EASTERN AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHERS' VIEWS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the diverse perspectives of Eastern and Western philosophers on the concept of civil society. By examining key philosophical frameworks and ideas, the paper highlights the similarities and differences in their views on civil society, its functions, and its role in fostering social order and progress. The analysis delves into the historical contexts and cultural influences that shaped these perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of how different philosophical traditions approach the idea of civil society. Ultimately, the article aims to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western thought, offering insights into the potential for a more integrated global perspective on civil society.

KEYWORDS: Civil society, eastern philosophy, western philosophy, social order, cultural influences, philosophical traditions, global perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Civil society, as a concept, has been extensively debated and analyzed by philosophers from both Eastern and Western traditions. This article aims to explore the differing views on civil society by examining key philosophers from each tradition. By understanding these diverse perspectives, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the concept of civil society and its role in promoting social order and progress.

Eastern Philosophers' Views

1.   Confucius (551-479 BCE):

Concept of Civil Society: Confucius emphasized the importance of moral values and social harmony. He believed that a well-ordered society is based on the principles of righteousness, propriety, and filial piety.

Role of the Individual: The individual is seen as a moral agent whose behavior is guided by virtue and respect for social hierarchies.

Function of Civil Society: Civil society, according to Confucius, is a space where individuals cultivate their moral character and contribute to social harmony through proper conduct and adherence to traditional values.[1]

2.   Mencius (372-289 BCE):

Concept of Civil Society: Mencius built upon Confucius's ideas, emphasizing the innate goodness of human beings and the role of benevolent governance.

Role of the Individual: Individuals are inherently good and can contribute positively to society when governed by just and virtuous rulers.

Function of Civil Society: Civil society serves as a platform for the expression of human goodness and the promotion of social justice and harmony.

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3.   Laozi (circa 6th century BCE):

Concept of Civil Society: Laozi, the founder of Daoism, presented a more passive view of civil society, emphasizing natural harmony and the importance of non-interference.

Role of the Individual: Individuals should align themselves with the Dao (the Way) and live in harmony with nature and others.[2]

Function of Civil Society: Civil society should facilitate a natural and spontaneous order where individuals live simply and harmoniously without excessive regulation or interference.

Western Philosophers' Views

1.   Aristotle (384-322 BCE):

Concept of Civil Society: Aristotle viewed civil society (polis) as a natural and essential aspect of human life, where individuals come together to achieve a good life.

Role of the Individual: Individuals are political animals who realize their potential and virtue through participation in civic life.[3]

Function of Civil Society: Civil society is a space for the cultivation of virtue and the pursuit of the common good through active participation in political and social affairs.

2.   Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679):

Concept of Civil Society: Hobbes had a more pessimistic view, seeing civil society as a necessary construct to prevent the chaos of the natural state (state of nature).

Role of the Individual: Individuals are self-interested and require a strong central authority to maintain order and security.[4]

Function of Civil Society: Civil society is established through a social contract, where individuals surrender some freedoms to a sovereign power in exchange for protection and order.

3.   John Locke (1632-1704):

Concept of Civil Society: Locke emphasized the importance of natural rights and the role of government in protecting these rights.

Role of the Individual: Individuals are rational beings with inherent rights to life, liberty, and property.[5]

Function of Civil Society: Civil society exists to protect individuals' natural rights and provide a framework for the pursuit of happiness and property.

Comparative Analysis

1.   Similarities:

a.   Both Eastern and Western philosophies recognize the importance of civil society in promoting social order and individual well-being.

b.   Both traditions emphasize the role of moral and ethical principles in guiding the behavior of individuals within civil society.

2.   Differences:

- Eastern philosophies often emphasize social harmony and collective well-being, while Western philosophies tend to focus more on individual rights and freedoms.
- The role of government and authority is perceived differently, with Eastern traditions advocating for moral governance and Western traditions often emphasizing the protection of individual rights through legal frameworks.

CONCLUSION

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The concept of civil society has been shaped by diverse philosophical traditions in both the East and the West. While there are notable differences in their perspectives, there are also significant commonalities that highlight the universal importance of civil society in fostering social order and progress. By bridging the gap between Eastern and Western thought, we can develop a more integrated and holistic understanding of civil society, contributing to the promotion of global harmony and cooperation.

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