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Nature v. Potential: A Critical Analysis of Hsun Tzu's Work, "Man's Nature is Evil"

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A Critical Analysis of Hsun Tzu's Work "Man's Nature is Evil"

For as long as we have existed, humanity has repeatedly endeavored to understand and define ourselves. As cultures have aged and grown, humans have both heroically defied expectations and foolishly fallen into endless cycles, leaving those who attempt to determine our nature with a difficult, complicated task. How can a humanity that is naturally good and willing to selflessly pursue justice also perpetuate patterns of great evil? How can a humanity that is naturally evil and capable of creating devastating ruin also strive to achieve peace and cultivate artistic creativity? Throughout history, humans have written endless introspective works, voicing both grief stricken outrage and extreme admiration for our choices and their consequences. From the vantage point of many different ages, perspectives and experiences, we have drawn countless different conclusions about what it means to be human.

Like many who have gone before and come after him, Hsun Tzu offers his readers yet another attempt to define the nature of humanity. In his work "The Nature of Humankind is Evil", Hsun Tzu presents a direct, highly critical view of human nature by pointing out our instinctive, emotional desires and the consequences he believes come as a result. His argument, though, lacks the nuance needed to accurately portray and assess humanity, as it dismisses or entirely ignores important characteristics of humanity, such as a yearning to learn and a strong conviction to create. We are complex creatures and the attempt to assign our nature to a simple label of good or evil is a direct denial of our humanity. While the evil that Hsun Tzu addresses cannot be ignored, neither can our capacity for good. Perhaps the nature of humanity cannot be accurately described as either good or evil but, instead, as endlessly capable.

Hsun Tzu begins his argument with a few direct statements about humanity by mentioning three specific aspects of human emotion: a fondness for profit, a propensity for hate

and envy, and a love of beautiful things. Hsun Tzu's assessment of humanity is blunt and admirably honest, calling attention to human tendencies that have historically been incredibly problematic. "He is born with feelings of envy and hate," writes Hsun Tzu, speaking of humankind, "and if he indulges these, they will lead him into violence and crime, and all sense of loyalty and good faith will disappear" (71). Truly studying the consequences of what Hsun Tzu calls our "emotional nature", however, also requires us to study the consequences of *not* indulging (71).

History is littered with both individual and collective choices to not engage in hateful activities, selfish profit, or reckless pursuits of beauty, and it carries countless examples of "loyalties and good faith" that did not disappear. Take for example, the stories of Gandhi who refused to engage in hate or violence, allowing him to remain faithful to his goals of peace and political independence. If humanity is to be accurately scrutinized and examined to find its nature, then it must be done comprehensively. Human history is marked by a dialectic of terrible crimes and heroic choices but to observe and acknowledge, as Hsun Tzu does, that humans are *capable* of evil is not the same as being evil by nature.

Connecting the need for education to his belief about the nature of humanity, Hsun Tzu compares humanity to warped wood by saying that, due to its natural state, it must be forced and shaped before it can become straight and useful (72). When wood is chosen for a project, however, it is the plank's flexible quality and strong fibers, not its original shape, that determines its identity and its usefulness. It carries in its nature the same potential to be a peaceful paintbrush as it does to be the shaft of a murderous spear.

To observe, as Hsun Tzu does, that wood is warped in its original state means nothing more than to observe that it is not straight. The fact that the wood's natural characteristics have not yet been harnessed and cultivated to create something productive or positive does not mean

that it is, by nature, the opposite of these things. Like timber, humans begin life with unrefined manners and undeveloped philosophies, and to acquire them, need some degree of teaching and practice. Like the wood in Hsun Tzu's example, though, this observation speaks, not to our nature, but to our potential. In the same way that wood can be manipulated to serve nearly any purpose, the education and ritual Tzu speaks of is simply a process of developing and stunting various aspects of our human nature. This process is not inherently good and without it humanity is not inherently evil.

If, as Hsun Tzu proposes, education is the way to remedy man's evil nature, why do two equally educated parties so often go to war for what they believe is a good cause and produce the same strife and violence he blames on our evil nature? Education does not produce good or bad people; it produces *equipped* people and arms them with a cause. Like the diverse, ever-changing needs and interests of a country at war, the causes we adopt and education that we prepare ourselves with can lead us to any end - good or evil. Humanity's equal abilities to harness our education and beliefs to enact both positive change and destructive ruin is an aspect of humankind not properly accounted for in Hsun Tzu's argument. Perhaps, as he suggests, we are not good by nature, but is the evil we perpetuate truly more representative of our nature than the good we pursue?

In his argument, Hsun Tzu pauses to offer his audience an important distinction, saying, "That part of man which cannot be learned or acquired by effort is called the nature; that part of him which can be acquired by learning and brought to completion by effort is called conscious activity" (72). He argues that because productive activities like learning and creating require effort and conscious activity they are not part of our nature and thus, in our natural state, we must be unproductive. In making this point, however, he fails to explain why, then, humans willingly strive so hard to engage in activities that do not come naturally to us.

If we are not born naturally capable of creative production and scholarly learning, then our repeated attempts to learn and to create in spite of the challenge and effort it requires, must come from something inside of us. Hsun Tzu himself even hints at what this might be when he discusses humanity's instinctive, natural desires and affinities. He criticizes our fondness for beauty, claiming that it leads to "license and wantonness" yet he fails to also acknowledge that this same fondness is often the driving factor behind our desire to create and incorporate beauty (72). What Hsun Tzu has been quick to label as strife could, in a different individual, at a different moment, be just as easily defined as "inspiration".

In the same way, the desire for profit that Hsun Tzu observes in humanity extends to more than personal gain. If this trait is evidence of an evil nature, why does it also prompt people like child labor activist, Mother Jones, to stand up and fight to obtain rights and benefits that would profit people she didn't even know. In the same way that our love of beauty and music has inspired so many individuals to create, the desire for physical gain and profit is not exclusively a selfish one as many throughout history have endeavored tirelessly to distribute needed goods and improve the wellbeing of those around them directly benefiting themselves.

By calling attention to our tendencies for conflict and anger, Hsun Tzu concludes that human nature must be evil. Hsun Tzu's observations of ruin and strife caused by human behavior, desires and emotions, provide him with plenty of evidence to argue against the idea that we are naturally good. Despite the truth in his argument, though, Hsun Tzu's depiction of humanity is inaccurate and lacking. He leaves no room in his assessment of human nature for other equally innate human responses to desire and emotion. Hsun Tzu rightly calls for his audience to consider the destruction and pain we are capable of creating, but when he doesn't also address our ability to cultivate creativity and peace, he ignores one of the most important aspects of human nature: potential.

When Hsun Tzu argues “to find it practically possible or impossible to do something and to be capable or incapable of doing something are two entirely different things” he is right; capability and practical action *are* different; that difference is called potential (78). As individuals, humans are defined by the decisions they make and the specific actions they decide to take, not by the infinite theoretical actions they are capable of taking. Our potential to naturally pursue learning and benevolence, though, cannot be merely theoretical as Hsun Tzu suggests. From the vantage point of a world where technology has provided infinite opportunities, it’s easy to see that the desires to learn, to create and to help others are hardly unusual let alone unnatural.

Time and time again, humanity has proven itself willing to break expectations and be impractical in the pursuit of seemingly impossible things. Humans have known their theoretical potential to fly for centuries, and it was this potential that caused Orville and Wilbur to leave behind the practicality of carriages and ships to travel by sky. In the same way, humans have also understood the potential of their minds and chosen to endure hardship to pursue education, understood the weight of their words and chosen to speak up despite opposition and understood the power of their message and chosen to create art in the midst of controversy. There is, as Hsun Tzu argues, a difference between capability and possibility, but there is also an unmistakable connection. Perhaps there are barriers that can make pursuing and cultivating our capacity for learning, creativity, and morality impractical, but this doesn’t make them impossible.

Despite undying efforts to suppress it, unprovoked evil can arise even in the most innocent and peaceful communities. Stranger still, though, good also has a way of emerging even from the most hopelessly corrupt situations. The goals and desires that humanity strives for come in a diverse, precarious blend of controversial beauty, variable justice and complicated profit. We have repeatedly demonstrated a capacity for both destruction and creation, continuously meeting,

exceeding and ignoring expectations. The study of human behavior is a study of broken patterns. Why should the study of human nature be any different? Maybe the attempt to define our nature as entirely good or evil is a rightfully impossible endeavor. We are, by nature, complex and endlessly capable.

As Hsun Tzu closes his argument, he ends with a curious statement proclaiming, “Environment is the important thing!” and adds emphasis by repeating it twice (79). Hsun Tzu looked at the world around him with both a critical and hopeful lens. He saw evil in human behavior but he also believed in our ability to fight evil. Perhaps, if he could experience it, Hsun Tzu would find our current world and its inhabitants different from his own, and perhaps he wouldn’t. Either way, Hsun Tzu’s work poses a question that still stands. Are we, through the power of intention and conscious choice, capable of influencing our world, establishing meaningful education, and curbing evil? For thousands of years, we have proven our potential.

What now are we going to do with it?

Works Cited

Hsun Tzu. "The Nature of Humanity is Evil." *Reading the World*, edited by Michael Austin, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc. pp. 72-80.