

Prologue to the “Zhengming” Chapter of the *Xunzi*

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The “Zhengming” chapter is one of the most philosophically rich chapters of the *Xunzi*, but it is also one of the hardest to translate, because on many key points the text is ambiguous, as can be seen from the different ways that various commentators and scholars have explained its meaning. Of course, ambiguities are common in natural languages, and classical Chinese is often more ambiguous than other ancient languages such as Greek and Latin, so it is not surprising that the “Zhengming” chapter contains ambiguities. However, one point that is unambiguously conveyed in the first part of the chapter is that *words matter*, because much that is worthwhile in human life depends on successful communication among people, and words are the typical medium by which people communicate. Hence, the chapter itself stresses to anyone who would translate it the importance of conveying its meaning clearly, but it is then especially vexing—even ironic—that the chapter is so often unclear in what it is trying to say. One lesson it thus teaches, albeit unintentionally, is that conveying clearly one’s thoughts and intentions remains a difficult task even for those who are focused upon it. In what follows, I will point out a few of the interpretive and philosophical puzzles posed by these ambiguities, but will not attempt to resolve them here.

Now as just noted, the first part of the chapter focuses on language, and the context for its discussion is the social and political chaos of the Warring States period in ancient China. According to the text’s depiction of history, long ago sage kings established certain conventions governing the use of names for things, which helped them to create a well-ordered and prosperous society, but “nowadays, the sage kings have passed away, and the preservation of these names has become lax” and “strange words have arisen,” resulting in disaster for all. Although we may not share such a belief in a past golden age when sages created a system of naming, the problem of people twisting

words, creating confusion and sowing political discord, is a problem that is still very much with us today.

The “Zhengming” chapter responds to this problem in a number of ways, including discussing the purposes and proper methods for naming things, outlining the appropriate way to engage in persuasion and argument, and explaining some of the particular terms adopted by the sage kings. This last response, though, raises an important question: to what extent does Xunzi think the problem should be addressed by resolutely insisting on the original naming conventions established by the sages? Here we encounter one of the significant ambiguities mentioned previously. According to one influential commentator, Wang Xianqian, the text says that if a new sage king were to arise, “he would surely follow along with the old names [that are still in use] and *change back* the new [i.e., bad] names.” Other readers, however, have construed the same Chinese sentence as saying that if a new sage king were to arise, “he would surely follow the old names in some cases and *create* new names in other cases.” On the former reading, Xunzi is advocating a severe linguistic conservatism, whereas on the latter reading, he allows for linguistic innovation but does not specify how much innovation of this sort is acceptable. Other parts of the text may support either interpretation, so deciding between them is not a straightforward matter, but it is worth noting that this difficulty is also characteristic of a tension that appears not only in the *Xunzi* but in many other Confucian works, namely the tension between a deep reverence for tradition and the need to address the challenges of the present.

After its treatment of language, the “Zhengming” chapter turns to what we would now call the topic of moral psychology. The text draws a distinction between what people *yu* 欲 (“desire”) and what they *ke* 可 (“approve”). It claims that “those who seek after things follow what they approve,” and it uses this point to argue that the key to achieving order lies in changing what people approve, rather than trying to eliminate or reduce people’s desires, as some thinkers had proposed. At first glance, it may seem

that this discussion is completely disconnected from the earlier part of the chapter on language, and given what we know of how the text came to be, it might well be the case that this section on moral psychology originally existed as a free-standing piece of writing that was later incorporated into this chapter by the earliest editor of the *Xunzi*, Liu Xiang. Nevertheless, there *is* a theoretical link between the two parts of the chapter, because the text declares that what people approve is determined by their *zhi* 知 (“understanding”). Insofar as people’s understanding is influenced by the discourses and persuasions of others, then we can see the chapter’s discussion of moral psychology as explaining why, at the individual, psychological level, it is important to prevent the perversion of language, and we can see the chapter’s discussion of language as offering guidance for how to keep people from approving the wrong things.

As with the first part of the chapter, though, there is also an important ambiguity in the picture of moral psychology it offers. When it declares that “those who seek after things follow what they approve,” does it mean that approval of some course of action is merely *sufficient* to determine what one does, or does it mean that approval is moreover *necessary* for each and every action? The latter view would seem to entail that, strictly speaking, desire does not have any direct role to play in causing a person’s actions, since every action involves some instance of approval and that approval is sufficient to determine what one does, regardless of one’s desires. The former view, on the other hand, would allow that people can in some cases be directly caused by their desires to act, such as if they act spontaneously and without any thought of approval for one rather than another course of action.

What is at stake in the difference between these two positions is the proper method for moral self-cultivation. The view on which action is caused always and only by an agent’s approval entails a highly intellectualist approach to moral cultivation, because changing a person’s understanding is the only successful way to change their behavior. On the other hand, the view that agents might sometimes also be directly caused to act

by their desires implies that moral cultivation must pay no less attention to changing people's desires alongside changing their understanding, even if the understanding can always use its power of approval to override one's desires. Like the other ambiguity discussed earlier, it is not easy to resolve this interpretive difficulty, but it does point to a significant philosophical issue that remains relevant today, concerning what might be required for successful moral training, beyond invoking people's mechanisms of self-control and changing their ways of thinking.

The final part of the "Zhengming" chapter focuses on the problem of wellbeing. As with its remarks on moral psychology, this discussion may have originated as an independent piece of writing that was later incorporated into this chapter, but again there is a fairly clear link between the two parts of the text. In distinguishing between approval and desire, the text makes it clear that one can deliberately forego satisfaction of one's desire, even a desire so strong and fundamental as the desire to live, if one knowingly approves otherwise. Moreover, the text clearly indicates that changing what people approve is the most important factor for achieving order, which in the context of the *Xunzi* is a large part of what constitutes following the Way, i.e., the proper way to live and organize society. Those points then raise the question: does following the Way mean that one must forego satisfaction of one's desires and so to that extent live worse than one would by not following the Way?

The chapter argues that the answer to this question is "no" and that following the Way is in fact a superior means to satisfy one's desires and live well as compared to any other alternative. According to the text, the unrestrained pursuit of satisfaction for one's desires is counter-productive, because it leads to chaos, which endangers people acting in this way and hence must make them feel fear, which in turn makes it impossible for them to enjoy whatever things they manage to get. Instead, the text proposes, it is only when one constrains one's pursuit of what one desires that there can be order and that

one can enjoy whatever one manages to get, and moreover in so constraining one's desires one learns to be satisfied with less in the first place.

Such an answer, though, presents a final puzzle about Xunzi's view. Is the chapter saying that what justifies the content of the Way is simply the fact that it leads to the best possible life for human beings? If so, the normative ethical and political view offered by the text would ultimately be consequentialist in its structure. Or is its proposal supposed to be that the Way is justified primarily in virtue of being the standard of *good order*, and while such order results in the best possible life for human beings, those consequences neither define nor justify the Way? In that case, the normative ethical and political view offered by the text would have a significant non-consequentialist element. Again, scholars have disagreed on this matter, but it represents an important problem about how to understand the *Xunzi*, as well as an important problem about how to justify normative ethical and political standards more generally that philosophers are still wrestling with today.

In sum, the "Zhengming" chapter is noteworthy for its sophisticated discussions on a variety of topics that remain relevant even now, despite the many centuries that have passed since it was first composed. At the same time, the text also leaves many questions unanswered. It thus prompts us to further study of the *Xunzi* and to further philosophical reflection on the issues it raises.

Since much of my own work has been devoted to making the *Xunzi* accessible to those who cannot read Chinese, I welcome Nuño Valenzuela's Spanish translation of the "Zhengming" chapter. I hope that it will encourage interest in the *Xunzi* among Spanish readers and lead to greater engagement with Chinese philosophy among Spanish-speaking scholars.