

# Research on Xunzi's Epistemological Thought from the Perspective of Philosophy

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**Abstract.** Xunzi explores the origin of human cognition based on empirical evaluation and psychological analysis, and reveals under what conditions human cognition is possible and how it develops. He has also developed a layered system of human cognition that has evolved from lower to higher levels. The article examines Xunzi's epistemology from the perspective of knowledge. First, it analyzes Xunzi's definition of knowledge, which emphasizes the difference between innate perception and acquired cognition, and holds that knowledge comes from experience, education and cultivation. Secondly, it analyzes Xunzi's logical classification of knowledge, and it is argued that Xunzi classifies knowledge into that of "practice" and of "names and terms" according to what these kinds of knowledge produce. Next, it discusses Xunzi's views on the formation of knowledge in terms of nature and nurture, the power of education, and practice and experience. Finally, it explores the development of Xunzi's epistemology from several dimensions: tradition and innovation, individual and society, and cultivation and change. Xunzi's epistemology is closely linked to his moral philosophy, shedding light on modern understanding of education, ethics and human nature.

**Keywords:** Xunzi's Epistemology; Knowledge of Practice; Knowledge of Names and Terms.

## 1. Introduction

Epistemology, as a central branch of philosophy, has long focused on how one can acquire knowledge, what the nature of knowledge is, and how to determine that one's beliefs or ideas are correct. Epistemology is an integral part of Xunzi's philosophy. He critically evaluated the doctrines of various schools of ancient China, thus forming his own unique epistemological system. Xunzi advocates that human beings are inherently evil and need to be educated to become moral, reflecting his in-depth understanding of cognition and cultivation. Influenced by Taoism, Xunzi puts forward the idea that "There is a constancy to the activities of Heaven. They do not persist because of Yao. They do not perish because of Jie", advocating the separation of heaven and man. Meanwhile, he also emphasizes the idea of "oversee what Heaven has mandated and use it", namely the definitive role of education and environment on human character and cognition. Xunzi believes that knowledge can be acquired, and that human cognition and behavior can be improved, thus affirming the cognitive ability of human beings. Xunzi's epistemological thought is based on a view of nature that aims to expound how people should know the world, seeing the relationship between human beings and the outside world, including the natural world and the cosmos, as a kind of active seeking of human beings, emphasizing the initiative of learning, and believing that through learning one can know and understand the whole world. Influenced by Confucius' epistemological thought, Xunzi believed that the objective world could be known and that people could acquire correct knowledge through learning.[1]

## 2. Xunzi's Definition of Knowledge

### 2.1. Basic Understanding of "Knowing": Distinguishing between Innate Perception and Acquired Cognition

Xunzi emphasized the difference between innate perception and acquired cognition. He argued that "for everyone, the ability to know comes from human nature, and what can be known are the underlying patterns of things". Human beings have the desire and ability to explore the outside world and understand it by nature, and that their natural perception forms the basis of cognition. In Xunzi's



view, the innate perceptions of human beings (hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, etc.) are the direct response to and experience of the external world, which form the basis of cognition. “[Everyone’s] Heaven-given faculties cognize things in the same way”. However, true knowledge does not only come from innate perception, but also must be acquired through education, training and experience, as well as thinking, judging and understanding, in order to achieve acquired cognition. Then the heart will have “the power to judge its awareness” [3]. One will be able to form a logical and refined understanding of the world, and thus forming a comprehensive cognition. In addition, Xunzi believes that “without accumulating tiny steps, you have no way to go a thousand li”. The acquisition of knowledge should be a continuous process, and individuals need to improve themselves through continuous learning and cultivation. Eventually, Xunzi believes one would become a perfected person who is “capable both of fixity and of responding to things”. [2]

## **2.2. Sources of Knowledge: Experience, Education and Cultivation**

According to Xunzi, the sources of knowledge can be divided into three main areas: experience, education and cultivation. Experience is the direct knowledge that people gain through practice, observation and perception. Education was regarded as a particularly important source of knowledge in ancient China. Xunzi emphasizes the importance of education for the acquisition of knowledge, that people can acquire correct knowledge and moral concepts through studying classical literature, the teachings of teachers and elders, and society. Cultivation, on the other hand, is an internal process by which individuals can acquire higher levels of knowledge and wisdom through contemplation, introspection, and examination of oneself [4]. Selim Berker further explores how to correct those beliefs generated by experience and education, and, in particular, how individuals can balance and adjust their own beliefs when these beliefs are in conflict with new information or moral concepts. [3]

## **3. Categorization of Knowledge: The Knowledge of "Practice" and of "Names and Terms"**

According to the results of cognition, Xunzi divided them into two categories: the knowledge of "practice", the fundamental source of knowledge, and the knowledge of "names and terms", the knowledge of logic and reason.

### **3.1. Knowledge of "Practice"**

The knowledge of "practice" is knowledge gained through experience. According to Xunzi, "To put it into practice is to understand it, and to understand it is to be a sage." Xunzi's epistemology recognizes that through practice, one can become a sage. Xunzi's epistemology recognizes the knowledge of "practice" is divided into the knowledge “fixated on one twist” and that of "great clarity and brilliance".

First, the knowledge "fixated on one twist", according to Xunzi, is the knowledge twisted by the desires and evils of human beings. Almost no one can be exempted from the flaw [5]. The human spirit and mind are easily confused by all kinds of prejudices, making it difficult to obtain complete knowledge. Xunzi laments the consequences of this: “The person of true virtue and the true Way is denounced from above by the lords of chaotic states, and denounced from below by the followers of pernicious schools.” [4]

Secondly, the knowledge of "great clarity and brilliance" is also called the knowledge of "those who embody the Way", which Xunzi believes is not twisted by the prejudices of human beings. Xunzi introduces two solutions to obtain the knowledge of "great clarity and brilliance". Xunzi states the sage “is neither for desires, nor for dislikes, is neither for the origins, nor for the end results, is neither for what is near, nor for what is far away, is neither for what is broad, nor for what is shallow, is neither for the ancient past, nor is for the present”. Besides the sage’s method, he also puts forward the idea that "one’s heart must not be ignorant of the Way". Xunzi states that one’s heart can know the Way through “emptiness, single-mindedness, and stillness”, advocating that, through the guidance

of specific methods, the human heart can reach a clear state, so as to reach a comprehensive and thorough knowledge, and to achieve a clear state of knowledge and understanding.

### **3.2. Knowledge of "Names and Terms"**

"Names and terms" come from the human mind. Therefore, they can reflect the characteristics of cognitive objects in a logical way. Xunzi believes that "the wise man draws differences and establishes names in order to point out their corresponding objects", and divides the knowledge of "names and terms" into the knowledge from experience and the knowledge of "correct naming". [5]

First, Xunzi attaches great importance to experience: "If you never climb a high mountain, you will not know the height of Heaven. If you never visit a deep ravine, you will not know the depth of the Earth. If you never hear the words passed down from the former kings, you will not know the magnificence of learning." "To have heard many things is called 'broadness.' To have heard few things is called 'shallowness.' To have seen many things is called 'erudition.' To have seen few things is called 'boorishness'". He emphasizes that one should hear and see more, highlighting the Confucian theory of cultivation. According to Xunzi, one should actively draw on the experience of history and the present, study the Confucian classics, befriend gentlemen and learn from them so as to become a sage.

Second, Xunzi advocates "the wise man draws differences and establishes names in order to point out their corresponding objects" and "observing the objects and determining their numbers". Only when the name is appropriate, then "a name is heard and the corresponding object is understood" and one can "discriminate among things without going to excess", so that we can indirectly understand the world and avoid falling into fallacies.[6]

## **4. Xunzi's Views on the Development of Knowledge**

### **4.1. Innate and Acquired: The Relationship between the Initial Disposition of the Human Being and Acquired Education**

Xunzi clearly states that "People's nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort." Xunzi argues that man's innate disposition is flawed. Human beings are "born with a fondness for profit", "feelings of hate and dislike", and "desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds". This is compatible with certain views of Western behavioral ethical consequentialism [1]. Selim Berker, for example, states that "we should not proceed by first identifying certain epistemic goods and then constructing a theory of epistemic justification in terms of what conduces toward or promotes those epistemic goods." [2] Behavioral ethical consequentialism holds that an action can be called "right" if and only if a particular condition occurs or exists. Philosophers tend to differ on what are the necessary conditions for the establishment of "correct behavior". Consequentialists argue that the correctness of an act should only be judged by the results it produces, and that there is no intrinsic goodness or evilness in an act. Xunzi's epistemology also contains a consequentialist consideration and an appeal to virtue, but should not be narrowly reduced to an "instrumental-purpose" relationship

### **4.2. The Power of Education: How to Guide Individuals Towards Goodness**

Xunzi emphasizes the importance of acquired education in correcting a person's innate nature and guiding them to the right path. "In every case, ritual and yi are produced from the deliberate effort of the sage; they are not produced from people's nature". "The sage transforms his nature and establishes deliberate effort. In establishing deliberate effort, he produces ritual and yi. In producing ritual and yi he institutes proper models and measures". "Everything that one values in Yao and Shun and the gentleman is due to the fact that they were able to transform their nature and to establish deliberate effort". Ritual and yi are not human nature, because human nature is inherently evil, they can only be formed through the process of "transforms his nature and establishes deliberate effort". Through

personal cultivation, rituals and music, the enactment of laws, and the creation of a good social environment, human wisdom is cultivated so that the individual will gradually realize the shortcomings of human nature, thus forming a good moral character and turning towards goodness.

He believes that education is the key to changing a person's nature and cultivating their good character. This indicates that education can not only provide knowledge, but, more importantly, have a profound impact on human character and moral concepts. Xunzi further argues that it is only through education that people can truly understand what is good and how to put their knowledge into practice.

#### **4.3. Practice and Experience: The Process of Knowledge Formation and Individual Interaction**

Xunzi attaches great importance to the role of practical experience in the development of knowledge. "If you never climb a high mountain," he states, "you will not know the height of Heaven. If you never visit a deep ravine, you will not know the depth of the Earth." He believes that relying on theoretical knowledge is unable to truly understand and master knowledge. The development of knowledge not only requires theoretical learning, but also needs verification, amendment and improvement in practice.

### **5. The Change and Inheritance of Knowledge**

#### **5.1. Tradition and Innovation: How to Renew Knowledge While Maintaining Our Respect for Tradition**

Xunzi values tradition. "Being generous is due to the accumulated richness of ritual." For him, tradition is not only a set of systems and norms, but also a sign of social order and civilization. However, Xunzi was not bound by tradition: "Learning must never stop." This indicates that learning is a never-ending process, and that people should continue to absorb, challenge and update their existing knowledge.

#### **5.2. Individuals and Society: The Process of Socialization of Knowledge and its Significance**

Xunzi emphasizes the central position of knowledge in individual cultivation, believing that knowledge is not only the understanding of the outside world, but also the control over oneself, one's temperament and desires. "[Human beings] must seek it and only then will they obtain it. They must work at it and only then will they achieve it. They must accumulate it and only then will they be lofty. They must make it complete and only then are they sages." Through learning, individuals can broaden their horizons, modify their temperaments, and hone themselves in a positive way. Meanwhile, Xunzi believes that knowledge is not limited to individual cultivation, but is also a process of socialization, related to the order and harmony of the whole society. Knowledge is not only the wealth of the individual, but also the wealth of society, and the transmission and sharing of knowledge is essential to social harmony and progress [6].

#### **5.3. Cultivation and Change: How Knowledge Affects Individual Cultivation and Social Progress**

Xunzi emphasizes the importance of knowledge for individual cultivation and social progress. "The purpose of learning begins with becoming a well-bred man, and ends with becoming a sage. If you truly accumulate effort for a long time, then you will advance[7]. Learning proceeds until death and only then does it stop. And so, the order of learning has a stopping point, but its purpose cannot be given up for even a moment." He believed the purpose of learning is to become a sage. Moreover, "[human beings] are not as strong as oxen or as fast as horses, but oxen and horses are used by them. How is this so? I say it is because humans are able to form communities while the animals cannot." He believed that knowledge could not only help individuals improve their own cultivation, but also have a far-reaching impact on society, and that through continuous learning and cultivation,

individuals could adjust their temperament and cultivate noble moral sentiments to achieve the purpose of cultivating themselves and promote social harmony and progress[8].

## 6. Conclusion

To summarize, in Xunzi's philosophical system, knowledge includes not only the cognition of the external world, but also the combination of the human mind and the way of heaven. Xunzi's in-depth insight into the form and content of knowledge provides an important perspective for us to understand the various dimensions of knowledge, which, from Xunzi's view, is not just pure facts or information, but also values closely connected with morality and ethics. Moreover, Xunzi's emphasis on the relationship between the innate and the acquired shed light on the indispensable roles of the nature of human beings and acquired education in the shaping of knowledge. Knowledge, in Xunzi's epistemology, is an internal self-cultivation and an external engine of social progress, as well as a tool of cognition and a guide to moral behavior. True knowledge is not only to know, but more importantly, to understand the reasoning behind it and how to use it to enrich one's inner world and to promote the harmonious progress of society, so as to realize the value of knowledge.

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