XUNZI’S POLITICIZED AND MORALIZED PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

In “Rectifying Names” (Zhengming 《正名》) and other articles, Xunzi 荀子 (313–238 BCE) developed a systematic theory of names, in which we can find some illuminating insights. These insights are still alive in contemporary philosophy of language, and can be used to broaden and deepen our thinking about names as well as about language generally. In this article, I will present Xunzi’s theory of names, and compare it to some ancient and contemporary theories, Chinese and Western, and then explore some characteristics of Xunzi’s theory, its strengths and its internal limitations.

I. THE DEFINITION AND TAXONOMY OF NAMES

Xu Shen 许慎 (c.58–c.147), the eastern-Han Dynasty philologist, explained the etymology of the Chinese word for “name.” The Chinese word, “名 ming,” consists of two fundamental elements “口 (mouth)” and “夕 (darkness).” The idea is: Since we cannot see objects in the darkness, we are unable to refer to them via ostension. Thus, if we want to talk about objects in the dark (i.e., use our mouths to refer to them), we must give them names. Thus, names represent objects in our speech and thought. Xu Shen was, therefore, concerned with the cognitive function of names.

Centuries ago, Xunzi had also acknowledged the cognitive function of names. He writes, “Names are the means by which one attempts to distinguish different realities.” He also writes, “... the wise man is careful to set up the proper distinction and to regulate names so that they will apply correctly to the realities they designate,” and “... one, on hearing the names, can immediately understand the realities they refer to. ...” For Xunzi, one of the purposes of regulating names is to “discriminate properly between things that are the same and those
that are different.” These quotations show that Xunzi is well aware of the cognitive function of names. We shall see later, however, that his primary focus is on the social, political, and moral function of names.

In Xunzi’s writings, “names” include legal terms, titles of rank and dignity, the names of ceremony and ceremonial objects, general names such as “thing,” specific names such as “bird” and “beast,” and individual names such as “Confucius.” He talks of abstract names such as “nature (xing 性),” “emotion (qing 情),” “desire (yu 欲),” “knowledge (zhi 知),” and the names of human behavior such as “deliberation (lü 虑),” “artifice (wei 为),” “business (shi 事),” “[virtuous] conduct (xing 行),” and so on. Actually, he refers to two kinds of names: natural names, which are governed by facts and things, and names of values or norms, which govern human behavior. Put simply, for Xunzi, “name” is a category that includes all the terms for substance and quality, the abstract and the concrete, individuals and classes, natural things and artificial objects, etc.

Xunzi gives an account of the taxonomy of names in the following passage:

The myriad beings of creation are countless, and yet at times we wish to refer to all of them in general, and so we call them “things.” “Thing” is the broadest general term. One starts with a limited general terms and keeps moving on to the broader and broader general terms until one can go no farther, and there one stops. At other times when we wish to refer to particular categories of things, and so we use words like “bird” or “beast.” These are broad particular terms. One starts with the broadest possible term and moves on to terms whose meaning is more and more circumscribed until one can go no farther, and there one stops.

From this passage we can draw out the following important claims:

1. There is a name of greatest generality (da gongming 大共名), which is shared by all things and everything in the universe, that is, the highest genus in biology and logic, and a category in philosophy. Xunzi takes “things” as an example. The way to reach the names of greatest generality is generalization: By extending the process, one makes terms more general names, and from these generalized names, one further generalizes until one reaches the point where there are no further generalization to be drawn, and only then does one stop.
2. There is a class of largest specific names (da bieming 大别名); Xunzi takes “birds” and “beasts” as his examples. The way to
reach the largest specific names is division or restriction: By extending the process, one draws distinctions within these groups, and within these distinctions one draws further distinctions until there are no further distinction to be made, and only then does one stop.

3. Such a process of division or restriction stops at the specific names where there is no further distinction to be made. I think Xunzi is implicitly referring to individual names or proper names, such as “Yao 尧,” “Shun 舜,” “Confucius 孔子.” Since in this passage he does not use the words similar to proper names, or even give their examples, it is an issue whether there are proper names in his system of names. I accept Robins’s interpretation: “Xunzi here is presumably thinking about proper names. If so, then like the Later Mohists, he is distinguishing proper names from general terms only on the grounds of their smaller extensions.”

I will offer my supporting comments for this interpretation later.

4. The names located between the names of greatest generality and individual names stand in two different kinds of relations: One is the relation between such a name and more general names. They are specific names relative to those more general names. However, they are also general names relative to those more specific names. So they have twofold identities: They are simultaneously both general names and specific names.

Quite often, the largest specific names have been interpreted as individual names, especially in some Chinese publications on the history of Chinese logic. I disagree with them. In my view, the largest specific names are not proper names, nor are the smallest names of species. Rather, they are the largest divisions of things, that is, they are the names of the first-series of species divided from a name of greatest generality. My evidence is that after Xunzi gives some examples of the largest specific names, he says that we can continue to divide or restrict them until we cannot do so anymore. Obviously, we cannot divide or restrict individual names, and even divide the smallest species-names. We only can divide or restrict species-names which are also genus-names.

It is clear that Xunzi is concerned with the membership or inclusion relations among the things that names designate: the individual–class relation and the species–genus relation in biology and logic. These relations can be diagrammed by the so-called “Porphyry tree” as follows:
Based on Xunzi’s examples, by adding some details we can draw the following Porphyry tree:

Of course, the Porphyry tree can be traced back to Porphyry (c.232/4–304/5), who was a philosopher and logician in ancient Rome. In his *Eisagoge* to Aristotle’s *Categories*, there are some remarks that deal with the membership or inclusion relations among the things names designate.

Let us clarify the above statement for just one category. Substance itself is a genus. Under this is body, and under body animate body, under which animal, under animal rational animal, under which man. Under man are Socrates, Plato, and the particular men.

Of these, substance is the most general and the one that is only a genus, Man is the most specific and the one that is only a species. Body is a species of substance but a genus of animate body. Animate body is a species of body but a genus of animal. Rational animal is a species of animal but a genus of man. Now man is a species of rational animal, but no longer a genus—of particular men. Instead, it is a species only. Everything prior to individuals and predicated immediately of them is a species only, no longer a genus.

Therefore, just as substance, being the highest, was a most general genus because there is nothing prior to it, so too man, being a species after which there is no species or any of which can be cut up into species, but only individuals (for Socrates and Plato and this white
thing are individuals), is a species only, both the last species and, as we say, the “most specific.”

It is reported that in the exposition of his commentary to *Eisagoge*, Boethius illustrates Porphyry’s remarks cited above in the form of a tree. It is said that this is the earliest occurrence of the Porphyry tree. The following is a reconstruction of that illustration:

Because of its usefulness and its transparent structure, the Porphyry tree, retained in the literaries of logic, has been used extensively in many different fields of knowledge, for example, the so-called “family tree.” It also has many different varieties in modern logic and contemporary computer science, such as the propositional logic tree and the quantificational logic tree, which are the procedures to decide the validity of certain formulae in the relevant logics.

The Porphyry tree was not drawn by Porphyry himself, but by some other person on the basis of his thoughts. However, this kind of thought has been clearly expressed by Xunzi in his “Rectifying names.” Moreover, since Xunzi wrote in the 4th or 3rd centuries BC and the Porphyry tree dates back only to the 3rd or 4th centuries AD, it is arguable that Xunzi’s work is possibly the earliest articulation of this structure. However, that possibility having been registered, it should be noted that Prophyry’s articulation is clearly more systematic, complete, and deeper than Xunzi’s in some senses which will be explained below. In his *Eiagoge*, Porphyry modifies Aristotle’s fivefold classification of predicables, namely, definition (*horos*), genus (*genos*), differentia (*diaphora*), property (*idion*), and accident (*sumbebekos*), into his own fivefold classification by substituting species (*eidos*) for definition. Moreover, according to Porphyry, there is a continued series of division from the highest genus to individuals: genus, species, subspecies, etc., down to individuals. But in Xunzi’s article there is no such continued division system. More importantly, Porphyry develops his classification in the context of
definition; based on Aristotle’s theory of definition, he formulates a set of procedures and rules to define species-concepts. One must first find the difference between the species from other species under the same genus, and then connect the relevant elements in the following order:

\[ \text{Definiendum} = _df \text{differentia} + \text{genus} \]

where the \text{definiendum} is a species (or genus), and the \text{definiens} is the formula that consists of the \text{differentia} and the genus (or super-genus). Taking humans for example, we have the following formula:

\[ \text{Human} = _df \text{rational animal} \]

This is the definition of the concept of “human.” Of course, we can trace the genus of human to “substance,” and give a more full and complete definition of human as follows:

\[ \text{Human} = _df \text{rational sensitive animate material substance} \]

Considering the importance of the theory of definition in logic, we should conclude that Porphyry’s doctrine is more complete than Xunzi’s.

The case of Xunzi’s classificatory system of names is but one example of a more general and puzzling phenomenon in ancient Chinese philosophy. The scholars of ancient China contribute outstanding and illuminating insights, as they give rough characterization of them, but then they stop. They do not continue to develop their insights into a concise and systematic doctrine, which have many different procedures, rules, strategies, and the like. But the thinkers of the Western tradition generally do not stop; and they go on to do some things that the ancient Chinese scholars do not do. Why is there such a radical difference between the ancient Chinese and Western scholars? I await an answer.\textsuperscript{13}

II. The Sociality, Conventionality and Coerciveness of Names

Xunzi’s account of names includes the following important claims:

1. \textit{Names Originate from Social Agreements and Customs: Conventions}

Names have no intrinsic appropriateness. They are bound to something by agreement in order to name it. The agreement becomes
fixed, the custom is established, and it is called “appropriate.” If a name differs from the agreed name, it is then called “inappropriate.”

Names have no intrinsic object. They are bound to some reality by agreement in order to name the object. The object becomes fixed, the custom is established, and it is called the name of the object.\textsuperscript{14}

The two passages above are critical for understanding Xunzi’s theory of names, because they expose the essence of names: sociality and conventionality. We can analyze these into the following points:

1. There is no internal, inherent connection between names and the objects to which they refer. The matter of choosing a name for an object depends totally on the agreements and customs of a linguistic community. There would be no reference relation between names and objects without such conventions and customs, not even to say whether the names are appropriate for their objects or not. Thus, names are, in some sense, “mere labels” attached to their objects. From the viewpoint of the baptismal ceremony of an object, we can attach any name to an object. However, once a linguistic community chooses a special “label” for the object, the “label” should be kept fixed on the object; it should not be changed rashly.

2. A linguistic community not only conventionalizes the reference relation between names and objects, but also, and more importantly, conventionalizes the social and cultural intensions of names, by means of which the members of the community identify the objects that the names designate. Xunzi writes that when establishing a name, the later kings “followed the Shang dynasty in the terminology of criminal law, the Zhou dynasty in the names of titles of rank and dignity, and the Rituals in the names of forms of culture. In applying various names to the myriad things, they followed the established customs and general definitions of the central Xia states.”\textsuperscript{15} When later kings do so, they not only inherit a system of names from their old generations, they also inherit the social, political, and cultural intensions of the names. For example, in the Confucian tradition, corresponding to such terms as “king (jun 君),” “minister (chen 臣),” “father (fu 父),” “son (zi 子),” there is a pattern of social and political institutions, and the position, right, obligation, and behavioral norms in such institutions. Confucius brings up a famous slogan: “Let the king be a king, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son.”\textsuperscript{16} These words are not tautological, but have some far-reaching implications. Take for example: “let the king be a king,” which means that the actual king should behave like a true and ideal king, or that we should treat the actual king
as a true and ideal king. What does “true and ideal king” mean? The role is prescribed by the pattern of relevant social and political institutions, and by the relevant systems of moral norms, or instantiated by some perfect model(s) from former kings in people’s minds. Thus, these prescriptions and the characteristics of the models constitute the social, political, and cultural intensions of the term “king.”

It is necessary here to mention a more recent and still ongoing controversy about whether all names have intensions (connotations, senses) and extensions (references). There are at least two views of the matter. Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) thinks that real and ideal names (including proper names and general names) have both sense and reference. The sense of a name is the manner of presentation of its reference, and it determines its reference. Saul Kripke (1941–) and Hilary Putnam (1926–) claim that names have no meaning, but only reference; they are all pure designators, which directly and rigidly refer to their objects. Of course, Xunzi does not participate in this debate. But, by reasonable analysis, we can infer that for him, names, especially names for social or moral roles, are not pure designators. Rather, they are loaded with rich social and cultural intensions, which we inherit from our predecessors and disseminate to our offspring.

2. The King’s Privileged Right for Regulating Names

In many places Xunzi emphasizes that the king has been endowed with the authority to regulate names, and that there is a causal relation between whether his right has been performed effectively, and whether his dynasty has been managed well. For example, Xunzi writes:

_The established names of the later Kings:_ They followed the Shang dynasty in the terminology of criminal law, the Zhou dynasty in the names of titles of rank and dignity... 17

Accordingly, the way a True King institutes names [is as follows.] Because fixed names keep objects distinguished and because when his Way is practiced his goals are universally understood, he takes pains to produce uniformity [in regard to names and his Way] among the people.18

Now, since the sage kings are no more, the preservation of names is neglected, strange propositions have sprung up, names and their realities have become confused, and the boundary between right and wrong has become unclear. Even both the officials charged with preserving the codes of law and the Ru who recite their texts and enumerate their copies are also confused. Should a True King appear,
he would certainly retain some old names, but he would also have to invent new names.\textsuperscript{19}

It seems that there is a dilemma here: On the one hand, we have the principle of establishment of names by social conventions and customs; on the other hand, we are informed that the king has some privileged right for regulating names. Don’t these two theses contradict one another? My reply is as follows: They do not conflict with each other, because the king’s right to regulate names is limited in many ways. For example, when the king regulates names, he has to consider the heritage of former kings, the names established by ordinary people, and the purposes, bases and grounds, principles and methods for regulating names. Moreover, Xunzi writes:

When the lord has schemes that transgress and undertakings that err so that one is apprehensive lest the nation be imperiled and the altars of soil and grain be destroyed, and as a great officer or senior advisor one has the capacity to advance to the throne and address the lord concerning these matters, then being agreeable when one’s advice is implemented and leaving when it is not called “remonstrance” (\textit{jinjian 进谏}).\textsuperscript{20}

And ordinary people may not accept the king’s names and not use them, so the names will not prevail everywhere, but gradually become forgotten and lost. So, Kurtis Hagen correctly points out that “the process of \textit{zhengming} (rectifying names) is a complex negotiation between the ruler, the moral and intellectual elite, and the people.”\textsuperscript{21}

We also can ask another question: Where does the king’s right to regulate names come from? In line with the Confucian tradition, perhaps we could reply as follows: The king’s right comes from his position in a social and political institution, and from his superiority with respect to virtue and knowledge. For the Confucians, the king should be a sage in some sense. He should be a model and example about whom his people admire, imitate, and learn from. Therefore, Xunzi usually combines the term “king” with the term “sage” into one compound term: “the sage-king.” However, Xunzi has yet another theory: Human nature is evil.\textsuperscript{22} Is the sage king an exception to this principle? Why? In regulating names, Xunzi always asks us to inherit the system of names of former kings, keeping fixed the relations between names and realities set up by them. Why should we do this? Are there some very special reasons for us to believe that the system of names of former kings is the best one? If one keeps to questions like these, many complicated and difficult problems emerge. Of course, all these problems are beyond Xunzi’s scope of consideration. Actually, he regards regulating names mainly as the strategies for the king to rule his people and manage his country.
3. The Coerciveness of Names Regulated by the Kings

The people are easy to unify by using the Way, but you cannot share with them the generalized reasons. Thus, the enlightened lord presides over them with the authority inherent in his position, leads them with the Way, reinforces it among them with decrees, illustrates it to them with his proclamations, and forbids them with punishments. Thus, his people’s conversion to the Way is as if by magic.23

That is to say, by means of the rights in his hands the king could compel his people to use his names, and reward the men who follow his orders, punish the men who disobey his orders; thus, he could regularize the relations between names and realities in his dynasty, and set up ideal social levels and orders.

Roughly speaking, according to Xunzi, the process of regulating names by social conventions and customs is as follows:

1. The former kings and ancient sages have used a series of names to designate some objects. As their uses become quite generally accepted, they become a part of the customs and tradition of the society.
2. In order to satisfy the needs of their life and practice, civil society has used some special names to stand for particular things, and their use has gained acceptance on a large scale.
3. Considering the purposes, bases and grounds, principles and methods for regulating names, the new king will retain some old names, and also invent some new names, and put them into universal use by means of his endowed rights.
4. If it is shown that the names regulated by the king are appropriate, and are used extensively by his people, then the relation between names and realities has finally been established. Otherwise, those inappropriate names would be corrected or forgotten by the moral and intellectual elite, and ordinary people in the society.

Xunzi’s theory of regulating names sketched above reminds me of Putnam’s theory of the division of linguistic labor. When discussing natural kind terms such as “tiger,” “lemon,” “water,” and “gold,” Putnam argues that just as there is a division of labor in social life, there is also a division of linguistic labor in a linguistic community. Only a few experts in some special fields know exactly the reference relation between some special technical terms and the objects to which they refer. For instance, in our society, only some experts on metals know exactly how to identify the reference of the term “gold,” and only some experts on genetics know exactly how to determine the reference of the term “gene.” Although ordinary people do not know
what the referents of these technical terms are, by means of the work of those experts they still can understand and use these terms reasonably. Putnam proposes a hypothesis regarding the division of linguistic labor:

Every linguistic community exemplifies the sort of division of linguistic labor just described: that is, possesses at least some terms whose associated “criteria” are known only to a subset of the speakers who acquire the terms, and whose use by the other speakers depends upon a structured cooperation between them and speakers in the relevant subsets.24

Putnam’s theory of division of linguistic labor shows that, as a tool of social communication, a language is an outcome of the universal cooperation among the members of a linguistic community; when anyone uses the language he necessarily depends on other members of the linguistic community.

Before Putnam, Ludwig Wittgenstein had expressed a similar view. In his later work *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein espoused an important proposition: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”25 And he further developed a doctrine of a language game. He wrote:

I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the action into which it is woven, a “language-game.”

Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form.26

Both Wittgenstein’s doctrine of a language game and Putnam’s theory of the division of linguistic labor stress the social character of language. Xunzi’s theory of names is, by and large, convergent with Wittgenstein’s and Putnam’s theories in spirit. In Xunzi’s view, first, the relations between names and realities are established not by one person, even not by the sage king alone, but by the whole linguistic community collectively. All the members of the linguistic community make their own contributions to rectifying names, directly or indirectly, more or less. Second, in regulating names, community members are not at the same level, for example, the sage king has a more important position than that of his subjects; he has some privileged right to regulate names, and after finishing the regulation of names, he also can promote the extensive use of his names by means of his rights. In Putnam’s theory of the division of linguistic labor there are also two such elements. One only needs to substitute “experts” for “sage-king” to see the parallel. In Wittgenstein’s theory there is at least the first element. However, from his doctrine of language game Wittgenstein develops a kind of anti-essentialism:
Various language games have no common essence, just some kind of family resemblance; and the therapy of philosophical diseases, that is, we only describe the actual use of language, neither explain nor deduce anything: “The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.” Working with reminders and series of examples, different “philosophical” problems are solved. Putnam develops his theory in the criticism of traditional descriptivism, and clarifies some kind of causal-historical theory of names, and an essentialist doctrine to the effect that for natural kinds their internal structures constitute their essences. Therefore, although there are some important similarities between Xunzi’s theory, Wittgenstein’s theory, and Putnam’s theory, the differences are still considerable.

Xunzi’s theory also reminds me of Kripke’s theory of rigidity and causal-historical chains. According to Kripke, naming objects is a kind of social activity. Moreover, the initial baptismal ceremony is very important; after the ceremony, the name is spread by means of relevant causal-historical chains. Proper names and natural kind terms have no sense or meaning at all, as pure designators they rigidly designate the same object in every possible world in which they exist. How does one determine the reference of a name? Kripke replies, he does by means of the following elements or conditions: first, an initial baptism which gives a name to a particular object; second, a causal-historical chain which spreads the name and determines its reference; third, when using the name, the receiver of the name has the same intention as his predecessor’s in the same causal-historical chain, and so on.

According to Xunzi, the establishment of the relations between names and realities depends on social convention, and depends on the games between the king, the elite, and ordinary people of the society. Only when a name refers to an object in a way admitted by the society, can the relations between names and realities finally be set down. If the society considers the name to be inappropriate, not congenial with the object to which it refers, it would be forgotten. The process of naming the object would restart, until there is some proper name that is accepted by the people. Moreover, Xunzi implicitly thinks, what the society conventionalizes about a name is the social, political, and cultural intension of the name. It is such kind of intensions of names that we have to inherit from our predecessors and pass down to our successors. So, for Xunzi, it is implausible that names are senseless pure designators.

Comparatively speaking, I agree with Xunzi’s theory of names rather than Kripke’s; I have some serious objections to the latter. But, this is another long story.
III. The Rationale for Having Names

According to Xunzi, when the king of later times regulates names, he has to consider the rationale for having names, the bases or grounds of distinguishing the similar from the different, and the essential requirements of regulating names.

As mentioned above, Xunzi discusses the cognitive function of names: to regulate names in order to designate the realities, in order to distinguish the similar from the different, and in order to express one’s intentions and thoughts clearly so that people are able to communicate smoothly, etc. These are several important reasons why names are needed. However, Xunzi’s focus is not on the cognitive function of names, but on some other functions of names reformulated as follows:


In Xunzi’s view, it is necessary for a king to regulate names because it will make clear what is noble and what is base. By doing so, the king can rule his people better, keep his country in order more easily, and make his dynasty peaceful and stable. This introduces the social and political function of names.

Xunzi argues that splitting words and sentences, making new names arbitrarily and recklessly, throwing the names that have already been established into confusion, causing the people to be suspicious, multiplying debate and litigation among them, should be called “Great Evils,” and punished as severely as the crimes of forging credentials or tampering with weights and measures. Hence, by means of his rights the king should rectify names, get them into accepted use, and ensure that his people do not dare avail themselves of odd words and sentences in order to create confusion in the use of names. Thus, his people will become simple and honest, and will be easy to control, and will contribute to their country. His people will be thus united in adhering to his law and will meticulously follow his orders. When such a situation prevails, his legacy will long endure, and meritorious accomplishment will be achieved. This situation is the epitome of good governance. These are the results of being assiduous in seeing that agreed names are observed.

So, Xunzi thinks that the problems about names are not only about language and thought, but about right and wrong in behavior and action, about social order, about whether to comply with political and moral authorities, whether to insist on political and moral standards. If people do not distinguish right behaviors from wrong ones, not
complying with those authorities, not keeping up to those standards, then the relations between names and realities will fall into confusion, and the whole society will enter onto the wrong track and lose its orders. Therefore, if the king wants to consolidate the social order, to straighten out social management, to maintain his governance, he has to start with rectifying names.

It should be pointed out that the social and political function of names not only benefits the king, but also benefits his subjects. In Xunzi’s opinion, regulating names will make social ranks, orders, and levels distinct, make the rights and duties of various social roles clear, and put the whole country into a good order. Of course, it is an idealization for a king that he may achieve long-term peace and stability for his dynasty. However, an orderly country is still quite good, or at least acceptable for the people, since if a society is out of control, there will be wars and disasters, from which the people will suffer firstly and heavily. So we often hear it said: Bad order is better than no order. That’s why the civil society of ancient China usually does not lack praise for a so-called “sage-king” or “wise ruler,” and does not lack imprecation and castigation for a “foolish king” or “violent ruler.”

Xunzi’s conception of regulating names has an ancestor in the Confucian tradition. On Confucius’s view, rectifying names is actually rectifying political governance, because, as he writes

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\ldots \text{If names are not rectified, saying will not serve its purpose. If saying does not serve its purpose, affairs cannot be carried on to success. If affairs cannot be carried on to success, then rites and music will not flourish. If rites and music do not flourish, then codes of punishment (law) will not function well. If codes of punishment (law) do not function well, then people will not know how to behave.}^{30}
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So Confucius claims, when one person takes on administration, his priority is necessarily “zhengming (rectifying names)!“ For the Confucians, one of the purposes of regulating names is to make various social and moral roles stay where they ought to be, do what they should do, own what they should own, to set up a society whose levels are clear, whose operation is good, and whose people are harmonious and happy.

2. The Gentleman Improves Himself: To Honor the Fair and Upright and Despise the Vulgar and Quarrelsome

Xunzi also thinks that it is necessary for the king to regulate names because names have an important moral function. They are helpful to the sages and gentlemen to rectify their own hearts, to cultivate their
moral sentiments and ideal personalities. In the latter half part of “Rectifying names,” he clarifies the qualities of argumentation of gentlemen, and characterizes the figure of ideal gentlemen in his eyes:

The gentleman and man of breeding observe the proper degree of courtesy and obey the rules of seniority. No improper words leave his lips; no evil sayings come from his mouth. With a benevolent mind he explains his ideas to others, with the mind of learning he listens to their words, and with a fair mind he makes his judgments. He is not moved by the censure or praise of the mob; he does not try to bewitch the ears and eyes of the observers; he does not cringe before the power and authority of eminent men; he does not feign delight in the words of the ruler’s favorites. Therefore he can abide by the Way and not be of two minds, can endure hardship without betraying his ideals, and can enjoy good fortune without overstepping the bounds of good conduct. He honors what is fair and upright and despises meanness and wrangling.32

In the latter half of “Rectifying names,” Xunzi also discusses at length the relation between “desire,” “heart,” and “the Way.” Desires include “what one likes” and “what one dislikes.” One person has many different kinds of desire; his heart makes comparisons, judgments, and choices among the various desires. Once a choice is made by one’s heart, one will begin to act; his action will lead to fortune or misfortune. This process should be guided by the Way: “The Way is the proper standard for past and present. He who departs from the Way and makes arbitrary choices on the basis of his own judgment does not understand wherein fortune and misfortune lie.”33

At the end of “Rectifying names,” Xunzi gives a warning to the gentleman:

Theories that have not been tested, and actions that have not been observed, and plans that have not been heard about—of these the gentleman is cautious.34

Therefore, in Xunzi’s view, rectifying names has two facets: One is the external facet, that is to say, the sage king institutes some correct names and gets them accepted by means of his rights, makes social order straight, and finally achieves long-term peace and stability in his country. Another is the internal facet, that is to say, by rectifying names the sages and gentlemen rectify their hearts and improve themselves, make their hearts guided by the Way, pursue fortune and escape misfortune, choose suitable desires to satisfy, and thus achieve their ideal personality.35 Some researchers in the history of Chinese logic in China usually claim that the latter half of “Rectifying names” has nothing to do with regulating names. Thus, when they discuss Xunzi’s theory of names, they totally disregard the latter half, as if it
is misplaced in the article. They do not give any evidence or account for their assertion. I think, such a policy destroys the completeness of “Rectifying names,” and should be seriously challenged.

3. The Communicative Function of Names Regulated by the King

Xunzi considers the communicative function of names from the positive side and also the negative side. He argues, when the later king regulates names in terms of social conventions and customs, “. . . such names could be used in distant regions whose customs are different, so that a common means of communication could be established thereby.” When the king makes the distinction between the noble and the base clear, and discriminates the similar from the different properly, “there will be no danger that the ruler’s intentions will be improperly communicated and understood, and his undertakings will suffer no difficulties or failure.” That is to say, by means of names, people can communicate smoothly with others who are from distant areas, express their own intentions, opinions and plans clearly, and understand their king’s intentions and ideas correctly, and deal with a variety of business and other matters successfully. If men [. . .] are careless in abiding by established names, strange words come into use, names and realities become confused, and the distinction between right and wrong has become unclear. Even the officials who guard the laws or the scholars who recite the Classics have all become confused.

However, Xunzi holds a pragmatist or functionalist attitude to the cognitive and communicative function of names. In his view, it is sufficient that names can perform some special functions, realize some purposes or satisfy some practical needs; otherwise, it would be fallacious to pursue non-necessary concision and delicacy in the use of names. The latter kind of action should be criticized and denounced rather than advocated and appreciated. For instance, Xunzi argues, the gentleman’s words and phrases [. . .] act as the messenger of his meaning. He makes certain that they are sufficient to communicate his thoughts, and there he stops, for to try to force them to do more would be evil. If the names one uses are sufficient to indicate the realities one has in mind, and the phrases are sufficient to lay open the heart of the matter, then one need go no further. Anything beyond this becomes labored. The gentleman rejects labored discourse, but the fool seizes upon it and makes it his treasure.

So, in his discussion of the rationale for having names, although Xunzi talks of the cognitive and communicative functions of names,
he places emphasis on their social, political, and moral function. In ancient China, many intellectuals regard themselves as “the teachers of their kings,” are very fond of persuading their kings in order to realize their own social and political ideals, and earn some official ranks and rights. Even their bodies are in the countryside, but their hearts always put on the royal or imperial court. They have quite strong emotions to design social and political institutions, think about how to administer the country effectively, how to maintain the social order and ranks, and keep the country in long-term peace and stability from the viewpoints of their kings. They consider names, and language more generally, only as the means to serve certain purposes; so they necessarily hold a pragmatic functionalist position on language. They do not care especially about the cognitive and communicative functions of names, and do not perform deep and systematic investigation of these functions or develop detailed and exact theories of names. They are not interested in questions such as how to divide names into a complete classification, how to distinguish the intension from the extension of a name and expound the relation between intension and extension, how to develop a quite comprehensive theory of definition about names, etc. Perhaps the Moists are the exception to this rule. In many documents they show a strong desire to investigate the principles of real things, and expose the truths of the world.

IV. The Bases or Grounds for Regulating Names

Xunzi thinks that in considering the basis for regulating names, we have to take account of at least two things: One is the similarities and differences among the objects to be named; another is our perception and cognition of the similarities and differences among the objects. The former is the ontological basis of regulating names; the latter is the epistemological basis.

Xunzi points out,

As a general principle, the faculty of knowing belongs to the inborn nature of man. That things are knowable is a part of the natural principle of order of things. Men use their innate faculty of knowing to seek the natural principles of order, which allow things to be known.

He also defines some epistemological terms as follow: “The means of knowing which is within man is called ‘awareness.’ Awareness tallying with the facts is called ‘knowledge.’ The means of being able that is within man is called ‘ability.’ Ability corresponding with the require-
ments of a situation is called ‘being capable.'”43 “On the whole, by understanding the nature of man, you can understand the principles that govern all other beings.”44 It is arguable that Xunzi acknowledges the existence of an external world that is independent of the human mind. Hence, he brings up a principle for regulating names: If the objects to be named are the same or similar, then we should nominate them in the same or a similar way; if the objects to be named are different, we should name them in different ways. It is absolutely not permitted that we use the same name to nominate different objects, and use different names to nominate the same object. In other words, the similarities and differences among real objects are the ontological basis for regulating names.

Xunzi thinks it is not enough for regulating names that there are some similarities and differences among objects of cognition; it is also necessary that the similarities and differences among the objects to be named have been known by subjects of cognition. He argues that human beings know things by their cognitive organs.

... [H]ow does one go about distinguishing between things that are the same and those that are different? One relies on the senses. Things which are of the same species and form will be apprehended by the senses as being all the same thing. Therefore, after comparing such things with other things of a similar nature, one may settle upon a common designation. In this way one arrives at a common name for all the things of one class, which everyone agree to use when the occasion demands...45

That is to say, since human beings are of the same kind, their knowledge of things by means of their organs is essentially the same or at least similar. This is the reason why people can conventionalize common names to designate the relevant objects. For Xunzi, the sense organs include the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body of man, and the cognitive organ is heart or mind of man. An eye can watch and see color, an ear can listen and hear sound, a nose can distinguish smell, a mouth and tongue can discriminate tastes, body can differentiate weight from lightness, and so on. In Xunzi’s view, the heart takes a privileged position in various sense and cognitive organs. Actually, it is in the position of domination and control, since the heart can control the activities of the sense organs and the body; it is the decision-making organ. From sense knowledge supplied by the sense organs, the heart can obtain inferential knowledge (zhengzhi 征知); and more importantly, by means of reaching the state of “void, oneness, and tranquility” (xu yi er jing 虛一而靜), the heart is able to know the metaphysical Way directly. By their senses and hearts, human beings acquire the knowledge of the similarities and differences among things, and they institute names to stand for appropriate objects.
I have to admit that Xunzi's ideas outlined above are quite illuminating: They are basically correct and still hold so far. This shows that Xunzi is a deep-thinking scholar. However, there is a problem yet to be explored. The last section shows that when he discusses the purposes for regulating names, Xunzi mentions at least two points: first, to make clear that what is noble and what is base; second, to distinguish the similar from the different. The first point involves the social, political, and moral function of names; that is, it concerns the value and normative side of names, and the practical guidance of names to the behavior and actions of people. The second point involves the cognitive side of names, that is, it concerns the reference relation between names and objects, or more generally, the relation between names and the external world. Nevertheless, when he discusses the grounds for regulating names, Xunzi considers only the cognitive side of names, totally disregarding the bases of the names of social roles and moral terms, such as “king,” “minister,” “father,” “son,” “benevolence (ren 仁),” “morality (yi 义),” “ritual (li 礼),” and “honesty (xin 信)” which are prescriptive, normative, and value-laden.

Although the bases of names of value or norms could be partly explained by analogy and extrapolation (“people’s hearts are the same or similar, so their reasons are also the same or similar”), it could not be explained fully in this way. What are the bases for regulating names of social roles and moral terms? Here Xunzi seldom thinks this question, just regards this kind of names as having some functions of avoiding social chaos and deceptive practices. So he vacillates between the descriptive side and prescriptive side of names; sometimes he is inclined to the normative side, for example, when he emphasizes the social, political, and moral function of names; sometimes he is inclined to the cognitive side of names, for example, when he discusses the bases for regulating names. In the two sides (descriptive and normative) of names, when he takes one into consideration he often neglects the other, so his theory is not so complete. Even when he discusses the epistemological basis of regulating names, his theory is just a sketch, lacks some relevant details, so many important questions are beyond the scope of his thinking: for example, how do human beings know the similarities and differences among the objects by their senses and hearts? How do we choose names to characterize this kind of similarity and difference between objects? When doing so, what kinds of principles, procedures, methods that we have to follow or apply? Xunzi makes few detailed investigations, and therefore, few technical contributions to the epistemological procedure and methodology of regulating names. However, we should appreciate his important awareness and central efforts to develop a general theory of names.
V. THE ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS OF REGULATING NAMES

Xunzi discusses what a good name looks like: “There are, however, names which are intrinsically good. Names which are clear, simple, and not at odds with the things they designate may be said to be good names.” Obviously, these are only the fundamental standards a good name has to satisfy; they are several necessary conditions, but not a sufficient condition to be a good name.

The principle of “establishment of names by conventions and customs” discussed above both exposes the essence of names, and also is the criterion and method for regulating names we have to follow. Xunzi asserts that, besides this principle, we have to abide by the following standards and methods for regulating names:

Things that are the same should have the same names. Those that are different should have different names. . . . Because one understands that different realities must have different names, one sees to it that they are given different names. There must be no confusion about this, any more than about the necessity to see to it that all things which are the same in reality have the same name.

Since names are the representatives of objects in our language and thought, we should use the same name to stand for the same object, different names to stand for different objects. At this point, there is no exception. No two different things should be designated by the same name; no one thing should be designated by different names. It is only in this way that names can separately correspond to realities; we can guarantee that we follow the law of identity in logic when we use names to refer to things, that is, we always use the same name in the same sense in different situations; and so can free ourselves from confusion and fallacy in the use of names.

When a single name is sufficient to convey our meaning, a single name is used; when it is not, we use a compound name. If the single name and the compound name do not conflict, then a general name is used. Although it is the general name, it will not create inconsistencies.

These remarks refer to the linguistic forms of names in Chinese. By a so-called “single name” Xunzi means a name that consists of a single Chinese character, such as “niu (cow)” or “ma (horse).” By a so-called “compound name” he means a name that consists of more than one Chinese character, such as “bai-ma (white horse),” “li-niu (black cow).” Xunzi emphasizes that if it is sufficient for designating object(s) to use a single name, we should use a single name; if not, we should use a compound name. In some situations, if we cannot avoid using both a single name and a compound name, for
instance, using "cow" to denote one object, and using "white horse" to
denote another, then we can generalize the two terms to a more
general name, for example, the name "animal," which could apply
to both the object called "cow," and also another object called
"white horse." Xunzi thinks that if we do so, we will not face any
inconsistency.

Things that have the same appearance but different locations and
things that have different appearances but the same location should
be kept distinct. Where the appearance is the same, they are
deemed to have different locations, even though they may properly
be conjoined, they are called two objects. Where the appearance
undergoes metamorphosis, but there is no distinction in the reality,
yet they are deemed different, it is called "transformation." Where
there is transformation but no distinction, it is called one object.
By this procedure, one examines objects and determines their
number.50

I think, this passage provides important evidence for the claim that
in Xunzi's system of names, there are singular names or proper names,
which are so-called "specific names where there is no further distinc-
tion to be made (wu bie de bieming 无别的别名)." Abstract things
(so-called "universals") are not located in space and time; they have
no difference of shape, no change of location, no birth, decay, and
death (so-called "transformation" [hua 化]). Only individual things
are in space and time, and are capable of change in shape and loca-
tion. The names for individuals are singular names, or proper names.
Therefore, when Xunzi talks of names, proper names have been
included into his system of names. Moreover, when we count the
number of things, we have incorporated those things into some class
or kind, for example, we count the number of people: John, Paul,
Robert, etc. We cannot count John, since John is only one; we can just
count people. So when "one examines objects and determines their
number," he is generalizing the names of individual objects to class
names. This means that Xunzi has been aware of the relation between
individuals and class, species and genus, the individual and the
general, the concrete and the abstract, and so on.51

Actually, Xunzi here is elaborating a principle of individuation,
which is a hot issue in contemporary metaphysics, that is, when can we
identify what we talk about as an entity or object? By what criterion
can we do so? American philosopher W. V. Quine (1908–2000) intro-
duces a now well-known slogan: "No entity without identity."52 By
so-called "identity" he means extensional identity between objects,
that is to say, if two objects are identical, they will be true of the same
predicates; if two classes are identical, they will include exactly the
same members. Only physical individuals and classes can satisfy
the criterion of extensional identity, so they are both included in his
ontology, and all other things are excluded, especially so-called “intensional entities,” such as meanings or propositions. Comparatively speaking, Xunzi advocates the criterion of identity as follows: What we are talking about is an individual just because it is in space and time, it has change of shape or location, and it also has birth, decay, and death. Obviously, such a criterion of identity is only applicable to physical objects, neither applicable to universals as in Plato nor ideas as in Berkeley. So, in Xunzi’s ontology, there are only physical individuals, no other kinds of individuals.

Xunzi knows that there are membership or inclusion relations between thing and class, subclass and superclass, species and genus, etc. So we can make some restriction or generalization of the names of things in order to satisfy our practical needs. If we need to emphasize the similarity among things, we may generalize the names of things: “One starts with a limited general terms and keeps moving on to the broader and broader general terms until one can go no farther, and there one stops.”53 For instance, there are many different kinds of people, such as whites, blacks, East Asians, etc.; good persons and bad persons; poor men and rich men; the noble and the base, etc. Whatever kinds of people they are, they are all “human beings”; so they should have the same basic human rights, such as equality, freedom, dignity. The limit of generalization is “the broadest general names,” that is, genera in biology and logic, and categories in philosophy, for example, “things” or “substance.” Rather, if we need to emphasize the distinctions and differences among things, we may restrict the names of those things: as Xunzi writes, “One starts with the broadest possible term and moves on to terms whose meaning is more and more circumscribed until one can go no farther, and there one stops.”54 For instance, when someone applies for a visa to visit a foreign country, the visa officials will very carefully examine his identification documents in order to make a correct judgment about the identity of the applicant. The limit of restriction is proper names, called by Xunzi “specific names that cannot be distinguished any further.” However, it should be pointed out that since Xunzi does not obviously distinguish the intensions from the extensions of names, he does not restrict the names of things by addition of their intensions, and he does not generalize the names of things by reduction of their intensions. He just goes from one name to another in terms of the comparison of their extensions. Strictly speaking, this kind of technique is not the restriction and generalization in traditional logic, where “restriction” means reducing the extension of names by means of adding their intensions, and “generalization” means enlarging the extensions of names by means of cutting down their intensions.
In my view, Xunzi’s discussion of the essential requirements for regulating names is quite thin and weak, especially relative to his clarification of other topics about names. He mainly elaborates the principle of “establishment of names by social conventions and customs,” and a few concrete principles and methods for regulating names. He also discusses how to restrict and generalize the names of things in order to make them pertinent to our aims. Strictly speaking, except “the establishment of names by social conventions and customs,” all the other points are not very suitable to the names of social roles and moral-ethical terminology, which are relevant to the systems of evaluation, prescriptions, and norms. How does one institute value-laden and normative names? What are the bases of these kinds of names? What are the principles, procedures, and methods for regulating these kinds of names? It is a pity that Xunzi does not discuss these questions carefully, perhaps just because he does not have the concern.

VI. THREE CATEGORIES OF ERRORS: CRITICISM OF SOME FALLACIES ABOUT NAMES

For Xunzi, the most important purpose of regulating names is to set up standards for the distinction between right and wrong, and to establish the rules of social operation and management. He argues that the highest standards of correctness concern whether the speeches and actions of people follow the regulations of the king. If yes, they are right; if no, they are wrong. By “the regulations of the king” Xunzi means the system of institutions, laws, and decrees issued by the king. He emphasizes that if there are no such standards of correctness, then what’s right and what’s wrong cannot be separated, and disputes cannot be settled. The whole society will be out of control and enter into a state of confusion, from which the people will suffer heavily. So he detests those paradoxical propositions held by Hui Shi (fl. 4th century BC), Song Xing (fl. 4th century BC), Gongsun Long (c. 320–250 BC), the Moists (from 770 to 221 BC), etc. He thinks they confuse the relations between names and realities and the standards of right-wrong. Therefore, he seriously and systematically criticizes those paradoxical propositions. He summarizes three categories of basic fallacies about names, which correspond respectively to the errors on three sides, that is, the rationale for having names, the bases or grounds of regulating names, the essential requirements of regulating names. However, by the space limit of this article, I have to neglect Xunzi’s analysis of some paradoxical propositions about names.
1. The Error of Using Names to Disorder Names

(Yi Ming Luan Ming

以名亂名)

Xunzi writes, “‘to suffer insult is no disgrace,’ ‘the sage does not love himself,’ ‘to kill a robber is not to kill a man’—these are examples of errors in the use of names which disorder names.”

According to “Rectifying Theses” (Zhenglun 《正論》) by Xunzi, the paradoxical statement “to suffer insult is no disgrace” comes from Song Xing, who claims that if one does not feel disgrace to suffer insult, he will not struggle or fight with other people, in this way debates, struggles, and fights will be reduced and, perhaps, even disappear, so the society will stay peaceful and stable. However, Xunzi argues, when suffering insult, the real cause of debate and fight is not the feeling of disgrace, but the hate of other persons to insult. For example, if someone steals your cow, you will debate and even fight with him, not because you feel disgrace, but because he hurt your interest and aroused your animosity to him. So Song Xing finds a wrong cause for debate and fight, and also runs counter to the agreed uses of the terms “insult” and “disgrace” by the society. He disregards the social conventionality of the relevant names and speech. Therefore, his proposition is fallacious.

The source of the paradoxical proposition “The sage does not love himself” is not clear; but it probably means that the sage loves other people but does not love himself. Xunzi disagrees, since he does not advocate an ascetic conception of morals. He claims, “the desire itself, which arises before one knows whether or not it can be satisfied, comes from the nature received at birth.” People (especially gentlemen) may normally satisfy their desires as they can; but in the process of satisfying desires, people should be guided by their minds, should follow the Way to do their best to ensure that the satisfaction of desire is neither insufficient and nor excessive. Moreover, he argues,

... the sage uses himself as the standard for measurement. Hence, the sage uses men to measure men, circumstances to gauge circumstances, each class of thing to measure that class, the persuasion to measure the achievement, and the Way to observe the totality, so that for him the ancient and modern are one and the same. Things of the same class do not become contradictory even though a long time has elapsed because they share an identical principle of order. Hence, because the sage uses himself as a standard of measurement, when he encounters what is perverse and deviant, he is not led astray, and when he observes the diversity of objects of the external world, he is not confused.

According to this kind of reasoning, since the sage loves people, and the sage is himself a person, he should love himself. Therefore, the
paradoxical proposition “the sage does not love himself” misuses such terms as “the sage,” “love,” and “people.” Therefore, it is fallacious.

Xunzi says that it is the way to refute the fallacy of “using names to disorder names” to examine the origin of those names, that is, why such names were regulated at the beginning, and consider whether they are workable in our ordinary speech and action. Xunzi’s diagnosis is coherent in light of his principle of “the establishment of names by conventions and customs”: Names are the products of social conventions and agreements, so the uses of names must correspond to the common view of the society about them. Strange words like “to suffer insult is no disgrace,” are against the common uses of the relevant terms; they are not accepted extensively by the society, so they have to be rejected.

2. The Error of Using Realities to Disorder Names

(Xi Shi Luan Ming
以实乱名)

Xunzi writes, “‘Mountains and marshes are level,’ ‘the essential desires are few,’ ‘grain- and grass-fed animals add nothing to the taste; the great bell adds nothing to the music’—these are examples of errors in the use of objects that disorder names.”

According to “Nothing Indecorous” (Bu-gou 不苟) by Xunzi, the paradoxical proposition “Mountains and marshes are level” is advanced by Hui Shi and Deng Xi (d.501 BC), who were two prominent scholars in the Warring States period. Perhaps, in terms of rare and exceptional phenomenon Hui and Deng refute some commonsense general propositions. For instance, mountains are generally higher than marshes, but as far as some marshes located at high mountains are concerned, they are possibly higher than the mountains located at a region of plains, at least at the same level with the latter. Probably, this is the reason why such propositions as “mountains and marshes are level” are asserted.

According to “Rectifying theses,” the paradoxical proposition “the essential desires are few” is also held by Song Xing. Xunzi claims, “The ancients thought otherwise: they considered that from his essential nature man’s desires were numerous, not few.” He agrees with this judgment, and argues: If man’s desires are few, why do the hundred kings always reward men with wealth and plenty, and penalize them with reduction and deprivation, while such methods of the kings are usually valid and workable? How can Song Xing explain this phenomenon?

In Xunzi’s view, the paradoxical propositions mentioned above are the fallacies of using rare and exceptional examples to refute some
ordinary, general, and commonsense propositions accepted by society. The way of refuting them is to resort to sense experience, to examine the bases and grounds for regulating the names, and to observe which alternatives accord with accepted use, and which are practicable.

3. The Error of Using Names to Disorder Realities
(Yi Ming Luan Shi
以名乱实)

Xunzi writes, “a white horse is not a horse,” “there is cow-horse which is not a horse,” are examples of errors in the use of names which disorder objects.64

As is well known, Gongsun Long argues for the famous proposition “a white horse is not a horse (bai ma fei ma 白马非马).”65 By the ambiguity of “fei 非 (not)” in Chinese, the proposition could be interpreted in two different ways: On one interpretation, the proposition means “a white horse is not identical with horse,” of course it is true; on another interpretation, the proposition means “a white horse is not included in the class of horse,” of course it is false. In my opinion, Gongsun Long demonstrates “a white horse is not included in the class of horse” by means of “a white horse is not identical with horse,” so he is sophisticating in order to mislead people.

Xunzi says, it is the way of refuting the fallacies of using names to disorder realities to examine them against the agreed use of names, and to use “what one accepts” to show that “what one rejects” is fallacious, only then can such paradoxical statements be demolished.

In short, Xunzi controverts some fallacies and sophisms about names, on the grounds that names are established by social agreements, conventions, and customs; in the use of names we have to follow those conventions, and the normal patterns accepted by the society. We should not conjure up some very queer reasons or find rare, exceptional examples to make strange uses of names, for example, these three categories of errors about names. However, we must also take note of the fact that Xunzi’s analysis and criticism of three errors about names is quite simple and sketchy; he does not carefully investigate the following questions: from epistemological and logical points of view, wherein lies the fallacies of the three categories of error about names? From what sources do these kinds of fallacies originate? Are they the complete classification of the fallacies about names? How do we refute and avoid them? And so on. Comparatively, Aristotle replies to almost all the questions and develops a systematic theory of fallacies in his Sophistical Refutation and Topics.

Moreover, Xunzi argues against those fallacies about names mainly from social and political considerations: If such “perverse sayings”
and “pernicious doctrines” about names are permitted to be influential, the thoughts of people will be intrigued and confused, the society will be disordered and out of control, the king’s dynasty will be threatened and fluctuated, and so on. Hence, we should forbid their spread and fluency. When Xunzi thinks in this way, he seems to be more a politician and a government officer than a philosopher.66

VI. THE POSITION AND FUNCTIONS OF NAMES IN THE SYSTEM OF ARGUMENTATION

Xunzi also investigates the position and functions of names in the system of argumentation. His relevant discussion can be regarded as further account of the rationale for having names.

Xunzi demonstrates an important proposition that “The gentleman must engage in argumentation. Every man without exception is fond of discussing what he finds to be good, but this is especially so with the gentleman.”67 From his arguments we know that the gentleman engages in argumentation in order to advocate and publicize the principle of humanity, to persuade people to follow the guidance of the Way, to achieve a perfect personality internally, and to contribute to the building of long-term peace and stability for his country externally. For these purposes the gentleman must engage in argumentation patiently and tirelessly, since he “never grows weary of the principle of humanity, for he loves it in his innermost mind, his action finds peace in it, and his joy is in discussing it.”68 Moreover, in light of the contents, aims, methods, and social effects of argumentations, Xunzi divides them into three classes: the argumentations of the sage, those of the gentleman, and those of the petty man.

Xunzi discusses many elements in the system of argumentation. It is when the reality itself is not clearly understood that names are used. It is when single names still do not clearly express meaning that definitions are used. It is when definitions are not completely clear that explanations are used. It is when simple explanations alone are not fully understood that discourses are used. He asserts that names, definitions, explanations, and discourses, being the primary forms for practical affairs and activities, are the first principles of the king’s enterprise. In such a system of argumentation, names are located at the beginning. Names are the means by which one attempts to distinguish different realities. So, on hearing a name, one can immediately understand the reality it refers to. Names of different realities are connected into sentences to express simple ideas. Sentences are combined and configured into explanations and inferences. It is called argumentation that employs the names of different realities to illus-
trate the Way of action and repose, right and wrong, truth and falsity. Argumentation consists of many elements or links mentioned above; it is the core and final link of the whole process of persuasion. By means of argumentation, the gentleman tries to persuade others to be guided by the Way in their behaviors and activities, so that the society could be managed well, the king’s ruling could last long, and the people could live happily and harmoniously; in sum, the king’s dynasty could be in a state of great order. Moreover, by means of argumentation, the gentleman also tries to persuade others to pay attention to their hearts, to understand and practice the principle of humanity, to cultivate their own moral sentiments and ideal personality, in order to become gentlemen and, perhaps, even sages.69 So Xunzi asserts,

... Argumentations are the mind’s representatives of the Way. The Mind is the artisan and manager of the Way. The Way is the classic standard and rational principle of order... When the mind conforms to the Way, explanations conform to the mind, and when names are used correctly and according to definitions, and real and true qualities of things are clearly conveyed... Using the correct Way to analyze pernicious doctrines is akin to stretching the marking line to test the crooked and straight. For this, unorthodox explanations cannot cause disorder, and the Hundred Schools will have no place to hide.70

VIII. Concluding Remarks

Here, I would like to make just two concluding comments about Xunzi’s theory of names:

1. Xunzi’s theory reveals the normative function of language, emphasizes the relationship between language and human behavior, and orients itself toward guiding people’s behavior. Its most outstanding characteristics are politicization and moralization.

American sinologist and philosopher Donald J. Munro claims:

In China, truth and falsity in the Greek sense have rarely been important considerations in a philosopher’s acceptance of a given belief or proposition; these are Western concerns. The consideration important to the Chinese is the behavioral implications of the belief or proposition in question: What effect does adherence to the belief have on people? What implications for social action can be drawn from the statement? For the Greeks, study was valued both for its own sake and as a guide to action...; but bliss lay primarily in study for its own sake. In Confucianism, there was no thought of “knowing” that did not entail some consequence for action.71
I think Munro’s judgments are especially suitable for evaluating Xunzi’s philosophy of language.

It is a common view that language has at least two main functions: description and prescription. The descriptive function of language concerns the relationship between language and extralinguistic objects, for instance, to which object a term or name refers, which fact or state of affair one sentence describes, in what situations is a sentence true, in what situations is it false, etc. The prescriptive function of language concerns the fact that some linguistic items are loaded with evaluative and normative elements, so that they can be used to guide and normalize man’s activities. As stated above, although Xunzi talks of the cognitive and communicative functions of names, he places emphasis on the social, political, and moral function of names: On one side, by means of regulating names the king makes clear what is the noble and what is the base in order to reorganize social order, strengthen social management, and keep his dynasty peaceful and stable. On the other side, since names, especially the names of social roles and moral terms, are implicitly loaded with corresponding social obligations and behavioral norms, by means of rectifying names the king could rectify the hearts of his people, guide and correct their behaviors, so that his people could accept the guidance of the Way in their life, achieve some balance between desire and the Way, pursue fortune and escape misfortune, and finally become gentlemen and even sages.

When Xunzi discusses how to regulate names, he is engaging in some sociological and political consideration as a “teacher of the king,” and he is thinking about how to design or reconstruct an ideal social and political institution and moral-ethical order. Therefore, the most important characteristics of Xunzi’s theory of names are politicization and moralization.

The characteristic of Xunzi’s theory just mentioned produces some further results. For example, the standard pattern of argumentation by Xunzi usually proceeds like this: If names are regulated, rectified, and used in such-and-such a way, beneficial and ideal social effects will obtain; otherwise, if names are misused and abused in such-and-such a way, bad and hurtful social effects will obtain. Hence, we should use names in the former, rather than the latter, way. That is to say, Xunzi chooses and discerns names in terms of their social effects. However, he does not especially care about some relevant details, for example, why if following certain ways to rectify names, we will obtain some beneficial or hurtful social effects? What are the processes, internal principles and links of such causal or conditional connections? And so on.

This also leads to another result: As said before, Xunzi does not give prominence to epistemological and logical questions about
names; in fact, he usually neglects them, so there are few technical achievements of epistemology, methodology, and logic in his research. This is an obvious lacuna in Xunzi’s theory.

2. Xunzi highlights the sociality, conventionality, and coerciveness of names. He obviously acknowledges social conventionalism in his theory of names, and touches the division of linguistic labor. At the same time he exposes the ontological and epistemological bases of regulating names, so his theory of name has some acknowledgment of realism and empiricism.

Here I would like to emphasize that the conventionalism in Xunzi’s theory of names does not lead to subjectivism, relativism, and skepticism. I can point out at least two reasons for this as follows: (i) Xunzi’s conventionalism has been restricted by his realist and empirical position about names. That is to say, there are some similarities and differences among the objects to be named, which are objective foundations to regulate and rectify names. Moreover, our sensations and cognitions of such similarities and differences among the objects are the epistemological bases to regulate and rectify names for them. (ii) Xunzi’s conventionalism about names is defined as “social,...”. That means, the process of regulating and rectifying names is a process of reciprocal confinement among various social forces; the final establishment of the relations between names and realities does not depend on the will of a single person (even the king), but depends on the common will of the whole linguistic community; it is usually the outcome of natural selection by a social and historical process. Therefore, when regulating and rectifying names people cannot do what they like to do; their jobs are constrained by many natural, social, and historical elements. By a metaphor, when regulating names they are dancing with some kind of fetters and handcuffs.

Although there are some obvious and serious defects and limitations in Xunzi’s theory of names, I still think that in some senses, it is better than the Kripke-Putnam theory of rigidity and causal-historical chains, because it maintains the principle of “establishment of names by social conventions and customs” more thoroughly, stresses the social elements of names more strongly, and accounts for our ordinary linguistic practice more reasonably. I will develop some kind of “causal-historical descriptivism about names” by way of absorbing and combining the reasonable elements in Xunzian, Fregian, Russelian, Kripkian, and Putnamian theories of names in the near future.
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1. The old transliteration “Hsun Tzu” is occasionally used in the citations or notes of this article.
3. Ibid., 142.
4. Ibid., 147.
5. Ibid., 142.
7. HT, 143–44.
10. Ibid., c.475/7–526.
13. Chung-ying Cheng suggested to me that the answer is to be found in the different natures of historical developments in two cultures. After Qin 廷, the intense discussion is focused on how philosophy contributes to politics and governance. Logic was then considered abstract and remote since Han 漢. Mozi’s 墨家 logic is also lost for this reason.
15. Ibid., 127.
16. Arthur Waley, translated and annotated, The Analects of Confucius (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), 166. However, the word “prince” in the original translation has been substituted by the word “king.”
18. Ibid., 128; italics mine.
19. Ibid.: italics mine.
20. XZ, vol. 2, 199. “Jinjian 进谏” is added by myself, which is absent in the original translations.
26. Ibid., 4, 10.
27. Ibid., 43.
30. *Analects*, 13:3. The translation is mainly from Chung-ying Cheng, “Language and Logic,” 347, but the translation of one sentence is missing there, and added up by myself.
32. HT, 148–9.
33. Ibid., 153.
35. Antonio S. Cua writes, “In propounding his doctrine of rectification of terms, Hsun Tzu, like Confucius, is mainly concerned with the problem of a morally well-ordered society; with the uniformity of human conduct under the government of a sage king or morally enlightened political authority. Rectification of terms is ultimately a matter of rectification of moral faults and misconduct and not merely a matter of avoidance of logical or linguistic errors. Thus, from the point of view of its ethical objective, the doctrine may be construed as a method for the diagnosis and remedy of moral faults. It must be acknowledged that Hsun Tzu, like most traditional Chinese philosophers, is more interested in the ‘behavioral implications’ of philosophical claims or beliefs than their truth as established by canons of deductive and inductive logic.” See his *Ethical Argumentation: A Study in Hsun tzu’s Moral Epistemology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 1–2.
37. HT, 137.
38. Ibid., 142.
39. Ibid., 139.
40. Ibid., 149.
41. Chad Hansen writes, Xunzi “... concurs in the assessment of the role of language as primarily a moral one, helping to regulate people and to provide order in the land. Hsun Tzu differs, however, in that he does acknowledge a descriptive function as well. ... Distinguishing between noble and base refers to the grading or regulative function of words. Discriminating similar and different appears to be a descriptive function.” See his *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 79.
42. XZ, vol. 3, 110.
43. Ibid., 127.
44. HT, 135.
45. Ibid., 142–43.
46. I agree with Chung-ying Cheng’s judgment: “Xunzi’s approach to what names stand for, therefore, is realistic and empirical. He reorganizes the different qualities of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, and feelings (desires and emotions). He recognizes that the human mind (xin 心) has the power to reason and organize. He concludes, therefore,
that names correspond to things in the world because of our ability to know things through the senses and mind. Xunzi conceives of names in language as representing objects in the empirical world; language, therefore, has empirical origins and empirical referents.” See his entry “Language and Logic,” 347.

47. HT, 144.
48. Ibid., 143.
49. XZ, vol. 3, 130.
50. Ibid., 131.
51. As Chung-ying Cheng says, here is involved the principle of correspondence. “Regarding difference and similarity, correspondence seems to imply that things can be recognized as a hierarchy of classes. Things are the same because they belong to the same class or different because they belong to different classes. Class, then, is the implicit criterion for similarity and difference. By recognizing the names of various classes, Xunzi, together with the neo-Moists, introduced the notion of lei (sort, kind, class) into the Chinese logical vocabulary. The purpose of naming is to identify similarity among things belonging to the same class and differences among things belonging to different classes.” See his entry “Language and Logic,” 347; italics mine.

53. HT, 144.
54. Ibid.
57. HT, 151.
58. Ibid., vol. 1, 207.
60. Ibid., vol. 3, 131.
61. Ibid., vol. 1, 176.
62. Ibid., vol. 2, 47.
63. Ibid., 48.
66. Chad Hansen writes, “Whether or not Xunzi understood the theories behind the paradoxes he criticizes, he clearly did not respect their motivation. He exhibits no philosophical fascination with solving conceptual puzzles for their own sake or using them to drive linguistic theory. He criticizes paradoxical statements on essentially political grounds—the deleterious social effects of asserting their conclusions. Each of them upsets conventional ways of using terms. His solution is political not intellectual—ban such talk!” See his entry “Philosophy of Language,” in Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy, ed. Antonio S. Cua (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 575.
67. XZ, vol. 1, 210. In Knoblock’s original translation, “bianshuo 辨说” is translated into “dialecitics and explanations.” I myself prefer “argumentation” to “dialetic and explanations,” so I use “argumentation” to take place of “dialecitics and explanations” in Knoblock’s translations I cite, because I think “bianshuo 辨说” has only one meaning in the contexts I cite, whose meaning is very close to “argumentation.”
68. Ibid.
69. Because of the double limitations of the space and the topic, this article does not clarify Xunzi’s conception of argumentation fully. However, Antonio S. Cua has made a systematic reconstruction of Xunzi’s argumentation from an ethical dimension in his Ethical Argumentation, which has been recognized as a quite authoritative and influential.