

## PPT1 Model Paper 1 (2018)

### Assigned model paper topic

Following the style (font size, citation style, etc.) of the paper model distributed to you, please respond to one of the following prompts. For all of them, you will probably need to refer to other parts of the text—but do so judiciously as your main goal is to carefully explain the small section that is your focus.

- (1) Explain what Xunzi means when he says that "What is that by which humans are human? I say: It is because they have distinctions," in Chapter Five.

### When reading the model:

Look for evidence that the writer has met the requirements below:

- Thesis statement.* Succinctly state your interpretation and supporting evidence. Make sure the essay's parts support or develop your thesis.
- Contextual awareness.* Demonstrate understanding of how the text's themes, arguments, and details are related to the immediate passage.
- Textual awareness.* Demonstrate understanding of how the text's details (genre, language choice, structure, etc.) inform your interpretation.
- Comprehension.* Demonstrate understanding of what the major themes, arguments, and claims of a text are, justified by textual evidence.
- Analysis.* Demonstrate understanding of how individual components of the text relate together as a whole.
- Interpretation.* Recognize where the text admits of multiple readings and present a preferred reading appealing to reasons for your interpretation.
- Quotations.* Use textual evidence appropriately to support your interpretation, being sure to explain the quotation and its context.

## Distinctions as the Source of Humanity in *Xunzi*

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In Chapter Five of his eponymous work, Xunzi argues that what is responsible for the nature of human beings is not biological facts. Instead, it is their ability to understand and act in the world in categories beyond the biological, an ability he calls having "distinctions." He supports this claim through several contrasting examples: Yu and Jie, apes and humans, and animal reproductive relationships and human familial relationships. Through these examples, Xunzi gradually sharpens the idea of distinction for the reader.

Xunzi does not think that biological facts about human beings are what define them as human. He takes "human" to be a description of something normative, or a way something should be, rather than a way something is. We can see this in his discussion of "what Yu and Jie both share" (Xunzi 266).<sup>1</sup> We know from Chapter One that Jie is a paradigm example of a bad person, along with Robber Zhi and Zou (260). And, in contrast, in Chapter Twelve, Yu is responsible for creating rules which help create order (269). Still, despite Jie being bad and Yu being good, they both share the same biological desires: to be fed, to be comfortable, to get sleep, to be happy, and to avoid pain. In saying that these desires are "already so," in contrast to something people must "await," Xunzi hints that what he means by "distinctions" involves a difference between inborn biological desires and something which must be brought about.

In a pattern which will be repeated again, Xunzi introduces a contrast with the word "however" in order to further develop the idea of human distinctions in the example of the ape. Yu and Jie, who are both human, share biological traits, and thus

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows all quotations from Chapter Five: Against Physiognomy may be found on page 266.

**Commented [CMK1]:** Begin by setting the context for your reader. You should include the author, the text, and the location of your focus.

**Commented [CMK2]:** Note the initial gloss of the key term, "distinctions" which will be explored in what follows.

**Commented [CMK3]:** The first paragraph is a guide for what comes. What do you expect to come next?

**Commented [CMK4]:** Notice what this relates to in the opening paragraph. What do you expect to happen in it?

**Commented [CMK5]:** This is an example of where going to another part of the text is helpful. It tells us who Yu and Jie are.

Does the rest of the essay use any other parts of the text?

**Commented [CMK6]:** Practice using different words for "means that" and "says that" which tell the reader whether you have understood the meaning from something explicit or implicit.

Is this an example of something explicit or implicit?

we might think this is what makes them human. Xunzi, anticipating this conclusion, implicitly denies it by saying "However, that by which humans are human is not that they are special in having two legs and no feathers..." **This is to reject an explanation of humanity in biological terms.** Further, it rejects a possible explanation in which it is not desires which all animals might share, but a specific set of physiological features. In this way, Xunzi moves to a consider a narrower understanding of being human: being a creature of a certain shape. This cannot be what makes a creature human, though, since apes share the same shape, that is, having two legs and no feathers. Rather, human beings, and here specifically "the gentleman" are differentiated in the fact that they consume apes.

**By using the word "thus"** to connect his observation about eating and his claim that being human is due to having distinctions, Xunzi indicates that these eating habits are a reason to conclude being human is due to having distinctions. Since he has already denied that the simple fact of wanting food is not what makes humans human, his observation that a gentleman eats ape is not meant to make that point. Rather, since he uses the term "gentleman," which elsewhere refers to someone who is "good at making use of things" (257), and who "makes things his servants," (263) Xunzi's point is **probably** that the cultured human being makes meals through cooking, showing mastery of their environment. In relationship to the gentleman, the ape is a "thing" and not a creature. Thus, perhaps, "distinctions" involves perceiving the other creatures in the world as objects to be manipulated for certain purposes.

**Finally, Xunzi suggests that distinctions involve normative social roles** in his example of birds and beasts. He observes that while animals have "fathers and sons," they do not have the "intimate relationship of father and son." By "fathers and sons," Xunzi is likely referring to the mere fact of biological reproduction. This is suggested

**Commented [CMK7]:** What is this related to in the opening paragraph?

**Commented [CMK8]:** Notice that the author is focusing on small words in order to make larger points. These signposts help us understand the text's structure.

**Commented [CMK9]:** Why does the author use "probably" here instead of just saying that this is Xunzi's point?

**Commented [CMK10]:** Again, look back to opening paragraph. How is this related and what do you expect to happen in what follows?

by using the terms in the plural as opposed to the generic "father and son." The latter description implies a role: someone is a father and someone is a son. As well, the addition of "intimate relationship" adds a moral dimension that mere reproduction, a bird having chicks, a beast having offspring, lacks. The parallel construction attributing to animals "the male and female sex" and not "differentiation between male and female" further supports the interpretation that Xunzi thinks humans are human in virtue of roles, not biology. Again, by a slight contrast in phrasing, Xunzi says "sex" to connote biology for animals and in omitting it for humans, connotes their playing a male or female role. He characterizes both male/female and father/son distinctions as human "ways," which emphasizes that these are not "already so" biological facts but "await" being enacted.

In conclusion, Xunzi understands human nature as something which goes beyond basic biological impulses, beyond the specifics of human physiology. Instead, humans are human because we navigate the world in a particular way. We are moral creatures, like Yu and Jie, who can do good or bad things. We shape our world, like the gentleman who eats animal flesh. We act in virtue of particular social roles, ones based on, but going beyond, biological categories like parent and sex. All of these are distinctions: between good and bad, between thing and thing-master, between father and son, between male and female. According to Xunzi, these distinctions are what make humans human.

[892 words]

#### Works Cited

Xunzi. "Xunxi." *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, translated by Eric. L. Hutton, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Hackett, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2001, pp. 256-307.

**Commented [CMK11]:** Notice that the author uses quotes judiciously, often only quoting single words which are important to the point, rather than lengthy excerpts.

**Commented [CMK12]:** How is the conclusion different than the opening paragraph. Imagine taking out "in conclusion" and then putting this at the beginning. Would it work? Why or why not?