Treatise on the Human Nature of Mencius and Rousseau

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Abstract

This study aims to clarify the difference between the treatise on the human nature of Mencius and that of Rousseau. From this study, we will be able to understand that both Gaozi and Rousseau thought that human nature is neither good nor bad but can degenerate with the influence of a bad society. But on the other hand, Mencius insisted that human nature is good and cannot degenerate by any external causes including human society. Even when someone argues that he still has a lot to say about Mencius’ treatise on human nature, he can accept the fact that Mencius and Rousseau had very different opinions on human nature. And that is the only fact that this short study tried to make clear.

Key Words: Mencius, Rousseau, Human nature, Confucianism, Gaozi

1. Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Swiss-born philosopher during the Enlightenment in 18th century Europe started his famous Emile by saying, “God makes all things good;
man meddles with them and they become bad. He forces one soil to yield the products of another, one tree to bear another's fruit. He confuses and confounds time, place, and natural conditions. He mutilates his dog, his horse, and his slave. He destroys and defaces all things; he loves all that is deformed and monstrous; he will have nothing as nature made it, not even man himself, who must learn his paces like a saddle-horse, and be shaped to his master's taste like the trees in his garden.”

Any Confucian scholars who are familiar with the original text of the Mencius would recall Gaozi instead of Mencius when they heard what Rousseau said. Gaozi, a Chinese thinker during the Warring States period and contemporary of Mencius, put a positive spin on human nature and did not want to hurt it. He also thought that society is bad and did not want human nature to be shaped to the society's taste like the trees in his garden. Whereas Mencius who thought that it is impossible for good human nature to degenerate would certainly oppose Gaozi’s opinion. But it is widely accepted that Mencius and Rousseau's treatise on Human nature is philosophically the same because Mencius said “Human nature is good” and Rousseau said, “God makes all things good.”

This study aims to clarify the difference between treatise on the human nature of Mencius and that of Rousseau. From this study, we can understand that both Gaozi and Rousseau thought that human nature is neither good nor bad but can degenerate by the influence of the bad society. But on the other hand, thousands of Confucian scholars including Mencius insisted that human nature is good and cannot degenerate by any external causes including human society.

2. Mencius’ treatise on human nature

In this chapter, we are going to deal with two themes. First, we will show that the eternal and infinite Heaven begets all creatures and exists as the eternal and

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3) see Francois, *Fonder la morale : dialogue de Mencius avec un philosophe des Lum*. Also see Min, *A Study on the basis of morality and Mind Fulfillment: focusing on the goodness of human nature by Mencius and Rousseau*, 2012.
infinite human nature in humans from Mencius’ theory. Second, we will find that human nature is neither good nor bad according to Gaozi’s argument which is totally different from what Mencius said.

① According to Mencius, human nature is good and unchangeable.

In his book, Mencius said that the eternal and infinite Heaven begets all creatures and exists as the eternal and infinite human nature.

The Odes say, “Heaven produces all creatures and where there is a thing, it has heavenly laws. People have unchangeable nature, and they love this good virtue.” Confucius commented, “The author of this poem must have known the Way. Every existing creature necessarily has its heavenly laws. And since people have unchangeable nature, they love this good virtue.”

According to Mencius, all the people have heavenly laws as their unchangeable nature because all creatures including people are begotten by Heaven. And since human nature is unchangeable, we can assume that Heaven is also unchangeable. At the same time, we have to notice the word "necessarily" from the sentence “every creature has necessarily its heavenly laws.” If heavenly law or unchangeable nature necessarily exists, it must exist at any time at any place. That is, it exists eternally and infinitely. And since heavenly law or human nature is unchangeable, it cannot degenerate. And Mencius called it “good.”

Many times Mencius emphasized that human nature is a natural law and exists eternally and infinitely. For instance, he said, “human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards.”

According to Mencius, all water necessarily flows downwards and all human nature is necessarily good. And “all” means “without exception”, which has the same meaning as “at any time at any place”, or “eternally and infinitely.” It is impossible for human nature to degenerate or become worse. It is always good according to Mencius.

Even if someone cannot accept Mencius’ opinion on human nature, he can assure that Mencius and Rousseau had different points of view on the matter of human nature.

② Human nature is neither good nor bad and changeable according to Gaozi Following this, we will deal with the conversation between Mencius and Gaozi. And we will clarify the difference between the opinion of Mencius and that of Gaozi. In the Mencius, we can find several conversations between the two philosophers. One of them is as follows:

The philosopher Gaozi said, “Human nature is like whirling water. Give it an outlet in the east and it will flow east; give it an outlet in the west and it will flow west. Human nature does not show any preference for either good nor bad just as water does not show any preference for either east or west.”

“It certainly is the case,” said Mencius, “That water does not show any preference for either east or west but does it show the same indifference to high and low? human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards.”

As Mencius’ disciple, Kung-tu Tzu said, the philosopher Gaozi’s theory is known as “human nature is neither good nor bad.” Even if Gaozi put a positive spin on human nature and did not want to hurt it, he did not think that human nature is good. And like Rousseau, he thought that people can change human nature in any direction using external tools, particularly in a bad way. With his philosophy, Gaozi would resist all external causes to protect his nature, and finally, be unsocial and lonely like Rousseau from Reveries of a Solitary Walker.

So far, we discussed Mencius’ treaties on human nature. Next, we will deal with Rousseau's treatise on human nature in A Discourse on Inequality and find its similarity to that of Gaozi.

3. Rousseau's treatise on human nature in *A Discourse on Inequality*

Rousseau is considered to claim that human nature is good. But at the same time, he thought that the bad society ruins good human nature. However, following his own theory, all the grown-ups whom he met were already socially ruined. As a result, he barely had the chance to meet good people by his own rule and therefore was mean to people who tried to take care of him. His own theory led him to be a *solitary walker*. And as Hanna Arendt put it, the general (?) will see in Rousseau's theory that(?) the social contract was the main factor that caused Robespierre's terrorism.⁸)

In this chapter, we will find that Rousseau's treatise on human nature is exactly the same as that of Gaozi. Many scholars nowadays are doing research on the similarity between Mencius and Rousseau. We can help them see the problems in a different way and find solutions by letting them know that they should not presume that both Mencius and Rousseau's treatise on human nature is the same.

In *A Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau confessed that the natural state which he was going to explain is just imaginary and not the actual one. “For it is not light enterprise separate that which is original that which is artificial in man’s present nature, and attain a solid knowledge of a state which no longer exist, which perhaps never existed, and which will probably never exist, yet of which it is necessary to have sound ideas if we are to judge our present state satisfactorily.”⁹)

As we can see, the natural state to which Rousseau prefer is not the one that Rousseau himself experienced and he does not expect the natural state to be actualized in the future. In Rousseau’s own theory, the so-called natural state has never been, and will never become real. Rousseau pictures “peaceful savage man” in Utopia as follows:

“We conclude, then, that savage man, wandering in the forest, without work, without speech, without a home, without war, and without relationships, was

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⁹) For translation, Cranston, “A Discourse on Inequality,” 68.
equally without any need of his fellow men and without any desire to hurt them, perhaps not even recognizing any one of them individually. Being subject to see few passions, and sufficient unto himself, he had only such feelings and such knowledge as suited his condition; he felt only his true needs, saw only what he believed it was necessary to see, and his intelligence made no more progress than his vanity.”\(^{10}\)

The concept of “peaceful savage man” was thoroughly criticized even in Rousseau’s living years, simply because it did not correspond with the facts observed.\(^{11}\) Since the political theory of Rousseau is based upon the treatise on human nature, if the concept of “peaceful savage man” is wrong then the political theory of Rousseau would be logically incorrect. It is impossible to separate the political theory from the treatise on human nature and singly deal with it, and the validity of any political studies on Rousseau which excludes the treatise on human nature has to be critically reexamined.

As Rousseau contrasted the savage man with the civil man, we can conclude that the natural state is the uncivil state. In *A Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau insisted that the concept of good and bad should only be used in explaining the civil state, not the natural state.

“It would seem at first glance that men in the state of nature, having no kind of moral relationships between them, or any known duties, could be neither good nor evil, and that they could have neither vices nor virtues; unless we took those words in a material sense and called ‘vices’ in the individual those characteristics which might be injurious to his own preservation and ‘virtues’ those which might contribute to ti, in which case we should have to call the man who least resists the impulses of nature the most virtuous.”\(^{12}\)

Let’s focus on Rousseau’s statement that men in their natural state could not be either good or bad, and had neither vices nor virtues. According to Rousseau, the savage men in their natural state are neither good nor bad. From this, we can conclude that the treatise of human nature of Rousseau is exactly the same as that

10) For translation, Cranston, “A Discourse on Inequality,” 104.
12) For translation, Cranston, “A Discourse on Inequality,” 98.
of Goazi.

Meanwhile, humans move towards the civil state using reason according to Rousseau. But since the civil state degenerates humans, using reason is the evidence of degeneration consequently. Rousseau pointed it out by saying, “I would almost venture to assert that the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal.”13) And he also explained the savage man who does not use his own reason and is thus in a happy state as follows: “It is by the activity of the passions that our reason improves itself; we seek to know only because we desire to enjoy, and it is impossible to conceive a man who had neither desires nor fears giving himself the trouble of reasoning. The passion, in turn, owe their origin to our needs and their development to our knowledge, for one can desire or fear a thing only if one has an idea of it in the mind – unless one is responding to a simple impulsion of nature. The savage man, deprived of any sort of enlightenment, experiences passions only of the last kind; his desires do not go beyond his physical needs.”14)

We can conclude that in Rousseau’s theory, the savage man only desires his physical wants and refuses to use his own reason. Claude Lévi-Strauss did all his effort in Tristes Tropiques to prove that the savage men are reasonable and use their reason at their best, although he strangely admired Rousseau. Lévi-Strauss understood the real world but misunderstood Rousseau’s imaginary world.15)

Anyhow, the concept of a savage man who does not use his reason is not right simply because it is against the facts observed. In A Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau contrasted nature with society and suggested that nature is good and society is bad in that society degenerates the good nature. He said, “But it must be noted that society’s having come into existence and relations among individuals having been already established meant that men were required to have qualities different from those they possessed from their primitive constitution; morality began to be introduced into human actions, and each man, prior to laws, was the sole judge and avenger of the offenses he had received so that the goodness suitable to the pure state of nature was no longer that which suited nascent society.”16)

13) For translation, Cranston, “A Discourse on Inequality,” 85.
14) For translation, Cranston, “A Discourse on Inequality,” 89.
Let’s focus on Rousseau’s statement that the society now formed and the relations now established among men required in them qualities different from those, which they derived from their primitive constitution. According to Rousseau, the required qualities of society is quite different from those of the primitive state. As mentioned earlier, Rousseau thought that the natural state is good and the civil state is bad. That’s why the required qualities between the two should be different.

So far, we discussed Rousseau’s treatise on human nature in *A Discourse on Inequality*. Next, we will deal with Rousseau's treatise on human nature in the *Social Contract* and find out what Rousseau thought.

### 4. Rousseau's treatise on human nature in the *Social Contract*

As I said earlier, Rousseau in *A Discourse on Inequality* insisted that using the reason only degenerated human nature. But in the *Social Contract* he changed his opinion and stated that if humans use their reason properly, they turned from “neither good nor bad one” to “better one.”

"The passing from the state of nature to the civil society produces a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked. It is only then, when the voice of duty has taken place of physical impulse, and tight that of desire, that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study his inclinations. And although in civil society man surrenders some of the advantages that belong to the state of nature, he gains in return far greater ones; his faculties are so exercised and developed, his mind is so enlarged, his sentiments so ennobled, and his whole spirit so elevated that, if the abuse of his new condition did not in many cases lower him to something worse than what he had left, he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him forever from the state of nature and from a stupid, limited animal made a creature of intelligence and

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Rousseau said without hesitance that the savage human is “a stupid and unimaginative animal” whereas the civil human is “an intelligent being and a man.” Now we can see that in the *Social Contract* Rousseau considered the savage human as an animal and the civil human as a man. Once admired, the savage man now became treated like an animal which is inferior to humans by Rousseau’s own point of view. That is, until using the reason properly to achieve a certain level, humans in a natural state cannot even be considered as “human.”

In the *Social Contract* Rousseau insisted that by using the reason properly, we can achieve the social contract. And the civil state based upon the social contract suggested by Rousseau himself can change the savage man from an animal to a human. But any other civil states which are not based upon Rousseau’s political theory would degenerate human nature as before. And since Rousseau did not live in a society based upon his own theory, he did not have to deny the early hatred towards the society in *A Discourse on Inequality* and could maintain the anger until the end of his life without contradiction. But it is certain that his vaguely changing attitude towards human society threw many scholars into confusion, and few understood the real meaning of the subtle change.

Without a doubt, Rousseau was a very self-important person. When he said that any civil states which are not based upon Rousseau’s own theory of the social contract are ‘worse’ than the natural state, but the civil states which are based upon Rousseau’s argument are ‘better’ than the natural state, he unconsciously declared that Rousseau himself is better than the nature and the rest of the people. But as we discussed earlier, Mencius did not think that external causes including any form of society can change human nature. Of course, we can change the social and educational system by “following” the unchangeable human nature. External environments are changing drastically and humans have to adjust to them under the principle of the unchangeable human nature. But that does not mean that we can actually “change” human nature, according to Mencius. We can change the political system and the educational system by the rule of unchangeable human nature. But if the rule itself has any possibility of certain change,
the rule can not serve us as a universal rule anymore, because no one can assure that it is “the” rule.

Even someone argues that he still has a lot to say about Mencius’ treatise on human nature, he can accept the fact that Mencius and Rousseau had very different opinions on human nature. And that is the only fact which this short study tried to make clear.

5. Conclusion

So far, we have discussed that Mencius and Rousseau had different views on human nature. In his life, Rousseau sent all five children to orphanages and spent his entire life betraying acquaintances who wanted to help him. Perhaps it was not human nature but himself that Rousseau felt the most fearful. As George Sabine pointed out with a resplendent note, “Rousseau’s passionate belief that men are naturally good, which he once said was the fundamental principle of his ethical writings, was less an intellectual conviction than a reversal of his innate fear that he was bad. By throwing the fault on society he was able at once to satisfy his need for condemnation and to shelter himself in a comfortable myth.”18)

The fact that Rousseau based his political theory including the social contract upon the treatise on human nature is undeniable if we analyze the logical structure of the Social Contract. In my earlier works, I hinted that the philosophy of Mencius is the same as that of Spinoza and not the same as that of Rousseau.19) Rousseau insisted that human will is free on the basis of his treatise on human nature, whereas Spinoza claimed that human will is not free on the basis of his treatise on human nature. Logically, if Rousseau’s treatise on human nature is wrong then his concept of free will which is based upon his treatise on human nature should be wrong. And if Rousseau’s concept of free will is wrong, then his concept of general will which is based upon his concept of free will should be wrong. And if Rousseau’s concept of the general will is wrong, then his theory of the social contract which is based upon his concept of the general will should be wrong. Like I said, a lot of scholars

these days separate Rousseau’s political theory from his treatise on human nature and singly deal with the political one. We cannot expect any useful outcomes from those approaches since they neglected and disobeyed the philosophical procedures.

Following this study, I will critically examine Rousseau’s political theory on the basis of his own treatise on human nature. I hope that we can diminish most of the confusion in Rousseau’s political theory by this approach.

References


