

Franklin Perkins, *Doing What You Really Want: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mengzi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 280 pages. ISBN: 9780197574911 (hbk.); 9780197574928 (pbk.). Hardback/Paperback: \$99.00/\$29.95.

Franklin Perkins' *Doing What You Really Want: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mengzi* offers a systematic account of the thought of the early Chinese philosopher Mengzi, often referred to as the "Second Sage" of Confucianism. The book is an excellent introduction to early Confucianism, and early Chinese philosophy more generally, written in such a way as to be of interest both to specialists in Chinese philosophy and to those coming to philosophy for the first time. It will surely engage any reflective person moved to make sense of their place in the world.

The book touches on a range of topics, including: (1) the place of human beings in nature, (2) the fundamentals of human psychology, including moral psychology and emotions, and (3) the possibilities and practices of moral cultivation and transformation. As Perkins' treatment of these topics makes clear, Mengzi was concerned not just with understanding human life but also with improving it. Thus, the book is full of practical advice both for attaining personal fulfillment and improving our social world. In what follows, I highlight and critically engage with two broad themes in the book: (1) Mengzi's conception of human nature, and (2) Mengzi's view of harmony and conflict in human life.

According to Perkins, Mengzi rejects the notion of "a fixed human essence or nature" in favor of the notion of "common human dispositions":

Claims about human nature are dangerous because they are frequently used to "naturalize" socially constructed identities. Gender inequality and slavery have been rationalized as natural in just this way. Another danger is that the particularities of one powerful group become universalized as the standard for all human beings. ... Mengzi avoids these problems by rejecting a fixed human essence or nature and instead highlighting characteristic ways of responding to the world. Humanity is not defined by specific values, ideals, or concepts but by basic modes of socialization (p. 34).

In this passage, Perkins contrasts "a fixed human essence or nature" with "characteristic ways of responding to the world," and "specific values, ideals or concepts" with "basic modes of socialization." According to Perkins, the notions underlying Mengzi's view of human nature are *not* defined by *specific values, ideals or concepts*. Instead,

Mengzi usually argues for specific examples of common human dispositions. ... [D]ispositions are not fixed traits but characteristic ways of interacting with our environment. Under similar conditions people form similar preferences, because taste depends on common embodied structures (p. 34–5).

Here, we may wonder how, exactly, the notion of “dispositions” avoids “naturalizing” socially constructed identities or “universalizing” a parochial characteristic of a subset of human beings as the standard for all of them. More specifically, we might ask whether Mengzi’s “basic modes of socialization” really can be fully characterized or defined, as Perkins claims, without drawing in some way on normative and evaluative notions. Indeed, Perkins later writes:

Although all things come from heaven and are in some sense natural, there are some things it is natural for human beings to resist, things like suffering and oppression. We should strive to change these, and this action harmonizes with heaven by expressing our natural dispositions (p. 78).

There are, then, certain natural and universal aspects to humanity, and in order to characterize them, we do need to draw on value concepts, e.g., resistance to *suffering* and *oppression*, and elsewhere Perkins writes of the natural orientation towards one’s *family* and *caregivers*. I am thus skeptical that a characterization of “basic modes of socialization” can really avoid referencing evaluative and normative concepts and ideals, as Perkins suggests it does for Mengzi.

To be fair, Perkins speaks of “*specific* values, ideals, and concepts.” But what makes a value specific? Moreover, how does seeing these “modes of socialization” as “basic” not involve seeing them as “natural” and “universal?” And how can we be sure that they are “basic” rather than merely being reflections or manifestations of the local, parochial (possibly oppressive) social structure? In raising these questions, I am registering some doubts that an account of human nature, if it does not already rely on a substantive ethical conception, can adequately *determine* one set of ethical values and social institutions (e.g., Confucianism) against all others.

I turn now to Mengzi’s view that for the ethically well-developed, life is harmonious. More specifically, it is a life that is free of conflicts between (or amongst) our values and desires, and between human strivings and the world in which human beings have strivings. Consider what Perkins says about what, for Mengzi, makes human beings distinctively human:

Mengzi defines human beings according to the reactions of the heart. We could say he defines human beings by their emotions, but not just any kind of emotions. ... For Mengzi, dispositions naturally lead human beings to form bonds of compassion (*ren*), rules enforced by feelings of shame and aversion (*yi*), rituals and customs for expressing emotions (*li*), and some body of wisdom (*zhi*). Culture, social structures, and rules arise from the interplay of a concrete environment and the kinds of things human beings naturally care about (p. 75).

For the ethically well-developed person, then, there is a compatibility between human desires and emotions, on the one hand, and the social structures of ritual, practice, and social organization, on the other. There is also a coherence or harmony between the different human desires that present themselves to an individual person.

A theme in the *Mengzi*, which Perkins brings out, is how to deal with conflicts between “the dispositions of the heart” and sensory desires:

We should give precedence to the dispositions of the heart, which form our ethical relationships to other people. ... Developing these tendencies is the task of self-cultivation. But we also naturally seek pleasure and joy. We must cultivate these dispositions too, channeling them into pleasures that are simple and supportive of community. Properly shaped, the eyes, mouth, and heart will each desire what is right. In those unfortunate situations where desires conflict, a cultivated person will more strongly desire whatever is most important, just as Mengzi chooses bear paw over fish and rightness over life (p. 106).

Also:

To deny the eyes, ears, and mouth would be unpleasant, unnatural, and unsustainable. The choice is not between an ascetic, miserable life and a life of comfort, but between a life of joy in friends, music, and plain rice, on one side, and a life of joy in a giant house, fancy car, and lots of toys on the other (p. 185).

This all seems like fine advice. Many self-help books today and past philosophers in the West, such as the Epicureans, would basically agree. Yet there's something about these choices as presentations of the human predicament that seems over-simplistic and unsatisfying. Doesn't life present us with

normatively more difficult choices? For example: What if the choice is between caring for one's ailing, elderly mother abroad or returning home to join the Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion? And can there really be no conflict between the four basic dispositions – *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (rightness), *li* (propriety), and *zhi* (wisdom) – in the ethically well-developed person?

More generally, what I miss in Mengzi's philosophy is a sense of the "tragic" and "conflictual" dimensions of human life: the sense that human life contains conflicts that are *not normatively easy* to settle, conflicts that are perhaps *ineliminable*. By this, I mean a full appreciation of three aspects of the human condition:

- (1) The plurality of goods in human life and the conflicts among them (see Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 1–20).
- (2) The human exposure to fortune and the vulnerability of human flourishing to disaster (see Franklin Perkins, *Heaven and Earth are Not Humane: The Problem of Evil in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); also, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Revised Edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)).
- (3) The possibility that we can fall into deep forms of conflict with one another through nothing but bad luck and can thereby "reasonably disagree" with each other (see John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Expanded Edition, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

More generally, for Mengzi, there is a harmony or fit between (1) the full development of human potentialities, (2) a certain form of ethical, cultural, and social life, and (3) nature. The virtuous agent (i.e., the Confucian sage) would not face within himself, or in the relation between his strivings and the normative structure of the world, much conflict. There is a kind of harmony, in that the development of our ethical capacities would fit with other forms of human excellence. But can we really accept that ethical dispositions can be fully harmonized with other cultural and personal aspirations that have as good a claim to represent human nature and development (e.g., artistic creation, intellectual achievement)? Can we really *do what we really want* without loss – without, that is, really missing out?

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