7

Moral Motivation for Future Generations, Naturally

A Mencian Proposal

Jing Iris Hu

1 Introduction

Hourdequin and Wong have recently offered an important model to explain a central question of intergenerational ethics; namely, why should or do we care about people in the future, especially those who are not related to us in meaningful ways and whose lives will not overlap with ours on this earth (Hourdequin and Wong 2021)? In other words, how does our moral motivation to do good extend to the future beyond our own time? The model Hourdequin and Wong offer is a Confucian-inspired relational construction of human agency and morality. In this model, we appreciate that relationships with others define and shape our moral agency and identity; we acknowledge that we are the product not only of our own devotion and efforts, but also of others' moral influences, gained through both subconscious socialization and purposeful emulation. It is in this spirit that the gratitude and admiration we feel and the moral legacies we receive direct us not to the original individuals who influenced us, but to those who might be influenced by us, no matter whether they are present in our time or in the future. We are motivated by emotions such as gratitude to return the debt we owe the moral exemplars who inspired us; however, the subjects of such repayment are not always those we originally admired, but those who may be inspired by us in similar ways. It is in the same spirit that we owe our gratitude to our moral forebearers and owe our good conduct to future generations, so as to pass on this gift of virtuous moral influence.

The relational understanding of moral agency and moral interaction provides an important platform from which to understand our interpersonal relationships in a spatial and temporal manner. Communal moral influences can reach people both nearby and far away; they can also be passed down so that the influence extends beyond the life of the moral agent.

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However, in this chapter, I argue that this model needs to be supplemented with other insights from early Confucians – especially Mencius and Xunzi and their naturalistic understanding of ethics – in order to be more effective in terms of intergenerational ethics. Their invaluable contributions are to treat emotions and some normative beginnings in them as the natural foundation of a moral theory, and to focus on internalizing values through moral education rather than relying solely on incentive/punishment-based policies to best motivate individuals.

In the following, I will first summarize the relational understanding of Confucian morality and its merits in Hourdequin and Wong's account, as well as the challenges it faces. In the second section I will explicate the reasons why I think, despite its enormous promise, it remains incomplete in addressing the question of why we should care about the wellbeing and moral plight of future generations, and will proceed by posing the challenge of "the loss of continuity" of communities and cultures. I argue that only a naturalistic ethics rooted in emotions, such as Mencius's, can be expected to motivate people across time. The commonality based on emotions can provide us with an account that resonates with individuals across different time periods and generations – people can still be properly motivated to care about and attribute moral weight to distant others based on these shared emotions across time, space and culture. On its own, without such a moral foundation, the relational understanding in Confucian ethics cannot reach its goal. Mencius's naturalistic ethics center around the shared common emotional responses with which people across cultures and generations can connect and resonate while, more importantly, allowing enough flexibility as to how people in the future might react and carry out their own actions. This adaptability prevents paternalistic interference and any attempt by current generations to manipulate future generations. The Mencian account shows why such attempts at interference with and manipulation of future persons would inevitably fail.

I should note that my purpose here is to enrich the toolbox in intergenerational ethics from a Confucian-inspired perspective; such tools are by no means exclusive to the Confucian philosophical tradition. A naturalistic understanding of morality, for example, is not limited to the Confucian tradition, nor are moral motivation and education based on it. It is also the case that the Confucian-inspired (specifically Mencian) models I discuss do not claim to present themselves as the only possible interpretations of the diverse early Confucian texts.

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2 Relational Perspective on Intergenerational Ethics

Confucian ethics is well-known for its focus on relationships, so much so that some would advocate a role-based or relation-based understanding of Confucian ethics in which the individual's roles and relationships, which help to construct moral identities and provide ethical guidance, are considered essential to their being a moral agent. Some would even argue that the moral guidance one receives from such relationships replaces concepts such as rights and justice (Ames and Rosemont 1999; Rosemont 2016), although this view has attracted criticism, since some version of the idea of justice is clearly present in Confucian ethics and its denial would be at the expense of the accuracy of the texts (Ivanhoe 2008). Other criticisms, from Paul Goldin and Aaron Stalnaker, are also highly relevant. Stalnaker claims that the so-called relational understanding of Confucian agents would lead to the false conclusion that, within such a framework, the person cannot rebel against their roles and relationships if these roles and relationships were the sole source of their moral guidance (Stalnaker 2019). Acts of rebelliousness can be justified on Confucian grounds, as we can see in texts such as *The Mencius* and *The Book of Odes* that contain stories about moral agents and, especially, women's moral struggles against the expectations stemming from their familial roles (Stalnaker 2019). In addition, as Goldin points out, women are frequently placed in impossible moral dilemmas that require them to choose between their moral duties as faithful wives, loyal daughters and devoted mothers – and the Confucian texts give no hope that there could be any theoretical reconciliation when such conflicts arise (Goldin 2016). As a matter of fact, in many of these stories, these women have to commit suicide to demonstrate their moral integrity, and even the celebrated *Confucian Four Books for Women* does not always provide a moral solution to its readers (Goldin 2016; Pang-White 2018). The concern here is that roles-and-relationship-based understandings of moral agency can fail to provide theoretical resources when conflicts between the moral expectations of one's various roles arise; and this concern is particularly relevant in regards to women, whose plight is less frequently discussed in philosophical texts. Stalnaker casts doubt upon the moral emphasis on relationships, worrying that such social and familial relationships may limit, rather than support, one's moral development. While the relational understanding of ethics is considered an essential feature of Confucian value-theory, it may not provide sufficient theoretical resources for people facing struggles against their relationships – for example, people in abusive or oppressive relationships who rebel against their roles and relationships (Goldin 2016; Mattice 2016; Stalnaker 2019).

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Wong provides a much more nuanced view that elegantly avoids the criticisms centered around the idea that one may not have a moral sense that is independent of the various demands of one's roles and relationships. He proposes that the relational approach in Confucian ethics ought to be understood in a developmental sense, in which one grows and learns morality while being situated in one's ever-changing roles and relationships (Wong 2004). We co-develop our moral agency with others who influence us in gaining a mature sense of our moral identity that we can, in turn, use to guide our moral conduct and attitudes when navigating relationships. In other words, by introducing the temporal dimension to the understanding of relationality, Wong's view is able to answer the question of how we can expect to rebel against or otherwise navigate relationships with our own moral sense. We should acknowledge that who we are today is the result not only of our own choices, efforts and devotion, but also of the moral influences of others throughout the course of our moral upbringing and learning – which, according to Confucius, should be a life-long process. As the products of such co-development with others around us, we are also a part of their moral co-development. In the same manner that we acknowledge and appreciate the moral influences of others, we are also predisposed to influence others in our own time and in the future.

The parent–child relationship, which is reciprocal but not transactional, is the most important resource for the Confucian insights on the topic of intergenerational relations in Hourdequin and Wong's paper. The reciprocity is realized through socialization, education and ritual practices and is based on the taming of emotions and virtues such as gratitude, filial piety and empathy (Hourdequin and Wong 2021). In addition, due to their admirable characters, a number of moral exemplars – such as the three legendary sage-kings – are held in high regard by the early Confucians (Hourdequin and Wong 2021). Their stories are often cited and used as moral inspirations and arguments for certain moral practices (e.g., sage-king Shun's stories are recited many times in the *Analects* and *Mencius*). People's respect and appreciation for moral traditions, as well as their ongoing efforts to draw moral inspiration and guidance from ancient moral sages, has allowed the legacies of these moral exemplars to live on through generations, with their moral influence extending for thousands of years (this is criticized and mocked by some of the early Confucians' contemporary rivals, such as the legalist Han Feizi). Perhaps what is more important – in addition to the more apparent celebration of parent–child relationships and the quest for moral inspiration and guidance from the ancient moral exemplars – is, as Hourdequin and Wong observe, the early Confucians' focus on the "importance of ongoing human community and sustained, collective work to develop a flourishing society in which multigenerational relationships play

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a central role" (Hourdequin and Wong 2021, 2). A relational understanding of agency enables us to see the long-lasting influence of the ways in which one interacts with others and conducts oneself; sometimes those influences may not be direct but they are nonetheless significant when situated in the collective endeavor of sustaining a flourishing community.

There are, however, certain reservations about the idea that, by itself, the relational perspective can save the day – that is, can answer the question of how and why one has moral reasons to be motivated to care about the well-being of future generations. One such reservation concerns the problem of the loss of continuity: or, in other words, the question as to whether or not, if a community or a culture were to become extinct, there would be reasons for people within that culture to care about the loss of future people to inherit moral influences from them or from their community? The potential loss of continuity means that reciprocity can no longer be justified or expected, in theory. After all, the future generations could be imagined as people like me, my nephews and nieces, my friends, my students, my community members, my readers, or people who also listen to Beethoven, read the *Monkey King* or watch the World Cup, who represent my influences or those of my communities and cultures. On the other hand, we could also imagine that the future generations of the population have little to do with us or our moral influences. They could adopt entirely different moral practices that are against everything we stand for today. They may reject and be ungrateful for the moral legacy we intend to leave them; or, worse, they may simply ignore and forget our influences entirely, including the moral legacy we intend to pass down and the moral lessons or pitfalls we ourselves faced and that future generations could have learned from. It is possible that, despite the causal relationship that would connect us, our moral and cultural influences would be of little or no consequence to them. And it seems that, taking the relational approach, we would naturally be disposed towards helping those who stand a chance of passing down the torch, so to speak, rather than those with whom we have no shared ties, through blood or cultural relationships. The central issue is that, even though the relational approach can expand our circle of moral concern from ourselves and those we care about over a few generations to large cultural and moral communities that can evolve and flourish over hundreds or thousands of years, it does not solve the problem of the loss of continuity or the fact that, no matter the scope of our moral concern, each unit will eventually face its own death. The relational approach merely delays our own eventual death and that of our community. The assumption that our community will always flourish and continue to exist must be queried, and the question of how to extend our moral concern beyond the end of our relations and communities remains unanswered.

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The interruption of positive, moral-influence feedback loops by unthankful actors is another challenge for the relational approach. Many, such as the Legalists (School of Fa) – one of the early Confucians' rival schools – would adamantly deny the importance of carrying on traditions or of aligning ourselves with ancient sages whose teachings, they claim, are simply outdated. Knowing that such views might always exist, and might not be in the minority, can we nonetheless assume a positive outlook and be morally motivated towards future generations and their concerns, despite knowing that they may "betray" us? Han Feizi (unknown — 233 BCE), for example, mocks the Confucians for regarding the ancient sages' teaching as moral guidance:

> In the most ancient times, when men were few and creatures numerous, human beings could not overcome the birds, beasts, insects, and reptiles. Then a sage appeared who fashioned nests of wood to protect men from harm. The people were delighted and made him ruler of the world, calling him the Nest Builder. The people lived on fruits, berriews, mussels, and calms—things rank and evil-smelling that hurt their bellies, so that many of them fell ill. Then a sage appeared who drilled with sticks and produced fire with which to transform the rank and putrid foods. The people were delighted and made him ruler of the world, calling him the Drill Man.
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> …
>
> Now if anyone had built wooden nests of drilled for fire in the time of the Xia dynasty, Gun and Yu would have laughted at him… For the sage does not try to practice the ways of antiquity or to abide by a fixed standard, but examines the affairs of the age and take what precautions are necessary. (Han Feizi, 49, Five Vermin, trans. Watson 2003: 97–98)

Han Feizi's states that only a fool would live in a nest on a tree in his time, even though, when the ancient sage invented nests for people to live in (possibly referring to housing structures detached from the ground), it was a great invention at the time that helped people avoid the dangers posed by insects and animals. Equally, only a fool would start fires in Han Feizi's day by drilling wood, as the ancient people did (chapter 49). Such traditions are no longer useful and have run their course – in the same way that our behaviors, whether morally praiseworthy or blameworthy, are only of significance to our own time. We don't owe it to our ancestors to pass down their legacy. Han Feizi goes on to say, "That is the reason why the sage neither seeks to follow the ways of the ancients nor establishes any fixed standard for all times but examines the things of his age and then prepares to deal with them" (*Han Feizi,* Chapter 49, "Five Vermin," translated by Liao 1939).

We might reasonably call people like Han Feizi "morally ungrateful," in the sense that they do not acknowledge that the current generation has received meaningful moral gifts in the form of positive moral influence from the past, nor are they especially concerned that they have special obligations or reasons

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to set good moral examples for future generations to look up to. The relational view that enables positive moral influences to spread and pass down the line will quickly dissolve when significant individuals are "morally ungrateful." The central problem with the relational account is that it can only prolong and extend one's social influence and concern through one's relational network, but such extension cannot be indefinite. When communities come to an end – whether this is the result of "morally ungrateful" people who refuse to participate in such a view or of the community running its natural course and dying out – the relational approach may not be capable of being stretched any further in a vacuum of relations.

The addition of temporal aspects is undeniably significant for the relational approach because it broadens the scope of our moral concern – not only for those who influence us, but also for those whom we influence throughout history or into the future. However, the problems discussed above, of the loss of continuity through kinship or culture and the problem of morally ungrateful actors, would have to be addressed in this line of thought.[1]

3 Can Empathy Provide Enough Help?

Hourdequin (2012) points out that one potential way to supplement the relational model is to understand how others' needs might be apprehended through emotional mechanisms, such as empathy. Through our natural emotional capacities, such as empathy, we can be motivated by ends that are not our own. In other words, others' well-being, plight and moral ends are sufficient moral reasons for us to act and do not need to be related to our own moral ends. She argues:

> Moral agents, in virtue of their capacities for empathy (understood as a particular kind of attunement and responsiveness to others' emotions) and shared intentionality (understood as a particular kind of attunement and responsiveness to others' goals), are sensitive to reasons that do not directly link up with their

[1] Another issue with Wong and Hourdequin's relational approach, based on parent–child relationships, is that it does not take competing relationships seriously in these models, which is precisely one of the central problems of intergenerational ethics. When different generations' interests come into conflict, how should we best address such issues? While I agree that a relational approach modeled after familial and communal relationships is necessary, it is equally important to consider intergenerational ethics from the lenses of conflicts – especially when the resources we are sharing with the future people are scarce, or at least finite. The relational approach would be significantly strengthened if resources that help to show how intergenerational conflicts could be solved within such a framework can be provided and discussed. On the other hand, when the relational approach is not based on parent–child relationships, but other types of relationships, such as those between friends, we would face a richer set of possibilities that could possibly address competing relationships outside of the family structure. I thank Mario Wenning for this point.

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> pre-existing ends. More specifically, they are sensitive to, and hence can be motivated by, reasons grounded in the desires, projects, commitments, concerns, and interests of others. (Hourdequin 2012, 403)

In this model, the moral concerns of future generations can motivate us, so long as we can put ourselves in their shoes and empathize with their plight. By adopting empathy as a useful mechanism we can overcome the problem of loss of continuity, since we can empathize with people who we do not know or who do not belong to the same cultural communities as us. However, despite being a promising approach, it is worth exploring questions about how strong a moral motivation empathy might be, especially when our own interests stand between us and our empathy.

Paul Bloom (2016) and Jesse Prinz (2011a, 2011b), notably, question the usefulness and reliability of empathy as, among other functions, a moral motivator. Prinz defines empathy as a "vicarious emotional response to another's emotions," which is largely consonant with Hourdequin's understanding of empathy (Prinz 2011a, 2011b; Hourdequin 2012). How reliable can empathy be as a moral motivator? The issue Prinz brings forth is straightforward: An emotion we "catch" through empathy from another is normally weaker than the original emotion. If, for example, I am upset as a result of empathizing with my student Jamie, who is upset that his submission to a prestigious philosophy conference was turned down, then, according to Prinz, my "second-hand" state of upset will be a weaker version of Jamie's. How can we expect a weaker version of the emotion to be a reliable motivator and to help the original, stronger emotion?

One response would be to debunk the assumption that a "second-hand" emotion is necessarily weaker than the original one, both in terms of intensity and motivating power. A parent might experience stronger distress when empathizing with their children's distress; By empathizing with a new victim, a previous victim of systemic injustices may have a stronger emotional response than the new victim who has just fallen prey to such systemic injustice and is oblivious to such social patterns. To assert that the result of empathy is, most likely, a weaker version of the original emotion is to demonstrate a lack of understanding of the complexities of human emotional responses.

Further, it is not the case that a more intense emotion in terms of feeling is always linked to a stronger reaction – or motivation. I have argued elsewhere that empathy can bring people to feel the distress of, and be morally motivated to help, people who are far away, non-kin and abstract (Hu 2018). My arguments were based on some of Mencius's texts, such as 1A7, in which Mencius demonstrates that the way to extend King Xuan's empathetic response to a suffering ox to the people of his country is by evoking his emotions

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(McRae 2011; Wong 2015a, 2015b). I should note that the term "empathy" in my work is understood to be slightly different than Prinz's and Hourdequin's use of the term. Instead of requiring that one be feeling the same emotion as the empathized, I include the congruent emotional responses one feels as a result of the original emotion as a form of empathy. This choice of terminology echoes that of many empirical studies, such as those by Martin Hoffman, Daniel Batson and Franz de Waal (Hoffman 2001, 2011; Preston and Waal 2002; de Waal 2008; Batson 2011a, b). In my framework, empathizing with someone who is depressed could result in feelings of concern; Prinz would not call this empathy because the resultant emotion and the original emotion are not the same. In my definition, one can retain a level of flexibility when empathizing with another – one can react to the plight of others in the ways that one sees fit.

However, even after debunking the claim that a "second-hand" emotion cannot be as strong as the original emotion and provide the effective help that Prinz puts forth, the question as to empathy's efficacy and reliability still remains: Can we be sufficiently motivated by empathy to care for and act on the plight of future generations? The conclusion seems to be that, through empathy and in the right contexts, it is possible, plausible and practical to care about people in the future with whom one shares no ties, biological or cultural. However, given competing factors, it is not the case that empathy alone can always be a reliable motivator. At least theoretically, the case of empathy shows that we *can* care about future generations and their well-being and moral plight, but it does not provide a strong enough basis for the claim that empathy-motivated moral actions demand us to do so, morally.

I supplement two additional points to advance the idea that a Confucian – specifically the Mencian – view of a naturalistic understanding of moral potentials, would be better suited to help us address questions faced in environmental ethics. In the next section, I argue that Mencian ethics is particularly useful in addressing the problem of our motivation towards the welfare and moral concerns of future generations. While I agree that the relational understanding of personhood and empathy are useful tools in the Confucian philosophy-inspired toolbox, it is only when paired with a Mencian naturalistic framework that they are most effective.

4 Naturalistic Morality

Mencius, a fourth-century BCE thinker, was a follower of Confucius's teaching. Mencius is frequently referred to as the "second sage," who is second only to Confucius himself; and his insights in moral psychology and

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ethical theory have received long-lasting attention in Chinese philosophy. Many debates center around his claim concerning the goodness of human nature, and many others focus on his contribution to moral education as he employs psychologically sound methods that take into consideration the subtlety of emotions in his attempts at persuasion (e.g., 1A7, 3A5).

In the following, I will argue that a relational approach should be accompanied by a naturalistic understanding of morality so as to be effective in addressing the theoretical challenges facing intergenerational ethics. In order to make this point, I will contrast the Mencian naturalistic ethics, in which normative beginnings reside in moral emotions, with the view of his fellow Confucian philosopher Xunzi, who views basic emotions as entirely natural and harboring no moral values prior to education and socialization. I will demonstrate that the Mencian framework could explain why we have moral motivation for ends beyond our own and for those with whom we have no shared ties in the future – its function in moral education cannot be replaced by a top-down, policy-driven approach.

The Confucians are known as "naturalists" in the sense that their moral theories are frequently based on deeply seated psychological features of humans and human groups. These psychological features are, in turn, woven into a normative framework of ethics and political philosophy. Schools in Confucianism typically focus on people's natural moral potential, as well as their cultivational efforts and the function of social constructions, such as *li* (rituals). Irene Bloom provides the most notable attempt to address the issue – much-debated by contemporary scholars – as to whether human nature, which is seen as the moral foundation and beginning by both Mencius and Xunzi, should be seen as a descriptive or normative concept (Bloom 1997). Her answer is that human nature is both descriptive and normative. Bloom argues that Mencius answers the question "what [do] people share and what causes them to differ" (Bloom 1997, 23). In other words, any theory of moral origin or foundation must first address this question.

This idea is particularly relevant to our inquiry into intergenerational ethics, since what people share in the past, present and future could eventually serve as the common basis upon which to bring their concerns into our moral deliberation.

4.1 Mencian Ethics

Since Mencius starts his arguments about human nature with something as basic as one's reaction to seeing an endangered child (2A6), many are puzzled by the biological and normative components in his theory, and, more

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specifically, by the question of how they relate and connect to one another. As a matter of fact, the normative aspects of Mencian ethics are carefully woven into its seemingly biological description of certain human psychological features. Many observe the close relationship between the normative and the biological features, and some go so far as to claim that Mencius is advocating for an ethic in which "biology implies ethics" (Virág 2017). Although this claim is controversial, and some would argue it is the other way around, it nonetheless highlights the importance of biological features and their close relationship with the normative aspects of the ethical framework.

Mencius employs a famous botanical metaphor to illustrate his notion of the goodness of human nature. He states that all human beings have four sprouts (or beginnings): the sprout of *ceyin* (compassion-like emotion), *xiuwu* (shame-like feelings), *cirang* (deference) and *shifei* (right and wrong). They have the potential to mature into four virtues, namely, *ren* (benevolence, humaneness), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety, observance of rites) and *zhi* (wisdom). This means that every human being is innately predisposed towards these ethical ideals. Mencius stresses that these innate qualities must be strengthened and guided so as to achieve ethical ends; thus, the focus of Mencian ethics consists of the innate disposition towards goodness and proper ethical cultivation.

In the next subsection, I aim to address the question of how the naturalistic interpretation of Mencian ethics connects with the normative aspects of Mencian ethics. I point out that the seemingly naturalistic aspects of Mencian ethics that are sometimes its celebrated characteristics furnish merely one aspect of his philosophy, and that the normative aspects are skillfully merged with the naturalistic side. My goal is to investigate and identify the origins of the normative claim and how it manifests itself in natural human biological functions.

4.2 Mencian "Natural" Normativity

Mencian ethics can be understood as a naturalistic philosophy, meaning that it draws insights from seemingly biological and psychological features of the human being, such as the basic emotion of sympathy or empathy, care for our young and our kin, our natural aversion towards certain situations and so on. The four sprouts, which are arguably the most representative and the foundation of Mencian ethics, represent four types of universal emotional responses.

There are a few places where the normative aspect is carefully woven into Mencius's seemingly biological description of general human conditions. We

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all care for our young, for example, and have some innate altruistic impulses. As one example, in the famous 2A6 case, he describes a situation in which a child is about to fall into mortal danger – a deep well – and everyone in that situation, according to Mencius, would have a robust sympathetic feeling and an urge to help (2A6). Now, what Mencius described here is descriptively true, as this thought experiment resonates with many of us across different cultures and time periods. It may not seem as if there is any normative twist in the story until he turns our attention to the rest of the four sprouts.

It is interesting to note that to which Mencius leads our philosophical attention and that which he leaves out of his discussion of human nature and outside of our understanding. Because, not only the part he focuses on, but also, perhaps more importantly, the part he intentionally omits, are where the normativity of Mencian ethics kicks in. Mencius acknowledges that we have *yu* (desires). These desire-based motivations lack the ethical potential – that is, the inclination towards goodness – that the four sprouts have. Insofar as your desires are not oriented towards ethical ends, they can be regarded as morally neutral. Regarding his views upon desires, Mencius is actually in agreement with Xunzi that there exist interest-driven desires and other neutral desires in humans. Unlike Xunzi, who would later proclaim that human nature is selfish and profit-driven, Mencius simply draws attention to the selected four sprouts (from all the other natural emotions) and claims that those are what we should be focusing on when thinking of our nature and our natural endowment for moral propensity. A moralistic attempt was made in the selection process.

On the other hand, moral inclination, defined as the tendencies of the four sprouts to grow and develop, is another area where the normativity of Mencian ethics comes into play. Mencius uses two notable metaphors to describe the four beginnings: the botanic metaphor, in which the four beginnings are likened to, and referred to as, sprouts (2A6); and the idea that our moral potentials will develop towards ethical ends, just as water will flow downward (6A2). These two dynamic metaphors – one biological and one physical, as noted by Wong – showcase that, in Mencius's view, moral potential and the four sprouts are dynamic in nature and have certain tendencies towards ethical ends that, even though they may be temporarily obscured, will nonetheless retain their resilience (Wong 2015b). It is telling that Mencius chose the botanical and water metaphors to describe our natural moral tendencies, as they are both dynamic in nature. The inclinations to become morally better are embedded in his theory in such a way that even though, like Mencius, we do acknowledge that the moral sprouts may not grow to maturity due to environmental issues, such as those in the Ox Mountain passage (6A8) or personal

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problems (lack of consistency or devotion in moral cultivation in 1A7, poor professional choice in 2A7), we are led to focus on the inclination towards moral betterment. This is perhaps one of the biggest theoretical differences between Mencius and Xunzi, aside from their definitions and understandings of what is and what should be considered human nature: Mencius thinks there is a moral inclination in us to be good, whereas Xunzi does not think that we hold any such proclivity. That is why, to the Xunzi, moral cultivation relies on human efforts (*wei*), and normativity resides in human efforts instead of natural endowment.

In this section, we have discussed Mencius building the beginnings of normativity into our understanding of "human nature," and the ways in which these beginnings can become connected to an increasingly sophisticated cultural and moral system focused on self-cultivation and ritual practices. In his understanding, every human being is innately predisposed towards the ethical ideals embedded in the four sprouts, which, given the proper conditions, will blossom. The very exciting possibility that Mencian ethics brings to contemporary ethics is that of a framework wherein our basic emotions and capacities carry the potential for complex moral systems which would eventually allow moral ideals to flourish and relationships to grow.

4.3 Mencian Ethics and People in Power

Mencius frequently engages in discussion with people in power. In the famous 1A7 passage, Mencius tries to urge his interlocutor, King Xuan of Qi – who confesses that he is only interested in strengthening his military strength and expanding his territory – also to take into consideration the hardships facing the people (1A7). The tribulations of the people may be physically and psychologically remote from the king's daily life and ethical and political reasoning: They may exist merely as concepts or ideas that lack the emotional charge Mencius tries to arouse in the king. Mencius's attempt to bring the king to feel for his people's suffering and align the king's emotions with those of his people is consistent with his political philosophy; namely, that a reign has legitimacy only when the ruler has the people's approval in some form, and that a successful ruler would always "rejoice with the people" (*yu min tong le*). There are some similarities between, on the one hand, the problem Mencius faces in mobilizing concern for the plight of the people on the part of the king; and, on the other hand, the problem of how to motivate the current generation to consider the plight of future people: In both instances, the people facing potential suffering are remote and have little power with which to bargain. It is difficult or impossible to make their voices heard. In the same way that a commoner

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would have a hard time communicating the tragedy of suffering caused by constant wars, military drafts and high taxation to the king, whose actions can change their plight for better or worse, it is impossible for the future generations to voice their concerns or protest their unfair treatment to people in our time, whose actions can change the fate of future people. This power asymmetry, among others, is described in the famous metaphor of the "perfect storm" by Stephen Gardiner (2006, 2011) to illustrate the difficulties in motivating current generations to take action for the sake of future generations, especially when their interests may be in conflict with ours.

The fact that many of the conversations in which Mencius emphasized the importance of *ceyin zhi xin* (the heart/mind of sympathy or the sprout of benevolence) were held with a powerful and influential figure such as a king (as we see in 1A7, 6A2, etc.) is quite telling. It seems that Mencius is really trying to make *ceyin zhi xin* work for those kings or dukes in high, but potentially isolating, positions – in order that they can empathize and emotionally connect with their people. The terms *wang* (king) and *min* (people, subjects or citizens) appear together many times when emotional connection is discussed in *Mencius*. More importantly, while Mencius frequently refers to King Wen and King Wu as moral exemplars due to their virtuous deeds, he also praises them as role models for all rulers to follow because of their emotional connection with their people. Not only do they feel and understand their people's struggle and delight, but the people, in turn, also delight in the king's delight and worry about the king's worries.

Mencius also emphasises, in conversations with powerful rulers, the importance of sharing emotions with their people. After a conversation, he makes King Xuan realise that delighting in common music rather than classic or ancient music is fine; what matters most is who he is enjoying the music with. Mencius asks, "Is it more delightful to delight in music with a few people or to delight in music with a multitude of people?" King Xuan answers, "It's more delightful with a multitude of people than with a few people" (1B1). Similarly, when King Hui of Liang asks if wise princes would find pleasure in the beauty of a scene of large geese and deer walking by a pond, Mencius responds by saying that only the wise and good princes can enjoy them because they know their people will also delight in them. Unkind rulers, on the other hand, cannot enjoy the beauty of such a scene even if they possess it, knowing that their people would only wish them ill (1A2).

Further, using King Wen as an example, Mencius states that:

> King Wen used the strength of the people to make his tower and his pond, and yet the people rejoiced to do the work, calling the tower "the marvelous tower,"

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> calling the pond "the marvelous pond," and rejoicing that he had his large deer, his fishes, and turtles. The ancients caused the people to have pleasure as well as themselves, and therefore they could enjoy it. (Mencius 1A2)[2]

In another passage, Mencius emphasizes the importance of sharing one's delight in music with one's people, concluding that rejoicing with people is the key to successful ruling (1B1) and proclaiming that "If a ruler rejoices with his people, he can be called the true king" (1B1). In fact, many conversations between Mencius and the kings and dukes stress the idea of "rejoicing with the people" as a political ideal. Meanwhile, as we have seen in the quotes above, rejoicing with the people is not uni-directional: In the ideal state, not only would the king resonate with his people's happiness and worries, but the people would also share the king's delights and worries. In other words, this is a reciprocal, or at least bi-directional, idea. In fact, this very basic idea runs through Mencian thought, emphasizing the moral and political importance of what the people feel and desire and the question of whether or not the king possesses the ability to resonate with his own people's feelings and desires. Of course, "rejoicing with the people" involves more than listening to the same music or admiring beautiful wild animals together; rather, it requires the rulers to take the commoners' concerns and worries to heart and to avoid letting their power isolate them from the people. However, to be able to do this while making political decisions, the king must have a deep emotional connection with his people. The above passages can be understood as an attempt to strengthen this connection so that the king can act upon the concerns of the people, or at least take them into consideration, even when making difficult decisions, and the people, in turn, will then have trust in their ruler.

Emotional connection is, according to Mencius, the hallmark of successful and benevolent state rule. However, it is made possible not only by the efforts of the ruler, but also by the naturalistic ethical framework that Mencius has carefully laid out. It is precisely because rulers also have the basic emotional responses that they can be expected to have shared emotional experiences with their people, who are far away and sometimes described as an "abstract group." But it is also because of the fact that within these emotions reside normative beginnings; the shared emotional experience is meaningful and morally significant, and can later be connected to moral values, such as benevolent rule, that affect both the rulers and the people.

[2] Translation from the Chinese Text Project https://ctext.org/ens which adopts the sections of *Mencius* from "The Works of Mencius" (Legge 1861).

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Returning, then, to similar issues that arise in intergenerational ethics, the insights from Mencian ethics – a framework that is naturalistic in nature and normative in its construction of certain emotions – tell us that, through the emotions, one is able to have meaningful connection with people in the future with whom we may have no biological or cultural ties, and who we are unable to identify as specific individuals with personal preferences. We can, nonetheless, based on our shared emotions, delight in their delights and worry about their worries. Such emotional sharing demands of us that we develop the relevant moral beginnings in order that they may be extended to the people in the future who might share our emotions.

One may think of empathy and wonder what difference there is between the empathy-based approach that Hourdequin discusses and the Mencian naturalistic framework outlined above. It may seem that both approaches rely on some emotional mechanism to connect people. The fundamental difference between these two approaches is that, in the Mencian view, the emotional sharing process carries ethical and normative demands based on emotional connectedness. The origins of this normative inclination and its demands are to be found in the ethical beginnings Mencius attributes to the basic emotions when he selects compassion-like emotion, shame-like feelings, deference and a sense of right and wrong as the four moral sprouts. We may not be able to gather enough normative and motivational force to take distant future people's needs into our hearts solely on the basis of empathy, especially when empathy is understood as a psychological response that mirrors another's emotional state.

5 Alternatives: Xunzian Naturalistic Ethics and Its Shortcomings

In this section, I would like to compare Mencius's naturalistic ethics with Xunzi's, who has a slightly different outlook on the role of normative values in his understanding of morality. I do so to demonstrate that, in dealing with intergenerational issues, there is an evident superiority to a Mencian-like framework in which normative beginnings are planted in basic emotions rather than, as Xunzi believes, in socialization and purposeful learning. This section is not an attack on Xunzi's philosophy, but rather an attempt to demonstrate that – to the extent that they ground all normative components in socialization or nurturing – ethical frameworks such as his do not fare well when confronted with the problems raised by intergenerational ethics. This comparison is significant, because many ethical theories have a Xunzian-like view and see no normative components in our basic biological and psychological functions.

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My argument in this section will show how and why such ethical theories suffer setbacks when addressing intergenerational ethical issues.

When discussing our natural emotions, Xunzi thinks that humans are selfish and profit driven, and that there is no normative value in the natural form of their emotions or desires. This is one of the reasons why he claims that human nature is self-interested and profit-seeking. In Xunzi's mind, the emotions are raw materials that may be transformed by socialization and cultivation, such as ritual practices, but lack any moral values or beginning in themselves prior to socialization and moral cultivation. In other words, raw, natural emotions hold no normative values even though they can be cultivated so as to become as versions of emotions that are intertwined with ethical values.

For example, Xunzi makes the distinction between "ethical honour and shame" (*yi rong* and *yi ru*), that come from one's inner moral dispositions, and "natural honour and shame" (*shi rong* and *shi ru*), that come from the external situation one is in. In his opinion, it is not a moral issue to feel the kind of shame that arises when confronted with public humiliation, as, for example, when receiving corporal punishment in public; the shame and disgrace one feels is due to the circumstances, not the person. Therefore, this type of shame does not necessarily indicate moral shortcomings or psychological weakness. It is simply how this type of natural shame works. In other words, according to the cultural scripts and the emotional script, it is appropriate to feel shame here, even though it may not be morally justified or have ethical significance (D'Arm and Jacobson 2000). The same is true for honor derived from circumstance, which is merely a natural reaction people would have when, for example, being praised in public by people of authority or as a result of fame. Honor that comes from within, on the other hand, would have ethical significance because it reflects a person's assessment of their own behavior in relation to their moral values. For example, Xunzi claims that:

> When one is perverse and corrupt, when one goes against what has been allotted and disrupts and proper order, when one is arrogantly violent and greedy for profit, this is a case where [shame] derives from within. This is called [shame] from what is *yi* [*yi ru*, or shame coming "from one's inner disposition;" Zhao 2018]. When one is cursed at or insulted, when one is dragged by the hair or pummeled, when one is caned or has one's feet cut off, when one is decapitated or drawn and quartered, or when one's family records are destroyed or one's descendants are eradicated, this is a case where [shame] comes from outside. This is called [shame] in terms of one's circumstances… And so, it is possible for a gentleman [that is, an exemplary person; JH notes] to suffer [shame] in terms of their circumstances, but it is not possible for him to suffer [shame] from what is *yi* [or from his inner disposition; Zhao 2018]. (Zhenglun Chapter, Xunzi; modified from Hutton 2014, Ch. 10: 517–526)

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In this passage, Xunzi claims that there are two types of shame one could experience: one that comes from the circumstances and is external to one, and one that comes from one's inner disposition and is internal to one. The former has no moral values, even though we are all vulnerable to it, including the morally cultivated. After all, who can remain intact when facing public insults or public corporal punishments, such as being "dragged by the hair or pummeled," "caned" or "having one's feet cut off," that are designed to evoke shame and ruin one's public image and reputation (Zhenglun Chapter, *Xunzi*; modified from Hutton 2014, Ch. 10: 517–526)?

Xunzi acknowledges that there is a natural and amoral type of honor and shame that is not governed by his ethical theory. These natural and primitive forms of amoral shame can become morally potent only through ritual cultivation and value internalization. However, the rituals or other measures of moral education in any particular time period, such as Xunzi's, will eventually be of limited relevance to a society in the future, which means that the ethical values and practices associated with emotions will also evolve. Thus, it is likely that our current moral theories and moral education would provide little direct guidance to us in addressing the concerns of future people; similarly, the social contexts and rituals in Xunzi's time provided very limited guidance to his contemporaries in terms of envisioning the difficulties we now face in the twenty-first century. I am not claiming that either Xunzi's ethical theory or all of our popular moral practices today will be completely useless in addressing a problem in the distant future, or that we should be discouraged by the possibility of our morality becoming outdated and irrelevant in regards to the problems of future generations; rather, I am highlighting a problem that theories such as Xunzi's must address. I point out the realistic concern that moral theories and practices will become less relevant and will be based only on shared natural emotions with the people of the future. We would have to invest more to account for why and how we would still care for the concerns of future generations when it is unclear whether or not our current understanding will be useful or relevant.

In contrast, for Mencius, a sense of shame is the root of morality and contains an ethical inclination to align oneself with good behaviors and distance oneself from those that are problematic. According to Mencius, normativity starts at the beginning of the most natural form of emotion that we share with people in the future; whereas, for Xunzi, it starts with human interventions in cultivation. A sense of shame, in Mencius, is one of the four moral beginnings or sprouts. The heart of *xiuwu* exists to help us distinguish between the morally pleasing and the morally repugnant in ourselves and others. The heart of *xiuwu,* when cultivated, can then guide us in our moral decisions and conduct so that we carry ourselves in a way that lives up to our moral values.

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The clever strategy in Mencius' theory is that the normative components are hidden in plain sight in the emotions that people share across time and culture, so much so that – if you can motivate others to share their emotional experience or "rejoice" with each other – one would gain a pivot point that is of ethical significance. And, from this emotional pivot, more sophisticated arguments can be developed. In other words, if you share my feelings, you are likely to share my moral inclinations and feel them as meaningful moral concerns. This, of course, does not guarantee that you would always act in my best interest or treat my concerns as priorities in your moral reasoning. The inability of the emotional pivot point to assume priority in the moral reasoning of others, or to dictate their behaviors, is not a theoretical flaw but an advantage: People who open themselves to being emotionally moved and connected should have their own autonomous deliberative process instead of one that is vulnerable to being hijacked or manipulated by others. The advantage of this Mencian approach is not only that we stand a better chance at persuasion and moral education when emotions are shared, but also that it leaves open a rich set of possibilities for the ways in which the person on the receiving end might formulate their thoughts and carry out their actions. This theoretical flexibility is important, because it sometimes marks the difference between paternalistic manipulation and persuasion in good faith. This is especially important in the context of intergenerational ethics, where we can only hope that future generations – who are likely to have moral and cultural frameworks that differ from our own and will be confronted with ever-changing circumstances – will devise their own solutions. Over-prescribing what they should or should not do would inevitably be futile and arrogant, and project an "egocentric" framework based on the current generations' understanding of the world.

6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that a naturalistic ethical framework that roots normative components in basic human functions, such as emotions, would stand at significant theoretical advantage in addressing questions in intergenerational ethics. I used Mencius's ethical framework, in which the normative beginnings are woven into his understanding of human nature and the basic human emotions, as an example with which to demonstrate how, through establishing emotional pivot points, we can take the concerns and worries of others into our own hearts and moral deliberation, regardless of how remote they are from us, physically or temporally. Such emotional sharing points enable us to treat the concerns of others as meaningful moral factors in our moral deliberations.

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I have argued, using the example of Xunzi, that an ethical framework that posits normative values not as natural endowments, but as the products of socialization and ritualized moral cultivation, would fare less well, especially considering that the social contexts and rituals we have now will almost certainly not survive changes in time. In fact, given that Xunzi has, as some would argue, a far better argumentative style in his texts, many attribute Mencius's lasting legacy to the flexibility and openness of his ethics and not to his sophisticated arguments (Hansen 1992). Mencius's philosophy experienced a great revival in the so-called Neo-Confucian school of thought that spanned from the eleventh to the sixteenth century, during which time many Mencian concepts, such as the four sprouts and the heart/mind (*xin*), were developed and re-interpreted to address challenges posed by the new metaphysical questions imported by the foreign Buddhist philosophers and local Neo-Daoist thinkers. The fact that Mencian ethics was re-developed more than a thousand years later serves as evidence that its philosophical framework has the merit of possessing the flexibility and adaptability to connect people from the past to the present and from the present to the future, in ways that are both emotionally and ethically significant.

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