

Contrasting and Exploring the “Evil Human Nature” in Chinese and Western Thought: A Comparative Analysis of Xunzi and Augustine

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Abstract: The topic of human nature has always been a significant issue in the field of philosophy, and the process of exploring human nature has revealed cultural differences between the East and the West. This study adopts a comparative approach to analyze the differences in the theory of "evil human nature" between Xunzi and St. Augustine, as well as the cultural disparities reflected in these differences. Through a comparative analysis, three main points of divergence between the two thinkers reflect the cultural differences between Eastern and Western civilizations: the manner in which individuals convert evil nature into goodness, the divergence in the choice of free will, and equality among individuals. These differences ultimately reflect the cultural disparities between Eastern and Western civilizations, with Confucianism and Christianity representing their respective traditions. However, it is undeniable that both Xunzi and Augustine aimed to encourage virtuous conduct and establish a harmonious society permeated by goodness.

Keywords: Xunzi, Augustine, evil, human nature, culture difference

1. Introduction

Human nature has always been an important and controversial issue within the field of philosophy. As rational beings, humans are constantly engrossed in the exploration of various phenomena and strive to find answers to them. Humans are always curious about “the essence of humanity” and “the reasons that drive behind the various behavioral phenomena of humans”. Ultimately, these inquiries lead to a metaphysical problem known as “human nature”.

Xunzi (approximately 370 BC–213 BC) holds a significant position in the history of Chinese philosophy. Based on his observations of human behavioral phenomena and combining speculative metaphysical thinking, he presented the controversial theory of "evil human nature" that has been debated for two millennia. St. Augustine (354 AD–430 AD), as the culmination of the Patristic thought, inherited and assimilated the viewpoints of previous Church Fathers. Drawing from his own experiences, he put forth the influential "doctrine of original sin" that impacted not only Christianity but also the future development of Western society.

Both philosophers presented seemingly similar viewpoints that "human nature is evil". However, beneath this shared topic lies profound differences. Starting from the premise of evil nature, their theories diverged onto distinct paths, bringing different influences to Eastern and Western

civilizations. This paper intends to analyze and compare the ideas and impacts of these two philosophers concerning the theory of evil nature, as well as the underlying cultural differences that accompany these viewpoints. By doing so, it aims to contribute insights and value to the study of human nature and comparative research in Eastern and Western philosophy.

2. Xunzi's Thoughts on Human Nature

2.1. The Theory of Evil Human Nature

In the chapter "Human Nature Is Evil", Xunzi expounded his perspective: "Human nature is evil; its goodness is acquired [1]." Before delving into Xunzi's ideas, it is crucial to understand what he meant by "nature" and what he meant by "evil".

"Regarding nature, it is the natural endowment bestowed by Heaven, which cannot be learned or cultivated [1]." Firstly, Xunzi referred to "nature" as innate, natural, and not something that can be learned or created through acquired experiences. About this inherent human "nature", Xunzi provided: "Now, man's nature is such that at birth, he is inclined to seek what is beneficial,... inclined to detest what is harmful,... inclined to desire the pleasures of sight and sound [1]." When considering "nature" based on everyday life experiences, it can be seen as: "Desiring food when hungry; desiring warmth when cold; desiring rest when weary; liking what is beneficial and disliking what is harmful. These are things that humans are born with and that arise naturally without any waiting [1]." Therefore, in Xunzi's discourse, "nature" refers to the innate desires and capacities that individuals possess from birth, akin to what might be called "instincts" today [2]. This "nature" determines how individuals exist and live, and they are inevitably bound by its constraints.

Similarly, Xunzi provides a clear definition of good and evil: "The so-called 'good' refers to upright principles and harmonious governance, while the so-called 'evil' refers to deviation, danger, and disorder [1]." According to the passage mentioned earlier: "Now, man's nature is such that at birth, he is inclined to seek what is beneficial, conflicts arise from this pursuit, and relinquishing arises from conflicts. At birth, one is inclined to detest what is harmful, and thus, loyalty and trustworthiness perish due to this inclination. At birth, one has desires of the ears and eyes and desires for pleasing sounds and colors. Thus, licentiousness arises, and the rites, ethics, literature, and reason perish due to this licentiousness. Therefore, by following a man's nature, complying with human emotions, one inevitably resorts to conflicts, violates boundaries, disrupts orders, and returns to violence [1]." Xunzi believes that precisely because humans have various innate desires (nature), and the unbridled pursuit of these desires inevitably leads to adopting immoral means and results in social turmoil and unrest. This is what he refers to as "evil", hence stating that human nature is evil.

2.2. The Transformation of Nature Through Acquired Means

Although Xunzi regards human nature as evil, he does not have a pessimistic view of human nature. He does not negate the possibility of virtuous behavior in humans. The way of transforming evil nature into goodness is "acquired".

The term "acquired" is explained by Yang Liang in his commentary on Xunzi: "Anything that is not natural but achieved by human efforts is considered acquired." It can be observed that "nature" and "acquired" are contrasting concepts. "Acquired" is the result of human efforts, acquired learning, continuous accumulation, and long-term cultivation. Only through "acquired" efforts can the inherent evil nature be changed [3].

In this way, Xunzi affirms the possibility of transforming from evil to goodness through acquired efforts. With this possibility in mind, Xunzi puts forward the assertion that "ordinary individuals can become sages [1]." Both sages and ordinary individuals share the same nature. Sages can achieve

goodness through acquired efforts, and therefore, ordinary individuals can also "transform their nature through acquired means".

However, although "the nature of noble men and petty men is the same [1]," there remains an indisputable fact: in the world, there are noble men and there are petty men. Xunzi attributes this difference to the role of free will. He pointed out that petty men can become noble men, but they are unwilling to do so; noble men can become petty men, but they are unwilling to do so. Although petty men and noble men can act as each other, they fail to do so because of their unwillingness [1]. This "can become" but "unwilling to become" undoubtedly reflects the free will of humans. The distinction between noble men and petty men lies in the different choices made by the free will, rather than in essential differences. Individuals choose to indulge their desires because they lack education and cultivation, and this leads them to act based on biological instincts. The conscious restraint of desires is achieved through the purification of education and cultivation, enabling one to attain the ability and realm of self-restraint and ritual propriety [4]. While there appears to be a significant moral gap between noble men and petty men, there is no insurmountable divide. With acquired learning and cultivation, along with the constraints of rituals and music and the influence of the environment, petty men can effortlessly become noble men.

Although Xunzi acknowledges that human nature is evil, he does not exclude or deny it. His focus is not on innate evil but on acquired goodness. His purpose is to advocate for the importance of acquired cultivation, promote the Confucian system of rituals and music, and encourage people to be virtuous.

It is worth noting that after subsequent examination, many viewpoints suggest that the chapter "Human Nature Is Evil" may not have been written by Xunzi himself. Therefore, the authenticity of this chapter in reflecting Xunzi's thoughts on human nature remains uncertain. Zhou Chicheng proposed that the chapter "Human Nature Is Evil" is a spurious work, and Xunzi is actually an advocate of "human nature is raw". According to this perspective, human nature is inherently pure, containing the potential for positive development, although it lacks a readily available and complete notion of goodness. Therefore, human efforts through "cultivating culture and refining reason" are required to perfect it. The nature of raw in Xunzi's theory does not imply inherent evilness [5].

Even if this chapter is a forgery, Xunzi's theory on human nature still holds valid. Under Xunzi's framework, there is no significant distinction between "human nature is evil" and "human nature is raw". The focus of Xunzi's theory lies not in human nature itself but in the development of nature through acquired means. Both "human nature is evil" and "human nature is raw" represent the inherent essence of human beings (their divergence lies only in whether this essence can be termed "evil"), and with concerted "acquired efforts," both can lead to moral improvement. The concept of "human nature is raw" views human nature as an uncarved jade that can be refined, while the notion of "human nature is evil" is similar in nature. Xunzi does not assert that this "evil" is unchangeable but rather acknowledges the potential for human beings to become virtuous. Therefore, apart from the difference in terminology, there is no substantial gap between "innate goodness" and "human nature is evil," and Xunzi's theory remains valid.

3. St. Augustine's Thoughts on Human Nature

3.1. The Doctrine of Original Sin

Christian thought encompasses a multitude of ideas about human nature. In early Christian theology, the theologies of human nature constituted a third significant domain alongside theologies of God and Christ. The core issues in Christian human nature revolve around "original sin" and "redemption" [6].

During Augustine's era, Christianity was in a developmental stage, undergoing rapid dissemination. On the one side, it faced challenges from pagan religions, and on the other side, it confronted certain obscure doctrines within the Bible. The task of theorizing and systematizing Christian thought became urgent. In the early stages of Christian development, the nature and origin of evil remained inexplicable, sparking Augustine's explorations. Many of his significant ideas emerged from his contemplation on the nature of evil.

Whether or not evil is a created entity by God is the initial question Augustine contemplates. If the answer is yes, then the consideration arises of how a God who creates evil can be considered supremely good. If the answer is no, it would contradict God's omniscience and omnipotence. Augustine presents his theodicy: "Let no one therefore, look for an efficient cause of the evil will; for it is not efficient, but deficient, as the will itself is not an effecting of something, but a defect. For defection from that which supremely is to that which has less of being, this is to begin to have an evil will [7]." Evil is not an entity; it is the absence of good. Sin, the origin of evil, arises from human free will. Augustine asserts, "I inquired what wickedness is, and I didn't find a substance, but a perversity of will twisted away from the highest substance – You, oh God – towards inferior things, rejecting its own inner life and swelling with external matter [8]."

3.2. Redemption

Due to the misuse of free will by the human progenitors Adam and Eve, the once pure and innocent human nature became tainted with sin and evil, burdening humanity with "original sin". Although the cause of "original sin" lies in the abuse of human free will, its consequences establish an immutable and inescapable determinism, predestining all humankind as descendants of Adam to inherent evilness, inevitable mortality, and suffering [9]. Sin emerges as a result of free will, and from the moment individuals employ their free will for evil purposes, it becomes enslaved to sin, thereby forfeiting its freedom. Thus, only through the divine "grace" of God can humanity attain redemption and restore their capacity for free will and goodness. God has chosen His people, whose devotion to God is manifested in their belief in Christ and the completion of atonement, which constitutes the sole path to salvation for humankind.

4. Cultural Differences the Two Thoughts Reflect

In light of the preceding discussion, numerous similarities can be discerned in the ideas of Augustine and Xunzi, both of whom put forth the notion that human nature is evil. However, their respective theories ultimately diverge, and reflect the profound cultural differences between the East and the West.

The following points exemplify the disparities between the two thinkers and the cultural variances between Eastern and Western traditions:

4.1. The Manner in Which Individuals Convert Evil Nature into Goodness

Xunzi advocates that individuals can transform evilness into goodness through acquired effort. He emphasizes the role of ritual propriety, ethical norms, and environmental influences in constraining and educating individuals. On the other hand, Augustine denies the possibility of autonomous self-redemption, placing full reliance on divine intervention. Christianity asserts that the highest goodness is not our happiness; it is not even our holiness; it is the manifestation of God's attributes [10]. He asserts that human redemption can only be accomplished through the grace of God, emphasizing the importance of worshipping God and the role of religion. The Confucian tradition and the Christian tradition manifest distinctive approaches to the pursuit of goodness, ultimately determining disparate forms of ethical life [4].

4.2. The Divergence in the Choice of Free Will

Both Xunzi and Augustine acknowledge the role of free will in human moral choices. Xunzi argues that human free will is inherently inclined toward goodness, stating that "if it does not exist within, it must be sought from without [1]." Due to the deficiency of goodness in human nature, free will possesses an innate inclination toward the good. On the other hand, Augustine contends that human free will not only fails to initiate an active pursuit of the good but rather willingly descends towards degradation. This reflects the distinct position of human beings in Eastern and Western cultures. Eastern cultures, with Confucianism at their core, emphasize human dignity and the humanistic spirit, affirming the value of humans. In Christian thought, however, humans are considered insignificant compared to God, with God occupying the central position while humans are seen as servants of God.

4.3. Equality Among Individuals

While Xunzi acknowledges that all individuals share the same human nature, he ultimately asserts that disparities arise among people through acquired effort. Not only does Xunzi consider that human nature is evil, but he also delineates clear distinctions between saints and ordinary individuals, as well as monarchs and their subjects [11]. Xunzi supports the notion that ordinary individuals should accept the governance of sage kings, thereby upholding hierarchical systems. This aligns with the political tradition of Eastern authoritarianism. Conversely, Augustine believes that all individuals, burdened with original sin, are inherently equal in the eyes of God. Whether rulers, priests, or commoners, they are fundamentally the same as God's people. This perspective of absolute equality has had a profound impact on Western culture.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ideas of Xunzi and Augustine may seem to revolve around the thought that human nature is evil, but they actually exhibit significant differences. Through comparison, it becomes evident that they diverge in some aspects, such as their definitions of evil, their approaches to transforming human nature towards goodness, and their views on the status of humanity. These differences ultimately reflect the cultural disparities between Eastern and Western civilizations, with Confucianism and Christianity representing their respective traditions. The outcomes of their philosophical ideas also prompt further reflection: Xunzi's thoughts were defeated by the idea that human nature is good and labeled as heretical, while Augustine's ideas were embraced by Christianity and became mainstream.

While Xunzi and Augustine diverge in various aspects of their ideas, a comprehensive assessment of the superiority or inferiority of their thoughts necessitates an understanding of the cultural contexts in which they originated. Confucianism and Christianity offer almost contrasting perspectives on human nature, yet they converge in their shared objective of fostering human virtue. Notably, their methodologies, approaches, and moral education processes exhibit striking resemblances, and it remains undeniable that both Xunzi and Augustine endeavored to promote virtuous conduct and establish a harmonious society imbued with moral goodness.

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