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A HERMENEUTIC RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CHILD IN THE WELL EXAMPLE

> 'My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the sufferings of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child.'
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> *Mencius*, Bk. II, Pt. A, Ch. VI. (trans. D.C. Lau)

> Mencius said, 'There was a time when the trees were luxurious on the Ox Mountain. As it is on the outskirts of a great metropolis, the trees are constantly lopped by axes. Is it any wonder that they are no longer fine? With the respite they get in the day and in the night, and the moistening by the rain and dew, there is certainly no lack of new shoots coming out, but then the cattle and sheep come to graze upon the mountain. That is why it is as bald as it is. People, seeing only its baldness, tend to think that it never had any trees. But can this possibly be the nature of a mountain?'
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> *Mencius*, Bk. VI, Pt. A. Ch. VIII. (trans. D.C. Lau)

I would like to explore Mencius' theory of the original goodness of human nature with special reference to his example concerning our

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putative reaction to the sight of a child about to fall into a well. In my opinion, this example does not so much prove as it does mirror and activate the original goodness of human nature in human beings. Mencius uses this example to illustrate that all human beings have an initial tendency towards goodness which requires nurturing to bring to fruition. A lack of nurturing or a presence of negative influences can, of course, nip this tendency in the bud (as illustrated in the Ox Mountain example). But both examples seem to Mencius to serve as illustrations that there is in human nature a proclivity or inclination towards goodness. What is especially interesting about this, for a Westerner, is that while there are Chinese philosophers who would argue otherwise, such as Hsuen Tzu, Mencius represents more or less the dominant tendency in Chinese philosophy. In the West, the dominant tendency is almost exactly reversed. While there are a few Mencian type philosophers, such as Plato – who is a qualified Mencian – the dominant tendency is to think that there is a tendency towards evil doing, not that there is a tendency towards the good. So, it is of special interest to have a look at a theory such as that of Mencius since it is so untypical of Western thought. At the same time, I believe that there is something to be learned about modern philosophical methodology from a study of this example.

I think that the story of the child about to fall in the well represents the best place to examine the sources of Mencius' theory. What Mencius claims is that any human being will feel a spontaneous sense of alarm and commiseration. He does not go on to claim that all human beings would take some action to save the child. It might be that some, out of cowardice or some other psychological deficiency, might still watch the child drown. But all, presumably, according to Mencius, would have the immediate feeling to save the child.

The first criticism that one might consider is an empirical one. How does Mencius know that all observers of the situation would in fact have the feelings that he describes? It may be that for a majority of observers, his description is correct. But there are some for whom it might not be. Perhaps there are human beings who would react with indifference; perhaps even others who might react with pleasure.

Now, Menicus obviously did not perform any empirical surveys to

test how many observers would respond in the fashion that he describes. In fact, even if he did, it would not be so clear what the evidence would establish. If we sent out questionnaires to ask how someone would feel on such and such an occasion, though our respondents might reply sincerely, they might not know what the actual situation would bring out. In addition, while they might feel or respond in one way one day, perhaps they might feel and respond in a different way on another day. So, it is not clear that any empirical gathering of evidence would prove to be useful.

In fact, it could be argued that an empirical survey could be counter-productive in terms of what it would establish. This is not only from the point of view that respondents might, for whatever sets of reasons, reply insincerely or sincerely (but unconsciously in order to provide the looked for response, deceive themselves), respond in ways which would disconfirm Mencius' claim. It does not even mean that they might change their answer depending on the form of the survey, the time of its being asked (what kind of mood were they in and so on). There is a deeper issue at stake. The deeper issue is that Mencius has a built-in reply within his own system to those who would bring up empirical confirmations or disconfirmations in the first place. He could say that if anyone answers that they do not respond with this feeling of commiseration and alarm that is because the trees on Ox Mountain (for that individual) have,unfortunately, been chopped down. While that individual (like everyone) has the inborn tendency to feel that the child should be saved, that individual simply has been conditioned by her or his experience in such a way that her or his moral sense has not had the opportunity to grow and develop. This sort of answer would also answer the question of other cultures or cultural relativism if one were to allege that there could be (or if there were in our imaginary survey) unlike responses to those which Mencius avers would occur.

Now, the problem with the Ox Mountain response, for Mencius, is this. If there can be no counter-example to his leading example, then it seems impossible to refute it. Using Karl Popper's criterion of non-falsifiability, it would follow that this is a theory, which, if non-falsifiable, is also without truth value. Thus, the problem with empirical confirmation

or disconfirmation is not only a problem with the validity of subjective reporting but on a deeper level displays that Mencius' theory is not really an empirical theory at all.

It might seem tempting to seek empirical confirmation of a theory when the empirical evidence is supportive of the theory. The problem seems to appear when the empirical evidence might disconfirm the theory. However, that fear is shown to be a false fear when we consider the theory on a deeper level and realize that on a deeper level the theory cannot really be disproved by any empirical counter-examples. This, however, raises a new problem. If the theory cannot be disproven by empirical counter-examples, on what grounds can we appeal to experience at all?

Theoretically, outside of Mencius' description of this hypothetical situation in which there are no exceptions, one might think there could be an empirical disconfirmation. Could we not find a man who is in touch with his own true nature but who does not respond with the feelings of compassion and alarm? But this is impossible in Mencius's terms for a man's true nature is displayed in precisely such a response. Such an example is legislated out of existence; it could not exist by definition. A man in touch with his own true nature must perforce have the feelings of compassion and alarm for such is human nature constituted.

Are we saying that Mencius' theory is pure metaphysics which does not need to be or cannot be supported by appeals to experience? This cannot be or else why did he use the example in the first place? I think the place of the empirical example occupies a special place in Mencius' thinking and has implications for philosophy as a whole.

That Mencius uses an example means that experience is relevant to his theory. Thus, his theory cannot be a metaphysics in the sense that it is outside of all experience or is a pure stipulative definition. On the other hand, he does not appeal to experience as a method of proving that his theory is correct although that is the appearance his use of example does give. But his use of example is not so much by way of proving his theory but more so as a way of showing the conditions under which his theory shows itself to us as true in our immediate understanding of that experience. To put it more simply, I think that he turns to experience as a method of illustrating that his theory is correct. Experience (such as the

imaginative act of putting yourself at the edge of the well witnessing the child about to drop) does not confirm Mencius' theory (in which case it could also disconfirm it); it *mirrors* it. In a metaphysics of experience (as opposed to a metaphysics which transcends experience), every experience must mirror the metaphysics or else it is a false metaphysics. But each and every experience is not, as in an aggregate, proving that the metaphysics is a true metaphysics. Each experience, like a reflecting glass, merely continues to reflect that the metaphysics is a true metaphysics. Thus, it does not matter that no counter-example can disconfirm the metaphysics. For the level of the truth of the metaphysics is not coming from the experience. If we adapt Kant's famous statement about knowledge, all metaphysical truth mirrors itself in experience but not all metaphysical truth originates from experience.

So, Mencius' example of the child in the well is not designed, at least in my hermeneutic reconstruction of it, to prove his point. Even in Mencius' own terms, it cannot be a simple proof or else he would have no need of the Ox Mountain story. If it is not a simple proof, what else can it be? I take it that it is meant as an illustration to remind us of something. If in our minds we are able to cut away from all of our negative conditioning or false education, this example would remind us of our own true nature. The example only works as a moral memonic device. It reminds us of our true nature. This sort of reminding is at the same time an opening of our minds in a special way. It is not meant as a step in a logical proof, but as a means to give us access to our true selves. Just as in another famous place he says that great is he who keeps his child's heart (Bk. IV, Pt. II, Ch. 12), this does not prove that we do have a child's heart or that he who keeps it is great. However, it does serve as a tool which can assist us to regain that pure heart if we enact the statement (return to child's heart) rather than simply look at it from without and try to decide if it describes something which is true or is simply a fantasy of some kind. One could argue that this is a form of begging the question, but the point is that such a metaphysics/ethics as that of Mencius is not set forth as a set of truths to be known; it is set forth as a program to be enacted. If it is not enacted, its truth or falsity is not really knowable.

This is not the place to "prove" Mencius' theory. I merely wish to

indicate the place of the famous example in his argument. It is not clear that everyone would be in a position to try out his example in real life. And suppose those that would do not have the feelings he describes, this would not disprove his theory either. Mencius' claim is that if you are already in contact with your real nature, these are the feelings that you will have. If you do not have these feelings, then you are cut off from your own real nature. Your task, then, would be to endeavor to return to your own real nature so that you could have these feelings.

Are we back to the problem that Mencius' theory is incapable of proof and thus also incapable of truth? Could we not also argue from the opposite side, that our human instincts are not to save infants but the opposite and that we need moral training and so on. Perhaps. I think, however, that Mencius could have two sorts of answers. First, this theory does have a ring of plausibility about it. It is more likely that we are designed by nature to preserve our species than to allow it to destroy itself. He may not argue in these terms, but I think that these are valid responses. Secondly, all ethical theories require some kind of enactment on our part. There is no truth of ethics which can be known apart from our committment and action. If ethics requires human responsibility, then this must be so. If we were good by nature and this was a kind of determinism, we would have nothing to do with it. It would also be a useless theory to put forth and defend. We would already be determined in this direction and that would be an end to it. The truth of the theory cannot be known apart from our willingness to put it into action. Our potential for goodness requires, if you like, our willingness to herd the cows of experience on Ox Mountain to allow it to emerge. If we stand back and expect to experience the truth of it apart from our action, ethics would be on the level of an objective truth of science.

Again, it could be argued that if we believe this and act this way, we might consider that we were good by nature but it would not prove that we were so. We might only be seducing ourselves to believe this way. It might be a better belief to hold but it does not mean that it is a true belief. We might be operating under a delusion.

Let us return to the example of the well. I think that Mencius is

using if you like a kind of phenomenological inspection. First, theoretically, one could say that some would not have the experience to which Mencius points. But this is a theoretical answer. How many (if any) would respond otherwise than the way that he suggests. I do not mention this to return to the idea of empirical confirmation, but to show how powerful this example really is as an indication of and an illustration of our nature. If in fact (not the theoretical possibility) the response is what Mencius has avered, then his example is one which does show something. It may not prove something (if we are thinking of the concept of scientific proof with experimental evidence), but it reflects something. It is a reflection, if you like, of our nature. For this example to be shown to be a false reflection, it should not work; what is more, we should be given an opposite mirror, which should reflect our response in a different and opposite direction. So, the example by itself is not a piece of evidence on behalf of a thesis; it is a reflective glass, a mirror to hold up to our nature.

What I am pointing to is that Mencius' use of examples are by the way of the phenomenologist, not the empirical scientist. If we are willing to perform the thought-experiment Mencius proposes for us, we should find out the same truth about ourselves. When we discover this truth about ourselves, we know it to be true at that moment of our introspection. We do not need others to perform the thought-experiment for themselves in order to confirm the truth of the theory. If we did, it would be a theory in science. What we want others to do is to find out what we found out for ourselves. If others make the same self-discovery, that does not further confirm our own truth; it merely mirrors it again and again and again. The "proof" of the theory is already gained in our own self-inspection. We do not need others to perform this experiment to confirm or disconfirm our discovery.

Mencius has, if you like, provided one of the first "phenomenological truth tests". His whole theory, to be sure, has more to it and does not simply stand or fall on this one example. But this example has had a strong historical fascination and with good reason. It is a good illustration of the fact that claims in philosophy must be illustrated in experience but their truth value does not come from that experience. If the truth value came from the experience, we would need to collect more data. But the sub-

jective re-enactment of the observer's role at the well is enough. If the example has worked, and we have re-enacted it well, then it illustrates our universal human nature. When I say, if the example has worked, what I mean is that for the example to work, it has to call our universal human nature into being. The example cannot simply be looked at from the outside, as it were. We must truly put ourselves in the place of the observer at the well. If we are not too removed from our original nature, the example should call it up instantly. In so doing, the example activates our goodness as it were. It opens the door to our orginal goodness and calls it into being. The example is thus not a "truth claim" to be inspected or tested as such; it is a signal to our humanness. Thus, the example cannot "work" unless we appropriate it properly. If we stand outside it and theoretically appraise it, it cannot function as an ethical indicator. If we re-enact it well, which is part of the condition for its working (the other condition is that we are not too removed from our natures), it will speak to the universal human condition. There may be preliminary work to be done. We may have to achieve a certain level of contact with our original natures before we can re-enact the witness role in this example or before, if you like, the example can "work" on us. But this is not to beg the question; it is only to say that this example presumes some ethical sophistication. It might be said that what this means is that this example requires our becoming (in the sense of becoming self-realized or fulfilling our human potential) good in order to discover our roots of goodness. In this sense the example also serves as a trigger for, as well as an illustration of, our goodness. Again, it may be argued that this is another form of begging the question. But it is not simply assuming that one has to be good before one can benefit from an example which illustrates goodness; it is assuming that if one is in contact with one's nature then the example will speak to that person. At the same time it is a way of assisting one to become closer to one's nature: it is both a bridge to and a reflection of that nature. Thus, if one is in some contact with one's original nature, the example will prove to be illustrative. The question is, why does it work at all? If it is true that one's sudden response is compassion, why is this so unless it is illustrative of universal human nature?

The suddenness of the feeling response is suggestive of something else as well. It is suggestive, though it does not prove, that the feeling response is inborn and not taught. A learned response, presumably, might require reflection. I suppose that it could be argued that such a response could be conditioned by repeated training until it were a sudden response. While this may be so in theory, it is, of course, rather preposterous to imagine this possibility. On the whole, then, the suddenness of the response to the situation is suggestive of a built in reaction. But it does not follow that learning or teaching of ethical responses is irrelevant. One could also be taught to respond ethically. How this teaching "takes" might still have its roots in one's original nature. Learning or teaching might reinforce one's nature or contradict it. If it contradicts nature, one's immediate feeling response might not be one of compassion and alarm. Thus, even if one to argue that such a response might be learned, it would not therefore follow that it was not an inborn response.

What is interesting, I think, is that in the history of ethics, whether Western or Chinese, and further research would be helpful here, how many examples can be found of situations which test the disposition of human nature to good or evil? Very few in fact can be found. For Plato, there is the story of Gyges but this story is put to the use that Gyges can benefit from a selfish course of action. While Plato could use this story to prove the original evil of human nature, he uses it more to demonstrate the ignorance of human nature. But with Gyges, there is not a question of an instant action which is called for; it is more a case of deliberate action which can take into account subjective benefits so that in the end the examples differ too radically to be compared. Plato's example of not being able to tear one's eyes away from the sight of dead bodies seems a closer example in that it takes into account one's impulsive and sudden course of action. But this example does not involve any choice that would either harm or help a fellow human being and as a result does not tell us very much about how a human being would feel (not act) in a suddenly demanding situation which involves the possible loss of another human life. Kant does use one's immediate feeling of guilt as a proof (he thinks) of the power of the Categorical Imperative and this initially appears to have some general relationship to Mencius's reliance on experience. But

this feeling of guilt is very generalized and it is not very plausible to see the connection of it to Kant's Categorical Imperative. Freud, for example, would account for the existence of this feeling of guilt in a very different fashion. It is entirely possible that in a shame culture rather than a guilt culture (Kant and Freud's culture were certainly guilt cultures while that of Mencius was a shame culture), such a universal feeling of guilt might not even arise at all in the first place. What is more to the point, in Kant's case, there is no situation portrayed involving the possible loss of life which would call forth one's ethical proclivities directly. Mencius' example which revolves around the existence or non-existence of a feeling is much more directly connected to ethics than Kant's generalized feeling of guilt, I think.

If one wishes to prove Mencius to be wrong, it would appear to be appropriate to come up with some example such as the type that he brings forth and use it to demonstrate the likelihood of the opposite sorts of feelings emerging. (One can of course use Mencius' own example.) But I find it interesting in itself that it is Mencius who comes up with the use of such a compelling and illustrative concrete example of an ethical situation.

So, if one is to aver the opposite theory – one must have an equally compelling counter-example. If one manages to find one, which also explains the "truth" of Mencius' example, then Mencius will have been overturned. It does not follow that Mencius' theory is incapable of refutation. It only means that a refutation must be provided.

Mencius' theory is greatly enhanced by his example, which is truly a mirror to our mind. The proper refutation of Mencius is to provide another mirror. Until that is done, Mencius' mirror seems to provide an accurate reflection of our nature. It both reminds us and offers us a portrait of that reminder. As a phenomenological test, it provides an example of a phenomenological inspection we can make of our consciousnesses. As such, it also contains some interesting implications for the corroboration of philosophical truth claims in general and truth claims vis-a-vis the realm of ethics in particular.

One final word regarding the use of this example in Mencius' theory with respect to the problem of circular argument. It could conceivably

be argued that this example serves to illustrate (and thus in some sense to prove) the truth of his theory and yet on the other hand, his theory of the original goodness of human nature is also being used to provide an explanation of why human response is one of alarm and compassion. I do not think that this is so. I think that it is fair enough to say that this example serves to call up our original human nature and thus to remind us of it. If it is an illustration of human nature then it does depend upon human nature being what it is claimed to be. But its accuracy as an illustration is not dependent upon an assertion of what human nature is; it is only a revelation of that human nature. If it is not such a revelation then human nature is not what it is being claimed to be. So, the example only works if human nature is what Mencius claims it to be and at the same time, it is indicative of that human nature. But this is not circular for one does not have to first believe that human nature is good before one can accept the evidence of the example. The example only reveals that which may perhaps be claimed independently to be so; it is not dependent upon that claim. So, there is no circle in the argument. The example illustrates the original goodness of human nature and the original goodness of human nature is what makes it possible that the example works. But the example could not function as an example unless human nature were good so the fact that human nature must be good for the example to work does not count against the use of the example; it only makes its use possible. If one were to say that one must first believe that human nature is good before the example could work and then use the example to prove the goodness of human nature, that would be a circular argument. Here, one does not need to first believe that human nature is good; one may turn to the test of the example directly. If one finds that the example (within the limits of the qualifications stated above) works, then this is an illustration of the goodness of human nature. On the strength of the example, one may then claim that human nature is good. It is the example that is the gateway to the truth of the theory, not the other way around.

It would be interesting to consider the philosophical implications of this study of Mencius' use of example in a philosophical theory for philosophical truth in general. Such examples as these might serve as indicators

of the truth of philosophical theories. As they involve acts of coming to knowledge, it would appear that discrete epistemological acts might be a valuable source of knowledge concerning the truth of ontological claims in general. An analysis of Mencius' use of examples might possess some interesting and valuable implications for the relationship between epistemology and ontology in general and the primacy of epistemology for coming to know the truth of ontological claims in philosophy in particular.

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