

The Human-Nature Premise in Cultures: East and West

None of the differences between Christian and Confucian cultures is more crucial and decisive than their respective premises regarding human nature. In this discussion, I will compare (a) the assumption in the Christian ecclesiastic doctrine of the “original sin” and (b) the Confucian assumption about the human disposition toward good, only distorted by post-natal (corrupting) influences in social life. I will attempt to show how this divergence, ultimately, accounts for the fundamental differences in Western and Chinese cultures.

A few words of clarification are in order. First, I say “Christian ecclesiastic” doctrine of the original sin, as differentiated from what the Christian Bible says about the subject in appropriate places, both in the Old and New testaments. I acknowledge that this ecclesiastic view has become the conventional wisdom and premise in Western culture.

Second, while Confucius’ own views on the subject could be interpreted in two different ways, the interpretation by Mencius that human nature is disposed toward good, or is corrigible after being contaminated after birth, has been accepted by all Confucians ever since the Han dynasty (3rd Century B.C. to 3rd Century A.D.).

I will begin by dwelling separately on the Western and the Chinese human-nature premises and their respective impact on Western and Chinese cultures. After that, I shall see if there is any possibility for the two views to be reconciled.

The Doctrine of the Original Sin & Its Impact on Western Political Thought

Notwithstanding what the Bible says to the contrary (as I will explain later), the Christian Church (both Catholic and Protestant) has consistently upheld the doctrine of the original sin. The widespread acceptance of this doctrine, in retrospect, has proven to have far-reaching effects on Western social and political thought throughout the centuries.

During medieval times, human society in the West was divinely ordained to be governed by two authorities, the spiritual and the temporal. This dual hierarchy bespeaks the inherent belief that the temporal authority (i.e., the government) would be incapable of dealing with (let alone saving) the soul of the sinful individual –hence, it (the government) should not even try to do so. St. Augustine in the eleventh century had taught in his *City of God* that the whole world (i.e., the then existing Western society) under God had two heads (the pope and the emperor); two principles of authority (namely, the spiritual rule of priests and the temporal rule of kings); and two hierarchies of governance. And, the temporal authority’s legitimacy was based on its imputed “divine right to rule.”

When subsequently the ecclesiastic order and imperial order fell apart from each other, the separation of state and church has come down as a firm tradition to this day in the West (including Britain and the United States). Even so, the belief in the evil human nature has survived the separation of the two authorities, and has inhered in post-medieval thinkers such as Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Rousseau, among others.

Keeping this in mind, we are ready to address the differences in Western and Confucian political thought and traditions.¹

In post-medieval West, almost all thinkers embraced as their first premise the evilness of human nature, although Machiavelli was the one who, in more explicit terms than others, openly stated that human nature was selfish and aggressive. To him, government was really founded upon the weakness and insufficiency of the individual, who was unable to protect himself against the aggression of other individuals -- unless supported by the power of the state. Hence, he (like Hobbes) believed in the necessity of absolute monarchy, if anarchy was to be restrained by the force behind the law, such as the state can enforce.² For the same reason, Hobbes endorsed the absolute power of the sovereign, for there was no choice except between absolute power and complete anarchy, between omnipotent sovereign and no society at all.³

¹ Zhao Dunhua, “The Goodness of Human Nature and the Original Sin: A Point in Convergence in Chinese and Western Cultures,” in *Christianity & Chinese Culture*, edited by Miika Muokanen and Paolos Huang (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

² See discussion in George Sabine & Thomas I. Thorson, *A History of Political Theory*, 4th ed. (Dryden Press, 1973), p.320f.

³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651). See also his *Human Nature* (1650).

Modern democratic theory arose during the European Enlightenment, a philosophic movement of the 17th and 18th centuries (1650-1800) marked by its rejection of traditional religious, social, and political ideas and by its emphasis on rationalism. John Locke, its leading spiritual leader, rebutted the claim that government, specifically monarchy, was an aspect of a divinely ordained chain of being. Yet, in his advocacy of basic rights of all men (and women), he invoked natural law as the guarantee of these rights (including right to life, to certain liberties, and to own property and keep the fruits of one's labor). And, natural law to him was identical with the law of God.⁴ Put in another way, the evil individuals had no choice other than relying on the force of a forgiving God.

And, when he argued that men in civil society enter into a contract with their government, Locke implied that (a) individuals need government to protect them because they cannot do so against other (evil) individuals; and (b) that a contract is necessary to keep (potentially evil) government officials under check. Locke's theory of natural law inspired a generation of Enlightenment philosophers in the West, from Jean Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu in France to David Hume in Scotland, Immanuel Kant in Germany, and Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin in what was to become the United States.

Montesquieu, reputedly Locke's foremost successor, endorsed the idea of republican government based on consent of the governed. This was necessary to highlight that the mundane government's legitimacy, unlike in medieval times, was not based on the "divine right to rule," but on the consent of the people. However, in advocating the separation, and balance, of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government,⁵ he implicitly displayed a lack of trust in the governing officials. Hence, checks and balance would be the best, and necessary, safeguard to keep (the potentially evil) officials from abusing power, allowing democracy a chance to work efficiently.

An earlier French writer (of the 16th century) Jean Bodin, who is best known for his exposition of the theory of sovereignty, defined the state as "a lawful government of

⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690).

⁵ C.L. de Secondat de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748).

several households, . . . with sovereign power.” The word lawful is said to signify just, in accordance with the law of nature, and to distinguish a sovereign state from a lawless association like a band of robbers.⁶ In other words, save for the guarantee of the law of nature, which is synonymous with the will of God, all social associations in the absence of a sovereign would be like bands of “robbers,” owing to the wicked (sinful) nature of individuals in society.

From these examples, I hope we have come to see the inherent, close links between the *a priori* assumption of the evil human nature (due to original sin) and the political and social tradition of the modern West. Below, we shall see how the Confucian postulate of original goodness in human nature was likewise closely linked, in its own right, to political tradition and institutions throughout Chinese history.

The Premise of Original Goodness in Human Nature & Confucian Culture

Confucianists accept the view of the original good in human nature as propounded by Mencius (372-289 B.C.?), the second sage (next to Confucius) and a disciple of a follower of Confucius’ grandson, Zisi (or Tzu Ssu, 483-402 B.C.?). It postulates an innately benign human nature, prior to its contamination by the external social environment, including but not limited to resource scarcity. Ever since Confucianism was adopted in 136 B.C. as the “national teaching” (國教), under the aegis of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, the path was set for a uniquely Chinese model of state-society relationship, as I will explain below.

*First and foremost, while Confucian philosophy proceeds from the belief that humans are born equal (and equally benign), it does not think all of them are identical.⁷ To assume them to be identical is to assign a false equality to all. The reason is that quite apart from the innate human nature, and despite biological equality, individuals are endowed with different degrees of intelligence, acumen, talents, etc. In addition, whether a person’s potentials are fully developed depends also on the extent of education, family upbringing, and other social add-on inputs (resulting from effects of interactions with

⁶ Jean Bodin, *Six Livres de la republique* (1576).

⁷ Donald J. Monro, *The Concept of Man in Early China*, note 3 above, p. 12.

one's siblings and peers; and other experiences), plus the ability to guard oneself against external corrupting influences (to preserve one's innate goodness and integrity).

Recognizing the effects of these variations on individuals is a necessary step to accepting the blatant fact that each individual may be in a different position to be useful in a different way to the community, hence having a different role to play in it. And, recognizing this differentiation between biological equality and post-birth variations provides the link to the (invisible) curves of actual inequality.⁸ The conclusion from this reasoning is that humans, as social beings, fall into a social hierarchy. Mencius was the first in ancient times to suggest that “those laboring with [strong] brains will rule, and others laboring with brawns will be ruled.” In modern times, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, father of Republican China after his revolution toppled the Manchu Dynasty (1644-1911), even more elaborately sketched out a social hierarchy made up of eight rankings of the people, ranging from the sage at the top to the crass social outcast at the bottom.⁹ The important thing is that Chinese political thought since Confucius conceives of a division of labor of sorts, in which only those duly endowed with qualities like Plato's philosopher king (plus a consciousness to be virtuous) are destined to fulfill their leadership responsibility toward society.

As Donald Munro notes, the combination of natural equality and the necessity of social hierarchies resulted in a peculiar Confucian notion of meritocracy.¹⁰ The resultant system I would venture to call an “epistemocracy,” as it were, to take into account the emphasis on knowledge (broadly defined to include the cultivation of a disposition toward virtue) as well as merits. It comes close to the ideal of Plato's rule by a philosopher king, except with the addition of the quality of moral discipline. In dynastic China, this sort of meritocracy, the equivalent of a collective philosopher king, consisted of the literocrats in government (hailing from the literati in society), attending to the levers of governance of the body politic for the emperor, who prevailed as long as he was seen as enjoying the “mandate from heaven” (tian-ming 天命).

⁸ The concept of “true equality,” as opposed to “false equality,” was fully developed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, whom Mao Zedong called the precursor of modern Chinese revolutions, in chapter 1 of his all-important treatise *San Min Chu Yi* (also Romanized as *San Min Zhu Yi*, 三民主義).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Donald Munro, note 3 above, p. 84.

Herein lies the root of the tradition of Rule by Man (in contrast to the modern West's rule of law), a tradition that, despite the long passage of time, dies hard. Rightly or wrongly, it remains as the view among many Chinese on the art of governance.

*Secondly, since Confucian thought became the cultural unifier of the Chinese civilization-state¹¹ lasting till modern times, the state acquired two unique functions totally alien to governments in the West and elsewhere: (a) the function of attaining the goal that the populace be properly educated and safeguarded from society's corrupting influences; and (b) the function of participating in people's livelihood. For the first function, a keju system, or civil service system writ large, was put in place to enforce the state-overseen channels of social mobility, ensuring elite circulation in both government and society at large. Under the keju system, the non-hereditary gray matter (i.e., educated brains) replaced wealth and nobility titles, which are inheritable, became the criterion for determining social mobility. This system, in fact, distantly inspired the future civil-service system (in the narrow sense) in governments in other countries, after the model itself was transmitted to Europe and England, whence to the United States ultimately, by way of the Ottoman Empire, which had gotten it from China.¹² Its importance for China was that it allowed the state to play a more proactive role beyond Plato's philosopher king (who would even be concerned with what music people listen to), in that the state undertook to ensure that only the properly educated and groomed elites (i.e., fortified against external bad influences) would serve as leaders in the polity (both in and outside government). Of and in itself, the system lived out the inherent Confucian belief that character purification (the secular equivalent of salvation) lies in the purging society of its real or potential corrupting influences, so that the original goodness in human nature can be maintained, or kept clear of contamination.

For the fulfillment of the second function above, furthermore, the Chinese state was in various ways participating in the nation's economy, from the Han (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) to the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. After Emperor Wu (reign: 140-87 B.C.) of the Han Dynasty abolished *laissez faire* policies, the Chinese state opted in and out of

¹¹ I dealt with the concept, and manifestations, of the Chinese civilization-state in my most recent book *China into Its Second Rise: Myths, Puzzles, Paradoxes, and Challenge to Theory* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishers, 2012). In short, China is not only a state, but a civilization, hence a civilization-state.

¹²See C. Max Korterper, *Ottoman Imperialism During the Reformation* (New York: New York University Press, 1972).

various sorts of monopoly, for example, on salt, iron, liquor, tobacco, etc.; and experimented with price stabilization schemes overtime.¹³ State participation even extended to industrialization, in the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty (1644-1911), under the elaborate practice of guandu shangban (官督商辦, state-supervised and merchant-operated) enterprises.¹⁴ In fact, the dual-track economic system, comprising a mixture of public and private sectors to varying degrees, had, off and on, existed in history before the arrival of the Dengist brand of partially marketized socialism in post-1978 China. The ultimate guiding thought behind these practices was the Confucian belief that government intervention in the economy is in partial fulfillment of the state's responsibility toward society in overseeing that the people's livelihood is well taken care of, so as to remove or minimize the pernicious influence of scarcity on the benign human soul.

Values placed on the above two functions of the state in discharging its responsibilities toward society, invariably, created both positive and negative effects, in retrospect and in comparative light. On the positive side, they brought state and society together in a way considered inscrutable by Westerners, including even some Sinologists, to the effect that the people embraced their government like family, to such an extent that Martin Jacques finds inexplicable. On the negative side (when viewed from the Western perspective), such qualities as "freedom" and "human rights," associated with what is believed to be criteria of good governance in the West, are neglected. These qualities of good governance, considered absolutely necessary in the West for protecting the individuals from their (potentially vicious) government as well as other egoistic (and sinfully disposed) individuals, is not shared in the Confucian system. In the latter, the people's primary concern is whether the government proves capable of living up to its "mandate from heaven," that is, in delivering peace/tranquility and prosperity. Unlike the medieval Christian idea of "divine right to rule," which is irrevocable, the Chinese doctrine of mandate from heaven is revocable in the event the government is judged by the people -- beginning with their Confucian elites -- to have failed to fulfill its responsibility of delivering peace/tranquility and prosperity, as will be defined below.

¹³ Donald B. Wagner, *The State and the Iron Industry in Han China* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2001).

¹⁴ Albert Feuerwerker, *China's Early Industrialization: Sheng Hsuan-huai (1844-1916) and Mandarin Enterprise* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1958).

It is plain when state and society coalesce like a family and are not viewed as antithetical to each other, external safeguards for protecting the individuals from their supposedly “evil” government (in the Western sense) need not enter into the human consciousness, until, that is, when instigated by Western critics, albeit well-intentioned in their own view. In the Confucian system, people would not worry about how they are governed (in the Western sense), as long as the government ensures there is ample evidence of peace/tranquility and prosperity (國泰民安) throughout the land. I have to note that “tranquility” in the Confucian context includes a dimension of social justice in that (a) corrupting and evil forces are brought under control or minimized, and (b) good deeds, diligence, and special achievements (like in intellectual pursuits) find their appropriate recognition and reward, etc. A government attuned to these concerns is considered to be successful in governing the land, hence, enjoying the “mandate from heaven” (天命).

The Epistemology of the Theory of Human Nature

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy, concerned with what is knowledge (as opposed to conjecture or ideology); and, among other things, how reliable (verifiable) is our knowledge. Our discussion here is concerned with the question of how true is the conventional wisdom of the evil human nature due to the original sin, which is said to be rooted in the Bible. Equally, it is concerned with how true is the alleged goodness in human nature, as found in Confucian culture; and, to be more exact, whether it can be empirically substantiated. Below, we shall first re-examine the appropriate scriptures in the Bible on the question of human nature.

According to conventional wisdom in the West, the original sin was taught by the episode in the Bible when Eve succumbed to the temptation of the serpent (representing the Devil), by eating the fruit forbidden by God. But, a careful reading of the Bible shows that the episode happened only in Chapter 3 of the book of Genesis, in the Old Testament. But, in Genesis I, verse 27, it is clearly stated: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (New Revised Standard Version, p. 1). In Chapter 2 of Genesis, the Bible records how God created the

“heavens and earth” and the first man on earth (Adam); then he planted a garden in Eden; and after that, he created a woman (Eve) as the man’s partner and wife. All the way to the end of Chapter 2 of Genesis, there is no mention of sin whatsoever. A faithful exegetical interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis, therefore, should be that (a) human beings were created in God’s own image; hence, righteous and without sin; and (b) sin did not occur until Eve ate the forbidden fruit and made Adam do the same, some time later (in Chapter 3). The logical conclusion from this [re-]reading, therefore, is that human nature is originally good, but turned sinful by external corrupting influence (of the Serpent, representing the Devil). Put another way, human nature is originally good but turned evil afterward. Hence, descendants from Adam and Eve inherited the sin committed by them after their creation by God, that is, their acquired sin from succumbing to Devil’s temptation. In scientific language, since their sin was acquired after birth, it is obvious that it does not empirically support the theory of the “original sin”.

Furthermore, Apostle Paul, in the New Testament, confirmed this point in his Letter to the Ephesians. In Chapter 4, verses 22-24 of the book of Ephesians (*Ibid*, p. 190), where Paul was admonishing the faithful followers of Jesus in the church of Ephesus on the essence of salvation, which is “to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts (verse 22), and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds (verse 23), and to clothe yourselves with the new self created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (verse 24)” (underlines mine).

In other words, the “new self” after salvation (through accepting Jesus as the Savior) is cleansed of all sins of the pre-salvation “old self”, but ultimately, and in reality, experiences a return to the original “likeness of God” when Adam and Eve were first created (recalling Genesis 1, verse 27). Hence, there are three “selves”: (i) the original self created in God’s likeness (Genesis 1 :27); (ii) the old-self after contamination by sinfulness due to the influence of the serpent (Genesis 3:6-7), hence, the acquired sin; and (iii) the new self after salvation, returning to stage (i), or the original self (before contamination).

Given this re-reading of the Bible, the final (or new) conclusion that human nature is basically good but contaminated subsequently by external influences comes very close to the Confucian more optimistic view of human nature, as discussed above.

This similarity “on paper”, however, remains to be verified empirically, if we want to be positive about the truthfulness of the assertion that human nature is basically good.

Empirical Test of the Theory of the Original Good in Human Nature

While psychologists are yet to design a way to test the innate human nature, Mencius, the most persuasive expounder of the Confucian view of the original good in human nature suggested a way to corroborate it. When one sees a child about to fall into a well, he said, one’s immediate impulse is to rush to the child’s rescue, to save him from falling to his certain death in the water below. One rushes to do so, he added, not because of any ulterior motive, such as ingratiating oneself with the child’s parents, or making oneself a big hero in the eyes of the community, etc. (*The Mencius*, Book II, Ch. 6, lines 4-6). This impulse of compassion, in other words, is the result of the innate benevolence of human nature. Is this true? you may ask.

Empirical proof: An event that took place in New York City, on January 2, 2007, literally served to bear out what Mencius pontificated in a similar situation, except it was in the city’s subway and the rescued individual was a young adult. According to New York Times, it so happened that a 50-year-old construction worker and Navy veteran (a black male), Wesley Autrey, was waiting for a train with his two daughters, aged 4 and 6, on the platform, at the 137th Street & Broadway station, in Manhattan. He saw a white young man, Cameroon Hollopeter, aged 20, convulsing from a fall, slipped from the platform and stumbled onto the tracks below, between the two rails. Suddenly, the headlights of an approaching train appeared. In a split second between life and death for the young man below, Mr. Autrey leaped to his rescue. Mr. Autrey lay on Mr. Hollopeter, pressing him down in a space roughly a foot deep. The train brakes screeched, but it could not stop in time. Five cars rolled overhead before the train stopped, the cars passing inches from his head, smudging his blue knit cap with grease. Amidst onlookers’ screams, Mr. Autrey remembered his two daughters up on the platform. “We are O.K. down here,” he yelled, “Let my daughters know Daddy is O.K.”

True to Mencius' pontification, Mr. Autrey rushed to save another person's life, even at the risk of his own, in a split second decision out of an intuition to help someone in danger, free from any ulterior motive (*New York Times* : "A Man Down, a Train Arriving, and a Stranger Makes a Choice," January 3, 2007, p. 1). If Mr. Autrey had thought of his two young daughters at the critical moment, he probably would not have leaped to help the young man below on the tracks. The split second move, as Mencius said, proved the innate good disposition in human nature. Amen.

Thus far, we have seen that not only does a re-reading of the appropriate Biblical scriptures confirm a neglected, hidden compatibility between teachings in the Bible (as we interpreted them anew) and in Confucianism on the original good in human nature -- contradicting the conventional wisdom of the original sin, as preached by the Christian Church through the centuries. But, even more important, the very postulate also was empirically borne out, at least by the event of gallantry above, as reported in the *New York Times*. So, in this new light, it is possible to reconcile the Christian and Confucian teachings. The next thing is: then what?

What Follows from the Discovery of the Above Compatibility?

While I am not sure if the Christian Church will accept (much less appreciate) our revisionist view, based on our more precise re-reading of the scriptures cited, I am aware of the complex consequence from this reversal of the doctrine of original sin, even for the layperson. As we have outlined above, all the post-medieval thinkers in the West, plus the social and political institutions in the modern West, were invariably premised on the doctrine of the evil human nature. Now, the consequence of a reversal of the doctrine is to refute the premise (or the first principle) of everything in Western political thought and institutions, as discussed above. A refutation as such would entail the de-legitimization of almost everything in modern Western culture and institutions. Ultimately, it might require a re-writing of history!

I do not think that is feasible, even desirable, from the point of view of not rocking the boat, or disturbing the social and political order in the world. What I do think is possible and necessary, however, is that Westerners may hopefully gain a different perspective and acquire a totally different comprehension of Confucian culture and the

socio-political system it inspired. I am suggesting that if Westerners follow the logic of our reasoning above, they will, I hope, come to comprehend the connection between the different Confucian premise regarding human nature and the resultant socio-political tradition flowing from it, in this new light.

To be more exact, the West's premise of the evil human nature, as we have noted above, has produced concerns with impersonal rule of law, checks and balance in government, and the special concerns for good governance as measured by the safeguards for freedoms and human rights. All these were logical derivatives from the premise of the evil human nature. It necessitated coordinated restraint on government, to circumvent the (potentially) evil disposition of government officials. And, the rule of law is to protect individuals from predatory government officials as well as from other egoistic individuals. All this can be summed up as the Western thinking on what is good governance.

But, by the same token, in China since Confucius, a totally different culture and sociopolitical system, and, above all, a totally different view on what is good governance, have been derived from an opposite premise on human nature. From this discourse in comparative light, the least that we can expect is that neither the Christian West nor the Confucian East will be scornful of the other's culture and system. If mutual respect is too much to ask for, being less scornful of each other's culture may just be a good beginning. Amen.