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ON THE MENCIAN PERCEPTION OF MORAL SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Mencius' claim that human nature is good is well known among students of classical Confucian thought. It has been taken for granted that underlying Mencius' deceptively simple thesis is an appeal to intuition. No persuasive argument is offered, except the insistence that the moral propensities, such as the "four germinations" are inherent in human nature. A corollary of this insistence is the unquestioned belief that human beings all have the inner ability to commiserate with others, to feel ashamed of themselves, to have a sense of humbleness, and to differentiate right from wrong. And the only example of an attempt to "prove" the thesis which approximates a kind of empiricist procedure seems no more than a commonsense observation:

When I say that men have the mind which cannot bear to see the suffering of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus: Now, when men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they all have a feeling of alarm and distress, not to gain friendship with the child's parents, nor to seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor because they dislike the reputation [of lack of humanity if they did not rescue the child]. From such a case, we see that a man without the feeling of commiseration is not human. . . . [2A:6]*

Understandably even sympathetic interpreters of the Mencian position often feel impelled to note that Mencius "offers very sophisticated discussions of the differences between human and animal nature, of the way man's material and sexual needs may override his humane judgment, and of the effects of environment on man's nature," so that his alleged "proof" of the goodness of human nature should not be taken as evidence of Mencius' simple-mindedness.

In this essay, I intend to show that the Mencian thesis, far from being an unexamined dogmatic assertion, is an integral part of a coherent and thoughtful defense of a personalist position in philosophical anthropology. Indeed, I believe that if Mencius' subtle appreciation of all the complexities of human life is carefully studied, his view on human nature may very well turn out to be one of the most persuasive articulations on the subject. Of

*For translations of *Mencius* in this essay, see W. T. Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 51–83. Also, cf. D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (London: Penguin Classics, 1970).

course my immediate concern is not a comprehensive presentation of Mencius' considered opinion on "the innate moral qualities" as bases for the goodness of human nature; rather, I would probe into the thesis as a way of understanding what may be called the Mencian perception of moral self-development.

On the surface, it might seem that the best way to determine the shape of meaning of the concept of self in Mencius is to study the cluster of words somehow associated with the concept in the *Book of Mencius*. A linguistic analysis of these related words could then provide us with the parameters by which the values of the self could be fixed, as it were, in Mencius' system of thought. But such a procedure, while useful, cannot account for either the dialogical situation in which Mencius as a speaker articulates his thought in response to concrete questioning or the genetic reasons behind the formulation of the Mencian idea of self which have actually become inseparable aspects of the idea's internal structure. More serious perhaps is that such a procedure, ostensibly freeing itself from the intentional fallacy, completely ignores the spiritual direction of Mencius as a living, experiencing and creating thinker. Needless to say, as an interrogating historian, I cannot afford to overlook the groundlevel philological work as a point of departure. But for me, the interpretive task begins when our encounter with Mencius is as much a demand on our own openness to his challenge as a need to make him meaningful to us.

Quite a few scholars have suggested that underlying the Mencian thesis on human nature is a strong belief in man's perfectibility. However, as some have noticed, the idea of human perfectibility does not specify whether environmental intervention or native endowment plays the key role in the perfecting process. Mencius and Hsün Tzu, a sophisticated critic of the Mencian thesis, both share the same idea but their reasons for advocating it are significantly different. For Hsün Tzu, the perfecting process involves a complex interaction between the cognitive functions of the mind and social constraints. Levels of one's perfection are defined in terms of the malleability of one's human nature to communally shared values and norms perceived and understood by the intelligence of one's mind. One's willing participation in the perfecting process thus depends on internal self-cultivation as well as on conformity to societal ideals, but "malleabilization" according to well-established ritual forms is undoubtedly the focus of Hsün Tzu's educational efforts.

Mencius is also sensitive to environmental influences. It is not difficult to show that he recognizes that economic conditions, political situations and social relations have profound impact on a person's ethical life. Furthermore, he insists that improvements be made in those crucial areas of the environ-

ment before realistic programs of moral education can be implemented. The concrete examples of learning a language in an unfavorable linguistic world, [3B:6] of inculcating a sense of loyalty in the ministers without the reciprocal benevolence from the king and of developing a “secure mind” independent of an access to “secure livelihood” [1A:7.20] [3A:3] amply demonstrate that Mencius is acutely aware of the shaping influences of the environment on the person’s psychological milieu in which beliefs, motives and attitudes are formed. Yet, for Mencius, there is something in each human being that, in the ultimate sense, can never be subject to external control. This something is neither learned nor acquired; it is a given reality, endowed by Heaven as the defining characteristic of being human.

As A.C. Graham has pointed out, among Mencius’ contemporaries in the fourth century B.C. quite a few philosophers seem to have subscribed to the proposition that human nature is what human beings are born with. The etymological identification of “birth” (*sheng*) and “nature” (*hsing*) in classical Chinese usage has enabled several modern scholars to argue that the view was widely held as an interpretive consensus. Historically there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this analysis. It seems plausible that an overwhelming majority of Mencius’ adversaries actually advocated a naturalist position on human nature. The view that human nature is what human beings are born with, for example, led to the general observation that appetite for food and sex are human nature. Against this background, the Mencian thesis can be viewed as a critique of this interpretive consensus. Mencius’ strategy of presenting his position on the matter is best shown in his exchanges with Kao Tzu. Each of these exchanges, most comprising no more than a few lines, is in itself a subtle manifestation of Mencius’ overall concern, a cue to his underlying assumption on human nature. Let us examine one of them:

Kao Tzu said, “What is inborn is called nature.” Mencius said, “When you say that what is inborn is called nature, is that like saying that white is white?” “Yes.” “Then is the whiteness of the white feather the same as the whiteness of snow? Or, again, is the whiteness of snow the same as the whiteness of white jade?” “Yes.” “Then is the nature of a dog the same as the nature of an ox, and is the nature of an ox the same as the nature of a man?” [6A:3]

On the surface, Kao Tzu could have maintained that precisely because what is inborn is called nature, what is inborn in an ox is the nature of ox and what is inborn in a man is the nature of man, without committing himself to the seeming absurdity that the nature of ox is the same as the nature of man. But given his naturalist position, which is defined in terms of basic instinctual demands, I am not sure whether Kao Tzu would or could have differentiated human nature from animal nature in general.

To Mencius, the naturalist position is not factually wrong but, as an attempt to arrive at a holistic understanding of the uniqueness of being human, it is deficient and one-sided. In the words of a later passage which seem to apply here as well, the apparent truism advocated by Kao Tzu is like the man who “takes care of his finger and, without knowing it, neglects his back and shoulders.” [6A:14] Mencius continues, however, that if the man “eats and drinks yet without neglecting what is of more importance, how could the nourishment of his mouth and belly be considered as serving merely a few inches of his body?” The point is that since a proper knowledge of man’s physical existence necessitates an appreciation of the *gestalt*, the nourishment of one kind of basic need must not be done at the expense of the wellbeing of the whole body. Therefore, as it is simple-minded to reduce one’s physical nourishment to a few inches of one’s body, so it is deficient and one-sided to reduce human nature merely to appetite for food and sex.

Obviously, in Mencius’ opinion, the proposition that human nature is what we, as human beings, are born with cannot fully account for that something which is inherent in each of us as the defining characteristic of our being human. The proposition is too general to appreciate the unique human quality which is not explainable in terms of animal instincts that we seem to share with oxen and dogs. To be sure, Mencius can subscribe to the view that instinctual demands are themselves neither learned nor acquired and that they are, in a sense, given realities endowed by Heaven. He can perhaps also accept the observation that appetite for food and sex are so fundamental to human life that they ought to be recognized as absolutely basic needs. But the something in each of us that, in the ultimate sense, can never be subject to external control clearly points in a different direction.

An examination of the famous allegory of the Niu Mountain helps us to understand the issue in a new light:

The trees of the Niu Mountain were once beautiful. Being situated, however in the borders of a large state, they were hewn down with axes and bills—and could they retain their beauty? Still, through the activity of the vegetative life day and night, and the nourishing influence of the rain and dew, they were not without buds and sprouts springing forth, but then came the cattle and goats and browsed upon them. To these things is owing the bare and the stripped appearance of the mountain, which when people see, they think it was never finely wooded. But is this the nature of the mountain? And so also of what properly belongs to man; shall it be said that the mind of any man was without humanity (*jen*) and righteousness (*i*)? The way in which a man loses his proper goodness of mind is like the way in which the trees are denuded by axes and bills. Hewn down day after day, can the mind retain its beauty? [6A:8]

If the mind cannot retain its beauty, it seems apparent that environmental influences are overwhelming to the extent that the original nature can be dis-

turbed and destroyed to a seemingly irredeemable degree. Mencius' further observation seems to confirm this suspicion: "When there is repeated disturbance, the restorative influence of the night will not be sufficient to preserve (the proper goodness of the mind). When the influence of the night is not sufficient to preserve it, man becomes not much different from the beast. People see that he acts like an animal, and think that he never had the original endowment (for goodness)." In what sense can we still maintain that there is something in each of us that, in the ultimate sense, can never be subject to external control?

The question seems to have bothered Mencius. In the concluding part of the allegory, he refuses to grant that what one appears to be is necessarily what one really is. Surely he admits that "with proper nourishment and care, everything grows, whereas without proper nourishment and care, everything decays." But it would be misleading to suggest that Mencius actually means to imply that once a man has become not much different from a beast, there is little chance for him to regain his humanity. On the contrary, he time and again stresses the power of the will for self-realization, a power never totally lost, although it is conceivable that it can be forever latent. This is perhaps the main reason that in the last lines of the allegory, Mencius quotes the Confucian saying, "Hold it fast and you preserve it. Let it go and you lose it. It comes in and goes out at no definite time and without anyone's knowing its direction" and comments that this statement refers to the human mind. In fact, the human mind is such that no matter how disturbed and destroyed it has become, its inner strength for rejuvenation can never be completely subdued. It is in this sense, I suppose, that Mencius has an unflagging faith in human perfectibility through self-effort. To him, the establishment of the will is all that is needed to preserve the original mind. Therefore, "hold it fast and you preserve it" signifies a self-transforming inner decision, a way of internal healing and nourishing that is both necessary and sufficient for the cultivation of the mind. The healing rest of the days and nights and the nourishing air of the calm morning, by contrast, are merely desirable conditions for normal self-development. Indeed, Mencius even suggests in some cases difficult personal ordeal may turn out to be a blessing in disguise:

When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent. [6B:15]

However, this must not be construed as evidence of Mencius' advocacy of a particular thesis on challenge and response. For he also feels comfortable

with the commonsense observation that “in good years most of the young people behave well. In bad years most of them abandon themselves to evil. This is not due to any difference in the natural capacity endowed by Heaven. The abandonment is due to the fact that the mind is allowed to fall into evil.” [6A:7]

That Mencius is absolutely serious about human perfectibility through self-effort is beyond dispute, but the analogical reasoning by which he articulates his interpretive position needs further elaboration. To begin, it should become obvious now that something in each of us which ultimately can never be subject to external control actually refers to *hsin* (mind and heart). Presumably the susceptibility of the mind to environmental influences as a realistic appraisal of the nature and function of the mind is not thought to be in conflict with the view that the mind can always be preserved if one so wills. Paradoxically a constant concern for “losing” the mind and a persistent belief in an innate ability to “preserve” the mind are co-ingredients in Mencius’ line of thinking. While Mencius recognizes that we all have in varying degrees lost our hearts and only the sages have preserved theirs, he insists that as “there is a common taste for flavor in all mouths, a common sense for sound in all ears, and a common sense for beauty in all eyes,” there is also a commonality in all human minds. And the sage is characterized as someone having already possessed, in the sense of having fully manifested, “what is common in all our minds.” [6A:7]

Suggestively the Mencian version of the allegory of the growing of wheat stresses commonality rather than divergence caused by environmental forces:

You sow the seeds and cover them with soil. The land is the same and the time of sowing is also the same. In time they all grow up luxuriantly. When the time of harvest comes, they are all ripe. Although there may be a difference between the different stalks of wheat, it is due to differences in the soil, as rich or poor, to the unequal nourishment obtained from the rain and the dew, and to differences in human effort. Therefore all things of the same kind are similar to one another. Why should there be any doubt about human beings? The sage and I are the same in kind. [6A:7]

The commonality means, first of all, that the sage, like us, is also a human being endowed with the same nature. Thus the saying of an ancient worthy, Lung Tzu: “If a man makes shoes without knowing the size of people’s feet, I know that he will at least not make them to be like baskets” [6A:7] is quoted by Mencius to suggest the underlying compatibility of all human beings. But obviously Mencius is not proposing the leveling notion that the sage is merely human. Rather, he intends to show that inherent in our nature is precisely the same reality that enables ordinary human beings to become sages.

To the rhetorical question, "What is it that we have in common in our minds?" Mencius specifies that "it is the sense of principle and righteousness (*i-li*, moral principles)." [6A:7] This seems to imply that the moral sense in the mind is neither learned nor acquired. It is inborn which can be "lost" but is always recoverable if one wills to "preserve" it. Actually Mencius unequivocally states, "It is not the worthies alone who have this mind. All men have it, but only the worthies have been able to preserve it." [6A:10] And we may add that it is also in this context that Mencius characterizes the way of learning as none other than to seek for the lost mind. Once the mind is preserved, the moral sense will be regained and, by implication, the road to be human resumed.

It may seem, at this juncture, that Mencius' "moral sense" is essentially an appeal to intuition. And, recalling the example of suddenly seeing a child about to fall into a well, the appeal seems also directed toward the quest for a kind of physiological foundation of morality. This brings us to a close look at Mencius' thought on the "four germinations."

[A] man without the feeling of commiseration is not human; a man without the feeling of shame and dislike is not human; a man without the feeling of deference and compliance is not human; and a man without the feeling of right and wrong is not human. The feeling of commiseration is the germination of humanity; the feeling of shame and dislike is the germination of righteousness; the feeling of deference and compliance is the germination of propriety; and the feeling of right and wrong is the germination of wisdom. Men have these four germinations just as they have their four limbs. Having these four germinations, but saying that they cannot develop themselves is self-destruction. . . . If anyone with these four germinations in him knows how to give them the fullest extension and development, the result will be like fire beginning to burn or a spring beginning to shoot forth. [2A:6]

We can of course suppose that in saying a man without the feelings of commiseration, of shame and dislike, of deference and compliance and of right and wrong is not human, Mencius may simply mean to convey a point of semantics, namely that he refuses to call those who cannot or will not exhibit these feelings human beings. Surely the principle of the rectification of names, which has been extensively used to formulate critical concepts such as that of the king, is applicable here. But the force of Mencius' statement seems to lie elsewhere.

As Mencius clearly states, "humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not drilled into us from outside. We originally have them with us. Only we do not think [to find them]." [6A:6] It is quite possible that what he really intends to convey is not only a matter of semantics but also a reference to the irreducibility of one's moral sense. The difference is subtle but vitally

important. A man without those feelings is not human because it is morally impossible for a man not to have them. It is not the case that we can and should condemn someone who does not exhibit those feelings as inhuman according to our judgments. Indeed, it is inconceivable that a man, so long as he can still exercise his will, does not have a ready access to his own mind wherein the “germinations” of his basic feelings reside. Needless to say, the irreducibility of one’s moral sense which is rooted in one’s nature does not guarantee a spontaneous self-realization. Mencius is acutely aware of this:

Therefore it is said, “Seek and you will find it, neglect and you will lose it.” [Men differ in the development of their endowments], some twice as much as others, some five times, and some to an incalculable degree, because not one can develop his original endowment to the fullest extent. [6A:6]

The contention that the “four germinations” are always available for moral self-development seems in apparent conflict with the observation that the mind often has to be found and cultivated and that in a practical sense it can never be developed to the fullest extent. A way of resolving the conflict is to recommend a twofold interpretation of the mind as both an ontological reality and an existential process. The manner in which such an interpretation may be justified as well as the far-reaching implications it may have cannot be explored here. Yet the mind so interpreted seems to make good sense in light of the Mencian literature we have examined thus far. The “four germinations” understood in terms of the mind as an ontological reality can be characterized as the mind’s original manifestations of its true nature; they are therefore absolutely irreducible. On the other hand, the finding, cultivating and developing understood in terms of the mind as an existential process can be characterized as the mind’s own efforts of self-realization. They are therefore necessarily ceaseless.

This is certainly compatible with Mencius’ insistence upon a conceptual distinction between physiological needs and moral feelings and yet, at the same time, upon the importance of recognizing the former not only as legitimate constitutive elements in the structure of human nature but also as integral parts of one’s quest for moral self-development. The practical consideration then is not the suppression of instinctual demands, such as appetite for food and sex, but their proper expression in a holistic way to be human. And it is precisely in this connection, I suppose, that the differentiation between the “great body” and the “small body” of human nature is made. [6A:15] The small body, despite its universality as what is common to each member of the animal kingdom, tends to be fixed on external objects for immediate gratification. As a result, it is easily limited by a rather restricted area of human concern and can be extremely limiting to an inclusive process

of self-growth. The great body, by contrast, is the basis for personal identity and for genuine communication, and despite its elusiveness as something often barely present in our ordinary daily existence, it is that by which the uniqueness of our human way is defined.

An example of Mencius' thinking on the divergence of the great body and the small body in self-development is found in the following exchange:

Kung-tu Tzu asked, "We are all human beings. Why is it that some men become great and others become small?" Mencius said, "Those who follow the great body in their nature become great men and those who follow the small body in their nature become small men." "But we are all human beings. Why is it that some follow their great body and others follow their small body?" Mencius replied, "When our senses of sight and hearing are used without thought and are thereby obscured by material things, the material things act on the material senses and lead them astray. That is all. The function of the mind is to think. If we think, we will get it (the moral sense). If we do not think, we will not get it. This is what Heaven has given to us. If we first build up the great part of our nature, then the small part cannot overcome it. It is simply this that makes a man great." [6A:15]

The centrality of the idea of "thinking" (*ssu*) may give one the impression that Mencius seems to have subscribed to a kind of rationalist position. With a stretch of the imagination, we can probably also suppose that "if we think, we will get it" implies the possibility of a transcendental procedure whereby the constitution of the mind itself, as a thinking agent, determines a priori the form, as it were, of moral sense. That such a line of inquiry into the Mencian mode of thought may yield fruitful results is not being questioned here. But it seems unlikely that by thinking Mencius really means to advance a formalistic thesis devoid of any specific moral contents. For Mencius notes in analogical terms:

Humanity is man's mind and righteousness is man's path. Pity the man who abandons the path and does not follow it, and who has lost his heart and does not know how to recover it. When people's dogs and fowls are lost, they go to look for them, and yet, when they have lost their hearts, they do not go to look for them. The way of learning is none other than finding the lost mind. [6A:11]

The task of being human, according to this interpretive thrust, involves not merely the exercise of universalizable rationality in moral situations but the antecedent commitment to and the actual activity of moral self-development. The paradox of the whole enterprise then is that the concerted effort to find, cultivate and develop the mind is predicated on the belief that the mind as the defining characteristic of human nature is itself the ultimate basis for such an effort. There is no appeal to either the immortality of the soul or the existence

of God. The spontaneity of the mind is, in the last analysis, the necessary and sufficient reason for us to be moral.

Against this background, it may not be far-fetched to suggest that Mencius perceives, in the process of moral self-development, not only a multiplicity of ways to be pursued but, more important perhaps, also a convergence of stages to be perfected. Therefore, while Mencius recognizes several different approaches to sagehood, he maintains that as the usefulness of the five kinds of grain depends upon their ripeness, “[s]o the value of humanity depends upon its being brought to maturity.” [6A:19] In fact, on one occasion at least, Mencius even attempts to characterize a few perfected stages in poetic terms:

He who commands our liking is called good.
He who is sincere with himself is called true.
He who is sufficient and real is called beautiful.
He whose sufficiency and reality shine forth is called great.
He whose greatness transforms itself is called sagely.
He whose sageliness is beyond our comprehension is called spiritual. [7B:25]

Undoubtedly from the good to the spiritual there are numerous degrees of refinement. Moral self-development so perceived is tantamount to an unceasing process of humanization.

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