

Early Confucianism and Daoism: Part 2 Mencius and Xunzi

Infusing Seminar July 22, 2014



Mencius (Mengzi 孟子 Master Meng ca. 372 - ca. 289 BCE)



- Mencius engages in counter-argumentation against Mohism (which he portrayed as failing to recognize special duties to family) and Yangism (which he portrayed as a form of ethical egoism).
- He focuses on the “why” as well as the “what” and the “how,” and his “why” answers involve *ren xing* 人性.
- Standard translation of *ren xing* as “human nature,” but per R. Ames, should avoid attaching essentialist connotation.
- Instead, this conception: “certain characteristic features of human beings that are particularly conspicuous, pervasive, and difficult to alter, without necessarily having the connotation of what is essential as opposed to accidental” (Shun Mencius 1997, 185).

Mencius' theory of the *duan* 端 (beginnings, sprouts) in human nature

- Dispositions to have certain feelings and intuitions in response to events.
- 2A6: the four *xin* 心 (hearts or feelings) can develop into ethical virtues:
 - Compassion can develop into *ren* 仁 (human-heartedness);
 - Shame/dislike can develop into *yi* 義 (“righteousness”—the ability to grasp and act on rightness or appropriateness to the situation as a property of actions);
 - Deference can develop into *li* 禮 (observing ritual propriety);
 - Approval/disapproval can develop into *zhi* 智 (wisdom).

Some important things he might have gotten right

- He believed in the naturalness of compassion: the feeling of being unable to bear the suffering of others.
- 2A2 example of this sprout's manifestation: the alarm and distress that anyone would feel upon seeing a child about to fall into a well. Spontaneous and direct, not a calculated show of concern to impress or to get in good with others.
- 1A7: In trying to persuade King Xuan that Xuan has the “right stuff” to be a true king, Mencius appeals to the time the king spared an ox being led to slaughter. It reminded Xuan of an innocent man being led to execution.

- 3A5 refers to the innocence of child who is in danger (i.e. undeserving of the harm about to befall him) as part of the reason for the appropriateness of the response of compassion.
- Mencius' theory of the sprout of compassion presupposes not only response to suffering but the inborn beginning of an ability to distinguish who deserves to suffer and who not.
- He might be right in both these claims.

An inborn capacity to respond to suffering?

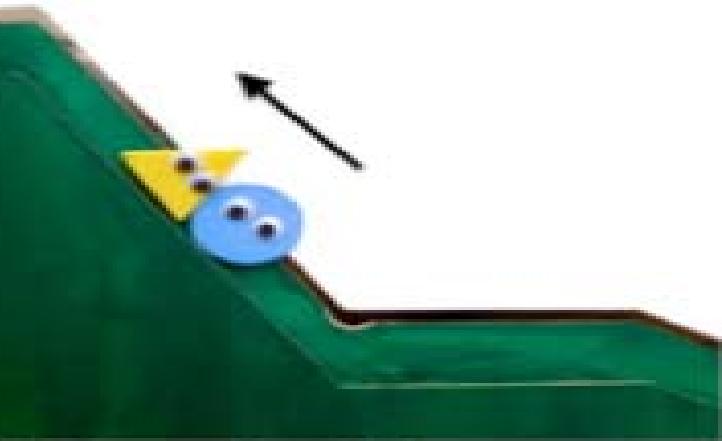
- Infants respond to other infants' crying (Simmer, 1971).
- Once they are able, they attempt to soothe others who are suffering (Sagi & Hoffman, 1976; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992).
- Toddlers will see an adult trying to grasp something beyond his reach, and will often, unprompted, go and hand it over to the adult (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2009).

Wynn and Bloom's experiments with babies

- Babies (3, 5, 6 & 10 mo. old) distinguished between individuals who help others versus those who hindered others; and prefer the former over the latter.
- 21 month olds chose to hand a treat to helpers or when asked to take a treat from either helping or hindering characters, chose to take from the hindering ones.
- Even more early sophistication: they prefer a third party who acts positively toward pro-social individuals or who act negatively toward anti-social individuals (Hamlin et al 2011).
- There may be an early ability to distinguish “good” from “bad” individuals, and to reward the good and punish the bad, and to prefer those who reward and punish accordingly.

Pictures from “Moral Nativism and Moral Psychology” by Paul Bloom

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A. Helper pushes Climber up



B. Hinderer pushes Climber down



C. Whom does Baby prefer?



A. Puppy (brown center puppet) tries to open box....., but can only open it partway ...



B. Helping Kitty (on left) helps to open it ...

Helping Kitty leaves; Puppy gets toy.



C. Hindering Kitty (on right) slams it shut...



Hindering Kitty leaves; Puppy doesn't get toy.

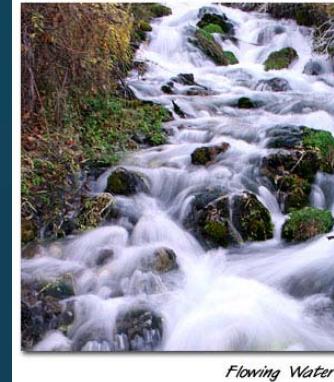
Might be biological preparation to develop in directions that support our ability to engage in the intricate interdependencies of human social life.

The cognitive dimensions of some biological dispositions suggest that we might be prepared to develop conceptions of what is right or appropriate (*yi*).

What does it mean for something to be inborn?

- If there are such biological dispositions, what might it mean for them to be inborn or innate?
- They do not manifest themselves immediately after birth.
- To say they are innate must mean something about the way they develop.
- Mencius gives us much tasty food for thought.

2 metaphors for how the beginnings develop



Flowing Water

- **Water:** the beginnings develop into virtue like water flowing downwards. It naturally flows downward but can be diverted through damning or striking it upwards (6A2).
- **Sprouts:** barley sprouts are alike in capacity to grow, but differences in soil, amount of rain, and human effort invested make for differences in growth.
- **The difference:** on water metaphor, ethical development is the default and it takes interference to stop it; on sprout metaphor, need active nurturing that is highly contingent

Which metaphor?

- Mencius seems not to have recognized the different implications of the 2 metaphors.
- But some crucial passages point to the sprout metaphor, passages that suggest a more plausible theory of moral development.
 - 1A7: The people, lacking a constant means of livelihood, will lack constant minds, and when they lack constant minds there is no dissoluteness, depravity, deviance, or excess to which they will not succumb.
Also mentioned as necessary: instruction in filial and fraternal devotion.

- 6A14-15: Reflecting by the mind is necessary for placing the appropriate priority on the “greater part” of oneself over the smaller part that is given to eating and drinking.
- The above passages suggest plausible conditions for development from the beginnings.
- Take “constant livelihood:” Empirical studies indicate the debilitating effects of poverty on cognitive performance and ability to regulate attention (Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, Zhao *Science* 2013).

What is effective reflection?

- 1A7: Mencius gets King Xuan to recall that he spared an ox upon seeing its terror. Mencius says this shows you can be a true king: just take the compassion showed to the ox and apply it to your own people.
- How did Mencius expect this to work?
 - Not just getting the king to be consistent.
 - Mencius is trying to get Xuan to *feel* his people's suffering in the way he felt for the ox's suffering. By getting the king to re-feel his compassion for the ox, and reminding him of his people's suffering, Mencius is hoping to get the king's compassion to flow to his people.

How might that flow happen?

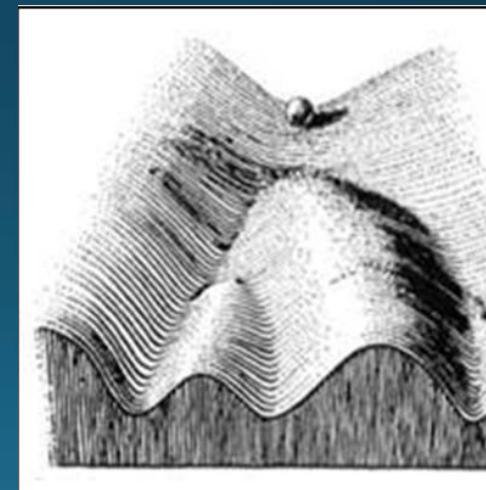
- The answer lies in how the sprouts have a built-in direction of growth.
 - 4A27: where there is joy in serving parents, this grows, and when it grows how can it be stopped?
 - 2A6: when one knows how to bring to fulfillment the sprouts, it will be like a fire beginning to burn or a spring finding an outlet.
- We are built to take satisfaction and pleasure in fulfilling the sprouts.
- Perhaps in reminding the king of the ox, Mencius is reminding him of how good and satisfying it felt to spare it.

Some supporting evidence

- Anonymous charitable giving based on ethical beliefs corresponds to activation of reward systems in fronto-limbic brain networks that are also activated by food, sex, drugs, and money (Moll et al *PNAS* 2006).
- Similar results from Harbaugh et al (*Science* 2007), who also found that both mandatory and voluntary anonymous giving increases pleasure.
- Studies about the self-reported effects of helping, e.g., Schwartz and Sendor *Social Science and Medicine* 1999 on MS patients who helped others.

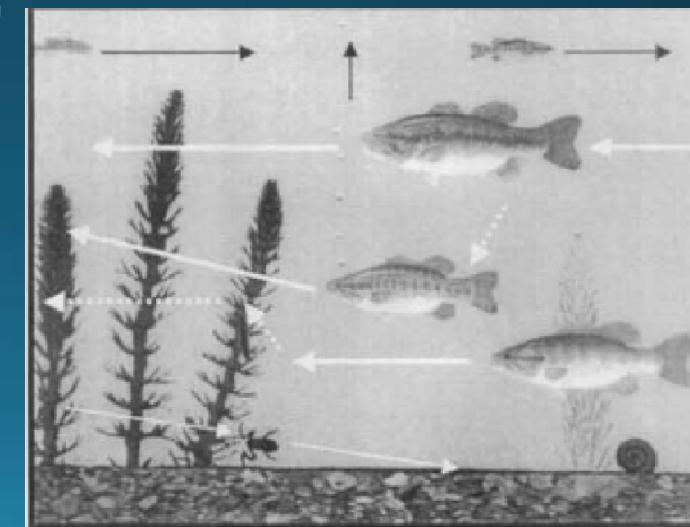
Issues about innateness

- A stereotypical concept of innateness corresponds to the water metaphor: built-in default development of an innate trait.
- But, we also know of genetic dispositions that can be encouraged to develop by environmental factors or not. This closer to the sprout metaphor.
- Waddington's "canalization" metaphor: development can be more or less sensitive to environmental influences, like a ball rolling down a hill in a valley with high or low ridges.



Chinese philosophy & the relational perspective

- Mencius' sprout metaphor exemplifies a relational approach to understanding moral development: to see how a person develops, understand how he or she interacts with the “field” around.
- See Hall and Ames *Thinking from the Han* “The Focus-Field Self in Classical Confucianism.”
- Nisbett (*Geography of Thought*) contrasts “holistic” vs. “analytic” approaches to understanding.



Mencius' response to Mohism

- Emphasizes the foundational role of family relations in moral development (recall *Analects* 1.2).
- A Mohist in conversation with Mencius (3A5) grants that the family is foundational but maintains that concern can be made impartial.
- Mencius asks, “Does Master Yi believe that a man’s affection for his brother’s child is just like his affection for the child of a neighbor?”

- This might be understood as asserting the human impossibility of making concern impartial.
- Analogous contemporary issue: is it reasonable to ask people to have as much concern for starving people in other countries as they do for themselves or their loved ones, or friends and neighbors?
- In criticizing Singer's seminal argument (*Phil Pub Aff* 1971) for a strong duty to contribute to famine relief, Steven Asma
http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/05/the-myth-of-universal-love/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0 appeals to something like the human impossibility of fulfilling this duty.

- Can make for an interesting class discussion on the relevance of considerations of psychological realism to what our duties are.
- I suspect Mencius (and Asma) was pushing it too far to imply that the difficulty of impartial concern shows there is no duty to show it.
- He is on better ground asserting the plurality of basic duties, e.g., duty to express gratitude toward certain others such as parents, duties to human beings as such; and the need to find satisfactory balances to strike when they conflict.

Interesting textual juxtapositions involving Mencius

- Compare with Hume on sympathy, Rousseau on natural pity.
- On human nature, compare with Aristotle's conception of what means for something to be in our nature (e.g., falling downwards as something in a stone's nature).
- Contemporary literature such as Singer's article on famine and Asma's critique that raises the question of how impartial we ought to be in considering the needs of others.

Xunzi 荀子 (312-230 BCE)

- Directly contradicts Mencius in the chapter “Human nature is bad.”
- Our *xing* contains a love of profit, envy and hatred, desires of the eyes and ears that lead to violence and anarchy.
- Human nature must be overcome and transformed to become good. Moral cultivation is more like crafting the self: the vessel is not inherent in the clay:



Understanding how observing ritual works on human nature

- Observing ritual propriety is crucial for correcting a natural undue concern for the self. Recall *Analects* 12.1.
- Rituals of mourning and burial (esp. for parents) have an especially powerful effect on people.
- Why? He points to a natural love of one's own kind that all creatures of blood and breath possess, humans especially. Rituals are powerful because they help us to express this natural love.
- Ritual activity not only restrains troublesome emotions but also strengthens emotions that are congenial to morality.

- Another example: the village drinking ceremony in which all drink from a single cup in order of seniority. The young learn to restrain their impulses and defer to the elder; and in drinking from the same cup, all affirm their common bond.
- Xunzi actually is not categorically opposed to Mencius: for him ritual's efficacy relies on natural emotions congenial to morality.
- Mencius not categorically opposed to Xunzi: he recognizes the power of the “small part” of oneself given to eating and drinking.
- Where they really disagree: Xunzi thinks Mencius is naïve about the power of the troublesome part of the self.

- Xunzi appreciates that ritual is regular and pervasive: marks the major passages of life as well as constituting the protocol of various daily social interactions.
- Therefore an apt instrument for shaping human thought, feeling, and conduct.
- Can be a kind of meditation in action wherein one focuses on others with care, respect, and gratitude. A regularized form of reflection shaping emotion in the way Mencius pictured.
- But also, studies of assuming the bodily postures and gestures of affective attitudes indicate that doing so helps to induce the feelings (Carney, Cuddy, Yap *Psychological Science* 2010).

More on the power of ritual

- Rituals confer meaning and coherence to human life: In treating birth, rites ornament the beginning; in sending off the dead, they ornament the end. When both end and beginning have been fully attended to, then the service proper for a filial son is finished and the Way of the Sage is fulfilled (19.7b).
- Rituals help one to accept responsibility for nurturing new life, and to express gratitude to and a sense of deep loss of the ones from whom one has received life and nurture.

- By being woven into a narrative through rituals in which many others have taken part, and by participating with others, we know that our joys and sorrows are not private but shared and central to being human.
- Ritual is sedulous in giving order to matters of birth and death, for birth is our beginning and death our end. When both the beginning and end are good, the Way of Humanity is complete. (adapted from K 19.4a, v. 3, 62).
- By imparting a kind of meaningful order and symmetry, ritual practices can make human life beautiful where originally ugliness predominated.

Xunzi might have something here

- Haidt (“Elevation and the Positive Psychology of Morality” 2003) has found that people experience pleasure in contemplating acts of courage and compassion. He calls this sort of motivation “moral elevation.”
- Thomas Jefferson held that acts of charity and gratitude can impress the observer with their beauty and prompt the desire to do the same.

Also in Xunzi, a metaethical theory of great interest

- Xunzi suggests that standards of rightness and appropriateness and the forms of ritual activity were generated by the sages in response to the problem created by the fondness for profit and their envy and dislike of others.
- Since chaos and anarchy are the likely results of acting on the strongest elements of our nature, the sages realized that these elements must be restrained and disciplined so that mutually beneficial cooperation results.

Parallel to Hobbes

- Like Hobbes, Xunzi emphasizes that some of our strongest natural desires & emotions get us into big trouble.
- We know it would be better to cooperate with each other, but we do not know if others can be trusted. They might “free-ride.”
- Hobbes’ solution was for everyone to agree to have a “common power,” a Leviathan, who would punish anyone who cheats on the rules of cooperation.
- This solution has well-known problems, e.g., who can be trusted to play the role of enforcer of the rules?

- That is why Xunzi's alternative is of great interest: a psychological and cultural transformation is necessary to make people trustworthy to each other.
... if one acts with only the preservation of his own life in view, death is inevitable. If one acts with only profit in mind, loss is certain (19.1d)
- Standards of rightness that specify fair divisions of labor and forms of ritual activity that reform destructive human impulses and strengthen the ones congenial to morality are necessary.

- Natural destructive impulses are restrained and the impulses more congenial to morality are strengthened through ritual activity.
- For those of us who do not see morality as part of the given fabric of the universe, Xunzi's naturalistic bent is refreshing.

Possible juxtapositions

- Hobbes, of course.
- Also Hume on the artificial virtue of justice.
- Contemporary literature on what enables cooperation between human beings. Now increasing emphasis on what kind of psychology is needed for cooperation.
 - E.g., the economist Robert Frank who emphasizes emotions such as compassion that make one a more likely partner for cooperation.
 - Also the Boyd and Richerson, who theorize that culture evolved to in partnership with human biology to produce more cooperative creatures.