

Xunzi on Empathy: A Confucian and Biological Naturalist Viewpoint

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Abstract

It is said that a science of empathy is emerging from several disciplinary studies in the West. As a biological naturalist from ancient Confucian school, Xunzi (circa 313BCE-218BCE) shares much of his modern Western counterparts on biological understanding of empathy with three but minor differentiations, that is terminology, approach and the goal of the empathy respectively. The aim of this paper is to provide an elaboration and justification to Xunzi's Confucian philosophy that he would like to join and expand the empathic progress with the contemporary 'age of empathy' or 'empathic civilization' proposed by his Western counterparts today.

Keywords: Xunzi, human nature, empathy, biological naturalism, Confucianism.

An Emerging 'Science of *Empathy*' in the West

It is said that the notion that human beings is inherently selfish but aggression and hostility are part of human nature is ingrained in Western thought for centuries. However, Howard C. Cutler concludes in 1998 that pessimistic view of humanity has been turned on in recent years and coming to a view of our underlying nature as gentle and compassionate:

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- 1) the latest scientific research in 1986 by Seville Statement on violence was that ‘it is scientifically incorrect to say that we have an inherited tendency to make war or act violently. That behaviour is not genetically programmed into human nature.’ⁱ
- 2) Some social psychological investigators such as C. Daniel Batson and Nancy Eisenberg from their numerous studies over the years show that humans have a tendency toward altruistic behaviour.
- 3) The sociologist Linda Wilson seek to discover that ‘altruism may be part of our basic survival instinct’ resulted from human traumatic disasters.
- 4) The psychophysiological (mind-body medicine) Larry Scherwitz found that people who were most self-focused were more likely to develop coronary heart disease, and a close bond with others had as increased chance of survival.ⁱⁱ

The list of recent studies demonstrated by Howard C. Cutler was longer than the cases mentioned above, but it doesn’t alter much of the conclusion that ‘the basic of human nature is compassionate rather than aggressive’ in the West since 80 decade in 20th century.

This compassionate tendency of studies is more convincible if we turn toward an emerging ‘science of empathy’ in the West from both of biologists and social scientists’ disciplines. Since the eminent primatologist Frans de Waal claims that we human live in ‘an age of empathy’ from his *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lesson for a Kinder Society* in 2009, a corpus of titles on empathy has been collected since then include *Why Empathy Matters*, *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, *The Science of Empathy*, *The Empathy Gap*, *Why Empathy Is Essential (and Endangered)*, *Empathy in the Global World*, *How Companies Prosper When They Create Widespread Empathy*, and some pedagogical books like *Teaching*

Empathy, Teaching children Empathy, and The Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child. Jeremy Rifkin summarises the naturalist and social scientist's based of the emerging 'science of empathy' in his *The Empathic Civilization* in 2009 as follows:

Biologists and cognitive neuroscientists are discovering mirror-neurons – the so-called empathy neurons – that allow human beings and other species to feel and experience another's situation as if it were one's own. We are, it appears, the most social of animals and seek intimate participation and companionship with our fellows.

Social scientists, in turn, are beginning to re-examine human history from an empathic lens and, in the process, discovering previously hidden strands of the human narrative which suggest that human evolution is measured not only by the expansion of power over nature, but also by the intensification and extension of empathy to more diverse others across broader temporal and spatial domains. The growing scientific evidence that we are a fundamentally empathic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society, and may well determine our fate as a species.ⁱⁱ

As a real conclusion, 'empathy' is no longer ignorable and it is considered as one of human good nature. Steven Pinker, a psychological professor at Harvard University, in his *The Better Angels of Our Nature* in 2011 explains his view of *empathy* as one of the four better angels along with *self-control*, *moral sense* and *reason*:

Humans are not innately good (just as they are not innately evil), but they come equipped with motives that can orient them away from violence and toward cooperation and altruism. *Empathy* (particularly in the sense of sympathetic concern) prompts us to feel the pain of others and to align their interests with our own. *Self-*

control allows us to anticipate the consequences of acting on our impulses and to inhibit them accordingly. The *moral sense* sanctifies a set of norms and taboos that govern the interactions among people in a culture, sometimes in ways that decrease violence..... And the faculty of *reason* allows us to extricate ourselves from our parochial vantage points, to reflect on the ways in which we live our lives, to deduce ways in which we could be better off, and to guide the application of the other better angels of our nature.ⁱⁱⁱ

Steven Pinker is although holding on to a more neutral standpoint on human nature that humans are neither innately good nor evil, but the reality is that empathy composed fundamentally of human good nature is commonly accepted by several disciplinary scholars in the West recently.

In a nutshell, the tendency of believing that humans are not inherently selfish and aggressive in the West in recent decades is supportable by a more fundamental study on what consists of human good nature with the existence of human ‘empathy’. Today the existence of human empathy was not only received and proven by several evidences from naturalist and social scientist’s study, the history of empathy as a science is also in the making. Jeremy Rifkin in his *The Empathic Civilization* and Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, for examples, traced the modern use of ‘empathy’ to British writer Vernon Lee in 1904 or American psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909, and how the use has been popularised in the mid-1940s onward before it reached its current status as a science in recent decades. This reorientation of human nature’s standpoint with a good and empathic evidence and understanding has pluralized the traditional Western selfish and aggressive viewpoints in modern context of society.^{iv}

Xunzi: A Biological and Confucian Viewpoints on Empathy

Compared with the empathic science from the modern West mentioned above, Xunzi was neither a naturalist nor social scientist in discipline, nor he a Westerner or contemporaneous to Steven Pinker as such from the East. He was an ancient Chinese philosopher from a humanistic Confucian school in today understanding, and lived somewhat later to Aristotle who lived in 384BCE-322BCE. Xunzi's Confucian philosophy, however, shared much of today's Western naturalist and social scientist believes in human empathy.

Xunzi, or Hsün Tzu (荀子, means 'Master Xun'), was a native of Chao (in modern Hebei, China) who lived during the Warring States Period, from 298BCE to 238BCE. Nothing is known about his early years of life. He was first known at the age of 50, around 264BCE, when he went to the state of Qi, and taught at Jixia Academy. Later, Xunzi was a Magistrate of Langlin, the State of Chu (Shandong, China today), until 238BCE, and was buried there (but the death's date is unknown).

Unlike the aphoristic style of the *Analects* and *Mencius*, Xunzi was a more rigorous thinker and wrote elaborately argued essays, which were collected into the book called *Xunzi* comprising 32 chapters. Xunzi has generally been considered as representing naturalistic Confucianism, compared with idealistic Confucianism by Mencius (孟子, 371BCE-289BCE), his contemporary, in ancient China. Xunzi's naturalistic Confucianism exerted far greater influence up through the Han (206BCE-220CE) to Tang (618CE-907CE) period than did Mencius. However, since then he was largely neglected until the nineteenth century. Mencius, instead, was regarded as in the direct line of transmission from Confucius (孔子, 551BCE-479BCE). Because of his naturalism and realism, he held special attraction for the modern Chinese.^v

From an introductory viewpoint, Confucian philosophy consists of philosophy of human nature,

philosophy of rites / propriety, and finally philosophy of heaven, and believes in indifferent nature between human nature and the heaven. To say Xunzi was a biological naturalist, because he defined in the very beginning the human nature biologically, for example:

Now, it is the inborn nature of man that when hungry he desires something to eat, that when cold he wants warm clothing, and that when weary he desires rest – such are essential qualities inherent in his nature. (23.6)^{vi}

Human nature, according to Xunzi, is nothing more than the biological fact. The biological nature cannot be said by itself good or evil in essence. However, it will become an evil until one follows the desires uncontrollably:

The nature of man is such that he is born with a love of profit. Following this nature will cause its aggressiveness and greedy tendencies to grow and courtesy and deference to disappear. Humans are born with feelings of envy and hatred. Indulging these feelings causes violence and crime to develop and loyalty and trustworthiness to perish. Man is born possessing the desires of the ears and eyes (which are fond of sounds and colors). Indulging these desires causes dissolute and wanton behavior to result and ritual and moral principles, precepts of good form, and the natural order of reason to perish. (23.2)

Therefore, to prevent human falling into the evil status of nature, an allocation of desirable goods among people is required, and this give room to the birth of philosophy of rites / propriety. For Xunzi, this was acquired by a conscious exertion:

Someone may ask: ‘if man’s nature is evil, how then are ritual principles and moral duty created?’ The reply is that

as a general rule ritual principles and moral duty are born of the acquired nature of the sage and are not the product of anything inherent in man's inborn nature... This being the case, ritual principles and moral duty, laws and standards, are the creation of the acquired nature of the sage and not the product of anything inherent in his inborn nature. (23.7)

The ritual principles as well as the moral duty are a set of allocation principles by matching one's own allocated goods with his position, emolument or service to the state:

It is the meaning of ritual principles that there should be rankings according to nobility or baseness, disparities between the privileges of old and young, and modes to match these with poverty and wealth, insignificance and importance. Hence, the Son of Heaven wears the dragon robe of royal red with its ceremonial cap, the feudal lords wear the black dragon robe with its ceremonial cap, the grand officers wear a skirt with an ornamented border at the bottom and the appropriate cap, and knights wear a hat of skin with their clothes. (10.3)

This conscious exertion of ritual principles and moral duty, or the acquired nature was not created from human inborn nature, was nothing special to modern biologists' understanding like Ernst Mayr in his *What Evolution Is?* (2001):

Few aspects of evolution have been more controversial than the explanation of the origin of human ethics...It is not automatically produced by evolution. Genuine ethics is the result of the thought of cultural leaders. We are not born with a feeling of altruism towards outsiders, but acquire it through cultural learning. It requires the redirecting of our

inborn altruistic tendencies toward a new target: outsiders.
(p. 259) ^{vii}

Finally, this acquired nature of ritual principles and moral duty is an unavoidable reality to human nature, or consists of what Xunzi understanding of philosophy of Nature, or more generally known as philosophy of Heaven in traditional China. For Xunzi, this acquired nature by its nature is non-purposive:

The course of Nature (天, Tian / Heaven) is constant: it does not survive because of the actions of a Yao (sage-emperor); it does not perish because of the actions of a Jie (wicked king). If you respond to the constancy of nature's course with good government, there will be good fortune; if you respond to it with disorder, there will be misfortune. (17.1)

The three philosophical standpoints above were the biological naturalistic response of Xunzi to his idealistic predecessor of Confucianism, Mencius, and that new contributed naturalist's Confucian philosophy comprised a systematic philosophy of human nature, of rites / propriety, and of heaven biologically in the history.

Now, what is the foundation of Xunzi's biological naturalistic Confucianism, or what is the status of empathy in Xunzi's Confucian philosophy in relation to the modern Western science of empathy? Difference to Mencius idealistic conception of human nature in the beginning which was the inborn 'conscience' (良知 / liangzhi in Chinese) in nature, as the conception has been adopted by United Nations into its *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as follows:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and

should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. (see “Preamble”, Article 1 and 18 respectively) ^{viii}

If the Mencius’ conscience should act towards others in a shared spirit, then the connotation is not much different from empathy as it ‘conjures up active engagement – the willingness of an observer to become part of another’s experience, to share the feeling of experience.’ ^{ix} If Xunzi was a biological naturalistic Confucian, then what was his standpoint to Mencius idealistic conception of human ‘conscience’?

For Xunzi, firstly, the “conscience” is but could be derived biologically from the human desires naturally:

‘Having desires’ and ‘lacking desires’ belong to different categories, those of life and death, not those of order and disorder. (22.11)

To avoid death, the human desires should be nurtured and satisfied with goods. This is the shared biological cognition that we could ‘feel’ or ‘empathise’ with other’s need for goods in life, and not much to do with moral conscience as Mencius supposed to be. In further terms of why should we care and satisfy other’s desires at the same time, Xunzi observed that:

How did ritual principles arise?...If in seeking to satisfy their desires men observe no measure and apportion things without limits, then it would be impossible for them not to contend over the means to satisfy their desires. Such contention leads to disorder. Disorder leads to poverty...so they established the regulations contained within ritual and moral principles in order to apportion things, to nurture the desires of men, and to supply the means for their satisfaction. (19.2)

Therefore, secondly, the Mencius' conscience is derived from a further need of an order to satisfy all men's desires. The regulations of ritual and moral principles is nothing more than but the institutionalization of 'conscience' which is to apportion things in order to satisfy all human desires.

The institutionalization of 'conscience', thirdly, is also a gradation of 'empathy' in modern Western understanding that human desires shall be matched with their social ranks:

When the gentleman has been nurtured by these things, he will also be fond of ritual of distinctions. What is meant by 'distinctions'? I say that these refer to the gradations of rank according to nobility or baseness, disparities between the privileges of old and young, and modes of identification to match these with poverty or wealth, insignificance or importance. (19.3)

If Xunzi's distinction could be redefined as 'empathy', then it is a very specific conception that what's to be empathized was the apportion things or goods according to one's rank in the society. Pertaining to the rationale of the gradations, according to Xunzi:

The Ancient Kings acted to control them with regulations, ritual, and moral principles, in order thereby to divide society into classes, creating therewith differences in status between the noble and base, disparities between the privileges of age and youth...All of this caused men to perform the duties of their station in life...only after this had been done was the amount and substance of the emolument paid by grain made to fit their respective stations. This indeed is the Way to make the whole populace live together in harmony and unity. (4.14)

This gradation between the statuses, disparities as such consists of Xunzi's philosophy of rites / propriety is also a very conception of empathy in term of the need of goods for life should be empathized, because it is a biological fact, but graded according to the gradation. In other words, Xunzi was not talking about empathy in general, rather his main concern is the gradation of empathy, and this gradation was no longer fixed:

“Although they be the descendants of kings and dukes or knights and grand officers, if they are incapable of devotedly observing the requirements of ritual and moral principles, they should be relegated to the position of commoners. Although they be the descendants of commoners, if they...are capable of devotedly observing the requirements of ritual principles and justice, they should be brought to the ranks of a prime minister, knight, or grand officer.” (9.1)

Consistent with his conception of acquired nature, Xunzi believes that one's gradation in the society depends on his / her conscious exertion of the need of ritual principles and moral duty to apportion goods, and the exact contribution to the goal among people in the reality.

Three Differences of Xunzi and Modern Conception on Empathy

As an ancient Confucian philosopher from the East, Xunzi understanding of empathy has at least three differentiations to his counterparts from the modern West.

The first differentiation is terminology. Instead of modern use of empathy in the West, Xunzi was inclined to denote the same psychological or moral feeling from the institutional perspective as 'distinction', 'gradation' and so on. He was not so much talking about the psychological

base of empathy, but how it works in the real world as humans are all biological animals that owe desires much to life. In other words, the modern neuroscientists, for example, are talking how humans experiencing another's situation as if it were one's own from empathic or psychological feeling (that is 'empathy'), then Xunzi's from graded or institutional based on same biological cognition that others' need of goods for life were not much different to ours.

The second differentiation is the provided argumentation from different disciplines. As an ancient biological naturalistic Confucian philosopher, Xunzi's biological argumentation was not much different principally from modern biologists like Ernst Mayr as mentioned above, he owed a neuroscientific explanation to the biological base of that 'distinction', 'gradation' as such in human nervous system (that is '*mirror neuron*'). However, the lacking could not weaken Xunzi's philosophy because it is still valid for non-neuroscientific level of biological understanding.

The third differentiation is the goal of argumentation. Regardless of the difference between naturalist and social scientist's study on empathy in the modern West which could be considered as descriptive study in general, Xunzi's theory of 'distinction', 'gradation' and so on is a prescriptive approach in order to justify the ideal of Sage-Emperor (圣王 / shèngwán in Chinese) in Confucian philosophy. The study of empathy in the West is usually to offer an explanation to the natural or social fact whether it is neuroscientific, biological, psychological, behaviour, sociological or something else. But Xunzi's is a justification to Confucian sage-Emperor as an ideal moral person-king who could realize the rationale of human gradation to make the whole populace live together in harmony and unity.

The three differentiations, however, are not the categorical difference between Xunzi and the West's. The difference is somewhat similar to the psychology to neuroscience within the study of empathy. As Steven Pinker remarks the trend of the study that:

Today the historian Lynn Hunt, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, and the psychologists Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley, among others, have championed the reading of fiction as an empathy expander and a force toward humanitarian progress. One might think that literary scholars would line up to join them...^x

In this case, I think Xunzi would like to join and expand the empathic progress with his biological naturalistic and a Confucian approach to the subject matter. Since Xunzi's philosophy was in itself a philosophy of empathy in different terminology, discipline and goal of argumentation, he has no problem with the contemporary 'age of empathy' or 'empathic civilization' proposed by his Western counterparts.

Endnotes

ⁱ The statement was finally adopted by UNESCO in 1989 in order to refute 'the notion that organized human violence is biologically determined'.

ⁱⁱ See Jeremy Rifkin, Excerpt from *The Empathic Civilization*, cited from Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 690.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, p. xxiv.

^{iv} The reviewer suggested that to compare with the ancient philosophers' viewpoint on human nature from the Greek is a good idea, but the paper's background was the relatively new and modern making of *empathic* science in the West.

^v See Tee Boon Chuan, 'The Calling of Modern Biology for Xunzi's Philosophy', *Journal of Contemporary Confucian Studies*, vol. 7 (Jan 2010), pp. 25-49.

^{vi} The citation '23.4' referred to as the sixth paragraph of chapter 23 from *Xunzi*, English translation by John Knoblock, Hunan and Beijing: Hunan People's Publishing House and Foreign Languages Press, 1999. The following citations also cited from the same source mentioned above.

^{vii} See Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is?* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p.259.

^{viii} For Mencius-based conscience of human rights system, see Guomundur S. Alfredsson and Asbjorn Eide eds., *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Common Standard of Achievement*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1999.

^{ix} See Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in A World in Crisis* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 12.

^x See Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, p. 711.

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