

Chinese Philosophy - Homework 3.

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Is human nature good or evil? (Mencius vs Xunzi)

In a famous dialogue between Mencius and Gao, the two philosophers use water as an analogy to represent human nature, Gao claims that people have no inherent sense of direction (in the moral sense): they are solely controlled by the circumstances. If my situation pushes me toward evil deeds, I will become evil, just like a pond of water will flow East if a passage towards the East is opened. The same applies to good deeds and the West correspondingly.

Mencius accepts the analogy but states that the concepts of good and evil bear more resemblance to the directions up and down. While left and right are in many ways interchangeable, the rules of physics impose some inherent limitations on the flow of water along the vertical axis. In Mencius's example, water flowing downwards represents people's tendency towards good deeds. (As an aside, note the curious divergence of this example from our usual and probably universal metaphor of UP-GOOD / DOWN-BAD.¹)

Xunzi, on the other hand, is a firm believer that human goodness is acquired through training and social interactions, and not inherent from birth. Humans, by nature, are evil, in the sense that they are controlled by various drives and natural forces, unless they learn how to control or repress these.

I find the whole problem of whether humans are good or evil by nature ill-defined. What is good and bad? Who defines these notions? No human exists without groups and society, does it even make sense to put the focus of our analysis on the individual? Thinkers like Mencius and Xunzi seem to be moral absolutists who define their views as axioms while assuming an intuitive sense of the concepts of good and evil present in all their readers.

¹ For a fascinating discussion of such metaphors, refer to: *Lakoff, G. (1980). Metaphors We Live By.*

My view is as follows. **The concepts of good and evil are in small part biologically imposed, in large part social constructs.** In this sense, morality is somewhere between objective and subjective. It is not objective in the physical sense, as there is no morality without humans (or at least conscious observers). At the same time, a lot of what we mean by morality is shared among large groups of individuals, thus making it *super-subjective*. Furthermore, **people are partly good by nature** (corresponding to *good* biological inclinations), **partly bad by nature** (corresponding to *bad* biological inclinations), **but mostly neither, as most of our values are learned through social interaction.**

The inherent part of our morality has biological roots. The structure of our brains imposes a limited perspective on our thinking and perception. This structure is the result of millions of years of evolution and natural selection. Some concepts increased the chance of survival, thus they are encoded into us biologically. These include very basic and abstract concepts like taking care of offspring, loyalty to a group, etc. Such traits and the corresponding reward-punishment circuits constitute archetypal² values, axioms, encoded into all humans. In this way, this portion of what we consider good is inherent in humans.

Other, more complex values, like honesty and justice, are probably not encoded into us but learned through social interaction. These values did not necessarily improve the chances of survival in prehistoric times. Once societies arose, however, such traits started to gain importance. Over time, implicit and explicit social rules emerged (myths, norms, laws), and got passed from generation to generation through a myriad of social interaction. Biological evolution gave way to a more rapid, social evolution, that in turn extended our set of value to fit the new challenges we faced. In this sense, this portion of what we consider good is not inherent but learned.

In conclusion, I appreciate the views of great thinkers like Mencius and Xunzi, but what they were tackling are ill-defined, over-simplified problems. Being ancient thinkers, they also lacked many insights that we modern people have. That said, the question remains: “*Are people inherently good or evil?*” To address the immense complexity of our situation, the best answer is: “*Neither and both.*”

² Jung, C. G. (1933). *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*.