

The Dynamic Generation of Human Nature as Seen from the Contradiction Between Good and Evil of "Basement People"

----Taking "Basement Notes" as an Example

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Abstract. This article focuses on the phenomenon of the contradiction between good and evil of the "basement people" in "Basement Notes". Through a careful reading of the text, it is concluded that they not only regret their evil deeds but also actively choose to be mean, and they have both good intentions and deliberately suppress them. On this basis, by combining the viewpoints in Sartre's existentialism and comparing Mencius' theory of human nature being good with Xunzi's theory of human nature being evil, the causes of this contradiction are analyzed. The exploration in this article aims to deepen the understanding of the complexity of human nature presented in the work, and at the same time, discuss the differences shown by the theories of human nature in China and the West. Research has found that Dostoevsky, through the image of the "basement man", profoundly criticized the rationalist trend that prevailed in 19th-century Russia, revealing the spiritual predicament caused by reason's attempt to simplify human nature.

Keywords: Human nature, Basement people, Basement notes

1. Introduction

"Notes from the Basement" is a philosophical novel written by Dostoevsky, with the first-person monologue of the "basement man" as its core narrative method. The protagonist of the novel is a retired civil servant who lives in a dark basement in St. Petersburg. He has no definite name, and this article will refer to him as the "Basement Man". Wrapped in loneliness and self-doubt, he always passionately expresses his inner self and confronts the outside world in his writings. He was both dissatisfied with the suppression of individuals in 19th-century Russian society and repulsed by the contempt others showed because of his low status. They are eager to gain recognition through interaction with others, but due to their inferiority complex and paranoia, they often push people away with sharp words and deeds. From following an officer to wait for an opportunity for an "equal collision" in an attempt to restore his dignity, to first showing pity to the courtesan Lisa and then humiliating her with money, and then swinging back and forth between restraint and outburst during a reunion with former classmates, his experiences have always been interwoven with doubts about rationalism that "people should pursue perfection", and have vividly demonstrated the complex

tensions between good and evil, desire and resistance in human nature. Upon initially reading Notes from the Basement, I observed that the psychological characteristics of the "basement people" are inherently contradictory: while they harbor concealed warmth within, their outward demeanor is sharp and caustic. At times, they express remorse for their harsh words and actions, only to subsequently and deliberately intensify the harm inflicted upon others. The shaping of this complex trait is profoundly related to the author Dostoevsky's life experiences. Dostoevsky had personally experienced exile in Siberia, witnessing both the most unbearable dark side of human nature and the hidden kindness among prisoners in the hard labor camp (such as the act of sharing bread). These fragmented yet re-pieced life experiences enabled his creation to break free from the shackles of mainstream thought at that time - refusing to simplify human beings as abstract existences within the framework of concepts such as "reason" and "morality", thereby endowing the image of "basement people" with a unique ideological tension.

At present, the academic interpretation of the "basement man" mostly focuses on his resistance to reason or the existentialist freedom he embodies. However, existing research has rarely delved deeply into the wavering characteristics of this image in the dimension of good and evil. In fact, the subtle behavior of "basement people" who feel ashamed after hurting others and hesitate and retreat when they want to help others precisely touches upon the most genuine state of human nature. Compared with macroscopic perspectives such as "rational resistance" and "existentialist freedom", the "contradiction between good and evil" perspective focused on in this article can more specifically present the complex state of human nature in real interactions: On the one hand, it supplements the academic circle's interpretation dimension of the "basement people's" spiritual world, sinking from "abstract thought resistance" to "specific behavioral choices of good and evil", making the analysis of the character image closer to the text. On the other hand, by comparing this struggle between good and evil with the ancient Chinese theories of "innate goodness" and "innate evil", it also avoids the limitations of a single Western theoretical interpretation, providing a cross-cultural perspective for exploring the essence of human nature, and thereby responding to the core question of "whether human nature is a preconceived label or a dynamic generation later in life".

This article will first sort out the core viewpoints and theoretical connections of Sartre's existentialism, providing a theoretical basis for interpreting the good and evil choices of the "basement people". Secondly, in light of the background of Russia's social transformation in the 19th century and the reasons for the prevalence of rationalism, clarify the historical context in which the contradiction between good and evil of the "basement people" emerged. Secondly, conduct an in-depth analysis of the specific behavioral manifestations of the "basement people" who actively release evil and passively suppress good, and analyze the causes behind the contradiction from two aspects: Sartre's existentialism and Dostoevsky's criticism of rational egoism. Finally, the differences between Pisa's existentialism and Mencius' "theory of human nature being good" and Xunzi's "theory of human nature being evil" are explored to reveal the essence of the dynamic generation of human nature. At the same time, the significance of the contradiction between good and evil in the "basement person" for understanding the survival state of modern individuals is summarized.

2. Literature review

Sartre's existentialism originated in France in the first half of the 20th century and was a product of the social crisis and spiritual turmoil triggered by the two World Wars. Its core viewpoint, "Existence precedes essence" [1], holds that human beings have no innate fixed essence and need to shape themselves through actions [2]. Influenced by Husserl's phenomenological methodology of "returning to the essence of things", it distinguishes between "self-existence" (active freedom) and

"self-existent existence" (static objectivity) [3]. This provides an important theoretical support for interpreting the wavering between good and evil of the "basement people".

Academic research on "Notes from the Basement" and Dostoevsky's thoughts on human nature can be classified into three categories: First, in the early days of the Western academic circle, the focus was on the resistance of "basement people" against rationalism, such as Joseph Frank's "Dostoevsky In His Life and Works", it is pointed out that Dohler criticized "rational egoism" for simplifying the limitations of human nature through the irrational behavior of the "basement man". In recent years, existentialist perspective studies have mostly analyzed his free choice based on Sartre's theory, but there has been insufficient exploration of the "choice between good and evil".

Secondly, domestic academic circles often interpret it in combination with traditional Chinese theories of human nature. In his book "On the Dialogue between Chinese and Western Philosophy", Zhang Shiying, based on Mencius' "Four Beginnings" theory (such as "compassion" and "shame and aversion"), pointed out that the "basement man's" pity for Lisa and his forbearance during the class reunion were the manifestations of the innate "good beginnings", while the subsequent evil deeds were the suppression of the "good beginnings" by the acquired factors [4]. This echoes Yang Bojun's "Translation and Annotation of Mencius" with the annotation that "at first sight, the child is about to fall into the well", which describes the "innate nature of goodness" [4]. Regarding Xunzi's "Theory of human nature being evil", Chen Lai, in "Confucianism and Contemporary China", holds that Xunzi's assertion that "human nature is evil, and the good is false" [5] aligns with the inherent inferiority complex and desire for revenge of the "basement people", whose kindness needs to be realized through later discipline [5]. Wang Xianqian's annotation in "Collected Explanations of Xunzi" that "false is the act" [6]. This further supports the "artificial" feature of goodwill. However, most existing studies use either the "theory of innate goodness" or the "theory of innate evil" alone, lacking a tripartite dialogue with Sartre's theory.

Thirdly, both domestic and international academic circles recognize Dostoevsky's reflection of the complexity of human nature, believing that his experience of exile in Siberia (witnessing darkness and kindness) led him to refuse to simplify human nature. However, existing research either focuses on Western theories or is confined to traditional theories of human nature. There is still room for supplementation in the comprehensive analysis of the "cross-cultural view of human nature", which is the research direction of this article.

3. The era background of Dostoevsky's creation

In 19th-century Russia, where Dostoevsky lived, it was at a critical juncture of social transformation. On the one hand, after the serfdom reform in Russia, feudal serfdom gradually disintegrated, capitalism developed rapidly, and the social structure underwent drastic changes. The collision between traditional noble culture and the emerging bourgeois ideology led to increasingly acute social contradictions. On the other hand, a large number of Western Enlightenment thoughts and rationalist trends flooded into Russia, exerting a profound influence on Russian intellectuals.

At that time, the Russian intellectual circle was divided into different schools. Among them, the "Western European School" actively advocated the rationalism and liberalism of the West, believing that Russia should follow the West's example and achieve social progress through reason and science. The "Slavic School", on the other hand, emphasizes the uniqueness of Russian traditional culture and advocates seeking a development path from Russia's own history and religion. Dostoevsky's creative work unfolded against the backdrop of this ideological confrontation. He was both influenced by Western rationalism and held a critical attitude towards it.

In the 19th century, the lower classes in Russian society led a hard life. The class gap between the nobility and the common people was obvious, and social injustice was widespread. Through his own experiences and observations, Dostoevsky deeply realized the hardships and spiritual predicaments of the lower-class people, which also became an important material for his works to focus on human nature and criticize society. Dostoevsky's works have always been closely linked to the social reality of 19th-century Russia. He attempted to explore the essence of human nature and the way out of society through literary works. "Notes from the Basement" is precisely his profound reflection on the prevalence of rationalism and the suppression of individual spirit in Russian society at that time.

4. The contradictory behaviors of good and evil of the "basement people"

The "evil" of the "basement people" is proactive and often disguises their vulnerability with harm. Because of the officer's assault on him, he held a grudge. "But I, I looked at him fiercely and angrily, and this went on for several years." [7] He deliberately sought revenge, stalking, prying into his privacy, and even borrowing money to buy fine clothes. Only to restore dignity through "equal collision" (this is precisely the embodiment of the agency of the "self-imposed existence" as Sartre described - he attempted to define the "undeserved self" through "evil" actions, but fell into the dizziness of "not knowing how to truly achieve dignity" in the free choice). In the face of Lisa's sincerity, he first preached in the manner of a "savior" until Lisa fully believed him. Then, due to his own difficult situation being witnessed by Lisa, he became infuriated and humiliated her with money, destroying her hope for life. (This transformation from "showing kindness" to "doing evil" was his escape from the "free existence" (the objective state of embarrassment) under the fear of "exposing his true self".) The manifestation of maintaining self-protection by choosing "evil".

His "goodness", however, appears passive and repressed: at the class reunion, he is ignored by everyone and ridiculed as a "beetle". Even though he is indignant inside, he restrains himself from responding with evil (this is his desire to obtain a "recognized existence" through a "good" choice, an active pursuit of "connection and warmth" by a "self-created existence"), which stems from his longing for friendly interaction. When he first met Lisa, the words he used to persuade her to get out of her suffering, though mixed with vanity and a sense of superiority, were full of pity for her situation (at this time, his kindness was an instinctive emotional tendency and also an attempt to shape the "positive self" when the "self-existent" was not carried away by fear). His thoughts of good and evil complement each other and are the result of self-selection in interaction with the outside world: "evil" is a weapon to resist external contempt and protect oneself, while "good" is an instinctive longing for connection and warmth, but it is suppressed due to resistance to "reason" and "morality" and self-doubt. This contradiction is precisely its "twisted" trait, which has created the vivid image of the "basement man" in Dostoevsky's works.

5. The causes of the contradictory behaviors of good and evil in "basement people"

5.1. Sartre existentialism: the conflict between free choice and external discipline

Sartre's core view that "existence precedes essence" is the key to understanding the causes of the contradictions of the "basement people". The essence of the "basement man" is not inherently fixed but is formed by a series of self-choices. "Sartre regarded self-action as the fundamental existence of human beings, took pure subjectivity as the starting point of philosophy, and thereby deduced the existence of the external objective world." [8] In the 19th century, the Russian rationalist trend advocated that "people should achieve self-improvement through reason", which became an external

discipline, requiring everyone to suppress "irrational" desires. He wanted to conform to the social trends of the time through "rational behavior" (sympathy and preaching towards Lisa), but couldn't help conforming to his "irrational impulses" (such as humiliating Lisa). A contradiction arose between the free will of the "basement man" and the demands of the outside world, leading to his contradictory behavior of good and evil.

5.2. Dostoevsky's critical stance: the negation of rational egoism

When Dostoevsky was writing this novel, Russian thought was under the influence of Western rationalism and utopian socialism, and many intellectuals advocated "rational egoism". Zeng Li and Ding Yufeng mentioned in "Thomas Nagel's Critique of Rational Egoism" that "rational egoism is a normative theory, which is based on facts about psychological desires." [9] It is believed that people can achieve their greatest happiness through rational calculation, and society can also move towards perfection. However, Dostoevsky held a critical attitude towards this theory. He believed that this theory overlooked the complexity of human nature. Humans are not purely theoretical beings; they also have contradictions, desires, and free will.

It is precisely for this reason that at the very beginning of the article, we can sense the inner distortion of the "basement person". "I'm a sick person..." I'm a fierce person. I'm not a likable person. I think there is something wrong with my liver. But I never thought about my illness at all, and probably had no idea that I was ill either. The initial inner monologue brings out the dark and distorted complex inner world of the "basement man", giving the protagonist of the novel an unconventional self-description. And this kind of self-description is a satire on the rationalist belief that "people should be rational and perfect". The contradiction between good and evil is Dostoevsky's proof that human beings cannot be defined by "reason", and the formation of human nature is a dynamic process, influenced by multiple factors such as free choice, external interaction, and emotional desires. Through the image of the "basement man", Dostoevsky criticized rationalism's simplification of human nature and drew people's attention to the true complexity of human nature.

6. The reasons for the prevalence of rationalism in Russia in the 19th century

Why did Dostoevsky criticize rationalism? Only by considering the social background of the prevalence of rationalism in 19th-century Russia can we have a deeper understanding. The prevalence of rationalism in Russia in the 19th century was first and foremost closely related to the spread of the Western Enlightenment. Since the 18th century, the ideas of French Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau have gradually spread to Russia. The concepts of rationality, freedom, and equality that they advocated have exerted a great appeal on Russian intellectuals. The Enlightenment emphasized that reason is a tool for humans to understand and transform the world, and advocated that through reason, one could criticize feudal autocracy and religious superstition, social progress, and human liberation could be achieved. This idea met the needs of Russian intellectuals at that time to break free from the shackles of feudal serfdom and promote social change [10].

Secondly, the development of Russian capitalism provided an economic foundation for the prevalence of rationalism. In the first half of the 19th century, the Russian capitalist economy gradually developed, and the emerging bourgeoisie needed an ideological theory that could serve their interests. The concepts such as free competition and individualism advocated by rationalism met the demands of the bourgeoisie for economic development and pursuit of interests, and thus received support and promotion from the bourgeoisie. The development of capitalism demands the

breaking of the traditional feudal hierarchical system and the establishment of a fair and reasonable social order, and rationalism is precisely an important ideological weapon for building such a social order [11].

Furthermore, the development of Russian education also created conditions for the spread of rationalism. In the 19th century, the Russian government gradually attached importance to education, expanded the scale of education, established a number of new-style schools, and cultivated a large number of intellectuals with modern consciousness. These intellectuals became disseminators of rationalist thought, gradually making rationalism one of the mainstream ideas in Russian society at that time. The popularization of education has raised the cultural level of the people, laid a mass foundation for the dissemination of rationalist thought, and at the same time cultivated a group of talents who can analyze social problems and promote social change with rational thinking [12].

Finally, the severe crisis that Russian society was facing at that time also prompted intellectuals to seek rationalism as a solution to the crisis. In the 19th century, the feudal serfdom system in Russia was increasingly corrupt, social contradictions were acute, and peasant uprisings broke out frequently. The country was facing a serious governance crisis. Intellectuals believe that only through the power of reason can comprehensive reforms of society be carried out, the crises in Russian society be resolved, and the prosperity and stability of the country be achieved. Rationalism provided Russian intellectuals with a method to analyze social problems and resolve social contradictions. They believed that through rational planning and design, an ideal social system could be established [10].

7. The contrast between sartre's existentialism and the theories of human nature in China and the West: the innate existence and the acquired choice of human generation

The vivid portrayal of the contradiction between good and evil in the "basement man" can't help but remind one of the theories of good and evil in ancient Eastern times. Mencius expounded on the "Theory of human nature being good", with the core being that "everyone has a heart that cannot bear to see others go". He also regarded the four principles of "compassion", "shame and aversion", "yielding", and "right and wrong" as the good roots that are deeply rooted in people's bones from birth. Yang Bojun specifically annotated this view in his "Mencius Translation and Annotation", giving the example of "When a child is about to fall into a well, everyone has a sense of alarm and compassion" [4], saying that when people see a child about to fall into a well, they will instinctively feel nervous and sympathetic, neither to please the child's parents, nor to gain fame in the village, nor to dislike hearing the child cry. These few annotations have thoroughly explained the "instinctive nature" of the innate goodness, proving that this goodness is not feigned but is innate.

Xunzi, in reverse, held the "Theory of human nature being evil", stating straightforwardly that "human nature is evil, and the good is false" [5]. In his "Collected Explanations of Xunzi", Wang Xianqian deliberately separated the meaning of the character "false", saying, "False means to act" [5], which means "to act as a person": Human nature is innate to follow desires, being fond of profit, and enjoying sensual pleasures. Goodness, however, is not innate; it must be cultivated through learning propriety and righteousness, abiding by rules and regulations, and gradually developed. These two statements seem to be at odds with each other, but in fact, they both revolve around one principle: human nature has an innate starting point, regardless of whether it is good or evil.

Sartre said that "existence precedes essence", perhaps not completely disregarding the innate elements, but rather placing more emphasis on how to choose and act in the later stage. In "Being and Nothingness", he wrote a very crucial sentence: "Man first exists, appears, and emerges, and

then defines himself" [1]. To put it bluntly, people do not have an innate "essence". What you become in the end is all chosen by yourself, time and again. Just like the "basement man", at first, he had pity for Lisa, but later, seeing his own embarrassment exposed, he actually "took out a handful of money and threw it in front of her" [7]. That little bit of innate kindness was thus stifled by the embarrassment and awkwardness later on. And for that officer, just because he was looked down upon, they actually "followed him for a full two years" [7], attempting to make up for their dignity through "equal confrontation", and forcibly led their innate instinct to protect their own face onto the path of revenge - these things seem awkward, but they precisely show that it is the choices made later in life that can truly set the tone.

Mencius' "good beginnings" and Xunzi's "bad beginnings" are more like seeds just sprouting, having an initial direction. But whether they can grow well and in which direction in the end still depends on the soil fertility and sunlight after birth. Sartre's "free choice" is exactly this principle. The "basement man's" soft-heartedness towards Lisa and his "hatred" towards the officer might both have their inherent shadows. But in the end, will he help Lisa or humiliate her? Whether to hold back that anger or take revenge depends entirely on how he deals with the current situation. This is actually the same meaning as Sartre's statement that "action is the only way of being" [8].

8. Conclusion

This article takes the contradiction between good and evil of the "Basement person" in "Basement Notes" as the core entry point. Through a detailed reading of the text, it sorts out his "evil" of actively retaliating against the officer and humiliating Lisa, as well as his "good" of suppressing the instinct for pity and longing for friendly interaction. It clarifies that the wavering of this image in the dimension of good and evil is not accidental but the result of the interaction between the individual and the outside world. Combining Sartre's core existentialist viewpoint that "existence precedes essence", and comparing Mencius' "theory of human nature being good" (the "Four Beginnings" theory) with Xunzi's "theory of human nature being evil" ("Human nature is evil, and the good is false"), it can be known that the struggle between good and evil of the "basement person" is driven by innate emotions and instinctive tendencies. It is even more profoundly shaped by postnatal free choice and social interaction - whether it is the kindness towards Lisa being stifled due to a sense of embarrassment, or the self-respect instinct towards the officer turning to retaliatory actions, all these confirm that human nature is not inherently labeled as "good" or "evil", but rather an existential essence that continuously emerges in dynamic practice.

Although this study attempts to supplement the conventional interpretations of "basement people" in the academic circle from the dimension of "the contradiction between good and evil" (such as rational resistance and existentialist freedom), and deepen the analysis through cross-cultural dialogue between Chinese and Western theories of human nature, there are still limitations: Firstly, the research focuses on the individual behavior and theoretical dialogue of the "basement people". The exploration of the rationalist trend in 19th-century Russia and the mental conditions of the lower-class individuals only remains at the level of laying out the background of *The Times* and does not conduct a horizontal comparison with the characters in similar novels in Russian literature of the same period. Therefore, it is difficult to fully reveal the universal characteristics of human nature contradictions and the differences in literary expression in that era. Secondly, in the dialogue between Sartre's existentialism and traditional Chinese theory of human nature, the focus is on the comparative analysis of theoretical viewpoints, without delving deeply into the integration space between the two on the issue of "the generation of human nature". For instance, whether the "good beginning" mentioned by Mencius can provide a moral starting point for Sartre's "free choice" and

how Xunzi's emphasis on "Postnatal etiquette and righteousness discipline" can form a dialectical balance with "existential freedom" still need to be further discussed.

Based on this research, subsequent studies can be advanced from two aspects: On the one hand, expand the scope of textual research. By comparing the writing strategies of different writers on the contradictions of human nature, further explain the specific influence of the era environment (such as the changes in social structure after the serfdom reform and the infiltration of rationalist thought) on the individual spiritual world, and enrich the overall understanding of the literary view of human nature in this period; On the other hand, deepen the integration of interdisciplinary theories, combine the self-determination theory in modern psychology, and explore the complementarity of Chinese and Western human nature theories in explaining "individual choices of good and evil", providing a more interdisciplinary theoretical path for understanding the dynamic generation of human nature.

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