

# THE COMPARISON AMONG KANT, MENCIUS AND XUNZI'S THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE

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**Abstract:** As the founder of German classical philosophy, Kant is one of the most powerful ideologists in the world. In his opinion, human beings are perceptual and rational, with “empirical personality” and “rational personality”. As a perceptual being, man pursues the satisfaction of desire and virtue instead as a rational being. He proposed that it’s impossible for a person become a saint in his lifetime unless he went through an infinite process, but everyone must do his best to become a better one. Mencius and Xunzi are the representatives of Chinese Confucianism. Mencius advocated the theory of original goodness of human nature. He believed that the natural morality is the reason why a person is qualified to be a human being. Xunzi put forward the theory of original evil of human nature. He thought that human nature is the hardware material, but not the decisive factor for a man to be a man. The real reason is the guidance of rite and morality set by saints. It is ‘heart’ in the view point of Mencius while it is “rite and morality” of Xunzi. Therefore, the moral connotation of goodness and evil are divided into ‘rites- internal’ and ‘rites- external’. Mencius’ theory of original goodness of human nature agrees with Kant's level of rational personality while Xunzi’s theory of original evil of human nature is consistent with Kant’s level of empirical character. Theory of human nature of Kant contains the basic elements of theories of human nature of Mencius and Xunzi, indicating that the biggest common point of human nature is that one should do his best to become a better person whether one can become a saint in his life or not.

**Key words:** Kant, Mencius, Xunzi, theory of human nature

In the fusion of Chinese and Western philosophy, we always take it for granted that Kant and Mencius’ theory of human nature are both self-disciplined morality. In fact, it is not accurate to think that theory of human nature of Kant is similar to Mencius. In addition, it is too one-sided if we believe that Kant also advocated Xunzi’s theory of

original evil of human nature according to the concept of “radical evil” he proposed. Therefore, if we want to correctly express the overall view of the integration of Chinese and western theories of human nature between Kant and Confucianism, we need to discuss them together to get a complete answer.

### **I. The meaning of Kant's theory of human nature**

Kant approved the theory of original goodness of human nature but also admitted the original evil of human nature. Kant means that people have the original talent for goodness (especially moral emotion) rather than that people are actually good. According to Kant, man is a dual existence. As a perceptual being, man pursues the satisfaction of desire and virtue instead as a rational being. As a rational being, human has the capacity to do good deeds, but his will is dominated by natural law and moral law because of the dual nature of human beings. The commands which govern our will come directly from either reason itself or the notion of perfection which produced by the reason, or the happiness which sensibility requires, that is heteronomy. The goodness achieved by heteronomy is conditional goodness, which is just a “means” to achieve a certain end. It has no universality but only relative value. On the contrary, the moral act is an unconditional goodness rather than an instrument if the commands which dominate our will come directly from reason itself, that is, the will legislate for itself, which can be called self-discipline. According to Kant, the real morality is not a tool, but a responsible behavior for responsibility, and the real goodness is unrequited. Those above mentioned are called self-discipline morality. The will of self-discipline is a kind of absolute good will, on namely “kindness” which is the foundation of every individual construction. This is not only the duty of human beings, but also the supreme requirement of nature. Because only a saint with the divine will can be able to realize completely self-discipline of will and restrain his behavior by the moral law all the time.

### **II. The meaning of Mencius and Xunzi's theory of human nature**

Mencius advocated the theory of original goodness of human nature. He believed that the natural morality is the reason why a person is qualified to be a human being. Mencius believed that everyone had the possibility of becoming a sage even though everyone was different in body and appearance. Mencius said, “who is Shun?who am I? if I have made achievements then I am Shun.”<sup>1</sup> Wang yangming made a further classical interpretation for this view: The reason to be a saint lies in the course of nature instead of the size of talent. Therefore, ordinary people can become saints as

long as they are willing to learn and develop their minds purely.<sup>2</sup> For example, 50 gram fine gold and dnr fine gold have great disparity in weight, but the former is not inferior in terms of fineness, that's why all men are capable of being Yao and Shun. The ability of Saints is different as well as the weight of gold. Everyone can turn around and be sincere from "reverse consciousness" to "experience", which is the way to practice insightful "building up its greatness firstly "and will of self-discipline in life.

Xunzi believed that human who had clarity of mind could recognize rite and morality, reflect oneself and others clearly, and handle each other appropriately. Xunzi put forward the theory of original evil of human nature. He thought that human nature is the hardware material, but not the decisive factor for a man to be a man. The real reason is the guidance of rite and morality set by saints. Common people tend to suffer from mind which is not always clear. Therefore, we must study hard for a long time before we can get a saintly heart, where everything can be done with courtesy and righteousness. In short, the rational mind can be trained by diligent learning. Xunzi said, "the man who can keep his word is a treasures of the country; the man who has all deeds and no words is the heavy weapon of the country; the man who speaks well but does not acts well can be reluctant used by the country; those who speak well but act wickedly are the evils of the country."<sup>3</sup> In addition, Xunzi emphasized that accumulating good deeds and developing noble morals will get the highest wisdom and the super achievement via the accumulation of hard work.<sup>4</sup> Only through learning can we enhance our talents and make ourselves surpass our predecessors. Therefore, we can get a clear mind after learning, on which basis we can perceive rite and morality and further put them into practice. Morality requires not only cognition but also practice and both of them are equal. "In the process of learning, listening and speaking is better than no listening, seeing is better than listening and speaking, knowing is better than seeing, practice is better than knowing. The ultimate goal of learning is practice which can produce true knowledge."<sup>5</sup> Theoretically, moral cognition and moral practice is distinct-different. The moral practice is a process of gradual improvement in spirit of the perseverance. The process of accumulative learning is the process of accumulating goodness to be a saint. In other words, we only have to constantly learn to recognize rite and morality and then practice them, as a result, we can get super wisdom and finally become saints.

### **III. A Comparison Among Kant, Mencius and Xunzi's Theory of Human Nature**

The nature of “the reason why people are human” of Kant and Mencius is at supernatural level. Kant believes that human is a existence of both sensibility and rationality, have “Experience Personality” and “Rationality Personality”, and desire happiness and morality. However, Mencius advocates “Double-Sided Life”, which is talking about large and small. The large and small do not mean that human has two individuals, but indicate two sides of human nature, have a difference between primary and secondary value, that is, both Mencius and Kant admit that human is a individual with dual personalities. The nature of “the reason why people are human” of Mencius and Kant is at supernatural level, the nature that is emphasized in ‘the Theory of Original Goodness of Human Nature’ by Mencius and Rational Personality proposed by Kant should complement each other. The rational personality of Kant and the nature of Mencius are at the same level, and are both servicing for rationality. but in Kant’s theory which is , there is a clear discrepancy between rationality and sensibility; even the “Moral Emotion” is not included in “Rational Personality” which only means pure practical rationality and the fact that the will legislates for itself and behavior is under supervision of morality in a moral concept. Mr. Zongsan Mou says that when Kant proposed Free Will (the will of self-discipline and self-sufficiency), we cannot feel it using a sense of touch, neither can we understand it through the sense of wisdom because it cannot always be recognized; therefore, it is not a concrete presentation, when he thinks this way, he regards free will as only a rational body (pure practical rationality without any component of perceptual experience, generally speaking, rational body); the activity that forgets the will is a kind of heart energy, which is the activity from the heart .<sup>6</sup> Mencius also proposed self-disciplined morality, but it is different from Kant’s. Although Mencius paid attention to self-discipline which does not mean that pure practical rationality is the source power of will action. Because the reason that rescuing the young man is above the natural level is the “four hearts” with moral emotion which is composed of “Right and Wrong”, “Shame”, “Compassion” and “Modest”. Mencius promoted the natural endowment of benevolence, “Moral Emotion” to “Rational Personality”, so “heart” is a lively “benevolence” and a real moral subject, and that’s why the self-discipline is possible. Mr. Zongsan Mou says that from the point of view of morality and benevolence, the heart of will is capable of doing great; the conscious activity of the mind can be restored at first, and the activity of the will is the presentation of moral sense; morality like that is so called real morality. Benevolence is not only the root of

morality, making morality more than an idea, but also a connection with heaven, deriving the righteous framework of devotion, intellectuality and knowledge of heaven, which is the foundation of completing the metaphysics of morality. Hence, for Mencius' benevolence and righteousness, although it belongs to Kant's "Knowing Character", but not only a presupposed ideal state, which, in this respect, indicates that Mencius is different from Kant and reveals the biggest discrepancy between them regarding the theory of original goodness of human nature.

Xunzi's theory of original evil of human nature is consistent with Kant's level of empirical character. Both of them are belong to the same level of nature. Xunzi paid more attention to the experience of human nature, which can be compared with level of empirical character what Kant has examined in his theory. The humanity put forward by Kant in the *Practical Anthropology and Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone* is observed in terms of empirical character, including self-protection, sexual (reproductive race), social instinct and the predisposition to animality, which are considered to be the nature of human beings. In Xunzi's opinion, the basic physiological needs of human nature are that hungry people want to eat, cold one want to be warm, tired one want to rest. And human nature is achieved by the heaven, covering the innate sensory abilities of eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body,<sup>7</sup> as well as the psychological emotions of evil, joy, anger and sadness,<sup>8</sup> and the physiological desires of the eyes, ears, mouth, nose and heart which should be born with emotion.<sup>9</sup> Human's innate sensory abilities can produce psychological emotions and then arouse physiological desires, which are all human's animal gifts without resorting to rational self-protection and self-love. Xunzi believed that human feelings were desire for more but not less, and they will never satisfied no matter how much they get.<sup>10</sup> This is due to the comparison of animal nature endowment and rationality. The predisposition to humanity called by Kant means that human hope to get everything equal with others. Therefore, Xunzi's theory of human nature and Kant's experiential personality are belong to the same level. The human nature discussed above is a phenomenon that we can observe in our daily life, that is, the body and spirit in space, and the node of life and death in time, which are the inherent essence of natural life. There are differences between Kant and Xunzi in the argumentation of the evil nature of human nature. Kant believed that the choice of will deviates from the moral law, and it is easy to develop a natural tendency (habit) to evil because of the habit, and this bad habit will lure away the will from the moral law when the will is doing the moral judgment next

time, which is the possibility that will happen on every one in the constantly vicious cycle. As a result, it is called “Evil Personality”. Xunzi believed that “obedience to people’s favor” would flow into evil and generate “Competition”, “Thieves” and “Adultery”. However, Xunzi did not explain why this happened, but directly point out that the nature of human was evil. Therefore, Xunzi's argument about the evil of human nature can not prove that “the nature of human is evil”, but can only prove that “if human is not restrained, evil consequences will happen”. So why does unrestrained human nature would generate evil consequences? Kant can answer this question and make up for the “reason” why “obedience to people’s favor” turns human evil, so as to reinforce Xunzi’s theory of original evil of human nature. Kant believed that “evil” can not be derived from the concept of “human”, and it can not be born in natural life or the object of will, but in the habits created by the acquired will instead. The acquired “bad habits” can be divided into different degrees, the most serious of which is the “evil of the human mind”; this evil is intentional, committing with purpose and reversing the moral order. Moreover, since the natural tendency toward evil is the result of one’s acquired nature, it can be traced back to the subjective basis of the possibility of evil in human nature, so it is also called “Radical Evil” in human nature, which is the real meaning of Kant’s theory of original evil of human nature. Kant’s elaborate statement of “evil nature” not only supplements the true meaning of Xunzi’s theory, but also highlights the importance of Xunzi's theory of self-cultivation. It reminds us that we should be vigilant for good and evil which only in one’s mind, which helps Xunzi to supplement Mencius’ theory of original goodness of human nature.

To sum up, Theory of human nature of Kant contains the basic elements of theories of human nature of Mencius and Xunzi. Mencius’ theory of original goodness of human nature agrees with Kant's level of rational personality while Xunzi’s theory of original evil of human nature is consistent with Kant’s level of empirical character. The comparison of theories of human nature among Kant, Mencius and Xunzi is not emulative. Their respective theories of human nature actually have own connotations respectively because of the gap between them in culture and times. Therefore, the conclusion of comparison should seek common ground while reserving differences. Kant's theory of human nature contains the basic elements of theories of Mencius and Xunzi, which indicates that human nature has an eternal and worldwide significance by across the ancient and modern (modernity) as well as the Chinese and Western

(world). Theory of human nature of Kant contains the basic elements of theories of human nature of Mencius and Xunzi, indicating that the biggest common point of human nature is that one should do his best to become a better person whether one can become a saint in his life or not.

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