

“Xunzi on Fixations and Their Political Relevance”

Franz Mang

For Xunzi, a political community flourishes when the Way (dao 道) is realized through the rectification of names (zhengming 正名), education, and legal institutions (Xunzi, Chap. 22). Therefore, it is of great importance, at least for a ruler, to understand—that is, to intellectually grasp and practice—the Way (zhidao 知道). But various kinds of fixation (bi 蔽) prevent one from understanding the Way: a person is often fixated on one aspect and thus deluded about the greater order of things, and almost anything can become an object of fixation to the exclusion of other important matters (Xunzi, Chap. 21). This paper argues that fixations can be understood as a distinctive epistemic vice, though the possession of such a vice is not necessarily morally blameworthy. To make this argument, I draw on Quassim Cassam’s vice epistemology and his discussion of the negative influences of epistemic vices on social justice. Then the paper explores strategies for overcoming fixations, including Xunzi’s method of “emptiness, single-mindedness, and stillness” (xuyierjing 虛一而靜). Furthermore, it suggests that contemporary civic education ought to incorporate a particular form of intellectual virtue education, which helps citizens overcome epistemic vices, including fixations.