

# Xunzi and Hobbes on the Value Foundation of the Possibility of Morality

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## Abstract

Xunzi proposed the idea that human nature is “evil” (性恶). Given humanity’s innate tendency toward self-interest, the difficulty lies in explaining how morality becomes possible. Within Xunzi’s theory of human nature, there exists a natural affinity with the Dao, a kind of natural emotion. It is precisely this innate root of natural emotion that enables the sage to accomplish the transformation into moral sentiment. The sage first achieves this moral transformation and, based on it, establishes rites and righteousness (礼义) that accord with human social order. Ordinary people, by simply adhering to these rites and righteousness, can also realize the transformation from desires and emotions into virtue. Xunzi thus establishes a connection between objective reality (“what is”) and moral necessity (“what ought to be”). By mediating through desires and emotions, he reconciles the split between “is” and “ought”, offering a new perspective for addressing Hume’s Problem. Hobbes, on the other hand, establishes mutually binding moral laws based on natural law. The social contract is not a constraint on individual moral behavior, but rather on collective moral behavior. It creates a tension between individual interest and moral action, a tension that effectively mitigates the disadvantages arising from purely individualistic actors. Moral law arises as moral agents, within interactive relationships with others, combine considerations of their own interests to formulate moral norms. In Hobbes’s moral thought, moral agents “invest” their moral conduct in the expectation of future moral feedback; to secure long-term interests, one must adhere to moral principles.

## Keywords

Xunzi, Hobbes, Moral Conduct, Moral Motivation

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of moral cultivation is to help social groups maintain stability within

a stable social environment. Faced with the gap between “is” and “ought”, how can real people ensure the implementation of moral conduct, or rather, what must one do to become a moral person? Li Zehou points out, “Morality is not ‘knowing’ but ‘doing’. Morality contains knowledge (i.e., concepts), but it is not itself knowledge; morality belongs to action itself. Thus, morality is neither ‘knowing that’ nor ‘knowing how’. Morality is primarily not about knowing whether one should or should not do something, nor about knowing how to do or not do it, nor about being willing or unwilling to do it. It is not a question of knowing, ability, or willingness, but a question of ‘doing or not doing’” (Li, 2017). A moral order is a necessary requirement for maintaining social peace. How is human moral conduct possible? Why do humans form moral concepts? What is the standard for measuring moral conduct? In practice, within moral conduct, it is common to measure others’ moral motivations from a self-centered perspective, as seen in virtue ethics and utilitarianism. This model takes the “self” as the starting point for moral examination, assuming that how I think it is how others should think, universalizing one’s own “ought” to everyone. This self-centered thinking is actually the root of the formation of the Golden Rule.

If one only adheres to one’s own moral concepts to practice morality, two drawbacks arise: first, one cannot guarantee the correctness of one’s own moral concepts; second, while unilaterally observing morality, one is easily vulnerable to malicious harm from immoral actors. Is there, then, a model of morality that maintains the protection of interests among moral agents? Hobbes’s contract theory opens a completely new perspective on moral conduct, which considers not only the moral agent but also factors such as conflicts of interest with others and the social environment. Xunzi’s concept of morality is also quite complex; he differs from the self-centered moral perspective, instead making realistic pre-judgments within the relational context of self and others. By restraining the self through moral pre-judgment, does Xunzi’s approach to moral conduct also represent a new perspective? Most scholars discuss the similarities and differences between Xunzi and Hobbes starting from their theories of human nature. This paper first attempts to analyze the formation of moral concepts in Xunzi and Hobbes; secondly, from the perspective of the moral agent, it further explores how each resolves the relationships between moral agents.

## **2. Contemporary Research in the Moral Thought of Xunzi and Hobbes**

Generally speaking, moral conduct must have a corresponding moral intention; intention, arising from moral motivation, governs human action. Therefore, clarifying moral motivation within the moral structure becomes key, but moral motivation is not the sole standard for measuring morality. Here, does moral motivation depend primarily on internal factors of the moral agent, or is it constituted by external social environments and the actions of others? In other words, is “morality” independent of human reality, or is it a construction of humans them-

selves?

In fact, moral theory faces a problem of moral transformation, first raised by Hume. He argued that relational terms in factual judgments are “is/is not”, while in moral judgments they are “ought/ought not” (Hume, 1980). How is the transition from a factual judgment to a value judgment achieved? Or is the move from “is” to “ought” possible? Hume believed reason cannot serve as the foundation of morality; reason can aid the realization of moral action but cannot be its root. Alasdair MacIntyre attempted to solve Hume’s problem by returning to Aristotelian teleology (MacIntyre, 2011). He argued that within the Aristotelian ethical system, there is a process of transformation from “man-as-he-happens-to-be” to “man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature” through moral imperatives, achieving a shift from original nature to cultivated personhood. However, after the Enlightenment, people gradually abandoned key elements of Aristotelian ethics, namely the telos of becoming “man-as-he-could-be”, rendering moral imperatives empty. MacIntyre’s solution was to restore the concept of function, but his thought also has limitations, and the “is-ought” problem remains unresolved.

Within the Chinese cultural tradition, there also exists the moral dilemma of the disconnect between knowledge and action. Regarding Xunzi, the transformation of moral conduct relies on the function of the “heart/mind” (心). But what exactly does “heart/mind” mean? Academia generally holds two views: one is the “cognitive heart/mind”, the other the “moral heart/mind”. Mou Zongsan believed that compared to Mencius’s heart/mind as moral subject, Xunzi’s heart/mind only has cognitive capacity (Mou, 2003). Xunzi’s subject is a cognitive subject; although the cognitive subject is conducive to the completion of moral action, it ultimately lacks an innate motivational root, making it difficult to establish a moral subject. Cai Renhou also pointed out that Xunzi’s heart/mind is not a moral heart/mind that “possesses principle” but a cognitive heart/mind that “perceives principle” (Cai, 1999). Xu Fuguan believed that Mencius’s discussion of the heart/mind emphasizes its moral nature, i.e., an inherent moral subject, while Xunzi’s heart/mind is a cognitive heart/mind; its correctness is guaranteed by the Dao, and it is by relying on this cognitive heart/mind that humans can be directed toward goodness (Xu, 2001). If Xunzi’s heart/mind only has cognitive capacity, it would lack the motivation for moral transformation, facing the dilemma of Hume’s problem. Yang Zebo criticizes the difficulty of Xunzi’s theory of evil human nature as lying in its lack of moral motivation (Yang, 2021). He argues that Xunzi’s thought only contains intellectual nature (智性), and the absence of benevolent nature (仁性) prevents the formation of moral motivation at its root, so the implementation of moral conduct ultimately has to rely on the constraints of rites and laws. Here, if one only believes that the moral motivation in Xunzi’s system comes from external causes, it will mean that there is no inner essence corresponding to the “Dao” in Xunzi’s thought, and human moral conduct is merely the constraint of primitive desires through rites and righteousness. This overlooks an important question: where do the sage’s rites and righteousness come from? Without the exist-

ence of an inner essence, how does the sage guarantee the realization of his own moral conduct?

From another perspective, Tang Junyi believed that Xunzi's heart/mind has two possibilities: "conforming to principle and the Dao" (中理合道) and "not conforming to principle and the Dao" (不中理合道). In moral cultivation, if through self-reflection one pursues unity with the Dao, then this heart/mind is one that "seeks refinement, seeks unity, seeks to traverse this peril, seeks to make this subtlety manifest" (Tang, 2005). The so-called "not conforming to principle and the Dao" means that the human heart/mind cannot always have the motivation toward the Dao; facing the subtlety of the human heart/mind, there is instead the possibility of not conforming. Since humans know there is "the ability to know that within it there is peril and subtlety", and pursue a heart/mind identical to the sage's, engaging in "rejecting things that are contrary to this possibility", then this heart/mind oriented toward the Dao must be good. Tang Junyi believed that Xunzi's heart/mind has the ability to cognize good and evil; this heart/mind includes not only cognitive capacity but also a tendency toward goodness. The heart/mind's orientation toward the Dao being necessarily good constitutes the heart/mind's possession of a good moral attribute. Liang Tao also pointed out, "Although Xunzi's heart/mind is inclined toward goodness, knows goodness, and acts with goodness, possessing moral function and attributes, it needs to explore and cognize externally to discover the knowledge and methods for realizing goodness" (Liang, 2017). Here, both Tang Junyi and Liang Tao believe that Xunzi's heart/mind possesses moral attributes, and that an inner essence of moral motivation can be found in Xunzi's thought. So, how is moral conduct formed in Xunzi? What is the source of moral value for Xunzi? If it is an objective existence of value, how is one's own moral conduct transformed?

Drawing on foreign scholars' research, we can further discuss the inner motivation for moral conduct in Xunzi. Kurtis G. Hagen argues that Xunzi's philosophy is a form of Confucian "Moral Constructivism" (Hagen, 2011). Hagen emphasizes that the moral order in Xunzi is evaluated by humans; moral value is not objectively real. Moral constructivism refers to the idea that there are no objective values in the world, only relative values established by evaluators. Here, does moral value exist independently and objectively prior to humans? Or is it constructed by human standards of evaluation? Moral value and evaluation fall into the ethical "Euthyphro Dilemma". Moral constructivists attribute the formation of moral value to human evaluation. Hagen points out that the function of Xunzi's heart/mind is to synthesize and discriminate against human experiential activities; the intellect of the heart/mind forms a new motivational level to overcome human primitive desires. Since moral construction originates from the cognitive capacity of the heart/mind, and the moral norms formed by cognitive capacity are descriptions of external reality, even if external reality does not provide moral value to the agent, it exerts a normative effect on one's own moral construction. This implies that norms of moral conduct based on external reality precede the moral

construction of the heart/mind, contrary to Hagen's claim that moral conduct is constructed by the self. Bryan W. Van Norden points out that the difference between Mencius and Xunzi lies in that Mencius would say a person acts morally because they desire to do good, while Xunzi would say a person acts morally because they approve of doing good (Van Norden, 2000). Van Norden believes Xunzi denies innate moral desires, instead achieving the overcoming of desires through the "mind's approval" (心之所可). The so-called rites and righteousness are a retraining of primitive desires. When we follow rites and righteousness, it is not initially out of the moral agent's own willingness, but in the process of moral practice, the agent gradually adapts to and comes to like the rites and righteousness themselves. Van Norden distinguishes between "desire" and "mind's approval", but also faces the question of how the "mind's approval" is possible. David B. Wong, building on Van Norden's thoughts, further analyzes the "mind's approval", suggesting it has both a "strong interpretation" and a "weak interpretation" (Wong, 2000). For Xunzi's "mind's approval", the "strong interpretation" model is not suitable.<sup>1</sup> In the "weak interpretation" model, the "mind's approval" is based on satisfying the agent's long-term desires; there is an essential connection between the "mind's approval" and desire. The difference lies between "immediate desires like food" and "desires arising from consideration of long-term benefit". Thus, it can be concluded that the motivation for the "mind's approval" is derived from one's own desires. Wong further proposes a possible explanation for the transformation of moral motivation.<sup>2</sup> Through further analysis, he argues that there exist certain natural emotions in Xunzi's thought that are precisely "congenial" to human morality, and it is these emotions that provide the motivation for human morality. Wong's thought differs from Hagen's moral constructivism. Here, the intellectual capacity of the heart/mind is influenced by external objective norms, and it is precisely because human natural emotions have points of connection with morality that the possibility for human moral transformation is provided. Wong's approach can help us better understand the source of morality in Xunzi.

Hobbes's moral concepts are established based on his natural law, but there is considerable debate over whether Hobbes's natural law constitutes moral law. R. S. Peters, starting from Hume's problem, classified Hobbes's natural law as a naturalistic fallacy (Peters, 1956). He argues that if natural law is taken as moral law, it is difficult to derive values from objective facts. Hilary Putnam believes, "Factual

<sup>1</sup>"Within this framework, 'what the heart/mind approves (心之所可)' permits only two interpretations: first, one founded upon the perception of irreducible moral properties—this constitutes the Platonic approach; second, one established upon the activity of pure reason itself—this represents the Kantian approach."

<sup>2</sup>"One interpretation is offered by J.S. Mill's analogy, which suggests that viewing morality as an end in itself, rather than a means, stems from habitual association. However, this interpretation struggles to establish a connection between the Sage-King's morality and happiness. Another interpretation is David Nivison's 'sense of duty' approach, which posits that humans, through their capacity for 'righteousness' (yi), can provide the motivational force for morality."

statements themselves, and the conventions of scientific inquiry upon which we rely to decide what is and is not a fact, already presuppose values” (Putnam, 2016). Here, the idea that values exist within objective facts suggests that, for the moral agent, the existence of moral value is influenced by objective facts; Hume’s problem is not an unbridgeable gap. J. W. N. Watkins believes that Hobbes’s natural law is only a hypothetical imperative in the Kantian sense (Watkins, 1965). Natural law aims only at the realization of self-interest, whereas moral action requires moral motivation from people. Watkins, from a Kantian philosophical perspective, views Hobbes’s moral law through the lens of innate moral goodness. Taking one’s own goodness as the motivation for moral action and universalizing this motivation to others is not the sole standard for measuring moral conduct. If measuring morality by its outcomes, Watkins’s claim is difficult to sustain, because this perspective on moral action must consider not only moral motivation but also the actual moral consequences. Peter Bieri points out, “When it is not our own interest, but the interests of others that determine our actions, then we are thinking and acting from a moral standpoint. For the core of moral respect and consideration is this: the interests of others constitute reasons for us to do or not do something” (Bieri, 2014). Therefore, Hobbes’s natural law itself is the foundation of moral law; our moral principles stem from respect and consideration for the interests of others.

This paper attempts, based on previous research, to continue analyzing the mechanisms of moral structure in Xunzi and Hobbes. For Xunzi, is morality independent of human reality, or is it a human construct? By extending the view of the “mind’s approval”, it addresses how Xunzi deals with the relationship between external objectivity and internal essence. This also helps us further advance the solution to Hume’s problem, mediating the gap between “is” and “ought”. For Hobbes, since moral motivation cannot be the sole standard for measuring moral conduct, how does Hobbes consider morality from the perspective of interacting agents? Xunzi’s moral thought is also not from a single-agent perspective; does his theory also represent an interacting-agents perspective? If so, what are the differences between their moral theories?

### 3. Xunzi’s Moral Realism

In Confucian thought, human nature is derived from the Dao (道) penetrating the person; “Heaven” (天) itself possesses moral attributes. In Western philosophy, objective, real nature cannot generate moral value; moral value is constructed by the agent. However, from the Confucian perspective, the “Decree of Heaven” (天命) contains both the objective nature of the generative Dao and the value attributes of ethical morality. Xunzi says in the “Discourse on Heaven” (天论): “The course of Heaven is constant. It does not survive because of Yao; it does not perish because of Jie. Respond to it with order and good fortune follows; respond to it with disorder and misfortune follows.” (Xunzi, 2018). Heaven itself does not change based on human virtue; order and disorder in human affairs are related to

one's own governance. The existence of Heaven is not determined by humans; humans must act according to the patterns of Heaven. The norms of behavior humans develop to adapt to natural patterns are precisely the source of value norms. Xunzi says: "The stars follow their revolutions; the sun and moon alternately shine; the four seasons succeed one another in control; the yin and yang undergo their great transformations; the wind and rain are broadly bestowed. The myriad things each attain their harmony in order to live, each attains their nourishment in order to mature. One does not see the process but sees the—results, this is called spiritual power. All know how it achieves completion, but no one knows its formless aspect—this is called Heaven." (Xunzi, 2018). The growth of humans and the myriad things cannot be separated from Heaven. Humans must affirm natural norms to survive. These descriptive norms of external reality exist independently of humans. Therefore, Xunzi's moral values constitute an external, objective Moral Realism.

If so, why does Xunzi still consider humans to have an evil tendency? He says: "Now the nature of man is such that he is born with a love of profit. Following this nature will cause aggression and greed to grow and courtesy and deference to disappear. He is born with feelings of envy and hatred. Following these will cause violence and crime to develop and loyalty and trustworthiness to perish. He is born with the desires of the ears and eyes, with a fondness for beautiful sounds and sights. Following these will cause licentiousness and chaos to arise and the patterns of ritual, righteousness, decorum, and principle to perish." (Xunzi, 2018). If human nature is not acted upon by "conscious activity" (伪), it will produce unlimited desires, ultimately leading to strife, violence, and other consequences. In fact, in Xunzi's thought, there is no direct moral tendency, but rather a gradual model of moral conduct. Morality in the agent does not manifest from innate moral goodness; ordinary people can only form moral concepts under the constraint of the sage's "conscious activity". How, then, does the sage generate moral conduct? What is the inner essence of the production of moral value? First, let's analyze the role of the "heart/mind" in Xunzi's thought. Xunzi says: "The heart/mind is born with the capacity to know, and knowing involves making distinctions." "The capacity to know belongs to human nature. That things can be known belong to the principle of things." (Xunzi, 2018). The heart/mind is the cognitive subject of humans; all things can only be known through the heart/mind. He also says: "The heart/mind is the ruler of the body and the master of the numinous intelligence. It issues commands and does not receive commands." (Xunzi, 2018). "The faculties of the ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and body each have their objects of contact but cannot interchange their functions. This is called the Heavenly offices. The heart/mind dwells in the center of the chest to govern the five faculties. This is called the Heavenly ruler." (Xunzi, 2018). The most basic function of the heart/mind is to cognize things. Regarding the Heavenly offices, the heart/mind can rationally process the perceptual materials obtained by the five senses, integrating them through reason to make effective use of sensory experience. As the Heavenly ruler, the heart/mind, through the process of

“emptiness, unity, and stillness” (虛一而靜), can achieve a deeper level of cognition, thereby restraining one’s own emotions and desires. In fact, the rational analysis of sensory experience by the heart/mind already implies acting according to the descriptive meaning of external reality.

The “Dao” is both an external objective reality and the goal pursued by the cognitive heart/mind in relation to external reality. The social moral order arises from the moral conduct generated by the heart/mind’s cognition of external reality. Although the rational cognitive capacity of the heart/mind is constructed, the external norms upon which internal value is based are independent objective realities. Only by effectively constraining desires can one accord with the Dao. The means of constraint is through establishing rites and righteousness, realizing the process of society moving from “disorder” to “order”. Xunzi believes that humans are born with desires such as love of profit. If the development of “emotions and desires” is left unchecked, it will lead to chaos. On the other hand, Xunzi also believes that within emotions and desires there are parts that correspond to moral attributes. He says: “Measure the emotions and establish patterns, thereby adorning the group, distinguishing the gradations of intimacy, honor, and lowliness—these cannot be increased or decreased.” (Xunzi, 2018). Here, emotions and desires seem to have a tendency that can be either good or evil, or essentially neutral, depending mainly on how they are guided. “Nature is what is conferred by Heaven. Emotions are the substance of nature. Desires are the responses of emotions.” (Xunzi, 2018). Nature is the innate tendency. When humans interact with things, corresponding emotions arise; emotions then generate desires for things. Under the influence of the heart/mind’s knowing, “emotions and desires” can be guided toward a tendency for goodness; this is also the transformation of primitive desires into moral conduct through the “mind’s approval”. Is the transformation of emotions and desires by the “mind’s approval” applicable to everyone? Xunzi says: “Thus, the sages transformed their nature and initiated conscious activity; from conscious activity, rites and righteousness were born; from rites and righteousness, laws and measures were produced. Thus, rites, righteousness, laws, and measures are produced by the sages.” (Xunzi, 2018). Before humanity entered the era of civilization, the sages first completed the moral transformation of their own emotions and desires and used this to establish rites and righteousness. The so-called value norms could only be established by the sages. The sages established norms of rites and righteousness based on their own standards of consideration, analysis, and judgment, arising from the needs of human survival desires and the long-term satisfaction of collective interests. This is essentially the difference Huang Ba Rui (David B. Wong) points out between “immediate desires for food” and “desires arising from consideration of long-term benefit”. The root of morality lies in prudential consideration given to external reality. Ordinary people rely on the rites and laws established by the sages to act. But if the sages had no external norms for constraint and cultivation, how did they achieve the transformation from primitive emotions/desires to rites and righteousness? Because morality is an objective reality external to humans, within human nature there exist natural

emotions that are “congenial” to moral value. The sage, through perceptual capacities of the heart/mind that surpass ordinary people, causes the parts of natural emotions that are “congenial” with morality to produce a fit. Within the “group” (群), they realize union with nature through disposition and emotions, thereby conforming to the development of the Dao. Thus, they establish rites and righteousness that conform to human relational norms. Thereby, the sage completes the process of transformation from natural emotions/desires to morality. Ordinary people cannot directly transform emotions/desires into morality; rather, through the guidance of rites and righteousness, they achieve the transformation of natural emotions into moral sentiments. Adherence to rites and righteousness can lead to the satisfaction of one’s own desires, because moral conduct satisfies the emotions that are congenial with the Dao, so people will adhere to morality. Xunzi states: “If men follow their nature and yield to their feelings, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end in violence. Therefore, there must be the transforming influence of teachers and laws, and the guiding path of ritual and righteousness (礼和义), and then it will be the case that they will yield to courtesy and deference, turn to conforming to cultured order, and end in stability.” (Xunzi, 2018). This passage articulates the necessity of progressing from “natural emotions” to “following the Dao”. Indulging human nature and acquiescing to human desires inevitably leads to contention, transgressions against social roles, the disruption of principle, and culminates in disorder. Hence, the edifying influence of teachers and legal models, along with the guidance of the Dao of ritual and righteousness, becomes essential. Only through these means can people develop deference and compliance, align with patterned order, and thereby achieve social governance. Here, the “Dao” is precisely ritual and righteousness; it constitutes the standard for rectifying and guiding natural emotions. Xunzi’s saying that “the person on the street can become a Yu [a sage]” intends to show that both sages and ordinary people have the potential to achieve the transformation of moral desires. The sage achieves it spontaneously, while the ordinary person can only achieve it by relying on rites and righteousness. The methods by which sages and ordinary people realize moral conduct differ, but the result achieved is the same. However, even after the establishment of the system of ritual and law, Xunzi’s theory still allows room for ordinary people to critique or improve it. Xunzi emphasizes that the essence of ritual (礼) lies in “nourishing human desires and meeting human needs”, and he maintains that righteousness (义) constitutes the spiritual core of institutions. Based on this, ordinary people can examine whether existing rituals genuinely fulfill human needs and promote social harmony. If rituals and laws degenerate into mere formalities or become tools of oppression, they betray their original purpose, and ordinary people may advocate for revisions in accordance with the spirit of “ritual righteousness”. Xunzi advocates “following the later kings” (法后王), that is, emulating the institutional practices of enlightened rulers of recent eras, thereby underscoring that institutions should be continuously adjusted based on practical experience. Ordinary people can question the rationality of rituals and laws by observing

their actual effectiveness in reality, citing historical precedents or contemporary cases to argue for timely reform. Xunzi's moral realism offers a promising approach to solving Hume's problem. Human nature contains an inner essence that corresponds to the Dao; these inner natural emotions provide the fundamental motivation and basis for the transformation of moral value. External reality is not directly transformed into moral value; rather, through the transformation of emotions and desires, internal moral value and external objective norms are brought into agreement.

If we analyze moral conduct from the perspective of the agent, does a new research horizon emerge? Generally, agents can be divided into single agents and interacting agents. A single agent takes the moral agent itself as the starting point, regardless of whether moral action benefits the self or others' interests. Interactive agency refers to the relational interactions between a moral agent and other agents outside itself. The interacting-agents perspective values not only the internal moral motivation of the agent but also the relationship with other agents, especially within complex historical environments and mutually constraining social contexts. The theoretical core of interacting subjects lies in the shift from a "subject-object" relationship to a "subject-subject" relationship: it requires us to regard others as subjects who, like the "I", possess autonomous consciousness and a Life-world, rather than as objects that can be fully predicted or manipulated. It also emphasizes the inner consciousness and motivations of acting subjects (such as moral intuition and emotions), as well as the dynamic, intersubjective network of relations mediated by socio-historical contexts. Intersubjectivity is neither a special form of exchange based on the principle of reciprocity, nor a formal analytical tool of game theory, but a more fundamental philosophical-anthropological premise and socio-ontological condition. In moral conduct, the perspective starting from a single agent is quite common. Whether it is pure moral goodness or utilitarianism aimed at utility, both take the "self" as the starting point to measure and examine the behavior and psychology of others. By a shift of thinking, they conclude that the self and others have the same moral conduct, inferring from the self that others must be the same. This mode of thinking is the source of the agent's moral motivation, such as Confucius's "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire", which starts from the self, assuming one's own moral conduct can be universalized to every other agent. Mencius believed that humans are born with innate moral knowledge and ability (良知良能); the so-called "heart/mind that cannot bear the suffering of others" (不忍人之心) is innate moral goodness. In concrete moral conduct, the moral agent need not consider the goodness of the outcome or whether it benefits oneself<sup>3</sup>; otherwise, it would not count as true moral conduct. From the perspective of single individual action, the moral agent uses innate goodness as moral motivation to implement moral conduct. But this

<sup>3</sup>"Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would without exception be filled with a heart/mind of alarm and compassion. This would not be because he sought to get in good favor with the child's parents, nor because he desired praise from his neighbors and friends, nor because he would dislike the sound of the child's cries." (Mencius)

perspective is limited to the individual moral agent; once exploited by immoral others, it can lead to significant losses for the agent's own interests. In the interacting-agents perspective, the moral agent must consider not only itself but also its relationships with other moral agents. This model more effectively promotes the implementation of moral conduct.

Xunzi says: "The standard for choosing between desire and aversion, acceptance and rejection is this: when you see something desirable, you must consider beforehand what is detestable about it; when you see something beneficial, you must consider beforehand what is harmful about it. Weigh both aspects carefully calculate, and only then decide your desire or aversion, acceptance or rejection. If you do this, you will consistently avoid failure." (Xunzi, 2018). Here, analyzing from the agent's perspective, Xunzi's moral conduct is not a norm of behavior starting from innate goodness, but rather a realistic pre-judgment made within the relational context of self and others.<sup>4</sup> Is Xunzi's moral conduct also from an interacting-agents perspective? Xunzi says: "Why is this? Is it not that they do not desire it, but rather that they are concerned about the long-term perspective and fear being unable to sustain it? Therefore, they again regulate expenditures, control desires, gather, store, and accumulate to sustain it. Is this not very good for themselves, considering the long term?" (Xunzi, 2018). Thus, what Xunzi emphasizes is not only moral principles starting from the self, but also consideration of others beyond oneself, as well as factors of the surrounding social environment. Xunzi's moral theory is not purely that of a single agent, unlike Mencius's innate moral knowledge and ability, which considers only the internal requirements of the moral agent. Xunzi's thought inherently involves realistic pre-judgment associated with others and concepts that measure the interests between moral agents. Here, Xunzi breaks through the traditional single-agent perspective, implementing moral conduct from the more complex perspective of interacting agents. Therefore, Xunzi's moral view is a Moral Realism from an interacting-agents perspective.

#### **4. Hobbes's Moral Constructivism**

Hobbes's contract theory breaks through the confines of traditional moral views. For Hobbes, whether something benefits one's own interests becomes the standard for measuring good and evil. What is beneficial to oneself is good, so self-preservation is the greatest good; what is detrimental to oneself is evil, so death is the greatest evil. The most basic requirement of natural law is to seek peace to avoid war. War brings death, destroying one's greatest good, while peace effectively ensures self-preservation. Hobbes defines "peace" as the absence of war, and

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<sup>4</sup>"Now, the nature of human beings is such that they are born with a fondness for profit. Following this nature will lead to contention and strife, and the virtue of deference and yielding will perish. They are born with feelings of envy and hatred; following these will lead to violence and villainy, and the virtues of loyalty and faithfulness will perish. They are born with the desires of the ears and eyes, with a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds; following these will lead to licentiousness and chaos, and the patterns of ritual, righteousness, refinement, and order will perish."

war as a state where everyone is in a condition of mutual hostility—this state is the State of Nature. Seeking peace cannot be done by surrender; compromising with aggressors leads to the frustration of self-preservation, infringing upon the inalienable “natural right” of anyone, namely the right to one’s own life. The purpose of natural law is to enable people to escape the state of nature, establishing a contract with others who also seek peace. Hobbes believes that, provided others are also willing, a person should, for the sake of peace and self-defense, be willing to lay down the right to all things when others are too, and be content with as much liberty against others as he would allow others against himself. Hobbes’s natural law is the premise and foundation of moral law; whatever secures the interest of self-preservation is good. He says: “Peace is good, and therefore the ways or means of achieving peace, such as justice, gratitude, modesty, equity, mercy, and the other laws of nature... are good; that is to say, they are virtues, and their contrary vices are evil.” (Hobbes, 2017). In Hobbes’s moral thought, following moral principles aids the realization of self-interest; to obtain long-term interests, one must also adhere to moral principles. Natural law aims to achieve peace for the purpose of self-preservation; therefore, it requires people to practice moral conduct like modesty, mercy, justice, etc.

It is difficult to discuss the principles of moral evaluation based on a single standard rule. Morality serves to mediate relationships between agents and to distinguish principles of right/wrong, good/evil. In ethics, both virtue ethics and deontology are models that measure morality starting from the moral agent itself. Virtue ethics takes the character quality of a person as the standard for judging morality. Deontology takes innate moral goodness as moral motivation, inferring from the self the result that moral conduct can be universalized. In fact, isn’t Hobbes’s contract theory a standard that does not measure moral conduct by moral motivation? Hobbes’s contract theory initiates the shift from a single-agent to an interacting-agents perspective, i.e., moral conduct must be mutually applicable among agents, not limited solely by the agent’s own moral motivation as the standard for constraining the self. The single-agent perspective presents its own internal logic in a universalized manner, causing moral conduct to be performed under the impetus of moral goodness. As social structures become more complex, relationships between people also become complex. If morality is measured solely by one’s own goodness, regardless of the outcome’s quality or the loss of interests, it can lead to adverse consequences for moral conduct. If the number of adverse consequences increases, it can make unilateral moral conduct difficult to sustain. Kant’s deontology is a typical single-agent perspective. Kant believed that human morality originates from human reason; reason establishes the status of the moral subject through self-legislation. Is the “moral law” established by free will a universal legislation? Differences in cultures lead to different “legislations”; each people has its own moral legislation. If a limited moral law is promoted as a universal moral principle, treating thoughts outside one’s own as heterodoxy, it results in absolute authoritarianism. This is actually the drawback of the single-agent per-

spective. If one acts solely based on one's own perceived moral consciousness, then concepts of good and evil cannot be guaranteed, and moral conduct becomes an act of self-psychological comfort rather than a safeguard for the social moral order. Here, free will is confined to undifferentiated moral concepts, which is also a shortcoming of Kant's thought. Kant's moral doctrine stands on the ground of reason, struggling against natural desires to alter sensuous emotions and selfish intentions. Kant completely opposes moral goodness and self-interest, denying the moral relationships formed through the interaction between agents.

Hobbes adopt an interacting-agents perspective. Contract theory considers not only the external relationships between the moral agent and others—such as interactions of interest between agents, the social environment, etc.—but also takes mutual interest as the starting point for moral concepts. It benefits the combination of the agent's morality and interests, representing a more comprehensive new perspective. Homann points out, "The perspective of multiple interacting agents emerges. It stems from learning the painful historical lessons encountered by the single-agent model." (Homann, 2014). Hobbes's moral concept is that moral norms are produced by moral agents within interactive relationships with others, combined with considerations of their own interests. Moral conduct not only benefits the self but also benefits other agents. The social contract is not an individual moral act but a constraint on collective moral behavior. In concrete moral conduct, the practice of morality does not stem from an inherent mechanism within the moral agent, such as innate moral knowledge and ability, but involves considering one's own interests, creating a tension between individual interest and moral action. This tension effectively mitigates the drawbacks arising from the single-agent perspective. If pure moral goodness alone is the basis for moral conduct, without weighing the resulting losses, harms, and conflicts of interest, it will be unable to form a sustainable practice of morality. Hobbes believed that the moral norms of agents are linked to their self-interest; there must be a contract of mutual trust between moral agents. That is; to win long-term interests, one must practice one's moral conduct. Roger Scruton says: "Thus my obligation is my most original creation; I have an obligation because I freely choose it. When you and I exchange promises, this is a contract, a contract that emerges autonomously." (Scruton, 2013). In the social environment of survival, to obtain mutual personal interests, it requires each to invest interests into the future. For example, in a cooperative relationship, one party must first relinquish short-term self-interest to help the other, in order to receive similar feedback in the future. Scruton points out, "Contractarians see the basis of moral judgment and moral motivation in the mutual recognition of free and responsible persons." (Scruton, 2013). Here, human moral conduct starts from self-interest; through maintaining self-interest and forming mutual cooperation with others, agents invest moral conduct in future moral returns. On the basis of protecting mutual interests, a common moral concept is formed. Contract theory, standing on the ground of self-interest, constrains the agent's own behavior to enable mutual benefit among agents, ultimately achieving

a moral model of mutual satisfaction of interests. Therefore, Hobbes's moral view is a Moral Constructivism from an interacting-agents perspective.

Neither Xunzi nor Hobbes takes pure goodness as the motivation for morality; instead, they constitute the realization of morality and the fulfillment of mutual interests through the relationship between self and others. Neither ignores individual subjectivity, while simultaneously transcending the limitations of the single-agent perspective, establishing common legislative safeguards between the individual and others. In the process of moral realization, Xunzi and Hobbes also have differences. Xunzi emphasizes the cultivation of human virtue and character. He believes, "When Tang and Wu existed, the world accordingly was ordered; when Jie and Zhou existed, the world accordingly fell into disorder." (Xunzi, 2018). Hobbes, on the other hand, addresses the problem of human nature through purely political means. David B. Wong points out the difference between Xunzi's and Hobbes's theories of the state of nature: Hobbes did not consider that human motives of self-interest might change during the transition from the state of nature to civil society, whereas in Xunzi, People's pursuit of desires is inherently constrained, requiring not only restraint on their own actions but also the transformation of their character through ritual, music, and righteousness (Wong, 2000). Hobbes's thought does not include the problem of citizen cultivation; it merely maintains stability between interest and morality. In Xunzi's view, the ruler above transforms the habits of the people through rites and righteousness, thereby achieving stable state governance. Additionally, both Hobbes and Xunzi believe that the influence of long-term interests causes people to abide by constraints of rights. But Hobbes did not consider the problem that would arise if the ruler were a self-interested violator of the covenant—state corruption. Xunzi proposes the prior moral transformation of the sage; here, the ruler's morality is effectively guaranteed, and state corruption is effectively alleviated.

## 5. Conclusion

Xunzi believed that within human nature, natural emotions contain parts that are "congenial" with the Dao. The sage, through the cognition of the heart/mind, completes the transformation of natural emotions into moral sentiments. Under the guidance of objective norms, the sage establishes rites and righteousness that conform to human relational standards. Ordinary people can only achieve the moral transformation of their own emotions by adhering to these rites and righteousness. Here, both sages and ordinary people have the potential for transformation, except that the sage's transformation is active, while ordinary people require postnatal cultivation. By establishing a connection between objective reality ("is") and moral necessity ("ought") through natural emotions, we do not directly transform external reality into morality. Instead, the process is mediated by the transformation of emotions and desires, thereby mitigating the tension inherent in a direct "is-ought" transition and offering an alternative approach to Hume's problem. Hobbes believed that the purpose of natural law is self-preservation. If

everyone were in a warlike state, it would destroy the greatest good. Therefore, to pursue peace, people lay down rights that others also lay down, jointly constructing a contract. Morality itself is based on natural law; to obtain long-term interests, one must adhere to moral principles. Agents invest their moral conduct in the expectation of future moral feedback. Only by mutually maintaining the same moral agreement can long-term, effective development of interests be achieved. From the perspective of the agent, neither takes innate moral goodness as the moral motivation. Instead, based on analysis of moral consequences, they make effective realistic pre-judgments about moral conduct. Within relationships of mutual interaction, they promote the realization of moral conduct and the greatest possible safeguarding of interests.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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