

Self-existence, Altru-existence and Human Nature

SHI Zhong-yang

Taiwan Central University, Taoyuan, Taiwan

ZHENG Da-hua

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University,
Hangzhou, China

The question whether human nature is good or evil has been argued about throughout the history. This paper contends that man's actions are driven by his needs for self-existence and altru-existence. Moral judgment is mostly determined by social norms, and different times may give different judgments to human actions. Whether man is good or evil depends on the actions taken in the situations and from the balance between self-existence and altru-existence in him. The balance point between self-existence and altru-existence may vary from person to person and from culture to culture. Even in the same person, at the different stages of his life or in different situations, the position of the balance point may change accordingly. This paper also applies the idea of balance point to the explanation of the formation of the Chinese national character.

Keywords: human nature, self-existence, altru-existence, balance point

Introduction

The philosophical doctrines of Confucius¹ and Mencius² in ancient China assumed that man is born good, and in *The Three Character Classic*, the opening sentence goes, "Men at their birth are naturally good."³ While another Chinese philosopher Xun Zi (313-238 BCE) professed the inborn evil of human nature; he "maintained that man is bad" (Plutschow, 2002, p.87). And the school of the legalists represented by philosopher Han Fei (280-233 BCE) "went even further, to assert that the evil in man's nature is such that it is incapable for him to do any good." (He, Z. & Peng, G., 2009, p. 277). I can hardly agree with either of them. The so-called "good" or "evil" is only defined by social norms. Deeply-rooted in the core of human nature, there only is the need for existence. This existence consists of two parts: self-existence and altru-existence. If man's action is driven by the primary impetus of self-existence so much as to affect and infringe others' interests and even existence, he shows his evil nature. But when his action is motivated by his altru-existence in him, helping others at the cost of his own interests and even existence, he is considered good and benevolent. I admit it to be true that man's nature is

SHI Zhong-yang, Master of Chinese philosophy, National Central University, Taiwan.

ZHENG Da-hua (Correspondent author), Master of arts, Professor of cross-culture studies, School of International Studies, Zhejiang University.

¹ Confucius (551-479 BCE), the founder of Confucian school, thought that benevolence is innate in man.

² Mencius (385-303 BCE) is a Chinese philosopher, who followed and supported Confucian idea of benevolence. He also proclaimed his idea of obligation. So in China Confucius' benevolence and Mencius' obligation are referred to as the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius. Mencius said, "The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards." (Mencius, 1998, XI. Book 1)

³ This short piece of 1744 Chinese characters was attributed to Wang Yinglin (1223-1296). Actually, its real author has not yet been convincingly confirmed (see Gray, Phebe X. Trans. 2010).

too complicated to be definitely judged good or evil. Man sometimes will show his good nature, and sometimes will reveal his evil side. So man's nature can be good as well as evil, or conversely, as Blaise Pascal puts in his *Pensees*, "Man is neither angel nor beast" (Pascal, 1966, p. 678).

Self-existence

Self-existence according to its word formation simply means the existence of oneself. We know that cells and organs of a human body need nutrition, oxygen and water to keep alive (Sizer, 2011, p. 74), and this kind of needs is unconscious. So self-existence is an instinct and innate in man, biologically encoded in his genes. On the conscious level, these needs are expressed as desires for food, oxygen and water. Because oxygen and water are usually plenty and easily available, food is inevitably what a living being most desires for its existence. If there are no others in competition for food, the living being will simply busy himself with obtaining food without showing his selfishness or any attributes of evil nature. Take the hero of Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe, 1994), in which he struggles for his existence in an uninhabited island, where he leads a non-social life, no one competing with him for food. So what he does has nothing to do with good or evil nature. Whatever he is doing is only for self-existence.

When a human baby is born, he instinctively turns around his head seeking his mother's nipple to suck milk. When the baby is hurt by something and feels pain, he will cry for help and protection. When he feels cold, he will cry for warmth. When he wets his diaper and feels uncomfortable, he will also cry, sending the signal for comfort. These actions are all automatic without any thought. At this stage, a human individual is doing whatever he can by instinct for his existence, most via others' help. In other words, his existence depends on others. When a baby grows to be a child, now he can talk, walk, do some easy things, and even learn to do difficult things. Whatever he does, he is not just acting for his present existence but actually for his future existence, that still means his actions are driven by self-existence.

And when he grows to be an adult, he has to work, earning his bread to sustain his existence. And at this stage, though his need for self-existence is met, he still has to prepare for his future existence. Again take Robinson Crusoe for example. When Robinson has carried wheat and other food from the wrecked ship to the island and found fresh water there, he can manage to live for some time. Yet he does not stop his activities, for he has to think of his future existence. So he starts to tame wild goats on the island, collect and dry wild grapes, and even tries to grow wheat. All these actions are motivated by his need for future existence. What's more, his work is always performed single-handed, and what he has done has nothing to do with others' interests, so he cannot be judged morally good or evil. On such a wild island, he is like an animal, doing what he can to sustain his life. Yet he is unlike animals, for animals such as bees only work for a store of a winter's food, while he will strive to store unlimited amount of live-stocks and other substances, which may be called in a derogatory term "greedy", or in a commendatory term "prudence" or "providence".

But If food is not sufficient for a number of creatures, there will appear competitions and conflicts not only in a human society, but even in an eagle nest. If food is not enough and there are two baby eagles in the nest, the stronger one might kill the weaker one when the parents are out⁴. The impetus of man's self-existence is so

⁴ see <http://a-z-animals.com/animals/eagle/2008-2011>. Accessed 9-August-2011.

powerful that it will in special occasions drive him to do whatever necessary to sustain his existence, no matter whether the action violates morals and laws or not. Robinson has to capture or even kill other human beings to protect his own interests, which shows his selfishness and cruelty in his nature. It is true that almost everyone will fight to protect his interests and life when he is in danger of losing them, and the force of self-existence, consciously or unconsciously, drives man to act.

Can we conclude from the above that because of the force of self-existence, man is by nature simply evil in a society? The answer is no. The reason for the negative answer is that man's actions are not only determined by self-existence but also dominated by altru-existence.

Altru-existence

Altru-existence is a newly-coined word by me. In any dictionary there is no this word, yet there does exist this concept in our minds. And there are many actions and activities indicating the attribute of altru-existence. Altru-existence means the existence of others usually at the cost of one's own interests and even existence. Altru-existence should not be confused with altruism. The latter, according to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, means the actions performed "when you care about or help other people, even though this brings no advantage to yourself" (Summers, 2003, p. 42), or I would rather refer it to behaviors which promote the survival chances of others at a cost of one's own, while the former refers to not merely those self-sacrificing behaviors but also the impetus of the actions from the depth of one's heart. In other words, altru-existence includes not only the behaviors but also the instinct on the unconscious level and the desire on the conscious level for such actions.

Here I must emphasize that like self-existence, altru-existence is also innate in man, biologically encoded in human genes. The difference lies mainly in that self-existence is encoded in the genes of the whole body, while altru-existence most prominently in the reproductive system of human body. Sex instinct is the original driving force of altru-existence. The reproductive system of man has the function of creating a new life (another life). This function determines its contributing property. It is acknowledged by many that lust is an attribute of bad nature. But I assert here that lust or sexual desire is mostly related to altru-existence, that is to say, biologically speaking, lust is a neutral or even a commendatory term.

Sigmund Freud gave sexual drives an importance and centrality in human life. He also argued that sexual instinct or energy (libido) is the single most important motivating force in adult life (Freud, 1931). But I would argue that sexual energy can only play a part as important as instincts and desires of self-existence in driving man's actions. Both self-existence and altru-existence are the motivating forces of man's sustainable development and continuity.

It is commonly acknowledged that sex is the natural force which can bring a new life into being, but what I want to assert here is that sexual activities are more or less self-sacrificing or at least at the cost of the parents' energy or health. For many species, sex and giving birth to the young incur their own death. Taking salmons, when they migrate from the ocean to the upper waters of their birthplace river, the females will spawn and the males fertilize eggs by covering them with milt. A few days after this sort of external sexuality both male and female salmons are destined to die. Neither can many species escape their doomed fate several days after mating and egg-laying. Such instances in the animal realm are countless. As for human beings, now there is no scientific

evidence indicating sex activities might harm the health of the pairs, but it is accepted and personally experienced that when a man is hungry or ill, he has no sexual desire, which indicates that only when a man has extra energy and nutrients can he function normally in sex, or we may say, sexuality costs much of the doers' energy and nutrition.

Sex, the primary and essential layer of altru-existence, is the foundation of other layers; or in other words, other layers of altru-existence are derived from sex. Because of sex, animals are disposed to court sexual partners, birds showing their merits to attract the opposite sex; male lions fighting with each other for the mating monopoly. Though the fighting is brutal and even causes injury, the victor can pass his stronger genes to the next generation, which can improve the quality of the pride, and of course can be referred to as altru-existent actions. As to man, because of sex, and the desire for sexual partners, especially when the desire is more or less hard to fulfill, there emerges love. The more people are attracted to each other, the more they are in love, which may lead to altru-existent actions. Therefore, throughout human history, there have been so many love stories, some very touching and self-sacrificing. When the couple has begot kids, they will extend the love between them to the young, and do what they can to the benefits and safety of the next generation. All these can be regarded as evidence of their good nature. Actually, what they have done is just the expression of altru-existence.

Besides the love between the sexual partners and the love of parents for their kids, there are of course other loves, such as one's love for his parents, grand parents, brothers and relatives, and his love can be extended to the non-blood related persons. All these loves, I think, are the expressions of altru-existence. So I claim that altru-existence is the essential force of human continuity. Here I have to point out that many loves and actions, appearing to be of altru-existence property, are cardinal of self-existence in nature. That leads to the question of the relationship between self-existence and altru-existence.

The Relationship between Self-existence and Altru-existence

Self-existence and altru-existence are not equally encoded in man's genes. Every cell, organ or system of a human body needs nutrition and the like to keep alive, so self-existence is primary and almost dominates the whole span of a human life. From this we can deduce that in a society, where competition is inevitable, man often shows his evil side of nature. Yet we should acknowledge that altru-existence is also encoded in human body, especially in reproductive system, and with the help of moral education and the enforcement of laws, altru-existence is strengthened in man to keep balance with self-existence. Generally, man's self-existence and altru-existence can maintain a rough balance, and they are inter-dependent though it is easily understood that different stages of a human life, different situations, and different nations may witness the different balance points between self-existence and altru-existence in man.

When a baby is born, what he needs most is self-existence, so at this stage of his life, all his behaviors are performed to meet the needs of self-existence. As I mentioned in section 1 he turns his head about, seeking milk, and cries for help and so on. Because his existence is completely dependent on others and there is no competition with others for substance of his existence, he does not show his evil nature, which is derived basically from one's self-existence in a competitive community. Thus some people, including Chinese philosopher Confucius and Mencius, think that man is born good, for in their eyes, little babies appear so naïve and vulnerable without any ability or intention to harm others.

When the baby grows to be a kid, he has to compete with his brothers, sisters and neighbors, and has to handle matters with others. Then he gradually shows his nature, as a Chinese old saying goes “One’s character at three years of age seals his fate”. And a British poet Wordsworth has written a similar sentence, “The child is father of the man” (Wordsworth, 1888). Because of the difference of each child’s genes passed down from previous generations and their different family backgrounds, each may have his own personal character. And what I want to assert here is: the degrees of the balance between his self-existence and altru-existence may formulate and show the different attributes of his nature.

As we know a child has little ability to earn his living, therefore his need for self-existence is very strong, tilting the balance in the favor of self-existence. What is more, his reproductive system is not yet mature, and biologically his altru-existence has not grown to be a force to counterbalance self-existence. Then can we say a child is only showing his evil side of nature? The answer is no, and the reason for the negative answer is that a child depends on his parents and family for his existence, so his parents’ existence is his existence’s precondition, and he must value their existence, which naturally strengthens his consciousness of altru-existence. The filial piety then starts to develop in his heart, and what is more, his parents may often ask him to care for his brothers and sisters, and other members of his own and extended families. That is what we call the early moral education. In ancient China, there was a well-known moral story of Kong Rong Giving Big Pears to Others.⁵ Moreover, when the child himself gets a bit older to understand the importance of his parents for his existence, he may consciously nurse and show his gratitude and love for his parents and those who are helpful to his existence. His dependence on parents for his existence in turn enhances his sense of altru-existence. We may think that the altru-existence at this stage is basically related to self-existence, or in other words, his altru-existence is cardinally a reflection of self-existence. Now I would like to share my personal experience with the reader. More than twenty years ago, when my daughter was only three years old. One evening I was trying to fix a pipe to the balcony of my apartment on the third floor of the building. I had to hang myself out to do the job. I could manage it, but it appeared dangerous to my daughter, so she ran to call my wife to help me. Yet her mother was sleeping on the bed, and she was unhappy that the daughter woke her up, murmuring, “Don’t bother me, go to play by yourself.” My daughter was very angry then, and yelled at her “You sleepy mum, bad mum!” From this episode, it is evident that the three-year little girl has her moral senses. She knew that the family members should help each other when someone is in difficulty or danger.

Besides their family members, kids will naturally extend their feelings to game partners outside their families. They have to play with their peers to learn skills and knowledge from each other. The play must follow a commonly accepted rule; otherwise it cannot be carried on. The accepted rules of the games are the very beginning of their regulation and legal education, which may help enhance their sense of altru-existence. When children are old enough to receive school education, they have to behave under the regulations and rules of the school, which force them to strengthen their sense of altru-existence. School is a much bigger and more formal community for a child, and if he wants to maintain his existence in it, he has to follow the regulations, which are

⁵ The story is actually entitled Which Pear to Pick. See Louie (2007, 7). The story goes like this: one day Kong Rong was asked by his parents to pick a pear from a basket; he chose the smallest one, leaving the bigger ones to his older brothers. When asked the reason, Kong answered, “I am the smallest in the family, so I should take the smallest, and my brothers are bigger than me, so they need the bigger ones.” This story has been told for generations in China as the good example of children’s moral education.

established to protect others' interests as well as his own. At this stage, the meaning of self-existence is extended, that is to say, self-existence contains two layers of meanings: the first, the existence in an entity unit, and then the physical existence in this world. And the first is usually the necessary step for the second, that means, a person has to gain a position in a community, and then he can have the means to keep his existence in the world. For instance, if a kid enters a school, he has to follow its regulations, and if he violate them, he is likely to be punished and unpopular with others. So in order to keep and promote his position in the school, he is conscious that he should not boldly satisfy his desires at the cost of others' interests. When he is old enough to work in a company, on the one hand he is exposed to the competitive situations, all the more showing his selfish, aggressive and greedy attributes, and on the other hand, he must obey the regulations of the company and abide by the laws, otherwise he might be expelled from the company, losing his means of existence. Moreover, he has to cooperate with others to achieve success and win honor and respect from others, that means what he is doing is not simply out of his self-existence, but also driven by his altru-existence. Now that he is an adult, his reproductive system is mature, which biologically forces him to love other human beings: first his sexual partners, and then his younger generations and others. All these enhance his needs and consciousness of altru-existence. So normally, a man even in a very competitive community can keep a balance between his self-existence and altru-existence.

Of course, self-existence and altru-existence cannot always maintain a perfect balance, and it is true that sometimes the balance may tilt in favor of one side, and sometimes of the other. In some extraordinary situations, there are examples of one completely overwhelming the other. Robbery and killing other people are the extreme examples of unbalance between the two, and sacrificing one's own life to save other people's life is also an extreme example of unbalance, but in favor of altru-existence. These unusual actions are usually taken in desperately unusual situations. For example, the crimes of killing taxi-drivers for robbery in some Chinese cities are usually committed by rural migrant laborers who cannot find jobs and have no substance to live on. In such situations, the balance is completely toppled and the need for self-existence rises to the summit, leaving altru-existence in oblivion. If a nation is in a desperate situation, there might be a nation-wide chaos or crime. In the end of East Han dynasty (25-220) in China, the Yellow Turban Army Uprising⁶ (184-192) is an evident example. During that period, a nation-wide famine and the corruption of the feudal governments drove peasants into desperation. Hundreds of thousands poor peasants had to rebel against government and rob the rich. In Chinese history, there are quite a few such events.

But we also have many examples of people sacrificing their own interests and even lives to help and save others. In China, Lei Feng⁷ has become the model of serving the people wholeheartedly. The whole country has been called to learn from him, who has performed a great number of altruist deeds. And Wang Jie⁸ is another extreme example. He covered an explosive cartridge with his own body before it accidentally set off. He was killed and the people nearby were saved. In these people altru-existence is much stronger, and when abnormal

⁶ This uprising led by Zhang Jiao and his two brothers broke out in the year 184 with the slogan of "Equal rights of all peoples and equal distribution of all land". The rebellion spread to an area of five provinces, but was finally put down by government's armed forces.

⁷ Lei Feng (1940-1962) was a Chinese soldier, killed in an accident. He is well known for doing good deeds for others. After his death, the Chinese government called the whole country to learn from him, and from then on, March 5th has become the day of learning from Lei Feng in China, when many volunteers will go out to do good deeds for others.

⁸ Wang Jie (1942-1965), a Chinese soldier, sacrificed his life to save twelve others in a military drill.

situations appear, the balance will be extremely tilted. Then we may ask why in some people the balance is tilted in favor of altru-existence. There are two reasons; the first reason is intense moral and discipline education, and the second is strong altru-existence inherent in them. Here I just talk about the importance of moral and discipline education, which can certainly enhance one's need for altru-existence. Lei and Wang both were soldiers in the 1960s, when in the army the soldiers were intensely educated with morals and strict disciplines. Soldiers were taught that the interests of the country and people were much weightier than their own. Thus it was quite probable that they had very strong sense of responsibility for helping others, willing to sacrifice their interests and even lives for the people. Moreover, Lei and Wang were in their twenties, the stage of life full of sexual energy, that means they were in great need for releasing their sexual love. Because they were strictly disciplined, they could not and would not release their sexual energy in an illicit or unnatural way, which in China then was considered immoral and criminal. Doing altru-existent deeds is a kind of catharsis or sublimation of sexual energy, and moral and discipline education is the right channel leading sexual energy to honorable and respectable actions. This kind of education certainly puts weights on the altru-existence side, which sometimes can completely topple the balance.

Balance Point and the Chinese National Character

A man's nature or his character is determined by the relationship between his self-existence and altru-existence, so is a nation's. Take China as an example, the national character of Chinese people is formed not in a short period of time, but through a long course of history. More than two thousand years ago, the philosophical ideologies of Confucius and Mencius began to dominate the minds of the Chinese people. There were many small feudal states in China then, and it was called the Era of the Warring States (475-221 BCE), when states were fighting each other. The king of each state had to consolidate his ruling power first, and then tried to annex others. The ruling classes needed badly the theoretical weapons to realize their aims, and the intellectuals intended to meet the ruling classes' needs by setting up the schools of philosophy. When these states were finally defeated one by one by state Qin, the whole China was unified under the imperial sovereignty of Qin Dynasty in the year 221 BCE. From then on no matter who took the throne, the ideas of order and loyalty were encouraged and favored by the authorities. Among the philosophical schools, the one led by Confucius is most influential, which even lasts up to modern times though it underwent its ups and downs in history. Confucius famous saying: "The king is the king; the courtier is the courtier; the father is the father; the son is the son"⁹ (Confucius, 2004, Book XII) emphasizes the importance of order. This saying means that a country is like a family, where the father plays the role of the head with the responsibility for the family and final say in family affairs, while the son has to be obedient and follow the father's words. The country is actually a big family, with king as the father, who has the final say in state affairs, while the courtiers have to perform their duties in accordance with king's opinions. Only in this way can the country as well as families prosper and develop smoothly. This idea of order is welcome to the ruling classes throughout the history of China. And almost every family in China is more or less influenced, and the education always takes the priority in filial piety, order, discipline and loving others. The idea of "loving others" is what Confucius means "benevolence", which is the core of his ideology. His proposition "the

⁹ Confucian Analects was first translated into English by James Legge, but to this sentence I make some alterations.

benevolent love others” (Confucius 2004, Book X) is widely spread throughout the Chinese history. Generation after generation, people grow up in such an environment and under such an education, and thus the national character of China is developed in this way.

Generally, the balance point of self-existence and altru-existence in Chinese people is a bit to the altru-existence side. That is the result of traditional prevalence of Confucian thought and authorities’ advocacy. And it is natural that the governments in different times all advocate collectivism, which is in accordance with Chinese philosophy. So it is generally accepted in China that more importance should be attached to collectivism than to individualism.

The Chinese national character has its merits and demerits. Because the balance point is a bit to the altru-existence side, the whole nation sets great store by collectivism, and when the nation is in natural or political crises, the people will all go out to fight the crises at the cost of their personal interests and even lives. Take Wenchuan earthquake in May 2008 for example; when the earthquake occurred, thousands of people, soldiers and policemen all over the country rushed there to save the victims at the risk of their lives. And within a short time of two years the flattened county seats and cities in the devastated area were rebuilt with the donations of the whole nation and the assistances of other provincial governments. Because of this national character, many Chinese people are inclined to think much of the public and national interests when their own interests are in conflict with them. Since these two decades, China has been witnessing a quick development in economy, therefore many streets in the cities had to be broadened, many highways had to be constructed, big reservoirs and airports had to be built. All these constructions needed much of land, and unavoidably, many residents in these areas had to move, and their houses had to be pulled down, making room for new constructive sites. Almost all the peoples concerned were willing to leave their homes and resettle in some unfamiliar places. A seventy-five years old farmer and his family even moved three times during fifty-two years because of the constructions of reservoirs.; and when asked whether he was sorry for his departure from his old homes he said that he felt more proud than sorry because he thought what he had done was actually contributing to the benefits of the local people and the development of the country.¹⁰ Of course the governments and companies recompensed the farmers with new homes and necessary facilities. Some of the farmers, however, were clinging to their old homes when leaving for new places. And so some people may think this kind of resettlements is a violation of human rights. Especially, to the Westerners, private property should not be infringed for it is sacred and inviolable. But the Chinese collectivism stresses that when in face of a big disaster, or when the country needs one’s help or sacrifice, personal interests tend to give way to more important and urgent collective interests.

The collectivist character of Chinese people, originated from the balance point a bit to the side of altru-existence, comprises such attributes as filial piety, loyalty, tolerance, inclination to public interests and so on. But this sort of national character sometimes also manifests its demerits, and the most obvious one is the shortage of initiative. People just follow their leaders’ words passively without active attitude toward their work. The situation before the Chinese economic reform in 1978 was typical. Then the farmers did not have their own fields, which belonged to collective productive teams, so the farmers had no choice but to work for the team to earn their living. One summer day, when I visited my relative in a rural area, I saw many team members resting in

¹⁰ See the report of Dushikuaibao (Metro Express), 21 September. 2011, B04

the shade of a big tree. I wondered at their idleness in such a busy time. One of the farmers told me that their productive team leader was in another place busy directing other farmers, so they were waiting for their leader, who would give them assignments when he came. But no one knew when he would arrive, therefore they had to rest here, enjoying the cool shade under the tree. Collectivism sometimes means low efficiency. No wonder, before the economic reform, China lagged far behind in economy. Now the situation is changing, all fields having been allocated to private owners, and more and more private enterprises having been established all over the country. No wonder the working efficiency has been much improved since then.

Conclusion

Human actions are actually the results of relationship between self-existence and altru-existence. Normally, the two are kept in balance though it might tilt to one side or the other time and again. Different persons may have different balance points, so may different nations. If we judge one's action and his nature from the relationship between his self-existence and altru-existence, it is easier for us to make a correct judgment. If we judge a nation's actions from its characteristic balance point, it will also be easier for us to make a correct judgment. Many international conflicts are caused by misunderstandings among the nations, and if all the nations can take different national characters into consideration from the viewpoint of different balance points, many international problems will not remain as hard as they appear.

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