

Hobbes and Xunzi on Human Nature: the Fixed and the Changing

Jongmin Jerome Baek*
UC Berkeley

November 2017

The object is the fixed, the existent; the
configuration is the changing, the variable.

Wittgenstein [1]

Abstract

Hobbes and Xunzi are frequently juxtaposed as having conceived of similar philosophies despite their great temporal, geographical, and cultural distance. I contend that, contrary to the perceived similarity, the extent to which Hobbes and Xunzi's philosophies overlap is in no way deep, indeed that the divergence of their philosophies sprouts from the divergence of their most basic assumptions about human nature: for Hobbes, internal human dispositions do not change but its external display can be forced to change, whereas for Xunzi, internal human dispositions can change but cannot be forced to change.¹In what follows, I provide a brief overview of Hobbes and Xunzi's philosophies. Then, I review related work. Then I discuss the philosophers' views on what life is, which forms the foundation for a discussion about their views on human nature. I conclude by linking their views on human nature with what I contend is a more fundamental metaphysical assumption on the fixed and the changing.

1 Introduction

Xunzi lived in 3rd century BC China amidst the chaos of the Warring States period. Hobbes lived in 17th century England during the headway of the Enlightenment. Considering the overwhelming temporal, geographical, and cultural distance between them, it is curious how closely their philosophies seem to overlap. Juxtaposed side by side, some of their arguments are uncannily similar. This from Hobbes's *Leviathan*:

In the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle ... Whatsoever therefore

*jeromebaek@berkeley.edu

¹Though this is the central thrust of this article, the more basic objective is to connect that thesis with a more basic thesis: that Hobbes and Xunzi's assumptions about human nature sprout from a deeper divergence in their most fundamental metaphysical worldviews – whether it is primarily about the fixed, or about the changing. In the appendix, I briefly describe, then suggest a mathematical framework for, the more basic thesis.

is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man . . . In such condition there is . . . continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. [2]

And this from the *Xunzi*:

Now, 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 . . . This being the case, when each person follows his inborn nature and indulges his natural inclinations, aggressiveness and greed are certain to develop. This is accompanied by violation of social class distinctions and throws the natural order into anarchy, resulting in a cruel tyranny. [3]

As can be seen, both philosophers hold the view that humans are naturally self-centered. Left to their own devices, they agree, humans will war against each other, society will crumble, and life will be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In other words, their diagnosis of the problem, that raw, unchecked human nature leads to an abysmal collapse of society, is the same. Now it is all the more curious how their solutions to the same diagnosis could be so different; as Invahoe writes, “Hobbes proposed his social contract and the absolute authority of the monarch; Xunzi offered a set of practices governing religious, social and personal conduct: the traditional ”rites” (li) of Confucianism.” [4] In brief, Hobbes’s solution is “absolute authority”; Xunzi’s solution is “rites” of Confucianism.

How could two brilliant philosophers face a problem, diagnose it in the same way, then devise utterly different solutions? The boring answer is that one was right and the other was wrong. The interesting answer is that they had different assumptions. In what follows, I investigate Hobbes and Xunzi’s ideas about human nature. First, I zoom out, contrasting their ideas about what life is, how life can be defined. With this foundation in mind, I launch into a discussion on their conceptions of human nature, focusing on two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the *is*: whether internal human dispositions *can* change. The second dimension concerns the *ought*: whether internal, or external display of, human dispositions *should* change.

2 Related Work

It is not an original idea that Hobbes and Xunzi’s philosophies diverge deeply. As Ivanhoe advances, Hobbes and Xunzi had “dramatically different responses” to the problem of natural human evil:

Hobbes proposed his social contract and the absolute authority of the monarch; Xunzi offered a set of practices governing religious, social and personal conduct: the traditional ”rites” (li) of Confucianism. Xunzi believed we could train ourselves out of the state of nature; Hobbes did not. These dramatically different responses to a similar premise about the character of human nature give us some indication of the profound differences between Hobbes and Xunzi. [4]

Similarly, Sungmoon argues that Hobbes and Xunzi understands human nature in “qualitatively different” ways:

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Xunzi’s and Hobbes’s understandings of human nature are qualitatively different, which is responsible for the difference in their respective normative political theory of a civil polity. [5]

However, this is by no means the consensus or even the dominant view. As Schwitzgebel argues, Hobbes and Xunzi basically have the same conception of human nature, despite the “superficial criticism”:

When Hobbes and Rousseau speak of human nature as good or as leading to violent strife, we have license to interpret them as speaking not just of how we would behave in the “state of nature.” They are much closer to Mencius and Xunzi than a superficial criticism of a few of their most famous passages suggests. [6]

The contribution of this article is to add more weight towards the position that the difference between Hobbes and Xunzi runs deep, and furthermore to connect this difference with an overarching mathematical framework.

3 Views On What Life Is

Here I contrast Hobbes and Xunzi’s views on what life is. The main point is that Hobbes reduces life to a mechanical, deterministic object, whereas Xunzi inflates life with quasi-religious sentiments. A related point is that Xunzi takes the more holistic view, focusing on configurations of lives, rather than lives in themselves.²

Hobbes’s view on life is stark. He sees life, and the interaction among lives, as entirely predictable, devoid of “magic” or “charm”, rather like the interaction among gas molecules in an isolated physical system. This view has not gone unnoticed by contemporary philosophers. The Kantian moral philosopher Korsgaard quips,

Hobbes opens his most famous ethical treatise with this apparently unpromising reflection:

For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs, the beginning whereof is some principal part within; why may we not say, that all *Automata* (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the *Heart*, but a *Spring*, and the *Nerves*, but so many *Strings*; and the *Joynts*, but so many *Wheels*, giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer?

And he proceeds to construct a completely mechanistic explanation of how human beings work and an ethics that is based upon it. [7]

As Korsgaard points out, Hobbes’s view is clear: human beings work in mechanical, predictable, computable ways, and Hobbes has figured them out. Hobbes believes he can logically show what must be done in order that humans can escape a chaotic hellscape of perpetual war. Hobbes’s picture is internally robust: given the assumptions, his conclusions follow with logical certainty. So what we want to examine are his assumptions, especially the drastic-sounding assumptions laid out in the above quote.

Hobbes views life in reductionist terms. Invoking a continued parallel apparatus of “what is x but a y ”, Hobbes reduces a soft, squishy concept, such as “life”, into a hard, austere concept, such as “motion of Limbs”, one after another. A human being, of course, belongs to the category of “life”. So if we take Hobbes at face value, Hobbes is declaring that human life is “but a motion of Limbs”. Hobbes gives human life slightly more credit when he later provides an “understanding of human being in terms of “passion,” which he defines as “the person’s voluntary motion toward or fromward something or someone,” namely, either “appetite” or “aversion”” [5]. It is all the same that human life is, for Hobbes, predictable and easily describable. The overwhelming sentiment is that: *that is all there is to it*. Hobbes seems to believe that there is nothing ineffable, religious, or irreducible about life. Crucially, Hobbes has *made up his mind* about what life is: he believes he has grasped it, he has figured it out, he has disposed of all contradictory kinks in his line of thought, and there

²In a mathematical framework, the relation between “objects” and “configurations of objects” is equivalent to the relation between $poly(n)$ and 2^n . See appendix.

is no reason for him to think about it further. And he can define it. In other words, Hobbes believes life is a definable object, a fixed thing.

This conception of life is in contradistinction to Xunzi's. Xunzi cannot talk about life without talking about *all* life. For Xunzi, all life, not just human life, is imbued with some ineffable and irreducible quality, as part of a natural system:

Unlike Hobbes, Xunzi recognized that human nature needed to be restrained not only to protect one human being from another but also to protect Nature from being destroyed by unregulated human exploitation. The Confucian rites not only made peace between human beings, they located human beings in a greater, harmonious natural system. [4]

For Xunzi, the totality of lives – the “natural system” – constitute a configuration, and this configuration as a whole, not just one life or another in it, has the normative significance. One specific configuration stands tall as the most important, namely Xunzi's famous triad:

Heaven and earth are the beginning of life, rites and social norms are the beginning of order, and the gentleman is the beginning of rites and social norms... Heaven and Earth produce the gentleman and the gentleman brings order to Heaven and Earth. *The gentleman forms a triad with heaven and earth*; he is the controller of all things, the father and mother of the people. [3]

The sentiment is grand, reverent, and focused on relations, as opposed to Hobbes's sentiment, which is reductive, irreverent, and focused on objects. Repeatedly, Xunzi emphasizes the relations between objects: the relation between “Heaven and earth” and life, the relation between “rites and social norms” and “order”, the relation between “the gentleman” and the “rites and social norms”, the relation between “Heaven and earth” and “the gentleman”, and so on. Far from having defined life, Xunzi even leaves what seems to be his main point, the “triad”, undefined, and the concept is still “little understood” [4]. Rather than accusing Xunzi of being lazy, it seems more apt to say that the triad is not an easily definable concept, that one may need to read hundreds of pages and cogitate deeply for a long period of time in order to understand the concept. This is a far cry from Hobbes's gusto of defining life as a “motion of Limbs”, a very easily graspable concept.

To get a sense of the deep divergence between Hobbes and Xunzi's thought, it is worthwhile to closely scrutinize the structure of their quotes. Contrast the structure of the quote by Hobbes and the quote by Xunzi. Hobbes's quote consists of a series of “but a” statements: each statement establishes an equivalence relation. When Hobbes says “life is but a motion of Limbs”, he implies that the concept of “a motion of Limbs” is sufficient to describe the concept of “life” in its totality, that “life *is* a motion of Limbs”. In rapid-fire strokes, Hobbes draws one equivalence after another. If the argument were a painting, it would be a number of sharp, grotesque lines. Xunzi, on the other hand, makes use of no equivalence relations. His relations are more colorful: a producer, a bringer of order, a controller, a father and mother. Sometimes the relations are mutually recursive, as in where “Heaven and earth produce the gentleman” and the gentleman, in return, “brings order to Heaven and Earth”. If the argument were a painting, it would be a softly swirling circle.³

³Now the easy objection is that Hobbes was informed by the Modern Scientific World View^a, whereas Xunzi was confused in his primitive, pre-scientific world. “*Of course* Xunzi had religious sentiments, because it was not until the Enlightenment that the death of God was seeded”, they might go on. I do not think this is a trivial objection, and it deserves to be addressed seriously. My main contention with this objection is that it privileges not science, but the Modern Scientific World View – a collection of sentiments, including a certain cynicism, that is taken to be true, which are not intrinsic in science, but are merely a product of how science is conceived of in this culture. I reply with a different and what I believe is a more appropriate scientific construct developed in theoretical computer science. See appendix.

^aKorsgaard believes that while the Modern Scientific World View causes many a philosopher to panic, this panic is unwarranted. See p.48, [7].

4 Views On Human Nature

Now that we have surveyed Hobbes and Xunzi's ideas on what life is, we are in a better position to understand their ideas on human nature. To put it crudely, Hobbes believes humans could never transcend their natural desires, but that a powerful man could forcibly repress them, whereas Xunzi believes humans can transcend their natural desires, however no man, however powerful or wise, can force that transcendence upon them.

There are two ideas here. The first idea concerns the malleability of fundamental human dispositions: "Xunzi believed we could train ourselves out of the state of nature; Hobbes did not." [4] In other words, Xunzi believed that humans are fundamentally malleable, and while raw human nature may be evil, it can be transcended. Indeed, for Xunzi, humans are so radically malleable that anybody can become a Yu (a sage):

A man in the street can become a Yu.

What does this saying mean? I say that in general what made Yu a Yu was his use of humaneness, morality, the model of law, and rectitude. Since this is so, then in each of these four there are rational principles that we can know and which we are capable of putting into practice. ...

Now, if the man in the street were induced to cleave to these methods, engage in study, focus his mind on a single aim, unify his intentions, ponder these principles, accomplish them each day over a long period of time, and to accumulate what is good without slacking off, then he ... could form a Triad with Heaven and Earth. [3]

While Xunzi believes anybody can be a sage, Hobbes believes nobody can be a sage:

There is no such thing as perpetuall Tranquility of mind, while we live here; because Life itselfe is but Motion, and can never be without Desire, nor without Feare, no more than without Sense. [2]

Xunzi believes that once one grasps the "rational principles" and "accomplish[es] them each day over a long period of time", one can become a sage. Hobbes believes that rationality has just one use: fulfilling one's desires. For Hobbes, the rational person carefully reasons about what could enable her to continually satisfy her desires, and concludes that only power can, that all desires can be reduced to "more or less Desire of Power" [2].⁴But Power only serves to fulfill more desires; it can never let one escape the system, to stop desiring. So Xunzi believes humans are malleable in this fundamental aspect, whereas Hobbes does not think so.

The second idea is that Hobbes believes humans can be forcibly repressed, while Xunzi believes humans cannot be forced to gain transcendence from their desires. Here, it is illuminating to analyze the metaphors for moral education used by Xunzi and Hobbes. Hobbes's preferred metaphor of moral education is that it is like writing on clean paper:

[T]he Common-peoples minds, unlesse they be tainted with dependance on the Potent, or scribbled over with the opinions of their Doctors, are like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by Publique Authority shall be imprinted in them. (176 [2])

To Hobbes, the common people are but receptacles "fit to receive whatsoever" by the authority

⁴Here, it seems that Xunzi and Hobbes diverge in what they mean by "rational". This gets us into tricky territory concerning the definition of rationality, which is a contentious topic that I have no pretention of addressing fully here. I will simply note that Xunzi's conception of rationality is ineluctably linked with "a long period of time", while Hobbes says nothing of the sort. In fact, it seems like Hobbes sees delight in quick, efficient calculations that rationality enables, going so far as to reduce reasoning to arithmetic when he says "When man reasoneth, he does nothing else but conceive a sum total, from addition of parcels; or conceive a remainder, from subtraction of one sum from another: which, if it be done by words, is conceiving of the consequence of the names of all the parts, to the name of the whole" [2].

figure. Once they have been scribbled on, they will act as is written; the moral authority can get them to do anything whatsoever. This is not surprising given Hobbes's conception of life as "but a motion of Limbs". For what could be so difficult about manipulating a motion of limbs? All that the authority has to do is to write down some instructions for the limbs, and the limbs, mechanical and deterministic, will act accordingly. In other words, the people can be *programmed* by the authority.

It is not so for Xunzi. Xunzi's preferred metaphor of moral education is that of bending a straight piece of wood:

A piece of wood straight as a plumbline can, by steaming, be made pliable enough to bend into the shape of a wheel rim, so its curvature will conform to the compass. Yet, even though it is then allowed to dry out completely in the sun, it will not return to its former straightness because the process of steaming has effected this change in it (135 [3]).

On the face of it, this seems like a similar metaphor to Hobbes's. Writing on clean paper, bending wood – both involve an external force imposed upon raw material. Indeed this is what Scwitzgebel argues: "[Xunzi's metaphor] suggest ... [an] authoritarian approach to education, more outward-in, more in the style of contemporary Western "conservatives"" (9 [6]). On closer inspection, however, one discovers that Xunzi's metaphor is quite different. Xunzi writes that before a piece of wood can be bent, it must first be "made pliable enough" through "steaming". Moreover, if the wood does not straighten back after drying out, it is because "the process of steaming has effected this change in it". This suggests that "steaming" represents more than external pressure: it represents an internal transformation. It must also be admitted that this is a limited metaphor, because while steaming strictly induces the internal transformation, Xunzi explicitly states that men cannot be induced, or forced, to become sages:

Someone asks: "How is it possible for the sage to reach this high state through his accumulated effort, but the rest of mankind cannot?"

I say that although it is possible for them to do so, they cannot be induced to do so. Thus, although the petty man is capable of becoming a gentleman, he is unwilling to do so; although the gentleman could become a petty man, he is unwilling to do so. (159 [3])

So according to Xunzi's moral philosophy, nobody, not even a sage, can induce a common man to become a sage. The sage can only guide, teach, and nurture them; no sage can force them. This is in contradistinction to Hobbes's idea that the moral authority can imprint whatever he wants to the common people's minds, that the moral authority can get them to do whatever he wants.

One may say that we are comparing apples to oranges. After all, Hobbes's moral authority can certainly induce a person's external behavior, but nobody in Hobbes's moral system can induce anyone to transcend their desires. And on this proposition Hobbes and Xunzi seem to be on the same page. But the point is that for Hobbes, the normative task is to change people's external behaviors, moreover that this task can be accomplished by adhering to some strict procedures such as intimidation, whereas for Xunzi, the normative task is to change people's internal inclinations, and no amount of strict procedures can do that. The point is whether they believe some set of strict procedures is enough to constitute the normative task – whether it is possible, in other words, to one day wake up and choose to be a moral person, or whether being a moral person is not about choice but about a long period of cultivation.

5 Conclusion

At first glance, Xunzi and Hobbes have similar ideas about human nature. However, the deeper one digs, one discovers, the further their ideas diverge. During the discussion on their views on

life, we found that Hobbes viewed life in decidedly simpler terms than Xunzi. This bled over to his views on human nature: that humans, simplistically, cannot transcend their nature, and that they, simplistically, can be thoroughly manipulated by a moral authority. Xunzi's views on human nature formulates humans in less simplistic terms: humans, though their nature may be evil, can transcend their nature, and since humans are that complex, they cannot be easily manipulated, even by a moral authority.

Now we may say: Hobbes's worldview is simple in the sense that he viewed the world as fundamentally fixed, and that Xunzi's worldview is complex in the sense that he viewed the world as fundamentally changing.⁵That the fixed is the object, and that the changing is the configuration, as per [1], takes the extra step in showing why, during their discussions on what life is, Hobbes concerned himself with objects in themselves while Xunzi concerned himself with relations between objects. So I have contended that Hobbes and Xunzi's ideas on human nature differ in a deep and unexpected way.

⁵This is coherent enough, but it lacks precision. Could there be a more precise way of formulating this? I believe there is, and a sketch of that formulation I have laid out in the appendix.

Appendix: Mathematical Formulation

In section 3 we established that Hobbes is concerned with objects in themselves, whereas Xunzi is concerned with relations between objects, or configurations. Furthermore we have seen that, for Hobbes, it is all so *simple*: even such a seemingly complex concept as life can be easily reduced to, defined as, “a motion of Limbs”. However, for Xunzi, it is a bit more complicated than that: he refuses to define the concept of “triad”, leaving it open to interpretation and deep cogitation. We may most aptly say that Hobbes believes most of the world is computable (\aleph_0 problems), while Xunzi believes most of the world is uncomputable ($2^{\aleph_0} = \aleph_1$ problems). This is consistent with the observation that given N objects, there are 2^N possible *configurations*, or *relations* among the objects. 2^N is exponentially large compared to N ; it is impossible to isolate each case and define it. When I say it is impossible, I mean that not in the point of view of mere mortal humans, but in the point of the view of the Universe: the modest quantity $N = 300$ already yields 2^N to be larger than the number of atoms in the Universe. Because the number is so huge, it may not be totally justifiable to say that all configurations “exist” in any meaningful sense. If something exists, that seems to have the implication that we can point to it, talk about it. It is not possible to do that with 2^N objects when N is modestly big. That, anyway, is how this article interprets the epigraph by Wittgenstein: “the object is the fixed, the existent; the configuration is the changing, the variable.”

Hobbes believes life is an object, a fixed thing. If by “fixed” we mean “computable”, then it is necessarily the case that given any two fixed things, we can say one is “better” than the other, unless they are exactly equal. This is because whatever is computable can be represented as a number. This explains why Hobbes talks of the “Value” of humans, and why it is imperative for his moral philosophy to give “equal” value to humans: in his moral philosophy, having lower value causes resentment.

The problem, Hobbes observes, is that it is extremely difficult (almost impossible) to satisfy one’s prideful self-love because the worth of a human being fundamentally depends on others’ recognition: “The Value, of WORTH of a man, is as of all other things, his Price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his Power: and there is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another.... For let a man (as most men do,) rate themselves as the highest Value they can; yet their true Value is no more than it is esteemed by others” [5]

This problem does not plague Xunzi. Why? Because Xunzi believes life is not an object, but that talking of life is tantamount to talking about the whole configuration of all lives. Under such a formulation, life is an uncomputable concept, and as such each life cannot be neatly packaged into a number.

References

- [1] L. Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 1922.
- [2] T. Hobbes and J.C.A. Gaskin. *Leviathan*. Oxford world's classics. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- [3] John Knoblock. *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works: Vol. III, Books 17-32*. Stanford University Press, 1988.
- [4] Philip J. Ivanhoe. A happy symmetry: Xunzi's ethical thought. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 59(2):309–322, 1991.
- [5] Kim Sungmoon. From desire to civility: Is Xunzi a Hobbesian? *Dao*, 10(3):291, Jul 2011.
- [6] Eric Schwitzgebel. Human nature and moral education in mencius, xunzi, hobbes, and rousseau. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 24(2):147–168, 2007.
- [7] Christine M. Korsgaard and Onora O'Neill. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.