



Doing what you really want: an introduction to the philosophy of Mengzi

by Franklin Perkins, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. ix + 267, £19.99 (pb), ISBN: 9780197574928

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BOOK REVIEWS

Doing what you really want: an introduction to the philosophy of Mengzi, by Franklin Perkins, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. ix + 267, £19.99 (pb), ISBN: 9780197574928

Franklin Perkins' newest book is written for a general audience with little or no background in the Chinese intellectual tradition and it purports to introduce readers to the philosophical views of the third century BCE Confucian thinker Mengzi. As with any book of philosophy written for non-specialists, one of the main difficulties is to find a balance between writing that is "too introductory or too academic" (6). Perkins attempts to traverse this gap by drawing parallels between the practical concerns that motivated Mengzi in his tireless struggle to improve the world and the contemporary issues we face today. Mengzi's Confucianism, according to Perkins, is first and foremost a way of life, and one characteristic feature of that is "to become the kind of person who could fix [some of the world's] problems" (4).

This approach to the *Mengzi* has many advantages, the most important of which is that it makes the text relevant and plausible to us. Despite such a focus, or perhaps because of it, Perkins feels the need to distance himself from decisively promoting Confucianism, saying that doing so would require much more attention to the "bad aspects" (14) of it. Instead of dwelling on these 'bad aspects', or even telling us what they are, Perkins devotes the book to presenting Confucianism as "a way that became the dominant Chinese tradition for those seeking to fix the world" (4). His point is that we can learn much from Mengzi and the early Confucian tradition without having to adopt it. For example, the texts contain strategies for cultivating one's person and leading a life dedicated to making the world a better place, but we do not have to become Confucians to benefit from them.

That such a Mengzian path to self-cultivation and to fixing the world comes attached with a plethora of views on human psychology, moral development, the philosophy of nature, in short, "a coherent vision of human beings and the world" (9), is rightly taken by Perkins as obvious. Hence, articulating such views requires significant interpretative work, and Perkins acknowledges right away that the original text is "difficult to make sense of" (6), "inherently ambiguous" (14), and that anyone "who claims to have the true meaning of a classical Chinese text is fooling you or fooling themselves". (14) Those are fair points. And yet, taking such remarks at face value, they make the prospects of writing an introduction to Mengzi an impossibly daunting task. How might we introduce something that is this elusive? Presumably, we would do so by presenting what is more or less agreed upon among Mengzi scholars – the state of the field, so to speak – and then perhaps mention, cautiously and with some reservation,

those parts of Mengzi's philosophy that scholars are more uncertain about, or leave them out entirely to avoid overburdening the non-specialist. But Perkins' approach is altogether different. He says: "I have given my own interpretation in this book without much justification or alternate readings". (14) Hence, given that this is the case, the reader should not expect a general introduction to the philosophy of Mengzi, but to Perkins' account of it.

"Fair enough", I hear you say, "but Perkins' own views about Mengzi are fairly orthodox, and he provides a survey of Mengzian philosophy that hardly any scholar in the field would take issue with". Perhaps so, but that misses the point. Throughout the book, it is sometimes a little difficult to discern whether it is Mengzi, or Perkins' Mengzi that is speaking. This issue is all the more pressing when one encounters more exotic claims made about Mengzi, or the early Chinese in general, for example that "the self is inseparable from a dynamic, interconnected world" (91; see also 81, 132), that the Confucians held a view of "the world as interconnected dynamic process" (165; see also 83), or that they lacked any mind/body dualism (36, 56, 165). The underlying metaphysical holism that is being assumed here in its various guises has been seriously (and, to my mind, successfully) challenged for being textually unsupported and, furthermore, for being incompatible with our best evidence from the cognitive sciences (Slingerland (2019); see also Goldin (2003), Puett (2002)). In the end, none of these controversial metaphysical assumptions seem to me even necessary for presenting the central theme of the book, and Perkins could have done away with them without doing much harm to his wider project.

Let me then, on that note, turn to the central theme of the book. According to Perkins, Mengzi advocates for changing the world, but he also proposes that we should be reconciled with it (7). With the latter comes peace of mind and contentment, but it also weakens our resolve to improve the lives around us. And yet it is this emphasis on struggling to make the world better that Perkins finds most appealing about Mengzian philosophy. As he puts it:

It is hard to embrace the world at the same time that one fights to change it. Mengzi's philosophy is dedicated to changing the world and yet it maintains an element of reconciliation. That is why I wanted people to read it.

(7)

How exactly Mengzi resolves this tension between opposition and harmony is the book's central theme. Those who are familiar with Perkins's other work, specifically his *Heaven and Earth are Not Humane*, will be also familiar with the way he interprets Mengzi on this point, given that much of the research from Perkins' earlier book provides the critical justification for the claims made in this book (14).

Perkins interprets Mengzi as giving the following argument. First, all human beings are part of the natural world. We do not stand apart from nature, nor is anything about us *supernatural*. Second, our desire to improve the world is natural – that is, it is a natural tendency stemming from our nature as human beings (40, 44, 49). Finally, if a person acts in accordance with what is natural for human beings to do, then this "is itself an expression of nature". (26; see

also 32) It is therefore natural for us to struggle to fix the world. It is ‘what we really want’, and expressing this in our actions is a way for us to harmonize with nature:

Ultimately, [*xing*, human nature] allows [Mengzi] to theorize a struggle to change the world as a way of harmonizing with nature, because that struggle expresses the tendencies we human beings naturally have.

(40)

Hence, Perkins’ solution is to say that we become reconciled (or harmonized) with nature by striving to change the world, because doing so expresses our nature. It is not clear to me whether this really is *Mengzi’s* solution, but putting that aside, let me examine it solely for its philosophical merits. Is this solution successful at resolving the tension at the centre of the book?

I am not sure that it is. Here is why. Suppose I struggle to make the world better. My struggle can take many different forms, and it can be more or less successful. After all, in my attempts to make the world better, I might unwittingly end up making it worse – either accidentally or out of ignorance. But are these misguided yet sincere attempts to improve the world an expression of my human nature? They should be, because it is supposedly natural for me to struggle to fix the world, and hence doing so is an expression of my human nature. However, Perkins himself seems to disagree. For example, he says that we do not harmonize with nature if we “fail to treat other people well, or we live in and serve an exploitative system” (42). At the very least, we must be “acting in harmony with nature’s patterns” (46), which nowadays amounts to mitigating climate change, reducing deforestation, etc. (47) But, one might object, it is surely plausible to imagine a ruler who, out of a genuine desire to make the world a better place, issues an edict that the nearby forests be cleared for additional farmland to feed a growing population. As Perkins admits: “Human work in establishing agriculture is as natural as the effort birds put into building nests” (47) – and yet doing so usually brings with it the destruction of various natural habitats. Hence, clearing out the woods to create new farmland does not seem to ‘align with nature’s patterns’, even though it is ‘as natural as the efforts of birds building nests’. In other words, such actions are an expression of our nature, but they do not harmonize with nature.

Perkins’s solution therefore faces the following dilemma. If what makes my actions harmonious with nature is the fact that they express my nature as a human being (that is, they express my natural tendencies), then I can harmonize with nature by destroying it. But if it is my enacting of a way to *improve* the world that renders my actions harmonious with nature, then it is false to say that I harmonize with nature merely by expressing my natural tendencies.

One might suggest the following to avoid the dilemma. Not all instances of struggling to change the world are actions that harmonize with nature, because only those actions that constitute a way of improving the world harmonize with it. But this will not do. Perkins is clear that the reason *why* our effort counts as harmonizing with nature is because it “expresses the tendencies we human beings naturally have”. (40) Does that mean we express our natural

tendencies *only if* we succeed in enacting a way of improving the world? That is implausible – largely for the reasons I have given above. I can intend to improve the world, even act on my intentions, without at the same time enacting a way of improving the world. Likewise, I can act on my natural desires, thereby expressing them in my actions, even if I fail to attain the objects of my desires. Is this true for intentions and desires, but not for natural tendencies? Can I fail to express a natural tendency, even though I am motivated by exactly the same concerns, emotions, motives, etc., as those who (*ceteris paribus*) succeed at enacting a way of improving the world? Again, that seems *prima facie* unlikely. Hence, it is difficult to see how the dilemma for Perkins' solution can be avoided.



Despite these issues, Perkins' book is an accessible, well-written, and frequently thought-provoking work. It is certainly one way of being introduced to the *Mengzi*, albeit an idiosyncratic one, and its greatest strength lies in the fact that it makes a powerful case for the contemporary relevance of a central Confucian thinker.

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Hume: a very short introduction, by James A. Harris, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp.123, £8.99 (pb), ISBN: 0198849788

In his *Hume: A Very Short Introduction*, James Harris describes Hume's shift away from systematic philosophizing and towards the writing of essays, as a genre more "suitable to the literary culture of the age" (35). Hume turned to essays,