

**Revisiting Mengzi and Xunzi with Aristotle's "Potentiality-Actuality"
as the Analytic Framework**

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Abstract

There is a new surge of investigation which has rendered Aristotle's thoughts with new interpretations. One of the problems is that which revolving the understanding of the concepts of potentiality and actuality. If we incorporate the new understanding of the concepts with the definition of change, it could provide a critical perspective by interpreting change from the sense of being, i.e., change is not merely about a process in which we move from one end to the other. Mengzi and Xunzi have similar way of argument when it comes to the issue of human nature, but their conflicting stances of good and bad have prevailed against their possible association. The triple scheme of potentiality and actuality have provided a juncture of associating their accounts of human nature.

Keywords: change, being, human nature, potentiality, actuality

The topic on the good and bad of human nature has been commented on and discussed incessantly for millennia, but a satisfactory way of explanation for this topic is still yet to be examined. In fact, the division between different accounts on human nature is not as incompatible as what is hold by majority of academic circles. For instance, the standpoint of human nature is good has been regarded as the principal axis of Confucianism, thus the standpoint that regards human nature as bad is incontrovertibly deviated from the core idea of Confucianism. This division is aptly manifested by the theory of human nature of Mengzi and Xunzi. Nevertheless, in spite of the question of what has been the orthodox theory by Confucianism, is it sufficient to conclude that their ideas are dually contrary? If the answer to this question is a negative judgement, is there any way to reconcile these views?

Human nature as a universal concern, in fact, is also one of the problematic questions in western philosophy since the age of ancient Greek. Unlike Chinese philosophers who often combine the topic of human nature in association with what is good and bad, ancient Greek philosophers tend to deal both of which independently as two entities. Aristotle set the great achievements of ancient Greek philosophy and put forward many innovative ideas, one of which is the set of concepts "potentiality-actuality" which is also the key to grasp his concept of change (运动), notwithstanding it is also the most controversial part. The heated controversy surrounds on the definition of change: the actuality of that which potentially is, qua such, is change (Hussey, 1983, p. 2); which involve the understanding and interpretation on what is potentiality and actuality. The definition goes even more complex when Aristotle further distinguishes *energeia* and *entelecheia* from actuality.¹ Fortunately, the new interpretation on change from the idea of being by L.A. Kosman has provided room for re-examination of the metaphysical foundation of Aristotle's philosophy. (Kosman, 1969, pp. 40-46) This new interpretation on change provides a possibility of integration between Aristotle and pre-Qin Confucianism.

Based on the views mentioned above, this article is not intending to solve the controversy regarding Aristotle's theory of change, rather to render the division of Mengzi and Xunzi a metaphysical explication in virtue of the new interpretation of Aristotle's definition on change, particularly the "potentiality-actuality" concepts as the explanatory framework.

¹ Just as what has been put forward by Oded Balaban (1995), the definition of change, also known as motion, has been interpreted countless times, but the accounts of 'process-view' or the 'state-view' either confront circularity of definition or contradiction. Li Meng (2011) quoted the criticism of Descartes towards Aristotle's definition of change as self-evident, so as to emphasize that both 'process-view' and 'state-view' have misconceive the description of change as the definition of change, which is also the same mistake made by Descartes. Thus, Li Meng asserts that the new interpretation by L.A. Kosman from the idea of being is the key to grasp the real intention of Aristotle.

(I)

When it comes to the good or bad of human nature in the context of Chinese philosophy, the viewpoints of Mengzi and Xunzi have been chronically deemed as adversarial relationship. If we look merely from the fragments of their discourses, the superficial division between them is obvious, but it is not adequate enough to conclude their theory of human nature as “human nature is actually in the state of good” (人性本善) and “human nature is actually in the state of bad” (人性本恶) respectively, or even conclude that their differences are actually their personal subjective metaphysical prejudice. The discourse fragments that have often been quoted include what Mengzi said by “benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a lustre from the outside, they are in me originally; only this has never dawned on me” (*Mencius*, 6A6)²; or what Xunzi said by “people’s nature is bad, their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort” (*Xunzi*, chap. 23). However, if we carefully go through the context of their discourses and investigate them by holistic approach, it could be easily disproved as misunderstanding of Mengzi and Xunzi.

The theoretical foundation, when Mengzi says human nature is good, root from what he calls the “four germs” of heart:

The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom, man has these four germs just as he has four limbs. For a man possessing these four germs to deny his own potentialities is for him to cripple himself. (*Mencius*, 2A6)

Instead of what translated by D.C. Lau as “germs” (端), there are scholars that translate it as “sprouts” which is more pertinent to the original meaning of Mengzi on human nature and moral cultivation.³ It can be taken as an analogy representing the potentiality of a man to become a moral person, just like a sprout as being able to grow into a tree. The important message here is that either germs or sprouts both denoting the meaning of potentiality rather than the actual state of human nature. This is to say, when Mengzi says human nature is good, there are two senses of interpretation: first, he is actually denoting it from the sense of man’s ontic being, which assure the potentiality of every man as being good; second, he is denoting that human is capable of becoming a sage. The latter proposition is consistent with what has been introduced

² Any references from classical literature will not be cited separately and will only state the chapters of the passages. For publication details of the works, kindly refer to the bibliography page at the last part of this paper.

³ For more detailed discussion, see Ivanhoe (2007, pp. 15-28).

⁴ Jonathan (2009, pp. 40-41) expounds that *dunamis* is precisely the capacity for agency, which is the active power to bring about change in another thing. For the passage stating the strict meaning of potentiality, see Makin (2006, p. 1-2).

by Aristotle the strict meaning of Greek term *dunamis* (potentiality), which is intimately connected with change.⁴ Thus, when Mengzi says every man has the heart of “four sprouts”, he is not stressing that a person being able to become a sage in present state, rather conceding that a person would need to go through the process of self-cultivation to achieve the end of becoming a sage. In this sense, benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites and wisdom are the powers within man that assure man as the moral agent who is “able to develop all these four germs that he possesses” (知皆扩而充之, *Mencius*, 2A6).

If the proposition of man has “four sprouts” bestowed within the heart is in another word saying that man is able and potential of becoming a sage, regardless of the object of the development, this is in fact agreed by Xunzi as well, he says:

Anyone on the streets can become a Yu. How do I mean this? I say: t h a t by which Yu was because he was *ren, yi*, lawful, and correct. Thus, *ren, yi*, lawfulness, and correctness have patterns that can be known and can be practiced. However, people on the streets all have the material for knowing *ren, yi*, lawfulness, and correctness, and they all have the equipment for practicing *ren, yi*, lawfulness, and correctness. Thus, it is clear that they can become a Yu. (Xunzi, chap. 23)

Although Xunzi do not justify a man for having the possibility of becoming a sage the same way as Mengzi do, his way of justification is another approach of saying the ability of man as a moral agent. Whenever Mengzi talks about the goodness of human nature, he always cites his authorities Yao and Shun. (*Mencius*, 3A1) The same goes to Xunzi as well who always mentioned the old day's sages as the paragons to exemplify the a priori material and equipment within every man. Material (质) and equipment (具) can be understood as the term equivalent to that of Aristotle's potentiality. Thus, the difference between Mengzi and Xunzi from the perspective of potentiality, which is interpreted in terms of change, is still unclear. We need to further investigate the potentiality of both in terms of the idea of being.

(II)

Potentiality of man becoming a sage, or in another word the ability of man as moral agent is the consensus between Mengzi and Xunzi, this is the key criterion that determines what it meant by being a Confucian. Nevertheless there must be substantial difference between them, and to bear in mind that the difference does not necessarily entail contradictory division. As compare to the text that discussed “four germs” of heart, when Mengzi is having a debate with Gaozi, he has made a fundamental transformation on the idea of the heart:

As far as what is genuinely in him is concerned, a man is capable of becoming good. That is what I mean by good.....The heart of compassion is possessed by all men alike; likewise the heart of shame, the heart of respect, and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of compassion pertains to benevolence, the heart of shame to dutifulness, the heart of respect to the observance of the rites, and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom. Benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a lustre from the outside, they are in me originally. Only this has never dawned on me. (*Mencius*, 6A6)

From the excerpt above, Mengzi has reiterated that every man is capable of becoming good, but the point he wants to accentuate here is when he says “a man is capable of becoming good”, it is to say that “a man as being good” (“this is what I mean by good”). Thus, the heart of compassion from the idea of being is no longer the sprout of benevolence but directly pertaining to benevolence itself, and so the same to the heart of shame, respect, right and wrong. We cannot curtly infer that this is a contradiction in Mengzi’s thought as Mengzi is deliberately providing a new perspective of the heart. From the strict meaning of potentiality, a man is treated as being a man, the man is potentially potential of becoming a sage; but from the derived meaning of potentiality, a man is treated as being a good man, or a sage, and the man is actually potential of being a sage. This is an imperceptible part on the accounts of Mengzi’s human nature. Let us refer to the relevant accounts of Aristotle:

Hermes in the wood and the half line in the whole, because they could be separated, and also someone not contemplating we call a knower, if he is capable of contemplating; and in contrast we call other things actually..... as what builds is to what can build, and what is awake to what is asleep, and what is seeing to what has closed eyes but has sight, [so is] what has been separated off from the matter to the matter, and what has been finished off to what is unwrought. (*Metaphysics*, 9.6)

Li Meng quoted the above excerpt from *Metaphysics* to illustrate how Aristotle derives potentiality from the idea of being. (Li, 2011, pp. 171-173) When a wood is no longer an actualized wood but actually potentially Hermes (a statue), the perspective of seeing the wood has been shifted from the sense of change to the idea of being. This view is as well consistent with Mengzi, say, when Confucius is no longer as Confucius but a potential sage, the perspective of discussion on moral cultivation should not be “how does Confucius become a sage”, rather the discussion should initiate with “Confucius as a potential sage”. Mengzi sees everyone as actually potentially a sage. A question followed by how would a man realize himself as a potential sage? Mengzi stresses that a man should “stand on what is of greater importance” and “be guided by the interests of the parts of his person that are of greater importance” (*Mencius*, 6A15). The greater importance here refer to the “four germs” of heart, with these innate characters, everyone would discover himself as a potential sage. If a man cannot act himself as a potential sage, this is not the fault of his native endowment.

Thus the issue here is not about the ability but the lack of will to acting, or put in this way, it is necessary for beings to further incorporate the end (*telos*) of becoming a sage within the beings, if beings are not in fact sage (to be in the state of *energeia*, if not *entelecheia*). Just like a sculptor could see the Hermes within the wood, moral agents ought to see the sage within themselves.⁵

Even though the approach of Mengzi's theory of human nature as good is indeed justifiable, but he has overlooked an important point. Just as a man is always able to be healthy or sick, we cannot deny that human beings are capable of being good or bad, hence the division of good and bad has to be dealt with on ontological level. Xunzi realizes the shortcoming of the theory of Mengzi, which is why he develops the famous proposition of human nature as bad:

Now people's nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit in them. If they follow along with this, then struggle and contention will arise, and yielding and deference will perish therein. They are born with feelings of hate and dislike in them. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise, and loyalty and trustworthiness will perish therein. They are born with desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then lasciviousness and chaos will arise, and ritual and *yi*, proper form and order, will perish therein. Thus, if people follow along with their inborn dispositions and obey their nature, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end up becoming violent.....Looking at it in this way, it is clear that people's nature is bad, and their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort. (*Xunzi*, chap. 23)

Similar with Mengzi when he says human nature is good, Xunzi never implies that "human nature is actually in the state of bad". We have mentioned that "four germs" of heart are taken to refer to the ability of man as being good, Xunzi argues that fondness for profit, feelings of hate and dislike, and desires have been taken to refer the ability of man as being bad. In his line of thinking, fondness for profit, feelings of hate and desires are not the factors causing a man for becoming bad. The key point causing the badness fall on the words "follow along", meaning when you push your sensibility or desire to extreme, the extreme point is what consider as being bad which brings about "struggle and contention, turn to disrupting

⁵ In the first chapter of Mencius, King Xuan of Qi asks Mengzi whether someone like him could protect the people. Mengzi states the fact that King Xuan of Qi cannot bear the trembling of a dying ox, this is an action out of the heart of empathy and it is sufficient for Mengzi to infer that he is able to become a true King. But King Xuan of Qi seems ignorant of his potential of being a sage, not to mention whether he has the will to become a true King as his political pursuit. The main purpose of Mengzi is clear that he wants to bestow the will from the way the King look upon himself from the idea of being.

social divisions and order, and end up becoming violent”. The strategic of arguments are very alike between Mengzi and Xunzi as the latter’s focal point is not “how a man is capable of becoming bad”, rather to accentuate “a man as being a potential villain”. More colloquially, we may say: a man is capable of becoming bad in relation to sensual desire; a man is bad in terms of extreme sensual desire. Again, this is another imperceptible part of Xunzi’s thought that need to be grasp.

(III)

Before we carry on interpreting their subtle differences, let us first discuss the distinction of triple scheme by Aristotle (*De Anima Book II*, Chap. 5):

	A man is capable to be a knower and have knowledge	The man has knowledge of grammar	The man is contemplating
First level	First potentiality (The man is a knower)	Second potentiality (The man is a knower)	
Second level		First actuality (The man knows)	Second actuality (The man knows)

Table 1

Li Meng has had a very incisive analysis regarding the controversy over the three states and levels stated above, which shall not be further described here as the main purpose of introducing Aristotle’s triple scheme (especially the transitions or alterations between three states) is merely to provide a valid metaphysical interpretation for the superficial conflict between Mengzi and Xunzi. It is important to emphasize that, although change (transition/alteration) is also known as *entelecheia* in some sense, we cannot claim that the result or the end point of change as *entelecheia*, just like there is substantial difference between the man with knowledge without exercising it and the man who is contemplating (actually exercising his knowledge), thus justify the necessity to differentiate two levels of beings in terms of potentiality-actuality and two senses of actuality in terms of *energeia-entelecheia*. In this reasoning, the probe of potentiality- actuality cannot be focused on change, but rather on the “incompleteness”⁶ which features the definition of change. Li Meng has provided two senses of interpretation on the incompleteness of two-time transitions of the triple scheme: firstly, in the sense of potentiality in which the potentiality of beings and its nature are yet to be constituted through the process of change, represented in the second row of the table above; secondly, in the sense of *energeia*, represented in the third row of the table above in which change and the end of change are

⁶ In *Physics Book III Chapter 2*, Aristotle mentions that “change does seem to be a kind of operation, but an incomplete one”.

separated ontologically. (Li, 2011, p. 193) In the first sense, the combination of potentiality and nature are constitutive instead of deprivative. For instance, when we say an Athenian infant potentially speaks Greek, it is nothing different from an adult Athenian who is potentially speaks Greek but at the moment silent, this is to say, for an adult to be able to speak Greek does not imply some kind of privation from an infant's nature, speaking Greek is not a change from inability to ability. Thus, the difference of infant and adult is the difference of state from incompleteness to completeness in the sense of potentiality, which is known as first potentiality and second potentiality respectively. While in the second sense, second and third state can be look upon as the difference between *energeia* and *entelecheia*, which means the difference of two kinds of actuality lies on the availability of will to practice, not to mention Aristotle has conspicuously pointed out that the man of second state "can if he so wishes... as long as nothing external prevents him" (*De Anima Book II*, Chap. 5) to complete the transition to the third state. Conversely, when the form of purpose or will has not been internalized within the man or any beings, the beings would still need to develop from the materials with myriad of possibilities.

If the triple scheme is applied to the ideals of Mengzi and Xunzi, it can be illustrated as the table below:

	First state	Second state	Third state
Mengzi	human beings can be good	becoming a sage as human beings final end	Human beings as a sage
Xunzi	human beings can be bad	following along desire as human beings will	Human beings as a villain

Table 2

We have discussed previously about how Mengzi and Xunzi make their stances on human nature from the sense of being instead of becoming. Xunzi reckons that Mengzi is not inspecting clearly the division between people's nature and their deliberate efforts whereby whether good or bad are both potentialities of human beings. For Xunzi, Mengzi's ideal of human nature has been fixated on one twist which results in the neglect of the potentiality of man as being bad. Indeed, Mengzi eventually could not able to persuade King Xuan of Qi by diverting the subject matter of desire to moral will, which is not the main problem of King Xuan. He finally concludes that he is dull-witted and cannot see way beyond the point, which depicts the failure of Mengzi on political persuasion. We cannot expect an ordinary person to see a Hermes from wood as the same as a sculptor, so to speak, as human nature is not merely the problem of subjectivity but also profoundly determined by extrinsic factors.

Xunzi clearly realizes potentiality of man as being able to be bad and develop his triple scheme that is on contrary with Mengzi. His view can be regarded as the complement and revision of Mengzi's discourse, especially on the problem of potentiality and volition, which leads to the proposition of "man can do so but cannot be made to do so", stating the decisive role of deliberate volition of human beings on moral practice:

Someone says: sageliness is achieved through accumulation, but why is it that not all can accumulate thus? I say, they can do it, but they cannot be made to do it. Thus, the petty man can become a gentleman, but is not willing to become a gentleman. The gentleman can become a petty man, but is not willing to become a petty man. It has never been that the petty man and gentleman are incapable of becoming each other. However, the reason they do not become each other is that they can do so but cannot be made to do so. Thus, it is the case that anyone on the streets can become a Yu, but it is not necessarily the case that anyone on the streets will be able to become a Yu. (*Xunzi*, chap. 23)

We have discussed that when Xunzi said human nature is bad, he is actually viewing it as potentiality in terms of being. The proposition of “can but cannot be made” on the one hand concedes that human beings is capable to be good, but on the other hand he wants to explicate the problem of why there is still people becoming bad, or in its negation form, not everyone becoming a sage like Yu. The difference when Xunzi says human beings “can” or “can be made” is inductively the difference between first potentiality and second potentiality. Since there is always the possibility that human beings “cannot be made”, therefore the antithesis of “human nature is good” is also valid and consistent in every sense of the word. Accordingly, he refuted the stance of Mengzi, which acclaims the goodness of moral sense, as the only potentiality of man but further envisages the badness of human beings for the reason that human’s subjectivity can neither be forced, twisted nor deprived from his own nature or disposition, hence highlights the function of free will on the problem of moral action.

From the analysis demonstrated above, the main issue around the problem of human nature is the problem of how to resolve the problem of *energeia* in terms of being, moral will in terms of moral action, or conventionally speaking, the problem of how to cultivate the moral will in which no one is able to stop someone from practising moral action. Owing to the existence of willingness of making choices, either becoming sage or following along sensual desire become choices of the agent. From the persuasion of Mengzi towards King Xuan of Qi, Mengzi clearly tries to bring the matter of sensual desire down and makes the telos of becoming sage as the sole choice of moral agent; Xunzi envisages the matter of sensual desire and further ascertains the antithesis of Mengzi’s thought, it is actually a major breakthrough of Confucianism which almost ignored by majority in the academic realm. As a supplement to the above discourse, it is important to clarify that Xunzi’s theory on moral practice is not dualistic as he do not concede that a man would willing to become a villain. What is said to be bad is actually the natural consequence when someone following along his sensual desire. Hence, badness do not has its independent source of motivation from the origin of change, which betokens that Xunzi has not derailed from the featuring ideological trajectory of Confucianism.

Brief Conclusion

Although there are still a lot of aspects from the philosophy of Aristotle that can be reviewed together with potentiality-actuality, such as distinction of active-passive, nature-*techne*, logos-without logos, etc., it is still sufficient to illustrate how the group of concepts can be combined with the context of thought by Mengzi and Xunzi. If we understand the concept of change merely from the idea of process, it is definitely not the main aspect of Confucianism because moral cultivation as a kind of process is equally accentuated by all Confucian thinkers. Moreover, moral cultivation as a process never has a definite ending from the sense of time and space, just as what has been depicted by Confucius that he never has the chance to see a sage or a good man throughout his life, not to speak of willing to admit that he is a sage. This seems to be a paradox of Confucius thought as no one would want to pursue over something that cannot be reached or has never been reached by anyone. Nevertheless, if we can revisit Confucianism idea of human nature from the sense of being, many seemingly opposing and ambiguous ideas can be well explained and hence provide a stronger support for the theoretical construction of Confucianism.

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