

Are Humans in the End Rational Beings or Sentimental Beings?

Lin Yi Ting

Social Science, New Asia College

Introduction

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, the rationality of human beings is highlighted since it differentiates us from animals and plants (152; bk. I, ch. 7, line 1098a3–4). However, *The Analects* mentions that humans are different from animals by having sentiments (2.7). Undeniably, humans are both rational and sentimental, but which part actually plays a greater part and rules the humankind? In the following, I will use some classical text to develop my argument.

Definition

Before we dig into the topic, there is a need to clarify some ideas in order to discuss the topic in a clearer manner.

According to *Dictionary.com*, “rational” refers to “having or exercising reason, sound judgment, or good sense.” Meanwhile, “sentimental” means that one is “expressive of or appealing to sentiment, especially the tender emotions and feelings, as love, pity, or nostalgia.”

Human Nature

To begin with, the nature of humans will be explored in order to find out the true ruler of humans.

By sentiments, *The Analects* differentiates the nature of humans from animals. For instance, human beings take care of both their livestock and parents but they are required to respect and love only their parents (2.7). Through showing the sentiments of the children towards their parents, it distinguishes the difference between the ways humans treat their parents and animals. This kind of sentiment is depicted as filial piety. Without filial piety, humans treat their parents in the same way they treat animals. Therefore, filial piety motivates people to be rational and treat their parents with love and respect, such as being polite to parents and supporting parents' livelihood when they are old. Under such circumstance, the rationale of taking care of one's parents is actually derived from the feelings embodied in filial piety. Thus, humans are sentimental beings rather rational beings.

It sounds paradoxical that human nature is sentimental when Aristotle upholds the rationality of humans. However, the truth is that humans are of a teleological nature and desire something good, which means that they engage in purposive behaviours that will lead them to good things (147; bk. I, ch. 1). In particular, they wish to possess the intrinsic good, which is happiness. This reveals the sentiments of desiring in humans. Driven by their sentiments, they practise rationality in their lives so as to fulfill their wants and obtain the good. For example, they make friends with those based on goodness in order to live happily (174; bk. IX, ch. 9, line 1170b14–20) since it can help one to achieve self-sufficiency. As a result, the teleological nature demonstrates that humans behave rationally due to their sentiments of desiring. Sentiments are then the roots of rationality so humans are sentimental beings after all.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, self-love is depicted as a kind of human nature since people show their self-love by wanting to gain benefits for themselves (Smith 431). To maximise their interest, men go for the division of labour and the free market system, eventually benefitting everyone else by achieving universal opulence and common interest. Obviously, humans are preoccupied by their sentiments of loving themselves since they only intend to engage in behaviours that benefit themselves and make themselves happy in the first hand. Their sentiments provide them the reason to participate in the division of labour and the free market system. Hence, men can exchange the products made by their labour with the products they need and made by the others, thus satisfying their own needs in life. Fulfilling the need of the others and achieving common interest in the society are in fact an unintentional result, revealing that men's behaviours are not driven by the rationality of helping out the others but their sentiments of self-love. Humans are in the end sentimental since their feelings are the foundation of rationality.

No one can deny that humans are rational beings as we always commit behaviours with sound reasons. However, these rationales only come after our feelings, thus making human sentimental in nature after all.

Human Practice

A fair judgment cannot be made if the focus is put solely on the human nature since humans still commit rational behaviours in daily life, such as obeying the law rather than violating them. Humans behave rationally in face of these practical situations since they have the sense of right or wrong in their head. Yet, they are prone to sentimental behaviours when they encounter some abstract situations, like questioning their own existence. In the case of existence anxiety, humans often seek spiritual help from religion to provide reasons for their frustrations and keep them going. Since religion is a matter

of faith and cannot be proved scientifically, it is obviously not a rational but sentimental behaviour.

Christianity is one of the religions that are widely practised in the world. The *Holy Bible* provides standards for Christians to follow in life. However, it is doubtful whether it is convincing enough since the *Holy Bible* is composed of different scriptures and versions written by different people, making the content less reliable. One of the examples is the creation of humans in the *Genesis*' P and J versions, which talks about gender neutrality and partiality respectively. Besides, its content cannot be proved to be true since it happened long ago with no scientific proof. For example, the miracles made by Jesus, like resurrection, are only recorded down in black and white without any scientific supporting documents. Despite the fact that religion cannot be proved rationally and has limited trustworthiness, people still believe in God and give reasons to their miseries in life. They say miseries are inevitable but can be gone through by believing in God. The fable of sowing seeds is one of the examples in showing such belief since it implies that people who listen to and practise the words of God in daily lives and hardships, will get prosperous harvest (*Holy Bible*. Mak. 4:13–20). In the believers' point of view, their religion provides reasons and solutions for their suffering, thus solving their existence anxiety. Under such circumstance, religion is a sentimental practice for it depends on the faith of humans in God instead of any rational proof. Consequently, humans are sentimental beings since they often involve in sentimental practices, especially when they encounter hardship and uncertainties in lives.

Islam is another religion covered in the course. Similar to the *Holy Bible*, *Qur'an* tells the revelations and teachings from God. *Qur'an* is not rationally formed either because it is transmitted verbally before written into a book

so there may be a discrepancy between the ‘truth’ and the written book. In spite of that, some people still become Muslim and believe Allah is their only God, who is almighty and all-knowing. Apart from believing in Allah, they also practise their religion in daily lives according to the five pillars, including Shahada, Prayer, Fasting, Pilgrimage and Alms-giving. This once again demonstrates that religion is not a rational behaviour since it depends on human’s sentiments in believing instead proving it with sound and logical reasons, thus making human sentimental by practising religion.

There is no doubt that we still perform actions out of rationality since the nature of rationality is having a sound reason and we always need reasons to support our logical behaviours. Yet, the word “need” actually reveals that these rational behaviours are originated by our sentiments of desire. In *The Social Contract*, people seem to be rational beings as they are consequentialists, wisely counting the benefits they can get after the formation of a legitimate government, such as civil liberty and moral liberty. Nevertheless, they are still sentimental since their sentiments provide a reason for their rational behaviours. Due to their self-love, they are willing to do everything for their own good. From the moral liberty granted by the government, humans are able to self-actualise, being free from the control of natural desires. Thus, they are very likely to support the formation of the government owing to their self-benefits in becoming the true owner of themselves instead of the slave of his impulses, illustrating that rationality is built on sentiments. Although the equality brought by the civil liberty seems to be something less related to self-love, humans are not rational enough to think from the whole picture and uphold equality for the others in the very beginning. Instead, they will always consider more on whether they, themselves, are equally treated by the others, thus protecting them from being exploited. Therefore, humans

establish a legitimate government by wanting to safeguard or even enhance their own benefits, like protecting them from being harmed and attaining a greater extent of freedom. Humans can hardly be rational beings when they commit rational behaviours based on their feelings.

In short, humans are sentimental beings in a sense that they often engage in sentimental behaviours and their rational behaviours are derived from their sentiments.

Conclusion

Both rationality and sentiments are important to human beings since they differentiate us from animals, according to *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *The Analects*. Even so, sentiments play a greater role in ruling humans since it provides a commitment for humans' rationality, thus making it the root of rationality. Meanwhile, humans often practise sentimental behaviours, especially when they encounter situations that are out of their control. In fact, to think deeper, exercising rationality is also a kind of sentimental desire because we can only act rationally when we want to. Rationality can never exist without sentiments. Therefore, humans are sentimental beings after all, especially when every bit of their rationality comes under the motivation of sentiments.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. 1976. Trans. J.A.K. Thomson. Rpt. in *In Dialogue with Humanity: Textbook for General Education Foundation Programme*. Ed. Julie Chiu, Wai-ming Ho, Mei-yee Leung, and Yang Yeung. 3rd ed. Hong Kong: Office of University General Education,

- The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013. 147–177.
- Confucius. *The Analects of Confucius*. Trans. Burton Waston. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Holy Bible (New International Version)*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2011.
- “Rational | Define Rational at Dictionary.com”. *Dictionary.com*. Web.1 May 2013. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/rational?s=t>>.
- “Sentimental | Define Sentimental at Dictionary.com”. *Dictionary.com*. Web. 1 May 2013. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sentimental>>.
- Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations*. 1904. Ed. Edward Cannan. Rpt. in *In Dialogue with Humanity: Textbook for General Education Foundation Programme*. Ed. Julie Chiu, Wai-ming Ho, Mei-yee Leung, and Yang Yeung. 3rd ed. Hong Kong: Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013. 421–449.

Reference

- Qur'an*. 2009. Trans. Tarif Khalidi. Rpt. in *In Dialogue with Humanity: Textbook for General Education Foundation Programme*. Ed. Julie Chiu, Wai-ming Ho, Mei-yee Leung, and Yang Yeung. 3rd ed. Hong Kong: Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013. 331–356.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract and Discourses*. 2007. Trans. G.D.H. Cole. Rpt. in *In Dialogue with Humanity: Textbook for General Education Foundation Programme*. Ed. Julie Chiu, Wai-ming Ho, Mei-yee Leung, and Yang Yeung. 3rd ed. Hong Kong: Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013. 383–417.

* * * * *

Teacher's comment:

This is an exceptionally difficult topic under the framework of the General Education Foundation Programme for a first-year undergraduate. The author uses various texts taught in the Programme to argue that human beings are fundamentally sentimental beings. This approach has not only enriched the content of the essay but also demonstrated that the author has a thorough understanding of the text with a high-level analytical and argumentative ability in textual and conceptual analysis. What the author has accomplished in the essay is well beyond my expectation. (Leung Cheuk Hang)