

XUNZI

Chapter 17: TREATISE ON TIAN (*Tian lun* 天論)

Throughout this chapter, the term ‘Tian’ may generally be rendered as ‘Heaven’, and where the clear intent is to picture the sky, it has been translated that way. In this sense, ‘Tian’ comes very close to ‘Nature’. There are, however, points at which the relationship between Tian and Nature is at issue, and for this reason, the term has generally been left in transcription.

A. The constancy of Tian

Tian’s ways are constant. It did not prevail due to the Emperor Yao; it did not perish due to King Jie. Respond to it with order and good fortune follows; respond to it with disorder and ill fortune follows.

Strengthen the root and regulate expenditures, and Tian cannot impoverish. Bring nurturance to completion and act only when the time is ripe, and Tian cannot sicken. Cultivate the Dao without irresolution, and Tian cannot devastate. Flood and drought cannot bring starvation; extremes of cold and heat cannot bring sickness; prodigies and freaks cannot bring ill fortune. Let the roots shrivel and spend extravagantly, and Tian cannot enrich. Skimp nurturance and act contrary to the times, and Tian cannot complete. Abandon the way and act wantonly, and Tian cannot bring good fortune. There is starvation without flood or drought; there is sickness without extremes of cold and heat; there is ill fortune without prodigies and freaks. Though the seasons revolve as they do in ordered times, disaster and devastation arise unlike in ordered times. Tian cannot be blamed: it is a consequence of the way chosen by man. He who understands the distinct roles of Tian and man may be called a perfect man.

Emperor Jie refers to the last ruler of the Xia Dynasty (the era preceding the Shang, which may or may not have been historical). Jie is portrayed in traditional literature as the prototype of a ruler so evil that Tian forsook his royal house and shifted the Mandate elsewhere.

“The root” is a standard way to refer to the fundamental economic activities of agriculture, which Confucians typically saw as the most ethically pure form of labor.

The final sentence, which concerns identifying the *distinct* spheres of Tian and man, forms a general theme for the chapter. Naturalist philosophies of Xunzi's time, of course, sought to ground their ethical models by *linking* man and Nature/Tian.

B. Keeping man and Tian distinct

That which is accomplished without action, obtained without pursuit: that belongs to the office of Tian. Though it be profound, man adds no thought to it; though it be great, man adds no ability to it; though it be keen, man adds no insight to it. This is called “not contesting office with Tian.” The heavens have their seasons, earth has its riches, man has his rule: this is what is meant by “forming a trinity.” To discard the means for joining with the other two and instead to aspire to their likeness: this is delusion.

The ranks of stars revolve in procession, the sun and moon shine in turn, the seasons succeed one another, the forces of *yin* and *yang* alternate in great transformation; the winds and rains give broad nourishment, the things of the world each obtain a harmony of forces whereby they come to life; each obtains nurturance to grow to completion: the process unseen but the finished work manifest – this is called “spirit.” All know it by that which it brings to completion, but none know its formless being – that is called “Tian.” Only the Sage does not seek to know Tian.

Note the theme of “forming a trinity”: Tian, earth, and man each in its proper role. This trinity model introduces the notion of human excellence as *parallel* to but not identical with the excellence of Tian. (Because the word *tian* could denote “sky,” sometimes the realm we might wish to label “Nature” is denoted by the terms “Tian” and “earth” together – the realm of sky & earth; other times, the term “Tian” alone functions in ways we would often denote by the term “Nature.”) The workings of this realm of nature is labeled “spirit” in the sense of that term which points to its “magic-like” ability to accomplish things in the world that are uncaused and marvelously efficient.

Note the sharp contrast that the final sentence in Section B draws with naturalistic approaches, such as those associated with Zou Yan.

C. The relation of the human person to Tian

With the office of Tian settled and the work of Tian accomplished, the physical form is intact and the spirit is born. Love, hate, pleasure, anger, grief, and joy are assembled therein: these are called the “Tian-like dispositions.” The ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and body have their realms of sensual encounter without duplicative ability: these are

called the “Tian-like faculties.” The heart dwells in the vacant center and thereby governs the five faculties: it is called the “Tian-like ruler.” It molds things not of its species in order to nurture its species: this is called “Tian-like nurturance.” It judges things which accord with their species to be fortunate and judges things which discord with their species to be ill-fortuned: this is called “Tian-like rule.”

To darken one’s Tian-like ruler, bring disorder to one’s Tian-like faculties, forsake one’s Tian-like nurturance, discord with one’s Tian-like rule, contravene one’s Tian-like dispositions, and so dissipate Tian’s work: this is called “greatest evil.” The Sage clears his Tian-like ruler, rectifies his Tian-like faculties, fulfills his Tian-like nurturance, follows his Tian-like rule, nurtures his Tian-like dispositions, and so brings completion to Tian’s work.

Thus if one understands what he is to do and is not to do, then heaven and earth will fulfill their proper functions and the things of the world will serve him. Acts fully ruled, nurturance fully realized, in life suffering no injury: this is called “knowing Tian.” Thus the greatest craft lies in acts not taken, the greatest wisdom in thoughts not pondered.

Section C forms a bridge between the realms of Tian and man. Earlier sections stressed the idea that Tian does *not* provide a basis for human excellence. Here, however, human capacities are depicted as rooted in the creative processes of Tian. While in the early parts of the section, the capacities discussed are *descriptive* – “value neutral,” at least in ethical terms – there is a transition towards the end of the first paragraph, and *prescriptive* statements about our Tian-like capacities are introduced. The final two sentences there are keys to this transition, and we will see the function of the mind as an organ capable of “molding” its environment is a pivotal element in Xunzi’s explanation for how man can create a world of human excellence. This step is critical to the way the *Xunzi* builds its ethics on the basis of a portrait of human nature that pictures us as innately lacking in ethical dispositions.

Note that this section forms a psychology that differs from but may complement the model of the mind in the “Dispelling Blinders” chapter.

D. What man seeks from Nature

What man seeks from the heavens should merely be their manifest images by which time may be marked. What man seeks from earth should merely be that which may be appropriated from it, which may be husbanded. What man seeks from the four seasons should merely be their regular sequence, to which he can act in response. What man seeks from the forces of *yin* and *yang* should merely be their harmonies, which he may employ to create order. Functionaries keep track of Heaven; you must

keep to the Dao.

The most potent philosophical adversaries of Xunzi were the various naturalistic teacher-thinkers at Jixia. Note the language the *Xunzi* uses to characterize those whose “arts” are based on close observation of Nature. Recall, for example, the theories of Zou Yan and the way they ultimately led to ideas such as those we read in the “Monthly Ordinances” texts.

E. The separation of human action and Nature

Are order and disorder determined by the action of the heavens? I say: the regularities of the sun and moon, stars, planets, and constellations were identical for both Yu and Jie. Yu created order thereby; Jie created disorder. Thus, order and disorder are not determined by the heavens. Are they determined by the action of the seasons? Proliferation and growth in spring and summer, harvest and storage in autumn and winter, this too was identical for Yu and for Jie. Yu created order thereby; Jie created disorder. Thus, order and disorder are not determined by the seasons. Are they determined by the land? He who acquires land is able to live; he who loses his land will die: this too was identical for Yu and for Jie. Yu created order thereby, Jie created disorder. The *Poetry* puts it thus:

Tian created the mountain tall,
King Tai tamed its wilds.
Then, his work complete,
King Wen brought thriving peace.

Yu was the legendary emperor who tamed the great floods when serving as Minister of Works under Emperor Shun. (He also served as the great exemplary sage for Mohists.) We encountered Jie in Section A. King Tai was a progenitor of the predynastic Zhou people, whose greatest hero, King Wen, was his grandson.

F. The junzi takes Tian as his model

Tian does not suspend winter because people dislike cold; earth does not contract its breadth because people dislike traveling great distances; the *junzi* does not curtail his actions because of the clamor of petty people. Tian has a constant way; earth has constant progressions; the *junzi* has constancy of person. The *junzi* takes what is constant as his way; the petty person calculates his credits. The *Poetry* says: “Undeviating in ritual and right, why be concerned what others may say?”

This section provides concrete content to the notion of “forming a trinity” with Tian and earth. Although the *junzi* does not imitate the workings of Nature, as Laozi-style Daoists or some naturalistic teachings would propose, he does aspire to emulate the major structural character of the nature’s regularities.

G. “Fate” is not determined by Tian but by chance

That the king of Chu may have a retinue of a thousand chariots does not mean that he is wise. That a *junzi* may have only beans to eat and water to drink does not mean that he is stupid. These are due to the rhythms of circumstance. To be refined in purpose, rich in virtue, and clear in thought; to live in the present but be devoted to the past – these things are within one’s own power. The *junzi* attends to what is within his power and does not aspire to that which is within the power of Tian alone. The petty person defaults on what is within his power and aspires to that which is within the power of Tian alone. Because the *junzi* attends to what is within his power and does not aspire to that which is within the power of Tian alone, he goes forward day by day. Because the petty person defaults on what is within his power and aspires to that which is within the power of Tian alone, he goes backward day by day. Thus the pivots of the *junzi*’s daily progress and the petty person’s daily regress are at root one. The difference between the two lies in this.

Although this section does not employ the term “fate” (*ming*), its ideas are in the tradition of the Mencius’s doctrines concerning fate/destiny, distinguishing clearly between realms that are and are not under the control of the moral individual, and acknowledging that outcomes that do not reward his ethical effort are due to a pattern that operates independent of people, the “rhythms of circumstance.”

H. Strange events in Nature have no significance

When stars fall or trees sing, the people of the state all ask in terror, “What does this mean?” I say it means nothing. These are the changes of the heavens and the earth, the transformations of *yin* and *yang*, rare events in the world of things. It is proper to wonder at them; it is wrong to fear them. Eclipses of the sun or moon, unseasonable rain or snow, the occasional appearance of strange stars: there has never been an age without them. If the ruler is enlightened and his government stable, then though these appear in series during his rule, no harm will be done. If the ruler is benighted

and his government reckless, then though none of these things occur, it will be of no use. The falling of the stars, the singing of the trees, these are the changes of the heavens and the earth, the transformations of *yin* and *yang*, rare events in the world of things. It is proper to wonder at them; it is wrong to fear them.

Among events which may occur, those which should be feared are human portents. When careless ploughing causes crops to suffer and those who weed leave weeds behind, when government is reckless and loses the support of the people – the fields unkempt, the crops meager, grain sold dear and people starving, corpses lying in the road: these are what I mean by human portents. When government directives are unenlightened, the populace summoned to labor out of season, agriculture left in disorder: these are what I mean by human portents. When ritual and propriety are not cultivated, public and private affairs not properly distinguished, when male and female mix wantonly and father and son doubt one another, when superior and inferior become estranged, when banditry and invasion appear in tandem: these are what I mean by human portents. Such portents are born of chaos; if all three types occur at once, there can be no peace for the state. The reasons are so near at hand; the catastrophe so tragic!

When labors are unseasonable, cows and horses give birth to one another's progeny and prodigies appear among the six types of livestock. It is proper to wonder at this; it is wrong to fear it. The teachings say: The prodigies of the world of things should be recorded but not explained. Analyses which have no application, investigations which do not proceed from urgency: these should be discarded and not cultivated. As for the proprieties governing ruler and minister, the affinities governing father and son, and the role distinctions governing husband and wife, these should be unceasingly refined.

Among the naturalistic schools of Xunzi's time were those that saw the realm of Nature as in constant responsive interaction with human action. On these models, human action – especially ritual and governmental action – elicited responsive action in the natural sphere. For example, bad tax policy could create drought; bad ethical conduct could produce comets. Naturalistic ritualism focused on the importance of maintaining regular and appropriate human *li* – especially on the highly leveraged government level – to maintain the regular flow of natural forces (*yin* and *yang*, the Five Forces, spirit forces and the energies of *qi* in Nature). Naturalistic theories of government focused on the need to align the ethical operation of governance with the *dao* of the natural world. Failures on either level could lead to inauspicious “omens” and natural disasters. These ideas reached their culmination in the Han Dynasty teachings of Dong Zhongshu.

Xunzi was a strong opponent of these sorts of thinking – he was, in clear

ways – anti-animistic and generally atheistic: just the sort of Confucian the Mohists attacked. Sections H and I both stress his opposition to cosmologies that claimed to have implications for human conduct. For Xunzi, the lessons of Tian are its *regularities*: these man may emulate in discovering his own ideal regularity, and he may also exploit them as predictable features of the world he can “mold” to satisfy his needs and potential. As for natural “prodigies” – irregularities in nature that others saw as meaningful – for Xunzi they were, in fact, meaningless accidents.

I. Rituals have no magic

When performance of the great rain dance is followed by rain, what does this mean? I say it means nothing. It is as though the rain dance had not been performed and it had rained. The rituals of “saving” the sun and moon when they are eclipsed, of performing the rain dance in times of drought, of divining with bone and milfoil before deciding a great matter, these are not performed as means of gaining an end; they are means of ornamenting (*wen*) action. The *junzi* understands them as ornamental, the populace understands them as spiritual. Understanding them as ornamental leads to good fortune; understanding them as spiritual leads to ill fortune.

For the *Xunzi*, good fortune is largely determined by man, not Nature. Enlightened conduct *is* good fortune, and here we see that identified with the embrace of *li* as *wen* and *wen* alone. The pattern of civilization and its social productivity are ends in themselves, and need no rationalization by means of naturalistic arguments. Note how different this is from the *Mencius*, which adds strength to the Confucian commitment to *li* by claiming that *li* is actually an innate component of our *natures*, implanted by Tian itself as a species-defining attribute (6A.6).

J. Ritual is the jewel of human culture

In the heavens, nothing is more brilliant than the sun and the moon. On earth, nothing is more brilliant than water and fire. Among things, nothing is more brilliant than pearls and jade. Amidst mankind, nothing is more brilliant than ritual and propriety. If the sun and moon were not high, their brilliance would not shine. If water and fire do not collect into masses, their powers to brighten and moisten will not be spread abroad. If pearl and jade are not polished then kings and dukes will not regard them as treasures. If ritual and propriety are not applied to the state, then the fame of its accomplishments will not become known. Thus it is said: The lifespan of a man resides with Tian; the lifespan of a state lies in *li*. If he who rules men exalts *li*

and honors the worthy, he will rule as king; if he lays stress on laws and values the people, he will rule as hegemon; if he loves profit and proliferates deceit, he will rule in danger; if he relies on calculating schemes, subversion and perilous secrecy, he will be totally destroyed.

Once again, the theme is “forming a trinity,” but now it is clear that for humans, the essential tool for this ultimate goal is *li*. From this point of the chapter on, the theme becomes a celebration of the ritualism that was at the core of all Confucian teachings.

K. Nature is to be exploited, not worshiped

Exalt Tian and contemplate it?

Rather, husband its creatures and so regulate it!

Follow Tian and sing hymns to it?

Rather, regulate Tian’s mandate and use it!

Look upon the seasons and await them?

Rather, respond to the seasons and exploit them!

Accept things as they are and increase them?

Rather, give rein to talents and transform them!

Contemplate things and treat them as givens?

Rather, create order among things and unfailingly seize their potential!

Long for the source from which things are born?

Rather, promote the means whereby they are brought to completion!

Hence to set aside man and contemplate Tian is to mistake the basic nature of things.

There is no section of the *Xunzi* that more clearly expresses the *humanistic* basis of Xunzi’s brand of Confucianism – it is up to us as a species to create the ideal world out of the raw materials Nature provides. Beyond those materials and the vague guidance of *regularity*, the natural world has few lessons to offer that man cannot teach himself. (Xunzi is certainly no romantic about the world of Nature!)

L. Rituals are the guides for human success

That which abided unchanged through the reigns of the hundred kings of antiquity may serve as the linking thread of the Way. Respond to the transience of affairs with

this thread; all principles will be linked without disorder. If you do not know how to link things in this way, you will not know how to respond to change. The essence of this linking thread has never ceased to be. Disorder is born of deviating from it; order exhausts its every aspect.

Hence in pursuing the goodness of the Way, follow what fully accords with it; what distorts it one must not do; to mistake it is the greatest confusion. When men wade across rivers, they mark the deep pits. If the markers are not clear, others will drown. Those who rule people must mark the Way. If the markers are not clear, there is chaos. The *li* are the markers. To reject *li* is to darken the world, and a darkened world is in greatest chaos. Thus if the Way is made thoroughly clear, if inner and outer are distinctly marked, if there is regularity in the hidden and the manifest, then the pits which drown the people will be removed.

M. Ritual inequality is the basis of a fair and prosperous society

The world of things is but a corner of the Way; one species of thing is but a corner of the world of things. A foolish man is but a corner of one species of thing, yet he believes he knows the Way. He is without wisdom. Shènzi could see the advantages of being last, but could not see the advantages of being first. Laozi could see the advantages of being bent, but could not see the advantages of holding straight. Mozi saw the advantages of equality, but could not see the advantages of inequality. Songzi saw the advantages of few desires, but could not see the advantages of many.

If all are last and none first, then there can be no gateway for the masses. If all are bent and none hold straight, then the eminent and the humble cannot be distinguished. If all are equal without inequalities then commands of government cannot be carried out. If all have few desires and none have many, then there is no means of transforming the masses. The *Documents* puts it this way: “Do not love doing any one thing; only follow the Way of the king. Do not hate doing any one thing; only follow the path of the king.”

This section echoes Section D of “Removing Blinders.” Here, the way to free ourselves of the narrowness of limited *dao* is to study the one true Dao: the Way of the Former Kings.

Note here the final theme of the chapter (somewhat divorced from its main one): inequalities among people are essential to the structure of the well-functioning state. It is one of a series of ideas that we see in this highly Confucian chapter that allow us to understand how students of Xunzi such as Han Feizi and Li Si could have absorbed his teachings but emerged as Legalists.