

Reading Response

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Prompt A:

Mengzi thinks that human nature is good, whereas Xunzi thinks it is bad. How do their respective versions of human nature connect up with the broader framework of Confucian ethics? Whose version of Confucianism do you think is more convincing, and why? Note: You should provide support for your answer with reference to the Mengzi, Xunzi, and the Analects.

A harmonious society is created when it truly understands human nature and aligns its governance with this understanding. Mengzi and Xunzi, two leading philosophers of ancient China, had distinct interpretations of Confucian ethics and social order. Their perspectives on achieving a harmonious society were influenced by the changing conditions of their times, leading them to advocate differing conclusions about human nature.

Confucius, born in 551 BCE during the late Spring and Autumn period in the state of Lu, focused primarily on the concept of *ren*, often translated as ‘benevolence.’ His philosophy emphasized the importance of internal virtues as the foundation of social order. For Confucius, *ren* was an intrinsic quality that one should cultivate within oneself. In his time, when social order was relatively stable, he believed that the cultivation of *ren* alone could sustain societal harmony.

Mengzi, born in 372 BCE in the state of Zou, faced a more complex societal context during the Warring States period. The increasing fragmentation and conflicts of his era required more than the internal virtues espoused by Confucius. Mengzi extended Confucian thoughts with *yi*, or ‘righteousness,’ as a moral principle that, if violated, would lead to moral condemnation and a sense of shame.

Mengzi argued that people are born with a natural inclination toward goodness and that every person possesses an innate moral potential, or a ‘seed’ of virtue, which can be cultivated into full moral excellence. In his work, the Mencius, he uses the metaphor of water to illustrate his view: “Human nature being good is like water tending downward. There is no human who does not tend toward goodness. There is no water that does not tend downward” (Mengzi, Book 6A: 2.2).

Mengzi also highlighted the role of education in nurturing these inherent virtues. He used an agricultural metaphor to illustrate this: “Consider barley. Sow the seeds and cover them... Hence, in general, things of the same kind are all similar” (Mengzi, Book 6A: 7.2). For Mengzi, human goodness is to be cultivated by providing the right environment, including proper teachings. When this innate goodness is well-cultivated and combined with the pursuit of righteousness, it results in a harmonious society.

On the other hand, Xunzi, born in 310 BCE, lived during the later stages of the Warring States period, a time marked by intense conflict among the seven major states vying for dominance. This era demanded more rigorous mechanisms for social control than mere moral persuasion. Xunzi emphasized the need for laws and formal regulations, expanding the concept of *li* in a more legalistic context.

Xunzi believed that human nature is inherently flawed and driven by selfish desires: “People’s nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort” (Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, Chapter 23: paragraph 1). He argued that, without strict rules and education, people would naturally lean toward conflict and self-interest. To counter these tendencies, Xunzi proposed that human nature must be shaped and refined through ritual, education, and discipline: “Thus, crooked wood must await steaming and straightening on the shaping frame, and only then does it become straight” (Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, Chapter 23: paragraph 2). In Xunzi’s view, a well-ordered society could only be achieved through external cultivation of virtue and adherence to social norms.

Confucius’ moral framework occupies a nuanced position between Mengzi’s view of inherent human goodness and Xunzi’s assertion of innate evil. While not explicitly stating that human nature is inherently good or evil, Confucius’ teachings suggest an innate capacity for moral development. This is evident in his description of his own moral journey: “At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning...at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety.” (Analects, 2.4). This gradual unfolding of moral potential aligns more closely with Mengzi’s concept of the ‘seeds’ of virtue, yet also shares common ground with Xunzi’s emphasis on cultivation. All three philosophers stress the importance of education, ritual, and self-improvement in nurturing moral character. Confucius’ statement, “By nature people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice.” (Analects, 17.2), bridges the gap between Mengzi’s agricultural metaphors of nurturing innate goodness and Xunzi’s view of transforming human nature through conscious effort. While Mengzi focuses on justifying innate goodness and Xunzi on overcoming innate evil, Confucius emphasizes the practical aspects of moral behavior and social harmony. Ultimately, all three converge on the crucial role of creating an appropriate environment and the need for consistent self-reflection in actualizing moral potential, suggesting that goodness, whether innate, developed, or achieved through transformation, requires careful nurturing throughout one’s life.

However, Mengzi’s idealistic view that human nature is inherently good faces challenges, especially during times of scarcity. Mengzi himself acknowledges this: “In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are cruel.” (Mengzi, Book 6A: 7.2) He argues that this is not due to a change in innate character but to environmental factors: “It is

not that the potential that Heaven confers on them varies like this. They are like this because of that by which their hearts are sunk and drowned.” (Mengzi, Book 6A: 7.2) Yet, the effectiveness of environmental nurturing seems limited in less favorable times.

To argue in favor of Mengzi, we must recognize that his philosophical stance is most tenable in environments where proper nurturing is possible. However, when such nurturing environments are absent, the practical application of Mengzi's philosophy becomes more challenging. For instance, consider a situation where two parents must choose between saving their own child or another's, with an equal chance of success in rescuing either. Most parents would naturally choose their own child, driven by a deep-seated instinct to protect their genetic legacy. This instinctual preference highlights a form of selfishness, an innate aspect of human nature that can overshadow the altruistic ideals Mengzi asserts.

Ignoring these survival instincts is akin to disregarding needs like sun and water. In this context, Xunzi's perspective seems more realistic, as it addresses the less ideal aspects of human nature and acknowledges that prosperous environments, which might enable innate goodness to flourish, are rare in broader human history. Xunzi's view on the need for conscious effort and societal structures in moral development, offers a more comprehensive understanding of humans as it correctly observes that one cannot stretch beyond the bounds of biology. Although it is expressed that he views the human nature as 'bad', it may be more correct to iterate his view as seeing humans as animalistic as we are, and avoiding to be arrogant with respect to the foods we consume and the planet we inhabit.

References

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