

Exploring The Idea of “Human Nature is Inherently Good”

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Abstract: No matter how times change and humanity progresses, mankind are social beings. Every individual in this world is closely connected to social reality and the community of life, and is surrounded by nature and fellow human beings. Therefore, one's actions are not only related to oneself but also have an impact on society. The ideal personality in our hearts is a perfect moral model, but no one is a stereotype of an impeccable personality. You are a unique individual. On the path of practicing kindness, one can do very small things or make very great decisions. We should not judge a person's character based on the size of their good deeds. Do what you can and do it well. This is the best manifestation of your kindness. The influence, transformation, and maintenance of the theory of “innate goodness” will be integrated and expounded in this article. The first chapter of this thesis explores the impact of the times on the essence of human nature, the second chapter discusses the changes in the essence of human nature brought about by the environment, and the third chapter argues that making firm moral choices of “kindness” in behavioral practice is the requirement for the all-round development of individuals and society. Kindness has many benefits, but the most far-reaching ideal and goal is to make our great motherland stable and prosperous and all things harmoniously coexist.

Keywords: Human nature is inherently good; Goodness; Evil; Mencius; The essence of human nature

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1. The impact of the era on the nature of human goodness and evil

The theory of “innate goodness of human nature” has a long history. As early as the Warring States period, Mencius was the first to propose the core doctrine of “innate goodness of human nature.” Regarding this theory, Mencius said, “The goodness of human nature is like water flowing downhill; no one is without goodness, and water never flows downward.” This sentence is both literary and philosophical. Based on the premise of the innate goodness of human nature, it compares human nature with water flow, meaning “There is no human nature that is not good; water never flows downward.” It compares the trend of water flow with the inherent goodness of human beings. Later, it was said, “Today, if water is beaten and made to leap, it can go over the forehead; if it is forced to flow, it can reach the mountains ^[1]. Is this the nature of water? It is because of its current situation. Just as it is possible to make people do bad things, their nature is also like this.” In my opinion, the essence of human nature is different from morality, and it is not completely equivalent to character or talent. What it concerns is human nature itself. Human long-term formed behavioral habits and thinking patterns have a stubborn nature, so the essence of human nature is actually very difficult to change. Even the scholar Wang Yinglin of the Southern Song Dynasty, who wrote “The Three Character Classic,” said, “Human nature is originally good; nature is similar, but habits separate ^[2]. This is not the nature of water. It is because of its current situation. Just as it is possible to

make people do bad things, their nature is also like this.” This sentence also confirms this point. When a baby is born, its nature is pure and natural. Although it has not received social moral education and its mind is not filled with traditional concepts, the innocent and pure side of its nature is revealed. It can be seen that human nature in the initial stage is inherently good. Then, as people grow up continuously, they gradually come into contact with nature and society. Some things will help us construct our outlook on life, world view, and value system subconsciously, deepen our understanding of the rules of the world’s operation, and constantly clarify the definitions of good and evil, form the standards for distinguishing good and evil, and determine what kind of person one should be ^[3].

Under the influence of various factors, the era has a significant impact on the essence of human nature. Taking the contrast between ancient and modern times as an example, during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, there was territorial division and fragmentation among the feudal lords, frequent wars, and rapid social changes. The lives of the common people were in great turmoil. Acts such as forced seizure and fierce competition that went against morality occurred quite frequently. Although the Confucian classics of China set up moral and ethical norms that people should follow, in that era, education was not yet widespread, and the opportunities and levels of education received by people varied greatly. Therefore, people’s understanding of goodness and virtues might not be as profound as in peaceful times. Naturally, they were unable to strictly require themselves in terms of behavioral norms ^[4]. Today, our country enjoys peace and stability, with clear waters and calm seas. The high-quality development of science and technology, along with the rapid changes in convenient living conditions, has enabled people to lead a happy life without the presence of smoke and gunpowder. The overall quality of people’s lives has improved, and everyone has the equal right to enjoy compulsory education. The understanding of doing good or evil has also been incorporated into the complete legal system based on the Constitution. However, regardless of the level of social education in different eras, good and evil could simply be two aspects of human nature. They are more related to individual choices or decisions. Or we can take “Do not neglect a small act of kindness, nor underestimate a small act of evil” as a moral principle. However, the occasional bad behavior of a few law-breaking individuals is difficult to eradicate ^[5]. If everyone shows a little love and kindness, the world will be filled with beautiful melodies. The seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter in nature are a continuous cycle of alternation. The pursuit of “goodness” is the same. With the pace of societal renewal, the meaning endowed by more conscious moral principles keeps evolving. It is hoped that people can live in harmony with each other, and all the beautiful wishes of the people will come true as expected ^[6].

2. The environment’s partial alteration of human nature’s essence

The exploration of human nature includes the views of Mencius that “nature is inherently good,” the view of Gaozi that “nature is neither good nor evil but all things are possible,” the view of Shi Zuo that “nature has neither goodness nor evil”, and the view of Xunzi that “nature is inherently evil.” Among these, the viewpoints of Mencius and Xunzi are the most widely known. The viewpoints of these two great scholars seem to be opposite, but in fact, it is due to the different perspectives from which they view the issue. Mencius started from the social attributes of human beings and believed that morality and ethics are the essential attributes of human beings ^[7]. While Xunzi discussed the natural attributes of human beings and held that human nature is inherently evil, thus requiring education to transform evil into good. Therefore, whether it is regarded as a symbol of “good nature theory” or “evil nature theory,” the underlying meaning behind its reference is that people should accept the constraints and discipline of social morality, thereby becoming members of society. Just as Mencius once said, “Everyone can become Yao or Shun,” but Xunzi also once stated, “Even an ordinary person can become Yu.” Therefore, when analyzing issues related to good and evil, one cannot merely look at the surface. At its core, the reasons for different conclusions lie more in the differences in starting points and perspectives. Thus, although Mencius and Xunzi’s theories on the nature of human goodness and evil seem to be in opposition, in essence, they are converging towards the same goal. Both emphasize that through education, people can be guided to do good ^[8].

In my opinion, at the very beginning of human existence, there were only personality differences, and there was no clear understanding of good and evil. Later, through education and enlightenment, they came to understand the significance of

abiding by morality and chose the behavioral orientations that signify good or evil. Regarding the clear demarcation between good and evil, and whether human civilization can only be characterized by a binary opposition of good and evil, there are diverse and conflicting answers held deep within people's hearts. Therefore, the focus of the research shifted to the relevant influencing factors that could cause changes in the essence of human nature. The most significant factor among them is the environment, which includes aspects such as social public opinion, traditional customs, and living conditions. In the guidance of social news media public opinion, there is always a tendency to condemn evil and promote good, uphold justice, which helps to enhance people's personal moral awareness, and is an effective way to improve social morality. It helps to establish a model image of proactive kindness and active dedication in front of the public, making people be kind to others and help others. Traditional customs and behavioral habits refer to the traditional ways of conduct or daily etiquette that have been formed historically within a specific social and cultural region and are commonly followed by the members of that society^[9]. They exert a very strong behavioral constraint on the members of the society and are deeply rooted in the collective memory of the people's ethnic group. The school, social and family environments actually play the most direct role in the development of human nature. From childhood to adulthood, our understanding of any socialized matters is inevitably influenced by the social environment's guidance of our concepts. Therefore, the entire social atmosphere and growth environment have a significant impact on the transformation of human nature's essence and will bring about a persistent effect that is difficult to change. At the brink of good and evil, people rely on their inner beliefs to guide their actions. Due to a single thought, there will be a significant difference in the judgment of good or evil and the classification of personalities^[10].

3. The “Theory of Good Nature” is not merely a summary of the original appearance of human nature; rather, it should also serve as a moral requirement for humanity

In the current social and cultural context, “goodness” is often associated with a virtuous quality, referring to people with noble character and excellent moral conduct. Therefore, regardless of how the research on the category of “goodness” is conducted, its root cause is not merely to explore the specific manifestations of human nature, but to enable human nature to increasingly meet the highest requirements of morality, transcend the id, the ego, and gradually reach the super-ego state. “Goodness” is not only an important part of traditional Chinese virtues, but also the goal of the comprehensive development of human beings. A favorable cultural atmosphere and social system are the fundamental ways to prevent evil deeds and promote moral development. This requires us to understand the meaning of kindness during our growth process, thereby respecting, tolerating, and caring for other lives. In practical behaviors, we should firmly make moral choices of “goodness,” use morality and reason to restrain ourselves, be responsible for ourselves and others, and work together and move forward as a community in this big world^[11,12].

Everyone sets a good example and extends kindness to others, continuously passing on the virtues of tolerance and kindness from the traditional Chinese culture. Every unremarked smile and act of kindness will receive positive social responses and bring about new growth momentum.” A thousand-mile journey begins with the first step; a mighty river is formed from small streams.” Every achievement of a lofty goal depends on the casual persistence and small accumulations. We need the perseverance and courage to accumulate small steps into a thousand-mile journey and small streams into a mighty river^[13]. We should internalize the thoughts of right and wrong and externalize them in our actions. At the crossroads of making moral choices, every individual must adhere to their own principles and moral boundaries, exchanging personal interests for acts of helping others, prioritizing kindness and finding joy in it. One should have the courage to uphold one's kindness when others back down, and the broad-mindedness to respect others' choices. One should also understand the unique value of everything in the world. The difference between good and bad deeds is not caused by value judgments. Always believe that happiness can be passed on. Treating others well is treating oneself well. Those who love others will always be loved by others; those who respect others will always be respected by others. Protect the plants, flowers, birds, mountains, rivers, seas, wild animals, and even every person around you^[14]. Cherish every opportunity to do good deeds. Kindness is not measured by its size; there is no need to rush to show it to others. The

light reflected from your heart will illuminate the darkness and color the day, like a rainbow after the rain, nourishing all things and the creatures of the earth. Kindness is the cornerstone for promoting social harmony and stable development. Therefore, maintaining kindness is your responsibility. Adhere to social ethics and morality, and with a kind heart, add new brilliance to the increasingly prosperous motherland, and let us create a beautiful future together ^[15].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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