, but also that of humans, including the humans’ position in this natural world (to establish order but not reading omens from natural phenomena), which is the meaning of “understand nature” and “understand the division between nature and humans” (*zhi tian ren zhi fen* 知天人之分) in the *Xun-Zi* (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 17, section 17.1).

<sup>26</sup> In previous section I contend that “good” and “bad” in the *Xun-Zi* refers to the consequences of human actions. However, it does not mean that Xun Zi is a consequentialist and determine what is right or wrong based on the consequences of human actions. “Good” and “bad” in the *Xun-Zi* are only a description of the state of a society (where “good” describes a peaceful and ordered society; while “bad” describes a chaotic, disordered society), which is the result of applying a correct moral rule. Hence, my interpretation of Xun Zi as a moral realist and “good” and “bad” as the consequences of actions are not logically inconsistent.

permissible. For instance, while Confucius was willing to follow the common practice and replace a linen cap with a silk cap, he nonetheless refused to bow after ascending to the hall and insisted to follow the rites (*Analects*, chapter Zi Han). Whether to follow the common practice or the rites is not an arbitrary decision based on one's personal choice, but whether the common practice abides by the moral principles that the rites are founded upon. In this case, one does not deviate from filial piety by using either linen or silk cap, but one fails to show respect to the king if one bows only after ascending to the hall. By the same reasoning, although it has been suggested that different ordinances are exercised in different areas (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 18, section 18.4), it does not render Xun Zi a relativist, since the same moral principles are abided by the people in those areas, namely, the same obligations and services to the king and the same standard of conduct. As Xun Zi says in the chapter "Discourse on Nature," the rites are the markers of the connecting thread of the Way that remained unchanged throughout the Hundred Kings (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 17, section 17.11), in other words, as long as the rites express those rational principles found in the constancy of the nature correctly, they may be adapted to different situations.

For the above reasons, although my interpretation agrees with Wong's account on the role of desires in the motivation of action, it is different from Wong (2000 & 2016) in that mine is a non-relativist view of morality in the *Xun-Zi*. Even though Wong holds himself as giving a constructivist/absolutist interpretation of Xun Zi, he is also aware that his understanding of absolutist would render him no different from a constrained relativist (Wong 2016). Wong (2000 & 2016) emphasizes that the rites in the *Xun-Zi* are invented by humans, and the design of which is constrained by human psychological materials. For instance, the mourning period for parents is extended to three years because it allows humans to fully express their emotions in "socially beneficial ways" (Wong 2016, 153). For Wong (2000), moral properties do not exist, and the rites are established to satisfy the enlightened self-interests of humans, which does not only allow humans to live with others harmoniously, but also to transform their emotions so that they are "*genuinely willing* to forgo advantage for oneself in order to be a trustworthy partner in cooperation and therefore in order to benefit from cooperation" (Wong 2016, 154. Original italic.). In effect, Wong (2000 & 2016) argues that there is no pre-existing normative structure that guides the sages to establish the rites, the rites are invented by the sages with reference to the psychological make-up of humans. Hence, there could be more than one correct way to establish the rites, as long as it satisfies the long-term interests of humans and result in an ordered society. Wong thus argues that the textual materials of the *Xun-Zi* "does not rule out acknowledgment of a range of permissible variation in the interpretation of Confucian values" (Wong 2016, 160). Thus, Wong's understanding of the *Xun-Zi* allows various equally good interpretations of Confucian values as the foundations of the rites, which is contrary to my analysis above. The problem with Wong's interpretation of the *Xun-Zi* is that he puts too much emphasis on the satisfaction of desires. He only sees the function of the heart-mind as choosing which desires to satisfy, while neglecting the important function of the heart-mind as the cognitive faculty that aims to "tally with facts" as

discussed in the earlier section. Essentially, Wong fails to acknowledge the importance of discerning the truth of the rational principles found in the natural world. For the above reasons, I contend that it would be more appropriate to see Xun Zi as a moral realist rather than a constructivist.

## 6. OBJECTIONS

Externalists may object that my interpretation of the *Xun-Zi* is not consistent with the passage where it is stated that the heart-mind is an authority that issues orders but does not take orders, acts autonomously, and chooses freely—“on its own authority it forbids or orders, renounces or selects, initiates or stops” (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section, 21.6a)<sup>27</sup>. However, the passage goes on to claim that the heart-mind is able to stay focused to generate knowledge despite the diversity present in the external world. Thus, it can be argued that the heart-mind is autonomous in choosing information to generate knowledge. For this reason, my interpretation that the heart-mind is in charge of choosing the appropriate objects of desire through learning and that it is efficaciously impotent since it is only an organ that generates knowledge remains consistent with this passage. For this reason, Van Norden’s claim that the heart-mind always trumps desires is less probable.

Sung argues that desires in the *Xun-Zi* are not motivating but are only a reason for action and that the heart-mind is always active and chooses which action to act upon. At the same time, she is aware that her interpretation of desires and the heart-mind “opens up the possibility that *yu* (desires) and *xin* (heart-mind) are not distinct entities and that *yu* is in some way integrated with *xin*” (Sung 2012, 382). As I have argued in an earlier section, desires in the *Xun-Zi* are motivating, but the heart-mind is not, and this is due to their distinct direction of fit. By not making the distinction between desires and the heart-mind in her interpretation, Sung has embedded the motivational force of desires in the heart-mind and thus undermined the role of desires in the motivational structure. However, Xun Zi has reiterated that desires cannot be eliminated; hence, it is more practical to moderate them (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 22, sections 22.5a and 22.5b). Moreover, Xun Zi contends that desires and the heart-mind could be in conflict with each other. The motivational force of desires could become so strong that the heart-mind succumbs to them. For this reason, people such as Ji mentioned in “Dispelling Blindness” would live in a cave to avoid contact with the external world and the arousal of desires in order to deliberate properly. Even so, Xun Zi claimed that they are only able to reach the state of “anxiously keeping oneself on guard” (*wei* 危) with their exercise of self-endurance and strength of will but have not yet attained the ideal state of being “subtle” (*wei* 微). In that state, the sages could follow their desires and fulfill their emotions without the need for strength of will and the exercise of self-endurance (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.7d). Therefore, the motivational force of desires should not be neglected, and that the desires and the heart-mind must be distinct entities as they would oppose each other.

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<sup>27</sup> “自禁也，自使也，自奪也，自取也，自行也，自止也。”

While my interpretation mainly opposes the externalist reading of the *Xun-Zi*, it also provides a better explanation of the transformation of nature given by the internalists. Both Hagen and Cua suggest that this transformation involves developing a new set of desires. For Hagen, an auxiliary motivational structure that desires specific things is developed on top of an agent's natural desires so that the agent can find more productive ways to satisfy one's self-interest through the help of this auxiliary motivational structure. Throughout the entire process, the agent's natural desires remain unchanged. Nonetheless, Hagen argues that the transformation of nature is essentially the transformation of character. For example, one is transformed from being honored to being honorable. Therefore, Hagen's suggestion involves the same transition from externalism to internalism. However, he is unable to explain how a self-interested person can become virtuous through prudential consequentialist considerations. For Hagen, the transformation of character is consequentialist in nature and is simply a means to satisfy prudential desires. In other words, the reason one would form a new motivational set is for its instrumental value and better consequences. In this sense, although Hagen suggests that one would eventually have a "fondness" for the rites and be *internally motivated by it* (Hagen 2011, 66. My emphasis.), this "fondness" would only have instrumental value and would remain at most a hypothetical imperative. If there are other means to better satisfy our desires, we have no more reason to be "fond" of the rites. Thus, under this consequentialist picture of the motivational structure, there is no guarantee that the rites will be "intrinsically motivating," as suggested by Hagen (Hagen 2011, 66). However, Xun Zi does not only see the rites as having an instrumental value that aims to bring order to society but also sees the beauty of the rites and believes that the rites complete human nature; hence, people are "fond" of practicing them (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.6). In my interpretation of the *Xun-Zi*, the rites do not only define the appropriate objects of desire to pursue but are likewise the truth of how a society should be organized. For the same reason, Xun Zi criticizes his contemporaries for being blinded and only understanding the truth partially (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 21, section 21.4). Moreover, the rites do not curb the nature of humans but beautify it and render human nature complete (*Xun-Zi*, chapter 19, section 19.6). Since the rites represent the truth of both the external world and human nature, the heart-mind learns about them because of their intrinsic value over and above their instrumental value.

Cua suggests that second-order desires are formed during the transformation of nature and that people are essentially motivated by their second-order volitions after the process (Cua 1978, 49-50). The development of a new set of motivations, in addition to the old natural and basic desires, opens up the possibility for conflict between the first-order and second-order desires. According to Frankfurt (1971), only when second-order desire entails the first-order desire then a person's will is free (Frankfurt 1971, 15). For Frankfurt, it is possible that one wants to want to do X but at the same time does not want to do X (Frankfurt 1971, 9). In other words, one can have a second-order desire without wanting the first-order desire to be effective. To ensure that the second-order desire entails the first-order desire, strength of will may be required, which is contrary to the description given by Xun Zi as discussed above. Also,

Xun Zi reiterates that all humans, whether sages or petty people, have the same desires. If a new set of desires is developed during the transformation of nature, as suggested by both Hagen and Cua, the interpretation would depart from the meaning expressed in the *Xun-Zi*. My interpretation of the transformation of nature as a transition from indeterminate pre-existing desires to the formation of determinate objects of desire avoids this problem.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have provided an analysis of the transformation of nature in the *Xun-Zi* in terms of the motivational structure. It is an alternative interpretation to the cultivation of virtue adopted by most scholars in the literature. I have investigated the possibility of the transformation of nature in the *Xun-Zi* based on Wong's (2006) model of the internalist about duty and the externalist about reasons. I have argued that the desires described in the *Xun-Zi* are motivating due to their "world to mind" direction of fit and that the heart-mind is impotent to move one to act since it is only a cognitive organ that is responsible for generating knowledge. Although the heart-mind is able to learn and deliberate, it only acts as the authority in choosing the appropriate objects of desire to pursue. The transformation of nature in humans is possible because humans are born with a desire to do good that motivates them to act morally. This desire to do good is analogous to the pre-existing propensities described in Wong's (2006) model. Even though born with this desire to do good, humans are indeterminate with respect to what objects of desire should be pursued to avoid chaos occurring in the society, for that reason the heart-mind provides external reasons to modify them in accordance with the rites. While petty people could transform themselves by putting effort into learning and practicing the rites, the sages are able to establish the rites at the beginning because they are exceptional in their ability to discern the rational principles that exist in the external world. In this way, the rites are installed based on the truth found in the natural world, even though humans are born without any innate incipient moral dispositions. For this reason, I disagree with Wong (2000 & 2016) that the rites are established with reference only to the psychological materials of humans, which aim only to satisfy the enlightened self-interests of humans. Instead, I have argued that moral properties are present as rational principles found in the natural world, and are represented by the rites. Xun Zi should thus be regarded as a moral realist rather than a constructivist as construed by Wong (2016). Lastly, I have replied to the possible objections to my interpretation, showing that it provides a more coherent understanding of the *Xun-Zi*.

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