

Heavenly Humanity or Total Tyranny?  
An Enquiry into the Rectification of Names in Hsün Tzu

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7 November 2004

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*"If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success."*<sup>1</sup>  
– Confucius, *Analects* Bk. XIII, Ch. 3

In the section titled "Rectifying Names" Hsün Tzu—within the text which bears his name—expands upon Confucius' above statement from the *Analects*:

Names are the means by which one attempts to distinguish different realities. Phrases consist of combinations of names for different realities, put together so as to express a single meaning. Discourses and explanations are the means by which, without allowing names to become separated from realities, one makes men understand the principles of correct action. Names and combinations of names are the instruments of discourse and explanation. Discourse and explanation are the means by which the mind gives form to the Way. The mind is the supervisor of the Way, and the Way is the foundation of good government (147).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, for Hsün Tzu, choosing suitable names to signify different realities—a process which can be properly accomplished only by the sage, or true king, who "understands what is to be done and what is not to be done"—is an integral first step toward implementing good government, inline with the Way (81). Hsün Tzu places such tremendous emphasis on the proper naming of different realities because although, "Man's nature is evil; goodness is the result of conscious activity" (157). Man's desires, which naturally arise in response to his innate emotions (151), will bring disorder to himself and to society at large if they are not held in check through conscious activity, whereby "the mind conceives a thought and the body

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<sup>1</sup> James Legge, trans., *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 263-4.

<sup>2</sup> Burton Watson, trans., *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963-4). Unless otherwise noted, all text citations consist of page numbers of the "Hsün Tzu" section of Watson's book.

puts it into action" (139-40). The highest form of this intellectual process results in the development of appropriate ritual principles, "produced by the conscious activity of the sages" (160). These rituals will bring order to society by satisfying man's inherent, and unavoidable, desires. Although these desires will remain present within all men, including the sage himself, they can be controlled through proper ritual, the desired end of the sage's conscious activity. For the sage king to institute right ritual, language must be sufficiently exacting so that all members of society can clearly understand the intended meaning of the sage's instructions, as well as his regulations and laws. Thus, proper words or names<sup>3</sup> are fundamental if the sage king is to create and maintain a well-ordered society.

The above brief overview of how language fits with Hsün Tzu's overarching philosophy provides the context within which we can now explore, in greater detail, his emphasis on words, names, and language in general.

How, then, does one name well?

At first thought words may seem to have some sort of intrinsic meaning, a direct connection to the reality toward which a word points. But Hsün Tzu thinks not, and I agree with the gist of his assessment, below:

Names have no intrinsic reality. One agrees to use a certain name and issues an order that it shall be applied to a certain reality, and if the agreement is abided by and becomes a matter of custom, then it may be said to be a real name. There are, however, names which are intrinsically good. Names

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<sup>3</sup> The terms *word* and *name* will be used interchangeably throughout this essay.

which are clear, simple, and not at odds with the thing they designate may be said to be good names (144).

Although Hsün Tzu's latter two sentences may seem to contradict his preceding two sentences, they, in fact, do not. While denying that words have intrinsic reality or meaning, Hsün Tzu simply goes on to say that this does not mean all words are good. To be so, words must clearly signify the realities to which they refer. If a word, or name, does not signify the intended reality, then precise communication is likely to be undermined, and disorder will follow. This lack of precise correspondence between the word and its underlying reality results not from the word inherently lacking a direct connection to reality, but from man knowingly or unknowingly muddying the intended meaning of a word by using the word in new or previously unintended ways. This is often the result of man's not having, himself, a clear understanding of the reality lying behind a word. For instance, Hsün Tzu criticizes Mencius' misunderstanding of man's nature, his not distinguishing between that which is inherent to man and conscious activity (158). To the extent that Mencius propagates such a misunderstanding through his use of the term *nature*, man, in general, will be unable to use the word in communication without confusion and ultimately disorder arising amongst individuals within society. So, again, it is not that words have intrinsic meaning, but that we must agree to use names to refer only to generally agreed upon realities.

But if words have no intrinsic reality, how do they manage to signify meaning?

In the above passage, Hsün Tzu tells us that, as users of language, we simply agree to use a particular name to refer to a specific reality. If this compact is generally upheld, the name is said to be a real name. Hsün Tzu's explanation points to what we in the modern West refer to as a deductive system. To develop such a system, we agree upon a set of assumptions—in this case to use a word to refer to a particular reality—and then build upon these assumptions to create a larger whole; the larger whole in this case being the development of a language which facilitates precise communication between king and his subjects, and the latter amongst themselves. Note, however, that in Hsün Tzu's philosophy the members of a society do not either explicitly, or through some organic process, come together to agree upon the use of certain terms. Rather, the sage king, through his unique insight into the nature of things, decides upon the use of names in particular, or language in general, and then *orders* his subjects to use terms in the way that he sees fit.

Whether instituted by a sage king, or established through an unregulated process whereby individual members of a society retain creative force, the development of a spoken or written language works in much the same way as does the development of a system of mathematics or geometry. We agree to define our terms and other assumptions upon which we create a larger, more comprehensive system, moving from general principles to the particular. Or, in Hsün Tzu's words: "One starts with general categories and moves to particular ones; one starts with unity and moves to plurality" (44).

But in creating the unity from which we move on to plurality, it seems we must first move from a multiplicity of distinct objects, or realities, to capture a unity by way of the process of naming itself. Names, or categories of any sort, are abstractions and, as such, exist nowhere outside of our minds; this is the reason Hsün Tzu tells us that names lack intrinsic reality. In other words, through the use of our minds, we impose names or words on separate realities and, in so doing, group these distinct realities into an abstract whole.

For example, we may collectively refer to four separate pieces of fruit which fell from the boughs of a tree above as *apples*, but each of these pieces of fruit exists as a separate reality or object. Through the use of abstraction, we agree to overlook inherent distinctions—for example, overlooking that the four separate pieces of fruit occupy different spaces and are composed of different parts. This process of naming or categorizing objects enables us to generalize about these objects and, thus, to abstract from the inherent oneness of realities in nature to talk about such objects in a collective sense. As with tangible objects, so too can we develop words that signify abstract ideas or concepts that exist nowhere in nature outside of the intellect. Yet even with physical objects, names which we use to refer to such tangibles are themselves abstractions in that words, by their nature, categorize objects which exist in actuality as distinct entities.

Numbers, too—like any other name or category—are abstractions which exist only in our minds. In nature there is only oneness; the universe, or reality as a whole, is composed of distinct realities. For practical purposes, man agrees to group certain

realities because they share certain attributes. The apples in our above example, for example, share various characteristics, such as having stemmed, literally, from the same tree. They may share a similar appearance and flavor, though we, likewise, know that we can bite into an apple which, though categorized by man under the general name of *apple*, has a distinctly different taste and, even, appearance when viewed more discriminatingly. We may refer to such an unpleasant-tasting apple as a *bad apple*. This is an instance of what Hsün Tzu refers to as a compound name: "Where a single name is sufficient to express the meaning, a single name should be used; where a single name is not sufficient to express the meaning, a compound name should be used" (143). The word *apple* is a single name; the addition of the modifier *bad* creates a compound name, taking us from the general term to a particular type of apple. In this way, we can see that Hsün Tzu is right to say that we move from general categories to the particular.

If the word *apple* is generally accepted amongst the people of a society, and is not confused with some other object or concept, the term will promote precise communication within that society. If, however, some people were to refer to another group of objects, say oranges, as apples, then the resulting lack of clarity will cause confusion and, ultimately, bring disorder upon society. More likely to cause confusion and disorder, however, are names we give to concepts which are even more abstract than the words we use to refer to physical objects. For Hsün Tzu, abstract concepts—for the very reason that they do not exist as physical entities—tend to lead men into sophistical argumentation, philosophical inquiry

beyond the point which is of use, and, eventually, toward societal disorder given that such abstracted thought tends unnecessarily to cloud the minds of men.

As an example from Western civilization, Socrates can be considered the quintessential muddier of men's minds. Through his day-to-day interactions with interlocutors in the marketplace and within the homes of influential men, Socrates, through the *apparently* passive act of strategic questioning, strikes at the heart of his fellow man's cherished opinions, undermines them, and leaves him with a foundational void upon which to reenter the daily life of the polity, though not out of maliciousness on the part of Socrates, but because he is not willing to reconstruct societal surety on the shifting sands of supposed knowledge. Socrates was sentenced to death for this *crime*, as his spoken words were a threat to societal order, or at least the political status quo of Athenian society.

In a way that is perhaps analogous to the reaction of the Athenian power elite to Socrates' constant questioning of the polity's mores, Hsün Tzu likewise feared and was responding to the propagation of the so-called hundred schools of Chinese philosophy. Their varying metaphysical and political philosophies, each of which was ardently supported in speech by its members, precluded the possibility of bringing unity to a divided China. The co-existence of alternative, and mutually exclusive, philosophies likely served to remind men that objective truth is elusive, that even if any one school of philosophy were to happen upon such truth, then there were many more schools whose philosophies, to the extent that they were in contradiction, were plying empty wares. But as the principles of metaphysical and



political philosophies are perhaps impossible to demonstrate as objectively true, this co-existence of incompatible schools of thought led men to argue, and as the stakes of political philosophy in particular are great, at least to the extent that such philosophies are enacted by those in power, then such argumentation tends to bring with it widespread political and societal tumult.

As we have seen, Hsün Tzu writes of the move from general categories to particular ones, or from a unity to a plurality. However, he left unstated, at least explicitly, man's initial move from separate realities to an abstract unity by way of the act of naming or imposing language on those realities. This is not surprising given the reluctance of Confucians to delve into the metaphysical. Hsün Tzu, like Confucius himself, prefers to remain grounded in the realm of human affairs:

Hence the really skilled man has things which he does not do; the really wise man has things that he does not ponder.

When he turns his thoughts to Heaven, he seeks to understand only those phenomena which can be regularly expected. When he turns his thoughts to earth, he seeks to understand only those aspects that can be taken advantage of (81).

So long as language serves man, there is no need for Hsün Tzu or other Confucian philosophers to go to great lengths to consider the origins or philosophical underpinnings of the process of naming itself. As stated above, Hsün Tzu does consider the process by which men enter into general agreement to use a particular word to convey a particular meaning; and, so long as we agree to consistently use that name to refer to this meaning, and not apply the same name to another type of object or concept, then language will facilitate bringing order to society.

Hsün Tzu, himself, writes with such clarity that there seems relatively little to say regarding this process of naming, as he sets forth his ideas on the matter with great simplicity and precision. Indeed, he succeeded in this to such an extent as to make it rather difficult to explore his ideas beyond mere exposition. That a talented writer can convey such precise meaning with relatively few words seems to tell us something about language and the process of naming. One would perhaps imagine that a longer, more detailed account would likely lead to conveying a greater sense of the author's intended meaning. On the contrary, a brief account which conveys an author's thought via simple language seems to lead to greater understanding and to lessen the chance for confusion. Perhaps this phenomenon goes some way in suggesting a reason for the tendency of a society's multitude to fall prey to reiterated oversimplifications of political maneuverings as opposed to more comprehensive, and thus complicated, accounts told with less frequency. Repetition of simple language is powerful in swaying men's minds.

In considering Hsün Tzu's well-written account of his rendition of Confucian thought, in general, and, in particular, his discussion concerning the need for the sage king to rectify names so as to bring order to a chaotic society, one can easily be brought to the bidding of Hsün Tzu's political philosophy. However, his deductive argument implicitly relies on assuming the integrity of the sage king, that he is, indeed, acting in accord with the Way and has in so doing formed a triad with Heaven and earth. Yet, as we have discussed, a word is itself an abstraction. The single name *king* is particularized into a compound name by the addition of the modifier *sage*; yet even this compound name remains an abstraction. We have

already discussed that such abstractions do not lend themselves to demonstrable proof; on the contrary, it may be the nature of abstractions to not admit of proof.

How, then, can society be assured that a self-declared sage king—or one who is held up as such by those who have the clout to place such a man in power—is, indeed, a sage king acting, as one-third of the triad, in accord with the Way?

If no such proof is accessible to man, then Hsün Tzu's political philosophy, meant to bring harmony to the human realm and, by extension, to Heaven and earth, could result in near-total tyranny given the absolute power of a so-called sage king to institute language to his liking. The power of language has been universally recognized by those who either have or vie for political power. I would suggest that there is a clear correlation between tyrannical power and the extent to which rulers resort to propaganda—the deliberate attempt to control thought in large part through the use and restriction of language.

The onslaught of Orwellian double-speak which presently permeates the airwaves and print media, and the assault on truth and the plain-spoken word, speaks volumes in support of this claim, as does the ubiquitous place in politics of the public relations firm or official spokesperson whose professional talents lie in the obfuscation of truth. If this is the case even without the granting of a societal mandate or Heavenly decree, one can only imagine the potential for abuse by a *sage ruler* whose mandate is purported to have been bestowed by Heaven. Or, need we

look to China's ancient history to see an assertion of just this sort of metaphysical mandate, or to witness the fallout that such a claim can occasion?

Hsün Tzu must have been aware of such a danger. The question is to what extent Hsün Tzu developed his philosophy despite this potentiality, or whether he truly believed in the possibility of a true sage ruler who could, literally, look up to Heaven for guidance and then down to earth to deal with the affairs of man.

Did Hsün Tzu believe such a sage ruler existed, or could exist if brought to enlightenment via cultivation through proper ritual (or, as a scholar, through the cultivation of the intellect); or, in classical Western terms, was the assumption of Hsün Tzu's sage king—and, indeed, that of Confucius—a *noble lie* told for the supposed benefit of society as a whole as an antidote to political disorder?

I cannot know the answer to this question. However, if the latter is the case, one is left wondering how far Hsün Tzu, Confucius and other idealistic political philosophers—referred to as such by reason of their grandiose claims to possess an understanding of man's nature and, armed with such an understanding, the knowledge of how to organize society—would be willing to go in order to package disparate peoples into a unified whole. If the political end of societal order justifies the means of the *noble lie*, one can easily imagine the sanctioning of any number of deceptive means, one after another in short order, to justify the ever-elusive end, an end which is more likely to get ever-distant. Or, need we imagine?

The power of language has never been dismissed by the politically savvy. Both Hsün Tzu and Confucius were highly attuned to the possibilities for power in controlling the language of man. It is by way of language that man constructs thought—the conscious activity of which Hsün Tzu writes—and regulating language amounts to regulating man's thought. The sage king's instituting proper ritual, the activity which Hsün Tzu reasoned would curb man's desires, would make the commoners content and the aristocracy submissive (78). Although such an enterprise in social engineering *may* benefit all involved were the man whose height of conscious activity resulted in his, literally, forming a triad with Heaven and earth and, therefore, ruling the less gifted with utmost beneficence, continually inline with the Way, anything short of such a Heavenly mandate is far more likely to result in near-total tyranny which approaches total tyranny to the extent that such a ruler succeeds in regulating language and, thus, thought itself.

If man is truly the greatest of all earthly beings—as is claimed by countless political philosophers in the West and East, Hsün Tzu amongst them (45)—then the greatness of man presupposes his freedom to think great thoughts and to practice great deeds. If, in the presumptuous pursuit to unify man, man's ability to think and to act independently of a puppet master (or regime) is extinguished, then man's place of greatness amongst other species is paradoxically precluded by the very political philosophers who advocate such means and yet still seek to place man on a pedestal above all other earthly entities.

The Athenians sentenced Socrates to death for his refusal to stop asking radical questions. Hsün Tzu, through the regulation of language, sought to stem the disorder caused, in his opinion, by the hundred schools of Chinese philosophy. In the end the result is the same. Both the Athenians and Hsün Tzu endeavored to control that which gives meaning to human existence—speech and thought. Nearly twenty-five hundred years later, it is not coincidental that we who cherish the sharing of ideas, intellectual debate and freedom of expression look, in the West, to classical Greek philosophy, of which Socrates was a standout contributor, and, in the East, to the period of the hundred schools of philosophy in China. Hsün Tzu lived during this period and was both a beneficiary and contributor. But, because he thought he was in possession of *the* way to order society, he was willing to forsake philosophy (excepting his) for what he considered the higher good—social order. Metaphysical and political debate can no doubt cause rifts amongst philosophers and society at large. Yet, if tyranny debases mankind through language and thought control, then human redemption lies in the open expression of ideas and intellectual and, I daresay, political debate.