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## **Xunzi and the primitivists on natural spontaneity (*xìng* 性) and coercion**

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# Xunzi and the primitivists on natural spontaneity (*xìng* 性) and coercion

**Abstract:** This article explores two opposing views from Warring States China concerning the value of human natural spontaneity (hereafter *xìng* 性) and large-scale government coercion. On the one hand, the Ruist (Confucian) philosopher Xunzi championed a comprehensive and coercive ethical, political, and social system or Way (*dào* 道) that he believed would lead to social order and moral cultivation while opposing people's *xìng*. On the other hand, the authors of roughly books 8-10 of *Zhuangzi*, the primitivists, criticized a Way bearing a striking resemblance to Xunzi's on the grounds that it seriously harms people by opposing their *xìng*. I argue that the primitivists offer compelling reasons for Xunzi to modify his own Way regarding its relationship with *xìng*, though their own proposed alternative Way is not very attractive. I conclude with a brief discussion of one primitivist-inspired alternative view found in the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*, which plausibly suggests that one way of respecting people's *xìng* is by offering them opportunities to explore their natural abilities.

**Keywords:** Xunzi, primitivists, Confucianism, *Zhuangzi*, coercion, *xìng*

## 1 Introduction

Can governments justifiably coerce their subjects into following a Way (*dào* 道) that goes against their natural, spontaneous tendencies in order to promote social and moral ends? Political philosophers have become increasingly interested in the ethics of coercion over the past half-century or so, but a number of Warring States Chinese philosophers (active circa 475-221 BCE) also debated its ethical status. In particular, the Ruist (Confucian) philosopher Xunzi championed a comprehensive and coercive ethical, political, and social system or Way,<sup>1</sup> which he

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<sup>1</sup>Because the term, *dào* 道, is so morally, politically, and socially comprehensive, rather than repeatedly saying, "Xunzi's comprehensive moral, political, and social system," I will simply opt for the standard translation of *dào* as "Way," with a capital "W" in order to make it clear that Xunzi believes that his way is the one, uniquely correct Way.

believed would lead to social order and individual moral cultivation in spite of people's natural, spontaneous tendencies (hereafter *xìng* 性).<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the authors responsible for at least the first three of the "Outer Chapters" (外篇) of the Daoist anthology the *Zhuangzi* (莊子), whom I will refer to as the primitivists,<sup>3</sup> sharply criticized a Way bearing a striking resemblance to Xunzi's, and argued that such a Way would lead to social chaos and harm to individuals by forcing them against their *xìng*.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I offer a sympathetic presentation of the primitivists' critique of Xunzi's Way, focusing in particular on their idea that coercing people into violating their *xìng* will leave them worse off. A thing's *xìng* is conducive to its health and well-being, they hold. Forcing people against it could only lead to disaster. This much I think the primitivists are right about.

Their own proposed alternative Way, however, is implausible for a number of reasons, the main one being that it demands its own campaign of oppression by means of destroying cultural artifacts and suppressing thought and innovation, for example. So while the primitivists offer compelling reasons for doubting Xunzi's underlying justification for his Way, it might ultimately be more tenable because it has a more realistic view of the value of human culture and tradition.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>I defend my reading of *xìng* in §3.

<sup>3</sup>A.C. Graham was the first to use the term "the primitivist" (singular) to refer to the author of books 8-10 of the *Zhuangzi* (Graham, 1981, p. 197). Similarly, Liu Xiaogan includes books 28, 29, and 31 in the same category as well, labeling the entire group "anarchist," (Liu, 1994). I do not see as much unity in these texts as Graham does, though, and so I will treat them as accretional texts as well, as the rest of the *Zhuangzi* is increasingly accepted as being. C.f., Fraser (1997) and Klein (2010).

<sup>4</sup>I will remain agnostic about the historical claim that the primitivists were in fact arguing against Xunzi, since indeed a wider range of opponents than discussed here might have been the target of these texts. However, the strong thematic and vocabulary overlap and contrast in primitivist and Xunzian writings suggests that Xunzi is among their range of Rusit and Mohist opponents and beyond targeted in their writings. Although this supports Graham's idea that the primitivist writings are late text, which we can precisely date to "within a few years of 205 BC" (Graham, 1981, p. 197), I do not see as much homogeneity that Graham does in these texts, since I assume they are accretional texts rather than from the same hand.

<sup>5</sup>We should keep in mind, however, Xunzi's dogmatic streak, which suggests that Xunzi might be less interested in providing a general philosophy of culture or ritual rather than giving normative arguments for a particular cultural tradition of which he is a member, the Ruist one. Which Xunzi is the true or most textually supported one is a matter of interpretive debate. Hansen (1992, pp. 310-19) espouses something of a "two Xunzi's" theory, and offers reasons for distinguishing Xunzi the pragmatist from Xunzi the dogmatist. Hagen (2007), on the other hand, offers a "constructivist" reading of the text wherein Xunzi is only committed to his Way for pragmatic and consequentialist reasons, but there's no in-principle reason for him to prefer it to others. Finally, Fraser (2012, pp. 265-69) takes seriously Xunzi's commitment to his specific cultural tradition, and discusses the challenges Xunzi's philosophy faces because of it. In this article, I work on the assumption that Xunzi is both committed to espousing the Way he sees as both consequentially best and rooted in historical tradition, while remaining agnostic about which consideration, if any, actually has priority.

In other words, a Way like Xunzi's might need to be reconceived, or given a different foundation that treats *xìng* as being compatible with it (a Way like Mengzi's comes to mind), but not necessarily replaced with the primitivists' alternative. Given the extremity of each view, however, it should be possible to find a middle Way that respects people's *xìng* without calling for a reversion to a pre-societal age. One possible view found in the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* suggests that governing in accordance with people's *xìng* amounts to respecting the natural diversity of people's talents and abilities so that everybody is comfortable with his/her role in society.<sup>6</sup> In this case, people's *xìng* would be respected, but in the context of a robust government system. However, thoroughly examining Warring States views of this kind lies beyond the scope of this discussion. Rather, my main goal here is to motivate the idea that these views are worth further study and exploration by pointing out the shortcomings of more strict and homogeneous views of people's *xìng*, such as Xunzi's and the primitivists'.

In §2, I clarify my understanding of coercion here in consequentialist terms so as to be fair to the texts, which make no deontological assumptions about the value of autonomy, political participation, or other modern, liberal values. I will then briefly discuss the ancient Chinese concept of *xìng*, here understood as “natural spontaneity” or “spontaneous, natural tendencies,” and highlight its specific reference to the life-preserving, and spontaneous features of a thing, as opposed to a thing's potential or original features. In §4, I present Xunzi's Way and its consequentialist and historical justifications, which support Xunzi's conviction that only his Way, the Way of the sage kings, can secure social order and avoid the chaos and disorder created when people follow their *xìng*. I then go on to discuss the primitivists' critique, which offers compelling reasons for rejecting Xunzi's view of *xìng*, chiefly on the basis of prevailing Warring States intuitions about the value of *xìng* and the harm that comes from violating it. I furthermore argue that in spite of their poignant critique of Xunzi's coercive Way, their own Way has serious shortcomings in so far as it is woefully impractical and perhaps even itself oppressive. I diagnose this mistake as arising from the belief that virtually no form of government is compatible with

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<sup>6</sup>I discuss this text in §5.2.

people's *xìng*, and so we must forcibly revert to a primitive, non-coercive lifestyle in order to avoid harm and chaos. Fortunately though, the primitivists' view is not the only option for thinking about how to govern in accordance with people's *xìng*, and I conclude with a brief discussion of one primitivist-inspired alternatives found in the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*.

## 2 Coercion

I frame the discussion in terms of coercion in order to most generally capture the issue at stake between Xunzi and the primitivists, but some caveats are in order, as coercion is a rich and complex topic in contemporary political philosophy. In this paper, I will focus on examples of coercion where 1) A coerces B to  $\phi$  by forcefully exercising political power over her and 2) A causes some harm to B. I adopt this approach to coercion in order to foster the most inclusive discussion of the texts I focus on, but I will now elaborate on why I think 1) and 2) are independently plausible ways to approach coercion.

1) is broadly derived from Scott Anderson's enforcement model of coercion, which treats as coercive an individual or institution that broadly and pervasively exercises power by limiting or disrupting an agent's possibilities for action (Anderson, 2010, p. 1). Anderson contrasts his approach to coercion with Robert Nozick's "pressure" approach, whereby Nozick treats as coercive those acts where one agent pressures another by threatening her (Nozick, 1969).<sup>7</sup> I utilize the enforcement approach here so I may freely treat as coercive the governing body in Xunzi's system—a virtuous, ruling elite—pervasively exercising power over its subjects by limiting or disrupting their possibilities for action.<sup>8</sup> In this way, I can characterize Xunzi and the primitivists as discussing whether or not those in power legitimately coerce those without power.

Regarding 2), I will here only discuss how coercive actors cause harm to individuals directly rather than how they violate an individual's liberty, responsibility, or autonomy as many

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<sup>7</sup>C.f., Wertheimer (1987) and Wertheimer (2002) for accounts that follow the pressure model closely.

<sup>8</sup>Anderson (2010) points out that this model is still an "agential" model where an agent or institution intentionally coerces another, rather than a relational model where coercion is considered, "[a] feature of structures, not a product of intentions," (Ball, 1978, p. 107).

philosophers who approach coercion normatively do.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the discussion might be able to more fruitfully engage with those who consequentially and paternalistically justify coercion in spite of the cost of undermining liberal values, as well as with those within the Confucian tradition who do not necessarily share liberal values.<sup>10</sup> Neither Xunzi nor the primitivists make use of the concepts of political freedom or autonomy, but instead consequentially and to a lesser extent historically justify and critique coercion. By revisiting Xunzi and the primitivists as they discuss coercion without utilizing liberal values, we might find new ways of discussing coercion with both parties.

### 3 The Core Concept: *xìng*

I will now turn to the ancient Chinese concept that will guide this discussion: *xìng*.<sup>11</sup> I will not translate it in this context and instead offer a minimal account of it here. In general, we can understand *xìng* as the natural, spontaneous features and tendencies of something. When water, for example, is clear or flows downward, Warring States philosophers would say that it accords with its *xìng*, or that its *xìng* is manifest (LSCQ 1/2.2 and MC 6A/2).<sup>12</sup> Warring States philosophers typically discussed the *xìng* of organisms, including human beings, in terms of how they characteristically look and function at the biological level (e.g., MC 6A/8).<sup>13</sup> When an

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<sup>9</sup>Arneson (2013) for example argues that coercion can be justified on consequentialist grounds. For a more radical defense of coercive paternalism, c.f., Conly (2012).

<sup>10</sup>Contemporary Confucians are not all in agreement about how compatible Confucianism is with liberal democratic values. For a recent defense of the claim that Confucianism and liberal democratic ideals are incompatible, c.f., Møllgaard (2015). For a comprehensive Confucian philosophical alternative to Western individualism, c.f., Rosemont Jr. (2015). For a compatibilist picture, c.f., Kim (2014).

<sup>11</sup>The discussion that follows is very brief and might be unsatisfying to some ancient China scholars. For a more robust defense of my understanding of *xìng*, c.f., Robins (2001), especially Chapter 2, and Robins (2011).

<sup>12</sup>「夫水之性清」and 「人性之善也，猶水之就下也。」 respectively. I will adopt the convention in this discussion of citing passages I translate myself using “chapter/line” numbers from Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series (1986) for the Xunzi (XZ), and Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series (1956) for the Zhuangzi (ZZ), both accessed via <http://ctext.org>. (In cases where the reference is clear enough, I will omit “XZ” and “ZZ” so as to not clutter the page.) For references to the Mengzi (MC), I will use standard “Book-Version/Verse” numbering (e.g., “1A/6”) from Lau (2003). For references to the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* (LSCQ), I will use Knoblock and Riegel’s “Book/Chapter.Verse” numbering (e.g., “2/4.1”) from Knoblock and Riegel (2000). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>13</sup>「人見其濯濯也，以為未嘗有材焉，此豈山之性也哉？」 Here, Mengzi laments the sorry state of Ox Mountain after generations of harvesters have stripped it of its natural foliage with their tools.

animal grows hair and nails, when it digests food, when its sense organs function properly, and when it spontaneously reacts to situations according to its design—all of this is due to its *xìng*. Furthermore, Warring States philosophers often claim that human beings share basic cognitive and affective tendencies due to *xìng*, such as how they naturally, spontaneously prefer what benefits them to what harms them, react to an imminent tragedy with a feeling of shock and compassion, and desire to eat when hungry (MC 6A/4, 7A/38, XZ 23/17-18).<sup>14</sup> Primarily, therefore, people's *xìng* flourishes when people 1) exhibit characteristically human features, 2) when their bodies function healthily, and 3) when their sense organs successfully, spontaneously react to stimuli.

In the context of moral and political philosophy, Warring States philosophers often wonder if it is people's *xìng* to be either good and orderly or bad and disorderly, if people naturally, spontaneously tend towards goodness and order or towards badness and disorder. To situate the discussion here, I will say that Xunzi generally contends that it is people's *xìng* to be bad and disorderly, that people naturally, spontaneously tend towards badness and disorder, (or at least that they do not tend towards goodness and order),<sup>15</sup> and that becoming good and orderly is an artificial and generally coercive process. Conversely, the primitivists hold that people naturally, spontaneously tend towards goodness and order, though they do not share the Ruist values of benevolence (*rén* 仁), duty or righteousness (*yì* 義), ritual (*lǐ* 禮), and music (*yùe* 樂). (For context, Mengzi, Xunzi's Ruist rival, shares these Ruist values, but holds in contrast to Xunzi that it is people's *xìng* to develop them, that people will naturally, spontaneously become good and orderly provided they are not interfered with.)<sup>16</sup> These positions represent the general and prominent contours of the space of ideas in which Warring States philosophers typically discuss *xìng*, ethics, and politics, and the current discussion fits squarely within the norm.

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<sup>14</sup> 「食色，性也。」，「形色，天性也」，「今人之性，飢而欲飽」 C.f., Hutton (2014, pp. 250-51).

<sup>15</sup>Xunzi's views on *xìng* vary on the question of how negative of a force it is. C.f., Robins (2001-2002) for a nuanced discussion.

<sup>16</sup>Although this is one way of understanding the slogan attributed to Mengzi that “human nature is good,” it is actually a minority view. Much of the Mengzi is focused on people's ability to be good rather than on the ethical guidance human nature provides us. C.f., Robins (2001, Chapter 2) for a detailed survey of the various positions found in the Mengzi on this topic.

## 4 Xunzi's Way

### 4.1 *A very brief summary*

Xunzi, like most early Chinese political thinkers, believes that the purpose of government is to guide society along the Way so as to generate social order. As a Confucian, Xunzi believes that only virtuous governments that promote moral cultivation among both the rulers and the ruled can accomplish this task, and therefore spends the bulk of his writings spelling out the social and moral content of the Way. This consists in a robust system of norms governing a comprehensive range of social exchanges, including norms for simple gestures, the use of language, how one dresses, and even elaborate state rituals and musical ceremonies (13/39-44, 19/48-97, 20/15-23, 22/6-12). At the top of Xunzi's ideal government sits a virtuous, powerful elite that shapes people by means of uniform standards of “ritual propriety and duty” 禮義 (3/20-21), a strict system of rewards and punishments 慶賞刑罰 (27/56-7, 15/48), as well as a robust network of “teachers and models” 師法 (8/107-8).<sup>17</sup> This elite thereby prevents people from acting solely in accordance with their spontaneous, natural desires and tendencies, and instead “monitors” (臨), “restrains” (禁), “corrects” (正), “agitates” (擾), and “guides” (導) people's *xìng*, so as to lead them along the Way (23/7-8). Conversely, people left to think and act without Xunzi's virtuous, ruling elite guiding them will inevitably fall into conflict, poverty, and disorder by following their *xìng*. “If people lack teachers and models, then they will revere their *xìng*. If they have teachers and models, they will revere accumulating [the Xunzian values, e.g., ritual, duty, learning, etc.],” (8/108).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this virtuous, ruling elite drives Xunzi's well-ordered state along the Way.

Xunzi describes the exemplars of this virtuous, ruling elite primarily as sages (*shèng rén* 聖人), enlightened kings (*míng wáng* 明王), and gentlemen (*jūn zǐ* 君子),<sup>19</sup> with the hope of encouraging his students, other government officials and advisors, and even the kings of the various warring states to imitate them and thereby secure order. For this reason, Xunzi in many of

<sup>17</sup>The combinations 師法 and 禮義 are ubiquitous in the *Xunzi* so my references here are very selective.

<sup>18</sup>「人無師法，則隆性矣；有師法，則隆積矣。」

<sup>19</sup>I adopt the traditional, gendered translations of these terms in this discussion for the sake of historical accuracy, though my own examples and philosophical applications of these ideas will be more inclusive.



his ethical and political writings describes the virtuous exemplars in detail, so that others may use them as ethical role models (*fǎ* 法).

These exemplars exhibit qualities valorized across early Chinese texts typical of individuals who have reached a level of mastery, characterized by effortlessness and spontaneity. For example, in book 5 Xunzi writes, “Not thinking beforehand or planning earlier, but speaking and having it fit, completely patterning and dividing [things] into kinds, avoiding mistakes and shifting to and fro, reacting to change without limitation—this is the disputation of the sage,” (5/60-61).<sup>20</sup> Early Chinese philosophers generally believed that effortlessly and spontaneously getting things right demonstrates mastery of any skill, including ethical conduct and political administration.<sup>21</sup> The gentleman and other exemplars were believed to be skillful masters of following the Way, having been transformed (*huà* 化) and completed (*quán* 全) by it to such an extent that their slightest movements could authoritatively influence others (1/30-31, 13/41-42).<sup>22</sup> They therefore do not merely obey the Way, but instead actively follow it and thoroughly appreciate it in its utmost detail. They revel in the beauty of ritual and musical ceremonies, and their sense organs, once motivated solely by *xìng*, now prefer grand cultural artifices (*wěi* 偽) to simpler means of satisfaction (1/46-61).<sup>23</sup> These exemplars have mastered the Ruist Way and thereby legitimize their political authority among the ranks of the virtuous, ruling elite, fully capable of coercively exercising power over others for the sake of ordering society.

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<sup>20</sup> 「不先慮，不早謀，發之而當，成文而類，居錯遷徙，應變不窮，是聖人之辯者也。」 C.f., Hutton, 2014, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Fraser (1999) attempts to show how this shared theme guides early Chinese ethical thought. He writes: “Early Chinese philosophical texts contain numerous passages that depict the perfected human life as a flow of immediate, automatic responses to the environment, occurring without thought, deliberation, or conscious intention,” (Fraser, 1999, p. i).

<sup>22</sup> 「君子之學也，入乎耳，著乎心，布乎四體，形乎動靜。端而言，蠕而動，一可以為法則。」

<sup>23</sup> 君子知夫不全不粹之不足以為美也。。使目非是無欲見也，使耳非是無欲聞也，使口非是無欲言也，使心非是無欲慮也。“The gentleman knows what is not complete or pure is insufficient to be taken as beautiful... He causes his eyes to not desire to see what is not *shì* (“this”/“right” [according to Xunzi’s Way]), his ears to not desire to hear what is not *shì*, his mouth to not desire to taste what is not *shì*, his heart to not desire to think what is not *shì*.”

## 4.2 *Justifying Xunzi's Way consequentially*

Xunzi justifies his coercive government system consequentially and paternalistically by arguing that his Way generates goods and values for both society and individuals that far outweigh any of the costs individuals bear by being coerced out of acting in accordance with their *xìng*. In the first place, the Way generates material wellbeing for the people, who would otherwise live in poverty and chaos. Secondly, the Way is also a source of intrinsic ethical motivation and psychological satisfaction for those who appreciate it.

The more cultivated someone is, the more she values the Way, and the more satisfaction she derives from acting in accordance with it. In an ideal Xunzian society, those in the virtuous, ruling elite fully appreciate the Way, and appreciate things like the elaborate niceties of all the grand state rituals while those in the lower rungs of society instead happily play their own modest but necessary role (20/40-49). Each person, by contributing to society's successful following of the Way, will eventually appreciate everyone, including himself/herself, being in his/her proper place under the skillful direction of a virtuous, powerful elite. Generally speaking this is how the consequentialist justification is supposed to go.

We might be able to make Xunzi's ideal society look more familiar by comparing it to a similar collective, such as a school orchestra, wherein we can easily justify the mild coercion of students by an instructor for the sake of generating net positive outcomes both collective and individual.<sup>24</sup> Students new to playing an instrument tend to play at first in the way that comes most naturally and spontaneously to them, with no regard for any proper technique. We could (figuratively) say that they're following their *xìng* at this early stage. The instructor, however, for the good of both the band and the students' own musical improvement, forces them to adopt the proper technique using incentives, such as threats of lower grades or public expressions of praise and blame, thereby coercing them out of their natural, spontaneous way of playing. They all find the proper technique awkward and uncomfortable at first, but they gradually internalize it as their skill increases. The students eventually become confident and competent players, and thereby

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<sup>24</sup>I thank Chris Fraser for first suggesting this analogy to me.

generate both collective and individual goods. On the one hand, the students collectively contribute to the orchestra's performance as a whole—which is satisfying in itself—while on the other hand they gain the satisfaction of becoming skilled players. Furthermore, the instructor, having successfully taught the students, is himself/herself proud and satisfied in a way only an instructor could be. This example illustrates how a coercive, authoritarian regime like Xunzi's can justifiably generate collective and individual goods.

Even when we highlight the costs incurred in this case explicitly, I think we can still justify the coercion in this example on consequentialist grounds. The instructor only coerces the students out of their bad playing habits, which is a very low cost. On purely consequentialist reasoning, therefore, she may justifiably coerce them so long as they are not harmed beyond, say, mere discomfort, and their compliance generates goods for the orchestra as a whole as well as for themselves individually. The orchestra, full of students whose instructor has broken their bad habits, performs marvelously at the end of the school year, and brings joy to everyone in the room, players and listeners alike. The students will likely feel great satisfaction that lets them know the trouble was worth it as they competently hits the most crucial notes in line with the instructor's baton, and therefore bear the temporary discomfort as they learn from their instructor without feeling wronged in the least. Furthermore, the instructor seated at the top of the orchestra, *qua* powerful, musical exemplar oversees the entire performance, and is uniquely satisfied by it since both his/her individual effort and understanding of the intricacies of an orchestral performance far surpasses the students'. Therefore, the collective good his/her coercing them generates for the orchestra as a whole, the individual satisfaction it gives to his/her students, and even the higher order satisfaction it generates for himself/herself, all consequentially justify the instructor coercing his/her students into playing better music.

Does this example and its consequentialist justification successfully analogize to cases of powerful states coercing people out of following their *xìng*? For one thing, many Warring States philosophers hold that nurturing *xìng* or allowing it to flourish ultimately preserves health (LSCQ

1/2.1-5).<sup>25</sup> In the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*, an ancient sourcebook of Warring States thought, we find for example, “It is people’s *xìng* to live long, but when things disturb it, then they will not get to live long,” (LSCQ 1.2/2),<sup>26</sup> and even Xunzi at one point defines sickness as harm to *xìng* (22/6).<sup>27</sup> In order to avoid the charge of his system being harmful to one’s health, Xunzi must try to make his ideal state look as much like an orchestra as he can, which he does by contending 1) that following *xìng* is conducive to neither wellbeing nor social order, and 2) that individuals stand much to gain and far less to lose by going against their *xìng*.

To defend both points, Xunzi argues that people throw society into chaos by following their *xìng*, and that only by acting contrary to it will they be able to generate social order and satisfy their desires. *Xìng* causes people to behave badly because it creates desires that they cannot help but try to satisfy and emotions that they cannot help but express. People spontaneously follow these desires and express their emotions, causing chaos (*luàn* 亂), poverty, and suffering (19/1-3, 20/1-5). Therefore, Xunzi concludes, people shouldn’t follow their *xìng*, and their *xìng* might even be bad or corrupt. Instead, people ought to follow the Way so they may satisfy their desires and express their emotions in an orderly fashion. He prescribes, for example, that people go against their *xìng* 反於性 (23/19-21) by waiting for elders and superiors to eat first rather than eating as soon as one comes across food,<sup>28</sup> and that people obey the proper funeral rituals, which prevents them from mourning the death of loved ones for inappropriately long or short periods of time (19/54-60). Both of these examples illustrate how people might justifiably be coerced into going against their *xìng* for the sake of social order without costing themselves very much.

Xunzi furthermore argues that individuals stand to gain more when they go against their *xìng* because the Way generates the potential for satisfying long term and higher order desires that a society in which everybody followed his/her *xìng* simply cannot. In this sense, Xunzi claims that

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<sup>25</sup>Robins (2001, 2011, Chapter 1) offers detailed discussion of this feature of *xìng* and its implications.

<sup>26</sup>「人之性壽，物者扣之，故不得壽。」

<sup>27</sup>「性傷謂之病。」

<sup>28</sup>Reading *fǎn yú* 反於 as “go against” might strike some as too strong, but the phrase *fǎn yú xìng* 反於性 is paired with *bèi yú qíng* 悖於情, meaning “violate their *qíng*,” where *qíng* is a concept related to and often associated with *xìng*. Given the parallel structure of the phrases, the strong verb, *bèi*, being paired with *qíng* I think justifies a strong reading of *fǎn* 反. C.f., Hutton, 2014, p. 250.

his Way does not oppose *xìng*, but instead nourishes it.<sup>29</sup> For example, it is people's *xìng* that their eyes like what is pretty and their ears like what sounds good. People nourish these desires with elaborate rituals and musical ceremonies to an extent only a collaborative, social endeavor could in an orderly fashion (19/3-5). Furthermore, people bring themselves benefit (*lì* 利)—something that it is people's *xìng* to be fond of—when they study the classics, ritual, and music in detail (4/71, 23/1). Xunzi is so confident that his Way can satisfy people's natural preferences that he believes that upon exposure to it, anybody would instantly prefer it to inferior ways just as they would fine meats to rice dregs (4/52-56). Overall, people end up vastly better off both collectively and individually if they go against, or at the very least do not follow, their *xìng*, and are instead subjected to the authority of the Xunzian Way.

### 4.3 *Justifying Xunzi's Way historically*

Xunzi's account so far raises at least two questions: First, if people spontaneously behave badly and disorderly and need a ritualized social and moral education system to become good and orderly, where do these institutions come from? Secondly, if Xunzi justifies his Way on consequentialist grounds by claiming that it successfully meets people's needs, can it be improved upon or be replaced by a better one? To answer both questions, Xunzi appeals to the sage kings. These cultural heroes created the institutions and values that constitute Xunzi's Way (23/22-24). Using them, Xunzi responds by explaining how the Way arose from chaos by means of the sages' superior judgment,<sup>30</sup> and thereby has a historical claim to its privileged normative authority.

Xunzi appeals to the sage kings explicitly in his descriptions of what I call the "sage narrative," which he offers in books 5, and 19, and 20 as an explanation of the origins of social divisions (*fēn* 分), ritual (*lǐ* 禮), and music (*yuè* 樂). The sage kings hated the disorder caused by

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<sup>29</sup>We see this in book 4 although Xunzi does not mention *xìng*, but *qíng* 情 or "natural sentiments," a related concept. C.f., Hutton (2014, p. 29).

<sup>30</sup>Xunzi's sage narrative raises the obvious question of where the sages came from amidst all the chaos. How, could they have had all of the cultural wisdom Xunzi thinks is necessary to run a state without teachers themselves? Xunzi attempts to answer this question, but they are not very satisfying or explanatory. They simply arose. C.f., Hutton (2014, p. 235).

people following their *xìng*, so they established these institutions to guide people along the Way. To combat this chaos, they “established rituals and duties in order to divide the people [into social ranks]...” (9/17-18 and 19/2-3)<sup>31</sup> “...in order to cause there to be grades of poor and rich, valuable and worthless” (9/18)<sup>32</sup> and “...in order to nourish their desires, and moderate their seeking behaviors.” (19/2).<sup>33</sup> Because the people were misled by their *xìng* and acted contrary to both social order and their own interests, the sages responded by inventing a comprehensive and uniquely effective alternative to people’s spontaneous non-governance that satisfied their needs better than they could on their own. In a single act, the sages established the society promoted by Xunzi’s Way, thereby securing its origins and justifying its authority.

To sum up, I have in this section presented a very broad account of Xunzi’s Way that highlights its authoritarian, paternalist, and coercive elements. I’ve then offered an account of Xunzi’s consequentialist and historical justification of it. Now, I will turn to the primitivists’ comprehensive critique.

## 5 The Primitivists’ Critique

### 5.1 *Denying Xunzi’s consequentialist argument*

The primitivists wholly reject Xunzi’s Way on the grounds that it harms people by coercing them into going against their *xìng*. One striking image comes from book 9 of the *Zhuangzi* where the primitivists compare the Xunzian virtuous, ruling elite to legendary horse trainer, Bo Le, somebody to whom Xunzi himself affectionately compares the gentleman. In book 12, Xunzi writes, “And so Bo Le could not be deceived concerning horses, nor can the gentleman be deceived concerning people. This is the Way of a King with Clarity/Illumination (明),” (12/77-78).<sup>34</sup> In characteristic Daoist fashion though, the primitivists paint Bo Le as incompetent,

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<sup>31</sup> 「制禮義以分之」

<sup>32</sup> 「使有貧富貴賤之等」

<sup>33</sup> 「以養人之欲，給人之求」

<sup>34</sup> 「故伯樂不可欺以馬，而君子不可欺以人，此明王之道也。」

instead harming and abusing his horses for the sake of order.

According to the primitivists, Bo Le, and by implication, the gentleman and other virtuous, powerful elites, gravely injure their subjects by coercing them out of following their *xìng*. Bo Le disfigured his horses in such a way that their natural features that fit them to their natural situations could no longer fulfill their roles. He also forced them to perform unnaturally taxing deeds, such as galloping and bearing riders, and inadequately nourished them. In all these cases, Bo Le damaged the horses' *xìng* and caused them an early death (9/1-6).

This analogy calls into question Xunzi's optimism about the cost-benefit analysis of going against *xìng* for the sake of order. Before going into a philosophical analysis of the analogy though, I should probably mention that there might be a literal component as well. Even though I only discussed Xunzi's more benign examples of going against *xìng* here, such as waiting for an elder to eat before you do, Xunzi does demand that people be physically harmed directly in order to promote his Way. Xunzi explicitly argues that criminals, for example, must be tattooed, branded, and have limbs amputated—"flesh punishment" 肉刑—in order to ensure that others will be sufficiently deterred from committing crimes (18/35-39). The primitivists might have been thinking of these and similar policies when writing about the abuse Bo Le forced his horses to undergo for the sake of ordering them. However, at the conceptual level, the point just seems to be that domesticating people by forcing them against their *xìng* cannot fail to hurt them.

In book 8, we find the same core complaint against Xunzi's idea that we ought to go against our *xìng* in order to be made better off. Instead, they lament how Xunzi's coercive system damages individuals and society. Xunzi explicitly claims that *xìng* is naturally deficient and must be worked on in order to become good or beautiful (*měi* 美) and even uses the very same imagery of lengthening what is too short and cutting what is too long when he describes ritual's beautifying and ordering process (19/63-65, 23/8). To contrast, the primitivists write,

What is long does not have extra, what is short is not insufficient. Thus, a duck's legs: although short, to lengthen them would cause grief, and a crane's legs: although long, to cut them would cause sadness. So what's a thing's *xìng* length is not to be

cut, and what's a thing's *xìng* shortness is not to be stretched, so nothing will cause them grief... (8/8-10)<sup>35</sup>

So the primitivists hold that at the conceptual level, going against *xìng* at all is the kind of thing that should harm an organism.

One consequence of this idea is that the harm that comes from being coerced out of following our *xìng* does not depend at all upon whether or not you successfully follow a particular Way. That is, they believe that petty people and sages alike violate their *xìng* and thereby do themselves great harm (8/19-21). Once exposed to these ideals, whether you pursue them or not, whether you become virtuous or vicious, the harm to your *xìng* is the same. They write, “The benevolent people of this age, with their eyes and ears obscured, grieve over the troubles of today. The people who are not benevolent, they cut off the stuff (*qíng* 情) of their *xìng* and natural allotments (*mìng* 命) and are greedy for wealth and honor...” (8/10-13).<sup>36</sup>

In order to be charitable to the primitivists, I suggest we take them at their word when they claim that going against *xìng* causes harm. Indeed, this would have been the commonsense view at the time, while Xunzi's would have been *prima facie* more difficult to maintain. He holds that we ought to go against our *xìng* to promote social order and virtue so long as we go against it in the appropriate way. As the primitivists point out though, whether stretching or cutting something, the harm to *xìng* is the same, and even opposition to *xìng* that is supposedly conducive to order leads to harm. That is to say, harm to *xìng* is qualitatively identical, so there does not seem to be a way to distinguish between good harm and bad harm. Perhaps there is some harm to *xìng* that produces some material benefit, or produces something of value that contributes to a net positive outcome, but it is still harm nevertheless. It therefore does not seem plausible that opposing one's *xìng* in general can lead to a net positive outcome. Furthermore it seems even less plausible that failure to do so would result in chaos and suffering, but indeed these seems to be Xunzi's claims.

This idea leads to an important disanalogy between the school orchestra and Xunzi's Way.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> 「長者不為有餘，短者不為不足。是故鳧脛雖短，續之則憂；鶴脛雖長，斷之則悲。故性長非所斷，性短非所續，無所去憂也。」

<sup>36</sup> 「今世之仁人，蒿目而憂世之患；不仁之人，決性命之情而饜富貴。」

<sup>37</sup>I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.



In a Xunzian state, people cannot elect, like students signing up for the school orchestra, to be put into mildly coercive situations that force them against their *xìng* for a shared goal, or even for some coinciding individual goal. Rather, they are born into a Xunzian state and are subject to the will of the ruling, virtuous elite in a wide range of life activities. The sheer comprehensive and compulsory nature of Xunzi's Way makes the primitivists' domestication analogy a better fit for it than the orchestra analogy.

Indeed, the domestication analogy poses a deep and apt conceptual challenge for Xunzi, no doubt in part due to its roots in core Zhuangist ideas. One such idea is the heterogeneity of value, which has been discussed recently by Fraser (2015). By identifying the general problem with imposing one's way on the natural normativity provided by *xìng* and *qíng* (情), the primitivists apply the idea that there are myriad values scattered throughout nature, and furthermore that there is no reason to expect some natural one to be especially fit for replacement. The *xìng* of horses provides them with a perfectly fine Way, so what could be gained by subjecting them to harmful coercion in an attempt to replace it?

Given the fact that there are so many different ways for so many different beings, that value is in fact heterogeneous, it seems hard to accept that coercive measures that force conformity to a single Way would not lead to suffering. If we want human life to flourish, we should try to organize society in a way that respects people's *xìng* as much as possible. This can be made clear by looking at the horse training analogy and diagnosing what would improve Bo Le as a horse trainer: not going against the horses' *xìng*. Indeed, I suspect that most people who have owned or trained animals would share this sentiment, that abuse and neglect of the animals do not count as competent handling. Rather, intimate knowledge of the animal's likes and dislikes enough to foster a reciprocal, deep relationship with the animal on the basis of its natural, spontaneous tendencies, grows over time into true competence, and this knowledge of an animal's psychology and biology amounts to knowledge of its *xìng*.

The suggestion that we ought to find a way of setting up society that corresponds with *xìng* takes us far away from Xunzianism, and instead brings us to a view on which *xìng* is *compatible*

with government, with the Way. Later on in book 9, the primitivists seems to offer up one such possibility, which they model on a mythological state of nature they call the “era of utmost *dé* (‘virtue’ or ‘power’)” 至德之世 (9/7-9). According to the primitivists here, very little if any government is able to respect people’s *xìng*, so people basically ought to be left alone and allowed to flourish. They have high confidence that allowing people to flourish according to their *xìng*, as other animals do, (and alongside other animals), will enable them to engage in spontaneous, cooperative activities such as weaving and farming, which the primitivists refer to as “having the same *dé*” 同德 (9/7). Furthermore, they will all lack knowledge and desires, instead being simple (9/9-11).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the primitivists hold that the sages ruined this happy state of affairs when they arrived, as they caused people to be struck with insatiable desires for cultural artifacts such as benevolence (仁), duty (義), ritual (禮), and music (樂) (9/11-14). While this might appear to just be gainsaying Xunzi,<sup>38</sup> it relies on at least one deep observation about *xìng*: its environmental component. According to the primitivists, people’s environment is crucial to them actually flourishing according to their *xìng*. Environments contribute to flourishing by providing enough sustenance for people, and not damaging them through coercive manipulation or indoctrination. Xunzi ignores both conditions, conversely holding that people’s *xìng* gives them naturally insatiable desires for the most exquisite luxuries, which they would therefore quickly outstrip nature’s resources in their attempts to satisfy (4/60-62) “Desires are many but things are few,” he says (10/5).<sup>39</sup> In book 18, he argues explicitly that people’s natural desires are many and far reaching in the context of a dialogue between himself and Master Song Xing, who conversely holds that people’s natural desires are scant (18/114-122). Furthermore, Xunzi argues in book 4 that people’s natural desires are insatiable, that everybody is the same with respect to their natural dispositions in desiring to be as wealthy as the Son of Heaven (4/72).<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the natural insatiability of people’s desires plays a necessary role in Xunzi’s argument for his Way, since

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<sup>38</sup>I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

<sup>39</sup>「欲多而物寡」

<sup>40</sup>「夫貴為天子，富有天下，是人情之所同欲也」

without it there would be no problem for his Way to solve.

To contrast, the primitivists argue that the insatiability of people's desires is not *xìng*-motivated, but is the product of an artificial environment. Therefore, the insatiable desires Xunzi's Way attempts to moderate does not reflect people's *xìng*. Rather, if people's *xìng* really did obtain, they would, like horses, have no use for lofty towers or large dwellings (9/1-2).<sup>41</sup> So while it may be the case that a Xunzian Way is more practical than re-creating a primitive society, it is hard to accept that this is *because* his Way goes against *xìng* rather than in spite of it, and that others will not work because they follow people's *xìng* rather than oppose it. It ought to be possible, the primitivists suggest, for people to follow their *xìng* to a fairly large extent without disaster, since people's *xìng* isn't nearly as demanding as Xunzi suggests.

To sum up, the primitivists highlight the costs of Xunzi's Way by pointing out how implausible it seems that a Way that coerces people out of following their *xìng* would not cause serious harm to those subjected to it. Secondly, the primitivists deny that the problems Xunzi's Way seeks to remedy are really caused by *xìng*, but are instead caused by environmental factors that harm *xìng*. If *xìng* is the kind of thing you can easily go against without much harm, or live according to in artificial or unnatural circumstances, then Xunzi's system seems plausible. However both of these assumptions go against prevailing Warring States intuitions about *xìng*.

## 5.2 *Plausible alternatives?*

In spite of the conceptual clarity of the primitivists' critique, their suggested alternative is not very plausible. In the first place, there is no reason to take their mythological recounting of the state of nature either more or less seriously than Xunzi's, as both are blends of wishful thinking and received tradition. That being said, it is certainly part of at least one primitivist view. As Sarkissian (2010) has argued, chiefly on the basis of a literal reading of book 10 of the *Zhuangzi*, "Rifling Trunks," the primitivists take themselves to be recounting a historical age that predates

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<sup>41</sup> 「雖有義臺、路寢，無所用之。」

the Zhou dynasty and its centralizing, homogenizing forces.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of its historicity though, the more worrying element of their mythology is the lengths to which some primitivist writers were willing to go in order to return to that age, including “censorship, suppression, and violence,” (Sarkissian, 2010, p. 326). As Sarkissian (2010, p. 313) notes with respect to the primitivist, “He is a Daoist who thinks the world can only be bettered by *doing something*—indeed, doing a whole lot of unpleasant things.” On a reading like Sarkissian’s, the primitivists’ positive project seems deeply implausible and, in its own way, coercive and harmful.

However, I think the primitivists’ positive project comes across less clearly in their writings than Sarkissian does. Therefore, at least with respect to the material we have been examining concerning people’s *xìng*, I have to depart from Sarkissian’s reading. In these texts, the primitivists do not seem to be supporting large-scale coercive measurements in order to achieve a society wherein everybody lives according to his/her *xìng*. (In fact, that sounds like an oxymoron.) However, I am not suggesting that we do not read the primitivists’ suggestions to, e.g., “beat the sages” (擊聖人) literally. Rather, I only want to suggest that if we assume that these are accretional texts, we need not take them as all representing the same view. The most striking examples of the measures the primitivists think are necessary for returning to a golden age come exclusively from the first two essays of book 10, and these do not mention *xìng* at all. To contrast, the third essay describes the age of utmost *dé* and talks about *xìng* in very much the same terms as in book 9, but without discussing the measures necessary to return to it. Perhaps the primitivists were in denial about the harm induced by coercing people *into* following their *xìng* in an effort to return to the age of utmost *dé*, or perhaps the angriest of all primitivists responsible for the passages Sarkissian focuses on was not as invested in the discourse on *xìng* as his or her colleagues. At any rate, the primitivists’ positive project is at its very best unclear, and at its very worst the oppressive kind Sarkissian suggests, regardless of how plausible their critique of other coercive Ways may be.

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<sup>42</sup>In spite of its name the Warring States period did foster “increasing cultural convergence” (Falkenhausen, Print, 1999. Online publication 2008, p. 451), as well as political convergence and the centralization of power which did not exist earlier during, e.g., the Spring and Autumn period, where dynastic power tended to be far less centralized and invasive.

That being said, given the primitivists' values, their outlook on the current age, and the one concrete method of governance they do suggest in book 10, there do not seem to be all that many options for primitivist political activism. That is, aside from simply moving on to a commune and living quietly in small groups or engaging in wide-scale coercive idol-smashing and censorship of innovation, it is a bit unclear what exactly the primitivists would have us do in order to live according to *xìng*. Clearly they envision *some* form of government to be compatible with *xìng*, but which in particular could meet their criterion without being horribly oppressive in the transition and maintenance process is difficult to say. The question the primitivists raise, therefore, is one fundamentally about compatibility: what kind of government is compatible with a life according to *xìng*?

Fortunately, the primitivists' own either unclear or extreme answer to the compatibilist question is not the only one we find in Warring States thought. One answer that comes to mind, for example, is that of Mengzi, wherein a very specific, Ruist form of government coincides with people's *xìng*. Human beings naturally flourish, therefore, in an environment in which the Ruist Way is followed. When put this way, though, this view also seems a bit extreme because of the robustness and specificity of the Way it considers compatible with *xìng*, the Ruist one. The Mengzian and the primitivist views therefore are divided by their respective ideas about *xìng*: the primitivist theory of *xìng* treats people as basically just another animal, without much extra in the way of spontaneous tendencies of the cultural kind. The Mengzian view of *xìng* to contrast treats people as basically sages in the making. Both views I think run up against serious challenges, as they are extreme in the opposite ways. While the primitivists are perhaps implausibly pessimistic about compatibility between our *xìng* and cultural artifices, the Mengzian view is perhaps implausibly optimistic about the extent to which our *xìng* is compatible with the Ruist Way. Indeed, both views seem to trip over the fact that people's *xìng* might vary from person to person, and instead suggests a one-size-fits-all model of government according to *xìng*.

A third type of compatibilism appears in the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*, and strikes an appealing balance between primitivist and Mengzian compatibilism by avoiding emphasis on a universal

human *xìng* while at the same time being realistic about the necessity of government (LSCQ 17/5.2). At its core though seems to be the primitivism of the *Zhuangzi*, as these texts have a number of striking vocabulary overlaps with primitivist writings, including the term “the stuff (*qíng* 情) of our *xìng* and natural allotments (命),” (性命之情), and “the age of utmost order” (至治之世), which is reminiscent of the primitivists’ “age of utmost *dé*.” We furthermore find some characteristically primitivist themes in this material as well, such as appeals to simplicity (樸), the avoidance of “hollow speech and empty phrases” (空言虛辭), the rejection of desire by expelling your “heart of fondness and dislike” (愛惡之心), and even non-action (無為). Indeed, these writings give the impression of an author who is really a primitivist with a job.

In this ideal society, the enlightened ruler follows people’s *xìng*, as well as their *qíng* and *mìng*, which is what we would expect from any form of compatibilism. Their novel idea though is that following people’s natural propensities amounts to doling out tasks according to their natural abilities such that everybody is comfortable with what they are assigned to do. Only then will people be at peace and not be tempted to misbehave. When the ruler rules according to people’s *xìng*, “the skilled and clumsy, foolish and wise, brave and fearful will all get, by means of their original conditions (故), an easy job,” (Knoblock & Riegel, 2000, pp. 17/5.2). By virtue of their natural propensities, people tend to be more suited towards some tasks than others. When people are given tasks according to these abilities, the authors hold, they won’t feel the need to gossip, complain, or scheme. This is one concrete and practical way of applying primitivist ideals in a more comprehensive and realistic society than they allow for in their own positive project, and it is also one that might even be able to work in a Xunzian society.

Overall, in spite of their positive project being either unclear or extreme and therefore implausible, the primitivists’ reasoning about the importance of following or respecting *xìng* is well-taken. I think it furthermore offers Xunzian Ruists reasons to reconsider their negative view of *xìng* and by extension a positive view of coercion for the sake of social or moral ends. Instead, we might draw the lesson from the applied primitivism of *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*, and look for practical ways to work with people’s *xìng* while governing, both by focusing on securing thier material

well-being, health, and longevity, on the one hand, and by respecting the differences in people's *xìng* by encouraging people to pursue their various natural inclinations and desires, on the other hand. Indeed, the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* concludes the compatibilist section discussed earlier with the claim, "What's most important in ordering [with] the Way is preserving and knowing *xìng* and *mìng*," (Knoblock & Riegel, 2000, pp. 17/5.2) From there, we can litigate tougher cases where, for example, certain tasks might be desirable to none, or certain fields in general might become demographically lopsided because of supposed or actual differences in people's *xìng*. So while Zhuangist primitivism gives us reasons to take the first step in recognizing the importance of following people's *xìng*, the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* compatibilists give us one way of applying this idea to actual circumstances while at the same time being realistic about human diversity.

## 6 Conclusion

In this article, I have presented an interpretation of Xunzi's political philosophy from the perspectives of coercion and *xìng*, offered reasons based on primitivist writings for rejecting Xunzi's justification for his coercive Way, pointed out problems with the primitivists' own alternative Way, and briefly touched on a primitivist-inspired alternative that attempts to navigate between the two extreme views of Xunzi and the primitivists. Although the primitivists ultimately fail to present a plausible alternative theory of government on their own, I think they give compelling reasons for Xunzi to give up his more negative view of *xìng*, and instead opt for a more compatibilist view such as Mengzi's, or abandon the Ruist Way altogether and search for a different, more natural Way to respect people's *xìng*, promote well-being, and secure social order.

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