

Chinese Philosophy - Homework 2.

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Dialogue

The philosopher Gao said, "Man's nature is like water whirling round in a corner. Open a passage for it to the east, and it will flow to the east; open a passage for it to the west, and it will flow to the west. Man's nature is indifferent to good and evil, just as the water is indifferent to the east and west."

Mencius replied, "Water indeed will flow indifferently to the east or west, but will it flow indifferently up or down? The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. There are none but have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards. Now by striking water and causing it to leap up, you may make it go over your forehead, and, by damming and leading it you may force it up a hill - but are such movements according to the nature of water? It is the force applied which causes them. When men are made to do what is not good, their nature is dealt with in this way."

(Mencius, Gaozi I)

Comments

One of the central ideas of Mencius is the inherent goodness of people. The dialogue above is in support of this view.

Using 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)

I see multiple problems with Mencius's claim. First, *argument from analogy* is dangerous ground in logical reasoning. However, we can say that in Mencius's case, this is just an example used for explaining his set of values, not a real justification for why he considers people to be inherently good. Second, 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? Thinkers like Mencius are 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.

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

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

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 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*.