

# A Comparison of Eastern and Western Views on Freedom

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The concept of *ziyou*<sup>1</sup> in English is two words: liberty and freedom. The former refers to rights and the latter is related to will and action. What I discuss here does not concern rights associated with liberty, but will only engage in a comparison of the Confucian, Daoist, Greek, and Christian perspectives on the significance of will and action associated with freedom.

From the meaning of the word, freedom refers to realizing what I want through actions. This definition has two important points: a person has material desires and is capable of acting. For example, someone wants to go to Tibet; as long as he or she has the ability to go to Tibet (however they do not have to put this into action), they possess the freedom to do so. If someone has never even thought about or possessed the desire to go to Tibet, then the question concerning his or her freedom to go to Tibet is a false question, because this is a question that has nothing to do with that person. Nonetheless, if someone wants to go, but does not have the ability to go, then what he or she lacks is the freedom to go to Tibet. This essay will analyze two essential points about freedom from both the Chinese and Western perspectives.

In Western philosophic history, Plato was the first philosopher to engage in an analytical discussion on the concept of freedom.<sup>2</sup> The city-state of Athens implemented a democratic system where the citizens had relatively great participation rights in public affairs. In this type of political structure, people had an unrestricted space of mobility called “freedom”. This original view of freedom encouraged people to follow their heart’s desire, namely: doing what they wanted to do. For Plato, this type of freedom ignored the tendency of people to harm themselves when following their heart’s desire. Plato’s analysis is this: everyone has the desire to live and to live well. The existence of this tendency can be expressed as “everyone seeks good”. If a person is able to achieve good in his or her actions, then they are free. If a person, in seeking good, always receives evil things that harm his or her existence, then they are not free. The existence of man is a process of judgments and choices. People will not seek things that seem evil to them. Thus, what they seek is certainly something that they believe to be good. The problem is, is what they think to be good really good? People’s judgments are based on thoughts. Possessing a true concept of good is the premise for guaranteeing that a person will make correct judgments. If a person does not know what true good is, then his or her judgments and choices cannot achieve good. When a person perceives evil as good when pursuing good, then in actuality what he or she is pursuing is evil, and in the end they will bring harm to their existence. In this analysis, Plato believes that those Athenians who believed to possess freedom, in actuality, were not free. True freedom belongs to those who make judgments and choices under the guidance of the true concept of good and become good people in life.

We have found that people always adopt two types of images about the concept of good. The first is putting oneself at the center. Every stage of our lives possesses a certain value with fixed perspectives of both good and evil. In being faced with choices, our decisions can only be based

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: the Chinese word 自由 *ziyou* means both freedom and liberty in Chinese.

<sup>2</sup> See Plato, *The Republic*, Chapter 8.

on our values. An individual's values can be unstable, such as during his or her youth; and there can also be some sort of social recognition of common values, such as the belief in and respect of a certain code of ethics. However, no matter what, a person must make decisions from his or her values. These values are the foundation of a person's good or bad judgments, and when making decisions, the truth of these values will not be put to question.

The second is taking authority as the center. When making good or bad decisions, people always give up on their judgment, giving the power of decision making to another person or some group. Authority is formed in different channels, and once formed, it becomes the leading function in a person's decision making process. For example, children's dependence on their parents, people's dependence on their own personified figure of worship, etc.: among them all exists the power of authority. The truth of authority cannot be called into question unless authority has been lost.

People make choices based on certain values. However, can my self-values and external authority ensure truth? Can they bring about real freedom in people's existence? No matter whether they are self-based or built upon authoritative foundations, in reality, people must rely on certain types of values in making good or bad judgments. Yet, due to our own continual changes, the good nature of any values that we possess cannot be sustained for long and thus is not dependable and lacks truth. People can argue that, when we hold on to some type of value and make it a standard by which we judge good or evil, this value holds a certain truth, a relative truth. An example of this is in the Chinese traditional ethics the view on "chastity". When people make good or bad decisions according to this traditional ethics, it is good, and thus possesses relative truth. In the course of history, during the attacks of the May Fourth movement, this ethics was stripped of its good nature and no longer possessed truth. Moreover, if we accept this saying, then we must accept that the good nature of a type of value is based on external historical conditions and therefore its truth is given and not possessed from within.

The question is, do our existing values possess true goodness? In reality, the values that people accept always are of a type of traditional acceptance, or from following the ideas of the majority, or from submitting to some type of strong external force. Nonetheless, none of these channels from which values are formed can guarantee the truth of these values, for example traditions, which we must also change. Whenever we discover the faults of traditions, we must make efforts to improve them. But where do our renewed efforts come from? We sometimes also blindly follow the ideas of the masses. However, the ideas of the masses are also mistaken. As far as the external strength of force, it could completely be a type of self-inflicted foreign force.

To live a free life one must possess knowledge about true good, this is more of a problem about truth. But, how to achieve this truth? St. Augustine, in his book *Confessions*, has deep experiences with the difficulties of man's human existence. He points out, man's quest for good and truth is a natural desire, yet, in this quest once man falls in love with one type of good, such as gluttony, gratification, worship of some ideology, indulging in pleasures, etc. then they will take this good as the perfect good, and will be unwilling to release themselves from it. People cannot just rely on themselves to release themselves from the perfect good. For that person, the perfect good is the true good, and giving up on it is like giving up on the quest for good, and thus giving up on a "life of freedom". However, the good that people are fixed to is a good from one certain perspective. With time and a changing perspective, this good will lose its nature. This type of "good" is not genuine good. When being stubborn, people become stuck in an illusion of perfect

good, thinking that the present good they are fixed to is a genuine good, and thus fully accept its confinements. Augustine believes that this concept of good, which one can not get rid of and dominates their existence, is more like the original sin of man, an existence of sin, where there is no freedom at all. How can this illusion of the perfect good be broken? He points out that, unless truth manifests itself to the person, the person will be unable to brake their illusions of good. Truth bestowed upon people is like the gift of grace. The relationship between people and truth is like that of take and receive. A person witnesses truth through grace and thus is able to make judgments from true good. This is the Christian concept of freedom from the concept of redemptive truth.<sup>3</sup>

We can also change our perspective when discussing this Christian concept of freedom. Freedom means the ability to choose and achieve what one wants. Everyone who wants to live a good life must be able to distinguish good from evil. This thus requires people to possess the knowledge to do so. However, St. Augustine's concept of original sin says that, after people fall by the wayside, they will not be able to get ride of the constraining concept of good, and therefore will not be able to have knowledge of true good. This is also to say that there is no way that a person can begin from true good and make a distinction between good and evil. Therefore, the judgments one makes can only be from evil to good, where in the illusion of perfect good one chooses evil and refutes good. In life people seek good, but when in the illusion of perfect good there is no way one can choose true good. There is no freedom in this type of existence at all. The strength to break the illusion of perfect good comes from the grace of god. When god, through Jesus, revealed true good (as grace), those who are Christians received god's grace, and as a result are able to judge true good through this grace. This type of existence is freedom.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of Western culture, freedom is to live a life of true good. This type of freedom is connected together with truth. Traditional Chinese culture did not put forth a second word for freedom. However, we have noticed that there is a similar spirit. Specifically in Confucianism's *Doctrine of the Mean*, there is a fairly deep expression of this spirit of freedom.

I believe that debates about the nature of good and evil in Chinese philosophy began during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. The center of these debates is the question of life's starting point. *Mencius. Gaozi. Part I* records a conversation between Gaozi and Mencius. Gaozi believes that there is no distinction between good and evil in human nature, life brings about both good and evil, and uses the parable "water flows indiscriminately" to support his argument. Mencius emphasizes that human nature is inherently good and uses the parable "water flows downstream" in response to Gaozi. When it comes down to it, is human nature good or evil? In society we witness that some people do good things and some people do evil things. Gaozi uses the observance of human nature's as being indifferent to conclude that people can be good and evil. But, if our point of perspective focuses on the behaviors of one individual, it will not be difficult to see that everyone's actions in fact suggest that they are acting from their own concept of good, and believe that they are doing good. Everyone has their own concept of good, this is the foundation for judging good and evil. However, in life, a person will take themselves to be good, and others to be evil. Does common goodness exist in human society? In response to this, Zhuangzi in his book *On the Equality of Things* says: "So it is that we have the contentions

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion about the concept of redemptive truth refer to Xie Wenyu's "Concept of Redemptive Truth", published in *Zhexuemen*, 2007, Vol. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Reference Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian Man*, in *Three Treaties*, Translated by Li Yong, Century, Shanghai's People Publishing House, 2010.

between the Literati and the Mohists, the one side affirming what the other denies, and vice versa.” Is there a common standard for good and evil? In Zhuangzi’s analysis, the problem here is who will be the one to decide the common standard (“whom can we ask to make a right judgment?”). This method of discussion cannot avoid plunging into the boundless abyss of “the standard’s standard”. This is also to say that people cannot come to a decisive conclusion amongst themselves when debating the concept of good. Although this is how it is, Zhuangzi believes that we should do away with our quest for a common good and live a life of natural inaction.

As a person of the same time period as Zhuangzi, Mencius agrees with Zhuangzi’s observation, namely: everyone is stubborn when it comes to their own concept of good, and as a result, it is impossible to form a common concept of good when making decisions. Mencius takes the observation a step further and says that (see *The Book of Mencius - Gong Sun Chou I*), although people stick to their own view points, yet we all have a common tendency towards good, namely that: everyone believes that they themselves are pursuing good. Moreover, “all human beings do have a mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others”, one case in point is that “no one is able to bear and see that a child is about to fall into a well”. Human emotions along with this tendency to quest for good are the common good. Therefore, Mencius believes that the question is not whether or not there is a common good, but how to cultivate this common good? Although everyone’s concept of good is different and even conflict, we are all pursuing good. But in regressing back to the original quest, we can carry forward the good in our hearts, experience a common good, and on this foundation create a harmonious society.

Mencius does not touch upon the question of true good. What he concerns himself with is how the “ceremonial disintegration” of a chaotic society returns to order. Therefore, Mencius does not concern himself with the question of individual freedom. However, the *Doctrine of the Mean* delves further and believes that man’s human nature is endowed from heaven, and thus true good is based on whether or not one can keep to their own nature. Its first three sentences are: “what heaven decrees is called inborn nature; to follow this nature is called the way; cultivating the way is called education.” This is to say that everyone’s human nature is decided by heaven, for man this means true good. Thus, people should follow their human nature, what’s called “willfulness”.<sup>5</sup> How is one able to follow their human nature? Following is an action. People live in the making of decisions. The knowledge and grasp one has of their human nature, is the “willfulness” they will have. If one’s knowledge of human nature is incorrect, for example, taking things that do not belong to your human nature as a part of your human nature, although you feel you are following human nature, in reality you are not. Therefore, the *Doctrine of the Mean* says that, how one understands and grasps their human nature is the central question in life and suggests that one should “pursue and demonstrate good by continuously improving oneself to be sincere” as a channel of knowledge. Simply speaking, this type of epistemology requires one to sincerely confront oneself, because human nature emerges to us from “sincerity” and as a result we can only know human nature through sincerity. As long as we are always “sincere”, namely “complete sincerity”, then we will be able to increasingly understand human nature. After we are able to do so completely, we will then be able to follow it, and synchronize with all in heaven and earth. This is the free life of the synchronization of heaven and man.

We can observe that, Christianity and Confucianism both pay full attention to the deceive use of “good” in human existence. People can only be free by living in true good. Nonetheless,

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<sup>5</sup> Translator’s note: doing what is natural, doing what one pleases.

Christianity, starting from a concept of grace, believes that man can only receive the gift of grace and break the illusion of perfect good by being a Christian. Grace is the beginning of true good and the enjoyment of freedom. Confucianism however emphasizes to sincerely continue to understand one's own human nature, and by living according to one's own human nature, in the end, one will synchronize with heaven and enjoy freedom. Of course, these two views on the role of freedom in human life need to undergo further analysis.

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Translated from the Chinese original by Michael Chang