

Human Nature in Ancient Philosophy and its Influence On Modern Philosophy

Natureza Humana na Filosofia Antiga e sua Influência na Filosofia Moderna

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Abstract

The concept of "human nature" is analyzed from the perspective of classical philosophy, with a focus on the thought of Mencius, a great Confucian philosopher. Mencius believed that human nature is inherently good and has the potential to develop morality through education and training. This view has continued to influence modern philosophical and moral theories, such as existentialism and materialism. Through a comparison of ancient and modern philosophical perspectives, the article clarifies the connection between traditional thought and modern theories, helping to better understand the role of human nature in building today's society and morality.

Keywords: Human nature, human nature, human beings, human society.

Resumo

O conceito de "natureza humana" é analisado da perspectiva da filosofia clássica, com foco no pensamento de Mêncio, um grande filósofo confucionista. Mêncio acreditava que a natureza humana é inerentemente boa e tem o potencial de desenvolver moralidade por meio da educação e do treinamento. Essa visão continuou a influenciar teorias filosóficas e morais modernas, como o existencialismo e o materialismo. Por meio de uma comparação de perspectivas filosóficas antigas e modernas, o artigo

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esclarece a conexão entre o pensamento tradicional e as teorias modernas, ajudando a entender melhor o papel da natureza humana na construção da sociedade e da moralidade de hoje.

Palavras-chave: Natureza humana, natureza humana, seres humanos, sociedade humana.

1. Introduction

Philosophers are always interested in human beings and want to know what their true nature is and where it comes from. Therefore, human nature has long been a central and pervasive theme in the history of the existence and development of philosophy for more than 2500 years. In particular, in ancient Chinese philosophy, Mencius' thought is one of the most influential ideologies on this issue. Mencius, a prominent Confucian philosopher, developed a profound and comprehensive philosophical view of human nature, arguing that human beings are inherently good and have the potential to develop noble moral qualities. According to Mencius, human nature has carried in it elements of goodness since birth. This is manifested in virtues such as compassion, fairness, wisdom, and loyalty. He argued that everyone has the ability to develop these qualities through the process of moral education and training. One of the typical examples that Mencius gave to demonstrate the good nature of human beings is the story of "the child falling into the well." He argued that when people see a child fall into a well, no one is without feeling pity and wanting to help, no matter who they are. This proves that kindness and compassion are natural human qualities, expressions of the inherent good nature. However, the concept of human nature does not stop at classical philosophy but also continues to be controversial and widely discussed in modern philosophical ideologies. Modern philosophers have re-questioned human nature, which has led to the development of new and more complex views on the subject. Among them, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism holds that human beings do not have a fixed nature. According to Sartre, human beings "are condemned to be free." This means that each person must be free to decide his or her actions and values. From there, human nature is not an existing element, but is formed through choices and actions throughout life. This is in contrast to the view of Mencius, who believed in an inherently virtuous nature of human beings. In addition, modern materialism and humanism also offer different perspectives on human nature. Materialist philosophers, such as Karl Marx, argue that human nature is not an immutable factor that changes depending on social conditions and relations of production. According to Marx, human nature is formed and transformed through the process of labor and social relationships. This means that the economic, cultural and social environment plays a decisive role in shaping people, rather than a predetermined nature. Materialism thus challenges the classical notion of a fixed human nature, as proposed by Mencius and Confucian philosophers.

Modern humanism, on the other hand, emphasizes that although human beings do not have a fixed nature, they still have the potential to develop good and humane qualities. This view is somewhat consistent with Mencius's thought of acknowledging that humans have the ability to develop moral qualities, but not necessarily assuming that these qualities are pre-existing from birth. In the context of modern society, when people face many moral and social challenges, it is more urgent than ever to study and understand human nature. The development of science, technology and globalization have changed the living environment and social relationships of people, which in turn also raises new questions about human nature. For example, does human nature change with technological advances? Can people retain the moral qualities inherent in an increasingly complex society that is subject to many external influences? Besides, with the transformation of philosophical and social ideologies, we also witness a change in the approach and study of human nature. Researchers today do not stop at debating the nature of human beings from a philosophical perspective, but also combine them with other scientific fields such as psychology, sociology, and cognitive science to better understand human beings. This shows that human nature is not a static concept but is always changing and evolving with the progress of society. Mencius's view of good human nature is a valuable philosophical thought, but in the face of modern ideologies and challenges, this concept needs to be further studied and developed. In modern society, with constant economic and social fluctuations, understanding human nature will help us shape new directions in moral and social construction.

2. Literature Review

Mencius, one of the prominent philosophers of Confucianism, had profound views on human nature, which, according to him, human beings are inherently good. Mencius believed that people have noble qualities such as compassion, fairness and wisdom. However, these qualities need to be developed and trained through education and moral cultivation. To illustrate this point, Mencius famously presented the image of the "child falling into the well", a metaphor intended to express the natural compassion of humans. He argued that when anyone sees a child falling into a well, the first reaction will be compassion and a desire to help, regardless of who that person is. According to Mencius, this compassion is a testament to the nature of human goodness. Mencius's idea of the good nature of man is in opposition to the view that man needs to be morally reformed. Instead, he emphasized that people only need to train to develop inherent qualities. Therefore, education and cultivation play an important role in arousing the good qualities available in people. This view reflects Mencius's optimistic belief in human nature and the ability of people to become better through training and cultivation.

Mencius' thought not only has a profound influence on Confucian philosophy but also left a great mark on the history of thought in China and East Asian countries. In the centuries that followed, his ideas about human nature and moral education continued to be propagated, developed, and studied. Many Asian thinkers have taken the foundation of Mencius philosophy to build educational systems and moral norms for society. However, in Confucian philosophy, not all philosophers agree with Mencius's views. Xuanzi, another great philosopher of Confucianism, had a completely opposite view of human nature. According to Tuan Tzu, human nature is not good, but evil. He argued that humans have been born with a tendency to pursue personal desires and act instinctively, leading to selfishness and immorality. Only through strict education and discipline can people renovate themselves and become good. Shun Tzu's views reflect a more pessimistic view of human nature, but contribute to building the foundations for theories of education and social management by emphasizing the role of discipline and law in guiding and regulating human behavior. Not only in Eastern philosophy, the concept of human nature has also been widely discussed in Western philosophy. Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, also had a similar view to Mencius about human nature. Aristotle argued that human beings are inherently inclined towards happiness and virtue, and that the implementation of moral actions is part of human nature. According to him, happiness (eudaimonia) is the supreme goal of human life, and to achieve happiness, one must live rationally and train virtues such as courage, fairness, and temperance. Aristotle's view, like Mencius, held that the good nature of man can be developed and perfected through education and moral action.

In modern philosophy, many thinkers also continue to develop the concept of human nature from new perspectives. Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the famous philosophers of existentialism, had a completely different view from Mencius. Sartre argued that humans do not have a fixed nature. Instead of being born with a predetermined nature, humans are free to choose and shape their nature through their actions and decisions. He argued that human beings are not bound by any innate factors, but are instead fully responsible for their freedom and choice. This view holds that human nature is not good or evil from birth, but that people create their own nature through what they do and the values they choose. In addition, philosophers who follow the school of historical materialism, such as Karl Marx, see human nature from an economic and social perspective. Marx argued that human nature is not an immutable factor, but changes depending on social conditions and relations of production. According to Marx, human beings are formed and transformed through the process of labor and social relationships. Economic conditions, class structures, and social relations play a decisive role in shaping human consciousness and behavior. Therefore, human nature, according to Marx, always changes according to social circumstances and does not have a fixed nature. These modern perspectives challenged the classical

notion of a fixed human nature. Instead of assuming that humans are born with a good or evil nature, many modern philosophers have emphasized that human nature is the result of interaction with social circumstances and conditions. This opens up new perspectives on how to understand human nature, and raises important questions about the role of education, society, and individual freedom in shaping the nature of each person.

3. Methodology

This paper applies a historical research method combined with analysis and synthesis to compare and clarify classical and modern philosophical ideologies on the concept of human nature. Specifically, the historical method is used to compare the views of philosophers such as Mencius, Aristotle, Sartre and Marx, thereby identifying similarities and differences in the approach to human nature through the ages. In addition, the analytical method is implemented to clarify the understanding and development of this concept through historical periods, providing insight into how philosophical thought about human beings has evolved over time. Finally, the synthesis method is applied to assess the impact of social, economic, and cultural factors on the conception of human nature, contributing to completing the overall picture of the development of philosophical thought related to this topic.

4. Discussion

Views on human nature of ancient philosophy

Mencius's view of man, Mencius affirmed that human nature is inherently good, and that it is the duty of each person to develop these good qualities through moral education and training. According to him, society and external factors only serve as conditions for people to reveal and develop their inherent good nature. This thought of Mencius laid the foundation for a harmonious and ethical society, in which education was considered the key to nurturing the good qualities of the human being.

Aristotle argued that human nature lies in the combination of reason and instinct, in which reason plays a leading role in controlling actions to achieve ultimate happiness, or *eudaimonia* (Aristotle, 1999). He emphasized that human beings are social beings (*zoon politikon*), which can only develop comprehensively when living in a community. According to Aristotle, virtue is not something that is available from birth but is the result of training and education. Reason helps people distinguish right from wrong and choose actions in accordance with moral principles. Human nature is also associated with the ability to think, reason, and judge, which are decisive factors for achieving intellectual and moral perfection. At the same time, the development of the individual must be placed in relation to the community, where social factors play a role in supporting and promoting the development of moral

qualities. From there, Aristotle affirmed that true happiness can only be achieved by living rationally and morally in a social environment (Aristotle, 1999).

It shows that Mencius and Aristotle both had views on human nature, but fundamentally differed in their approaches. Mencius believes that human beings have an inherently good nature, with the seeds of natural virtues such as causes, meanings, ceremonies, and wisdom, and that the task of human beings is to nurture these virtues through education and training (Mencius, 2007). In contrast, Aristotle did not consider human nature to be completely innately good; He emphasized the role of reason in distinguishing right from wrong and argued that virtue is formed through rational action and continuous training (Aristotle, 1999). Aristotle's progress in thought lay in his combination of moral philosophy with practice and social community, which greatly influenced Western philosophy during the Middle Ages through scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, who developed Catholic philosophy based on Aristotle. Meanwhile, Mencius' thought strongly influenced Confucianism, especially during the Chinese feudal dynasties. In the Modern and Modern periods, Aristotle's thought continued to influence Western political philosophy and morality, while Mencius' thought became the moral foundation in East Asian society. During the Middle Ages and the Modern Period, philosophy mainly focused on theological and metaphysical issues, especially the relationship between man and God, rather than analyzing human nature independently. Philosophy is strongly influenced by religion, especially Christianity, where man is seen as a creature dependent on God's will. It is only in the modern period, with the development of science and secular thought, that philosophy shifts its focus to human beings as independent individuals, upholding human nature, freedom and personal consciousness.

Views on human nature in modern philosophy

In modern philosophy, one of the prominent schools is existentialism, with Jean-Paul Sartre being the most prominent representative. According to Sartre, humans are not bound by any nature at birth, and must decide for themselves all values, actions, and meanings of life. This view is in stark contrast to Mencius's conception of the fixed nature of human good or evil. Sartre argues that there is no one priori nature that governs human beings, but it is through their actions that they create their own nature. Thus, each individual is the result of free choices and individual actions, and is not governed by any pre-existing good or evil nature. Sartre's thought strongly challenged traditional notions of human nature. In the worldview of existentialism, people are not born with a fixed meaning or value. Each individual has to create their own life, and this means that they are fully responsible for their actions and choices. Sartre laid the foundation for the idea of absolute human freedom and rejected any imposition of social or natural elements on human nature. In his philosophy, man cannot blame his innate nature or

circumstances to justify his actions. This is in stark contrast to Mencius, who believed that good nature is the natural and fixed foundation of human beings, which can develop through education and training.

However, not all modern philosophers agree with Sartre and the existentialist view of the complete denial of the fixed nature of man. Modern humanism, another school of philosophy, has a more conciliatory view of human nature. According to modern humanistic philosophers, although people do not have a fixed nature, they still have the potential to develop good qualities. This means that people are not born good or evil, but have the potential to develop both good and bad sides, depending on social conditions, living environment and educational process. Modern humanism emphasizes the role of the social and cultural environment in the formation and development of human personality. According to this point of view, human beings are considered products of the social environment in which they live, and moral values and qualities do not only come from the person himself, but also depend on cultural, educational and social factors. Thus, modern humanism accepts that human nature is not fixed but also not completely free as existentialism assumes. Rather, it depends on the process of interaction between people and the society and culture in which they live.

The historical process changed the conception of human nature from ancient to modern times

The view of human nature has changed from ancient to modern. The reason for this is due to the progress in awareness and development of society. In ancient times, human beings were understood through the lens of collective morality and society, such as Aristotle's view of reason and community. In ancient times, when humans lived in agricultural societies and small communities, the view of human nature was often more static and fixed. Mencius and other Confucian philosophers saw society as a fixed system in which each individual had his or her place and responsibilities. In the Middle Ages, religious thought dominated, considering people to depend on the divine will. However, since the Enlightenment and modernity, science and secular knowledge have developed, human beings have been seen as free, conscious individuals and capable of self-determination, reflecting the shift from theological thought to anthropology and existentialism. In modern times, when we look at the change in the way we understand human nature, we see that social, cultural, and economic factors have a major impact on shaping this concept. Because, in industrial and modern societies, as human beings face constant economic and social changes, philosophers begin to realize that human nature is not something immutable. With this conception, Marx pointed out that human nature is not abstract but real, not natural but historical. Human beings are a unified entity between biological factors and social factors, but it is the social factor that is the true nature of human beings. Therefore, in the conception of Marx's philosophy, man is an

entity in the dialectical unity between nature and society. Humans are born from nature, follow the laws of nature, and at the same time, human existence and development are associated with the existence and development of society. In his *Treatise on Phoenician* (1845) Marx: "*Human nature is not something abstract, inherent in a separate individual. In its realism, human nature is the sum of social relations*" (Marx-Engels (1995), *Complete Volume, 42, National Publishing House, Hanoi, p.372*)

This shows that, through practical activities, humans have transformed nature, society, and themselves and have made the history of human society. Outlining the role of the relationship between the elements that make up human nature, the relationship between the individual and society is an important contribution of Marx's philosophy. Here, the individual person is understood as living individuals, who are the creators of social relations; The richness of each individual depends on the richness of its social relationships. Rather, each individual is the sum of not only existing relationships, but also the history of those relationships. The turning point in human social development was marked by the fact that man began to know how to use the tools available in nature, gradually approaching the point of making completely new tools, creating completely new means of living for his life. From that time, humans have escaped from the state of animals to enter the history of human society. Regarding this, in the work *German Ideology*, C. Mark and Ph. Engels wrote: "Man himself begins by distinguishing himself from animals as soon as man begins *to produce* his means of subsistence – a step prescribed by the organization of the human body" (Marx-Eggel, *Complete Works*, p.3, p.29). Over time, thanks to labor and regular social communication, people form voices and languages, thereby strongly promoting the process of human beings escaping from the animal kingdom to form human society. Therefore, scientists agree that although human beings are "part of the natural world", "living in the heart of nature" as C. Marx said, if they do not communicate with the community of people in society, are not educated, they cannot develop normally, they cannot become human beings in the true sense. Immanuel Kant asserted that: "Man can only become a person through education" (Kant, 2007). This emphasizes the role of education in the formation and development of human nature. Although humans have a special biological structure with a developed brain, full development can only be achieved through social interaction and education. Education helps individuals practice skills, qualities, and mindsets, thereby becoming a conscious and responsible member of society. Social factors are not only affected through physical organs but also through the process of learning, training and labor of individuals, helping people develop comprehensively (Kant, 2007). Karl Marx argued that human nature is not an immutable entity, but changes through the process of labor and relations of production. Labor not only creates material wealth but also shapes social people, where class ideology and the role of the individual in production have a profound impact on behavior and morality. Social people, through labor activities, have exploited and

transformed nature to serve economic development. However, the overexploitation of resources and harmful agents from industrial activities, such as toxic waste and war, is having serious consequences for the environment and people themselves. The destruction of nature leads to climate change, changing natural living conditions, forcing humans to adapt. However, the human biological body's ability to adapt is limited and cannot respond immediately to these negative effects. The reciprocal relationship between social man and natural man becomes clear: when man transforms nature through labor, nature also reacts, causing challenges that man faces and seeks to overcome.

The impact of globalization and technology on human nature today

The impact of globalization and technology on human nature has become one of the important topics in modern philosophy. The rapid development of information technology and the rise of global connectivity have changed the way people interact, live, and think. No longer limited by space and time, people today can access information from all over the world with just a few clicks, and this has led to profound changes in the way we perceive ourselves as well as society. With the spread of global media, elements such as pop culture, values and lifestyles from different cultures have gradually penetrated into every corner of human life. This leads to people being increasingly influenced by external factors, including the media, global culture, and also pressures from the economy and the market. In the past, human nature was often shaped by local culture and social factors in a particular environment. However, in the age of globalization, with the rise of cultural and technological exchanges, these factors are no longer limited to geographical borders. Global connectivity has weakened traditional cultural boundaries, making it difficult for classical philosophical and moral systems to be fully applied to modern society. From Mencius's point of view, the benevolent human nature, developed in the context of a traditional Confucian society with strict social and moral rules, now faces the challenge of living in a much more diverse and complex cultural environment. Moral values and conceptions of right and wrong are no longer defined by a single philosophical system, but are governed by a variety of ideas, depending on the cultural and social context.

Information technology not only affects how people interact but also how people understand themselves. Social media and digital media have created a space where people can flexibly "build" their self-image, changing based on how they want to be perceived by others. This creates flexibility in self-expression, but also poses great challenges to the authenticity of human nature. While Mencius believed that human nature is fixed and can develop through education and training, in the modern world, with the strong impact of technology and globalization, human nature seems to have become as changeable and not fixed as before. Human beings are an entity that is simultaneously influenced by both natural and social factors, and the interaction between these two factors has changed human nature through each

period of history. According to Marx, the development of science and technology shows that the natural sciences and the social sciences are inseparable, but must be considered in a unified manner Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1980). *The Complete Volume* (Vol. 42, p.179). Human beings naturally change through adaptation to the environment and biology, while social humans change through labor, communication, and production relations. In the modern technological society, these impacts become more complex, as technology and digital technology profoundly affect the way people live, work, and think. Therefore, human nature continues to change when it has to adapt to an increasingly technological and volatile social environment.

In the context of globalization, human nature is strongly affected by cultural intersection and diverse interactions between ethnicities. Traditional values are no longer unique but gradually have to adapt to new ideological currents, forming a multicultural environment. Natural people and social people are changing when they not only accept global values but also need to preserve and develop separate national identities. To ensure harmonious development, people need to develop both physically and mentally, through education and comprehensive health care. The combination of common global values such as human rights and equality with specific national values will help people develop comprehensively in the modern world while still retaining their own identity, promoting cultural understanding and integration. In a digital society, natural people and social people must change to adapt to the rapid development of technology and globalization. Natural people not only need physical training but also develop skills to use digital technology, so as not to be left behind in the digital world. At the same time, social people must also adapt to the norms and values of globalization, such as competition and personal success, while preserving the traditional values of the community. Traditional elements such as compassion, fairness, and morality are set in the current context. However, for comprehensive development, people need to combine digital competence and traditional values, balance personal development and social responsibility, and maintain ethics in a more competitive and pragmatic environment. This change requires not only technological competence but also the maintenance and development of human values.

The global economy has a strong impact on the nature of human nature and society today. On the natural side, the increase in economic pressure forces humans to exploit and consume natural resources at a rapid rate, leading to changes in habitats and ecosystems. This not only affects physical health, but also creates stresses in balancing work and personal life. Socially, economic globalization promotes fierce competition, making people increasingly pragmatic and focused on personal success. This can undermine moral values, community spirit, and mutual interest, when profit and short-term success are the top priorities. The change in human nature from ancient times to modern times reflects adaptation to social,

cultural and economic conditions over time. From the notions of ethics and community in ancient times to the personal and pragmatic values of modern society, human nature has continuously evolved. Research on human nature today needs to continue to explore the balance between traditional values and the requirements of a digital society. This opens up the direction of practical application in preserving the cultural identity of ethnic groups, and at the same time orients scientific research on the relationship between natural humans and society in the context of globalization, in order to promote comprehensive and sustainable development.

5. Conclusion

Human nature has been concerned since ancient times, with many famous philosophers offering diverse views on the matter. In ancient times, philosophers such as Aristotle emphasized that human nature is a combination of reason and instinct, in which reason plays a key role in helping people live morally and achieve happiness. Ancient man was seen as a social creature, which could only develop comprehensively in a community environment and through rational action. Eastern philosophy, such as Mencius, emphasizes the inherent good nature of human beings, but must be nurtured through education and training. In modern times, the concept of human nature has changed profoundly under the influence of science, technology and globalization factors. In Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy, human beings are seen as free individuals, without a fixed nature, and it is their free actions that determine their nature. The development of the social and natural sciences also shows that human nature is not only influenced by innate factors, but also by the social and economic environment. These changes reflect a shift from a society based on moral and communal values to an industrialized and globalized society where competition, individuality, and short-term success become the dominant factors. The change in the concept of human nature from ancient to modern times is an inevitable result of social, technological and economic development. Today's humans not only need to adapt to a more complex social environment, but they also face new ethical, ecological, and technological challenges. This opens up the need to study human nature in a multi-dimensional way, combining both natural and social factors, in order to solve environmental issues, sustainable development, and cultural harmony in the digital age. For Vietnam and other countries, promoting human nature in today's society requires a combination of preserving traditional values and developing technological capacity and social skills. It is necessary to focus on moral education and community lifestyle in parallel with equipping people with digital skills so that people can adapt to technological developments. Each country should develop a comprehensive human development strategy, not only focusing on individual achievement but also associated with community values, ethics, and social responsibility, thereby creating a sustainable and humane environment for future development.

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