

MENGZI AND VIRTUE ETHICS*

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PRECIS

This essay sketches an interpretation of Mengzi's views on human nature and self-cultivation that is an alternative to the common "Neo-Confucian" interpretations. The Neo-Confucians and those influenced by them interpret Mengzian self-cultivation as a process of removing selfish desires that obscure a fully formed virtuous nature. In contrast, I hold that Mengzi advocates cultivating incipient ethical inclinations in a manner that is like cultivating domesticated plants. The essay also rebuts some common contemporary objections to Mengzi's view of human nature: that human nature cannot be good, or else it would not require any ethical cultivation; that Mengzi's view of human nature violates "the fact/value" distinction; that his view is logically circular, because it defines proper cultivation in terms of a natural way of life and a natural way of life in terms of proper cultivation; that his view of human nature is teleological in a way that cannot be reconciled with modern science; that his view fails to acknowledge the importance of human freedom; and that his view has been falsified by anthropological studies of cultural diversity. In each case, I argue that Mengzi has a strong reply to the objection.

Although he asserted that he was not "fond of disputation" (3B9), Mengzi (Mencius) was a frequent and skilled debater, who employed techniques such as *reductio ad absurdum* (for example, 6A3) and thought experiments (for example, 2A6, 3A5) to attack rival philosophical positions. However, commentators have disagreed over what Mengzi's own philosophical position was. Part of the difficulty is Mengzi's style of presentation. We have no surviving treatise in which he systematically laid out his own views. Why did Mengzi not follow the Mohists in writing systematic essays?¹ I believe that his style was, in part, dictated by his conceptions of human nature and ethical cultivation. Humans innately, Mengzi thought, have incipient virtuous inclinations. The task of ethical cultivation is a matter of gently nurturing these inclinations so that they grow into full virtues. A lack of cultivation may damage the inclinations, but so may the effort to force the inclinations to develop faster than they are able. Mengzi may have felt that the best way to stimulate ethical growth was through finding the well-turned phrase, the

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¹Zhao Qi, who wrote the first surviving commentary on the *Mengzi* and edited it into its current format, reports that there were in his era other works attributed to Mengzi. However, Zhao Qi did not regard them as authentic, so they were not included in what became the standard edition of the *Mengzi*, and they were eventually lost. We do not know what genre these works were written in, whether authentically Mengzian or not.

right metaphor, or the best illustration at precisely the right time for a particular individual's development. A systematic ethical treatise might overwhelm the beginner, leaving him or her both baffled and with a distaste for ethics. (Do we find anything different with most of our students in philosophy classrooms today?) The result is that Mengzi's comments are very context-sensitive. (Compare the manner in which Kongzi [Confucius] is shown tailoring his comments to his interlocutors in *Analects* 11.22.) This makes Mengzi seem very unsystematic. However, I hope to show that, if we read the text of the *Mengzi* as a whole, we shall find that Mengzi was a remarkably systematic thinker.

I want first to present an overview of what I take to be Mengzi's own systematic ethics, which I shall approach as a version of "virtue ethics," and second to examine some of the standard arguments against Mengzi's position.

I. Mengzi's Virtue Ethics

I have argued elsewhere that a fully articulated virtue ethics would appeal to several interlocking concepts: human nature, flourishing, the virtues, and ethical cultivation.² The term "nature" can be used in several related senses. Generally, the *nature* of a kind of thing is related to the way a representative member of that kind develops if given a healthy environment for the kind of thing it is. "Nature" can refer to a thing's potential or tendency to develop in this way, or to this course of development, or to the result of developing in this way. A *flourishing* way of life is one that fully expresses one's nature. The presence of the *virtues* is what results from developing one's nature, and their exercise is what constitutes flourishing. Depending upon what one thinks human nature is like, one will give a different account of how to *cultivate* that nature so as to realize those virtues and live a flourishing life. Different ethics of human nature provide competing accounts of what precisely constitutes human nature, flourishing, the virtues, and ethical cultivation. Furthermore, different ethics may stress some of these concepts over others.

Mengzi argued that we ought to live a certain way because doing so is in accordance with our nature as humans. Arguments of this form are currently out of favor among philosophers and other intellectuals. However, this is one of the reasons that Mengzi presents a challenge to us. Consequently, in this essay, I shall try to sketch Mengzi's view of human nature and its relationship to ethics.

A. Mengzi's View of Human Nature

Mengzi said, "Humaneness is being a human" (7B16).³ The word I have here rendered "humaneness" is *rén*, which was, for Kongzi, the summation of human virtuousness. Mengzi often used the same term in a narrower sense, to refer to a

²Bryan W. Van Norden, "Virtue Ethics and Confucianism," in Bo Mou, ed., *Comparative Approaches to Chinese Philosophy*, Ashgate World Philosophies Series (Aldershot, Hants, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), pp. 99-121.

³My translation. Similarly, in the *Zhongyong*, chap. 20, we find "humaneness is *rén*" (my translation).

particular virtue that is characterized by compassion. However, in passages such as 7B16, *rén* seems to retain its earlier, broader sense. So, what did Mengzi mean by saying that being a human is humaneness or human virtuousness? He could not have meant that all humans are already fully virtuous. This is not only patently false, but Mengzi seems to have been explicitly and painfully aware of the fact that most humans are far from full virtue.⁴ What could he have meant, then? We get a hint from Mengzi's frequent use of metaphors of agricultural growth:

Mengzi said, "In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are cruel. It is not that the potential (*cái*) that Heaven confers on them varies like this. They are like this because of that by which their hearts are sunk and drowned.

"Consider barley. Sow the seeds and cover them. The soil is the same and the time of planting is also the same. They grow rapidly, and by the time of the summer solstice they have all ripened. Although there are some differences, these are due to the richness of the soil, and to unevenness in the rain and in human effort." (6A7)

This passage suggests that humans are born with a certain potential (here, *cái*) for virtue, which can be either nurtured or stunted. In addition, Mengzi used the term "*xìng*" (nature), which we know from various early texts describes the course of development that a thing has the potential to realize if given a healthy environment.⁵ According to Mengzi, not only is there such a potential and such a course of development, but also (both for humans and for things in general) the full

⁴The interpretation I shall develop in this essay is significantly at odds with the so-called "Neo-Confucian" and "New Confucian" lines of interpretation of Mengzi and Kongzi. Specifically, according to the "Neo-Confucian" interpretation, Mengzi (and Kongzi before him) believed that humans are born with a fully formed virtuous nature, whose existence is obscured by selfish inclinations. In contrast, I hold that Mengzi believed that we have only incipient tendencies toward virtue, which have to be cultivated to develop into full virtues. In short, on the Neo-Confucian interpretation, virtue is something that awaits *discovery* within us; on the interpretation I favor, virtue is something that must be *developed* through cultivation. (On this point, I follow Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*, rev. ed. [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2000], pp. 17-18, 32-33, 59-60, 101-102; Jonathan W. Schofer, "Virtues in Xunzi's Thought," in T. C. Kline, III, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. and intro., *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi* [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2000], pp. 71-72; and Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990], pp. 59-61.)

⁵See Angus C. Graham, "The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature", in his *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 29-36; and Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), chap. 6, especially pp. 180-187. Early Chinese uses of "*xìng*" seem indeterminate among several related meanings: "the way in which [a thing] develops and declines from birth to death when uninjured and adequately nourished" (Graham, "Background," pp. 27-28); the properties and activities that characterize a thing when it is developing or has developed along its proper course (Graham, "Background," p. 11); and the "characteristic tendencies of things" (Shun, *Mencius*, p. 186) when they are uninjured and adequately nourished. These senses are clearly closely related, so it is not necessary for our purposes to disentangle them.

realization of the potential of a kind of thing provides a standard for evaluating an instance of that kind. Thus, when asked to clarify his teaching that “human nature is good” (*xìng shàn*), Mengzi responded, “As for what [humans] genuinely are (*qíng*), they can become good (*wéi shàn*). This is what I mean by calling [their natures] good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential (*cái*)” (6A6). In the same passage, Mengzi went on to remark, “Some differ from others by two, five or countless times—this is because they cannot exhaust their potentials,” and then he quoted approvingly an ode that says,

Heaven gives birth to the teeming people.
If there is a thing, there is a norm.⁶

Obviously, the natures of different kinds of creatures will differ. Thus, Mengzi took it to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view of the rival philosopher Gaozi that it entailed that the nature of a dog is the same as the nature of an ox, and the nature of an ox is the same as the nature of a human (6A3). Similarly, Mengzi condemned someone by saying that “one would have to be an earthworm” (rather than a human) to realize the ideals that person espouses (3B10), but for each creature there will be a capacity to lead a course of life that realizes that thing’s specific nature.

Mengzi frequently drew analogies between the sprouts of a plant and the human capacity for natural development, and in these analogies he often used the metaphor of cultivating the sprouts of a plant to refer to the innate potential for virtue. It is probably significant that Mengzi typically (with the exception of 6A7) used a word that means “sprout,” as opposed to one that means “seed” (*zhōng*). One important difference between a seed and a sprout is that a seed does not require any sustaining nurturance, while a sprout is much more fragile. Indeed, Mengzi used a sprout metaphor to illustrate that, because of the fragility of the human ethical potential, it is possible to fail to recognize what something “genuinely is” (*qíng*) because one is misled by the appearance of instances of that kind raised in very injurious environments:⁷

Mengzi said, “The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because it bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the rest it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, it was not that there were no sprouts or shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep then came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. People, seeing it barren, believed that there had never been any timber there. Could this be the nature [*xìng*] of the mountain?!

“When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness?! That by which they discard their good heart is simply like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? With the rest it gets during the

⁶My translation. Cf. *Zhongyong*, chap. 13: “In carving an ax handle, in carving an ax handle, / the standard is not far off” (my translation).

⁷My interpretation of *qíng* follows Dai Zhen, *Mengzi Ziyi shuzheng*, no. 30; D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970); and Shun, *Mencius*, pp. 183-186, 214-215.

day or night, and the restorative effects of the morning *qi* . . . , their likes and dislikes are sometimes close to those of others. But then what they do during the day again fetters and destroys it. If the fettering is repeated, then the evening *qi* is insufficient to preserve it. If the evening *qi* is insufficient to preserve it, then one is not far from a bird or beast. Others see that he is a bird or beast, and think that there was never any capacity [*cái*] there. Is this what a human truly is [*qíng*]?!

“Hence, if it merely gets nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow. If it merely loses its nourishment, there is nothing that will not vanish.” (6A8)

In summary, Mengzi thought that (at least some) things have characteristics that, although they may be distinct from their superficial appearances, characterize their *qíng*, or what they “genuinely are.” For living things, this includes the potential (*cái*) to develop in certain ways if given a healthy environment. The course of life and characteristics that result from realizing this potential (the *xìng*, or “nature” of that kind of thing) provide a standard for what is “good,” or the evaluative “norm” for that kind of thing. Consequently, when Mengzi said that “humaneness is being a human,” he was implying that humans, as part of what they are, have a potential to develop full virtue, which they can and should realize.

B. Mengzi’s View of Ethical Cultivation and Self-Cultivation

The story of Ox Mountain raises the issue of what sorts of things “fetter and destroy” a person’s potential for virtue, so that one comes to seem like a “bird or beast” rather than a human. Mengzi stressed conditions directly related to physical well-being. He thought that these conditions were not absolutely necessary to realize one’s nature (some heroic individuals rise above injurious conditions, such as Sage King Shun, who overcame a severely “dysfunctional” family environment), but most people will be impeded from realizing their nature without them:

Mengzi said, “To lack a constant livelihood, yet to have a constant heart—only a . . . [scholar] is capable of this. As for the people, if they lack a constant livelihood, it follows that they will lack a constant heart. And if one simply fails to have a constant heart, dissipation and evil will not be avoided. When they thereupon sink into crime, to go and punish them is to trap the people. When there are benevolent people in positions of authority, how is it possible to trap the people? For this reason, an enlightened ruler, in regulating the people’s livelihood, must ensure that it is sufficient, on the one hand, to serve one’s father and mother, and on the other hand, to nurture wife and children. In good years, one is always full. In years of famine, one escapes death. Only when the people have a regulated livelihood do they rush toward the good, and thus the people follow the ruler easily.” (1A7)

Violence also stunts the growth of one’s virtuous nature, breeding indifference to the suffering of others (7B1) and leading to further violence (7B7). Consequently, although Mengzi recognized that war might sometimes be necessary, he stressed that the only legitimate reason for war was to free commoners from the

rule of a tyrant (7B4).

Mengzi clearly held that a person's cultural and educational environment could also influence ethical development:

“It is the way of people that if they are full of food, have warm clothes, and live in comfort, but are without instruction, then they come close to being animals. Sage-king Shun was anxious about this too, so he instructed Xie to be Minister of Instruction, and instruct them about human relations: the relation of father and children is one of love, ruler and minister is one of righteousness, husband and wife is one of distinction, elder and younger is one of precedence, and that between friends is one of trust.” (3A4)

It is not only the common people who are often in need of education, though:

Do not be surprised at the King's failure to be wise. Even though it may be the easiest growing thing in the world, if it gets one day of warmth and ten days of frost, there has never been anything that is capable of growing. It is seldom that I have an audience with the King, and when I withdraw, those who “freeze” him come. What can I do with the sprouts that are there? (6A9, my translation)

A further reason that Mengzi preferred sprouts to seeds as a metaphor for the human capacity for virtue is that a seed is largely passive; it awaits external conditions to move it into action. In contrast, a sprout is much more active and responsive to its environment. Mengzi illustrated this point (as well as providing some evidence for the existence of the sprouts) in the following famous thought-experiment:

“The reason why I say that humans all have hearts [*xīn*] that are not unfeeling toward others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling [*xīn*] of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among their neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries.

“From this we can see that if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of disdain, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of deference, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of approval and disapproval, one is not a human. The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The heart of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The heart of deference is the sprout of propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom.

“People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts but to say of oneself that one is unable to be virtuous is to steal from oneself. To say that one's ruler is unable to be virtuous is to steal from one's ruler. In general, having these four sprouts within oneself, if one knows to fill them all out, it will be like a fire starting up, a spring breaking through! If one can merely fill them out, they will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas. If one merely fails to fill them out, they will be insufficient to serve one's

parents.” (2A6)

Several aspects of this subtle and intriguing passage call for comment. Although the baby-at-the-well thought-experiment focuses on benevolence, Mengzi mentioned three other virtues here: righteousness, wisdom, and propriety. These four are Mengzi’s “cardinal virtues.” He suggested in this passage that the capacity to develop these cardinal virtues is definitive of a human. If one lacks or loses this capacity, “one is not a human.”⁸ Thus, if one loses the capacity to become virtuous, one is no longer a human. However, as the sprout metaphor and the reference to filling them out (in 2A6) suggest, this capacity is something that must be developed in order to produce full virtues.

Also in this passage, Mengzi employed one of the key terms of his Philo-Sophia psychology: *xin*. Mengzi’s use of this term is complex, but systematic. In its “focal meaning,” *xin* refers to the psychological faculty that thinks and feels emotions.⁹ By metonymy, the term refers to the emotions that faculty manifests, and, by synecdoche, the term can refer to any one of the four aspects (almost like sub-faculties) of the *xin* that manifest the emotions and attitudes characteristic of Mengzi’s four cardinal virtues.

“*Xin*” is a key term in Mengzi’s view of self-cultivation. He made clear the need for *self*-cultivation (in addition to the external factors that assist ethical growth) by means of the craft metaphor in the following passage:

Now, *go* is an insignificant craft. But if one does not focus one’s heart and apply one’s resolution, then one won’t get it. “*Go Qiu*” was the best at *go* throughout the world. Suppose you told *Go Qiu* to teach two people *go*, and one focuses his heart and applies his resolution to it, listening only to *Go Qiu*. The other, although he listens to him, with his whole heart thinks about the coming of swans, longing to draw his bow and shoot them. Although he studies together with the other person, he will not be as good as he. Will this be because his intelligence is not as great? I answer that it is not. (6A9, my translation)

This previous passage stresses that focus on the task of self-cultivation is required. The following passage helps clarify what kind of mental focus is required:

Mengzi said, “It is not the office of the ears and eyes to concentrate [*sī*], and they are misled by things. Things interact with things and simply lead them along. But the office of the heart is to concentrate. If it concentrates then it will get [Virtue]. If it does not concentrate, then it will not get it. This is what Heaven has given us. If one first takes one’s stand on what is greater, then what is lesser will not be able to snatch it away. This is how to become a great human.” (6A15)

⁸This fits in with Mengzi’s comment in 6A6, quoted above, that the capacity to become virtuous is part of the *qíng* of humans, or what humans “genuinely are.” It is presumably reading passages such as 6A6 in light of 2A6 that led Graham to suggest that the *qíng* “of X is what X cannot lack if it is to be called ‘X’” (Graham, “Background,” p. 63, emphasis in original).

⁹On the notion of a “focal meaning,” see Yearley, *Mencius*. The focal meaning of a term need not be the same as its original meaning. Historically, the term “*xin*” seems to have originally referred to the heart as a physical organ.

Here we find another Mengzian use of metonymy, in which the “ears and eyes” stand for the desires of the various sense organs. These sensual desires are described as being passive and automatic, in that material objects of desire “simply lead them along,” without the need for any human agency. In contrast, the heart can either perform its function of engaging in *si* (“concentration”) or not. If it does concentrate, it will obtain virtue, which will involve restraining or redirecting the sensual desires when they might be “misled” by tempting but inappropriate objects of desire. The sensual desires are, therefore, a major source of wrongdoing. Nonetheless, Mengzi was not an ascetic: He stated that the enjoyment of music, ritual hunting (1B1), wealth, and sex (1B5) were all legitimate, as long as they were done in an ethical manner.

But what does *si*, the activity of the heart, focus on, and what sort of mental activity is it, precisely? As we have seen, Mengzi’s technical philosophical vocabulary consists of terms either based on metaphors drawn from everyday experience or used in senses slightly refined from ordinary usage. *Si* is not an exception. One common use of *si* is illustrated in the very first of the *Odes*, wherein it is said of a gentleman in love with his bride-to-be that “Day and night, he longed for her in his bosom,” where “longs for” is *si*. Similarly, *Analects* 9:30 cites an ode that says “How could it be that I do not long for you? It is just that your home is far away.”¹⁰ However, *si* can also refer to a more cognitive mental activity. Thus, in *Analects* 2:15, we find: “The Master said, ‘To learn without [thinking] will lead to confusion. To think without learning, however, will lead to fruitless exhaustion.’”¹¹ We find *si* used in both the first and the second sense in the following passage from the *Mengzi* itself:

The Duke of Zhou longed to [*si*] unite the excellences of the three dynasties in order to bestow upon the people the policies of the four sage kings. If he encountered anything that was not consistent [among the policies of the sages], he would raise his head and concentrate upon it [*si*], from the day into the night. When he was fortunate enough to understand it, he would sit and await the dawn. (4B20, my translation)

Given the non-technical uses of the term “*si*,” it seems likely that engaging in *si* has both an affective and a cognitive component. Both 6A6 and 6A15 suggest a connection between *si* and the sprouts.¹² Hence, it seems likely that to *si* is, at least in part, to attend to the sprouts in a way that involves longing for their proper development. This understanding of *si* helps make sense of the following passage:

The core of benevolence is serving one’s parents. The core of righteousness is obeying one’s elder brother. The core of wisdom is knowing these two and not abandoning them. The core of ritual is to regulate and adorn these two. The core

¹⁰My translation. Cf. *Mengzi* 3A5 for a use of “*si*” in the same sense.

¹¹Kongzi (Confucius), “The Analects,” tr. Edward Gilman Slingerland, in Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*.

¹²6A6 introduces the topic of *si* right after discussing the sprouts, and 6A15 connects *si* to the “greater part” of oneself (which is presumably the sprouts as opposed to the sensual desires).

of music is to delight in these two.

If one delights in them then they grow. If they grow then how can they be stopped? If they cannot be stopped then one does not notice one's feet dancing to them, one's hands swaying to them. (4A27, my translation)

Helping someone to focus attention positively seems to be part of what Mengzi was doing in his famous dialogue with King Xuan of Qi (1A7). The king is described as sparing an ox that was being led to slaughter. Through his dialogue with the king, Mengzi helped him to recognize several things: that he had compassion for the suffering of the ox, that this capacity for compassion was a good thing, and that the capacity would (if properly developed) allow him to become a true king.

Although self-cultivation is important, one should not force oneself to do things for which one does not yet have the appropriate feelings. Mengzi explained that, if "some of one's actions leave one's heart unsatisfied" (2A2), one's ethical motivations will "starve." Instead,

"One must work at it, but do not aim at it directly. Let the heart not forget, but do not help it grow. Do not be like the man from Song. Among the people of the state of Song there was one who, concerned lest his grain not grow, pulled on it. Wearily, he returned home, and said to his family, 'Today I am worn out. I helped the grain to grow.' His son rushed out and looked at it. The grain was withered. Those in the world who do not help the grain to grow are few. Those who abandon it, thinking it will not help, are those who do not weed their grain. Those who help it grow are those who pull on the grain. Not only does this not help, but it even harms it." (2A2)

In sum, Mengzi believed that humans have capacities to realize the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, and propriety, which can and should be developed. Environmental factors, including freedom from deprivation and violence, and ethical education make it easier to realize one's nature. Furthermore, the full development of one's nature requires the active engagement of a person's "heart" (*xin*) in the process of learning, involving both introspection (*si*) and study (*xué*)—ideally under the guidance of a wise teacher.

C. A Partial Defense of Mengzi¹³

1. *Three Steps*

Mengzi's appeal to human nature involves a number of different ethical intuitions. One aspect of Mengzi's argument (and others of this form) that is frequently overlooked is the way in which it attempts to ground ethics in our identity. This line of argument proceeds in three steps.

The first step is to claim that being a human being constitutes part of a person's identity. The second step is to claim that the normative facts about us

¹³My arguments in this section are speculative and need to be developed further.

(including our obligations and what constitutes virtues and flourishing for us) are largely determined by our identity. The third step is to offer a substantive account of being a human, in terms of human nature. Mengzi does not distinguish these three steps, but I think they are all implicit in his statement that “humaneness is being a human” (7B16). If we do distinguish the three steps subsumed by this statement, we get a better sense for both the strengths and the weaknesses of arguments of this form.

The first step seems difficult, although not impossible, to deny. One way to deny it would be to adopt a Cartesian picture of the self: Being a human being is a state involving the embodiment of a soul, but a person really is the soul that inhabits (or utilizes) the body. However, I think most of us find implausible this sort of Cartesian picture (and with good reason). Notice that the first step claims that being a human constitutes only part of one’s identity. Obviously, being a human being is not all of a person’s identity. I, for example, am not just a human being; I am a *particular* human being, distinguished from other human beings.

The second step could be denied in two ways. One could acknowledge that there are normative facts but deny that these facts are determined to any significant degree by one’s identity. This seems implausible, though. For example, if there are such things as obligations for humans, these are surely not the same as the obligations to which dogs are subject (if any). A more promising line of attack would be to deny that there are any normative facts in the first place. This is too complex an issue to discuss in detail here. However, consider the following claims: humans need oxygen; long-term isolation is bad for social animals; a diet low in fat and rich in protein is good for humans. These seem to be normative claims, and they seem to be claims that are not merely subjective matters of opinion.

The third step is perhaps the most controversial, because different theories will give different accounts of what human nature is. However, at least some of the aspects of human nature to which Mengzi appealed might very well appear in any plausible account of human nature. For example, humans are social animals. The members of any species of social animal that are sophisticated enough to have emotions at all will need to have concern for the well-being of other members of their species, or at least their own pack, in order to survive. Consequently, benevolence of some form is a plausible candidate for a feature of human nature. In addition, I have argued elsewhere that a sense of shame is a constituent of human nature and that Mengzian righteousness is a proper sense of shame.¹⁴

2. Other Arguments

However, many of the intuitions underlying Mengzi’s conception of ethics are simple yet powerful. Part of the appeal is to the view that what is natural for humans is what is healthy for them and that this is obviously worthwhile:

Mengzi said, “Suppose someone has a ring finger that is bent and will not straighten, and it is not the case that it hurts or that it interferes with one’s activ-

¹⁴See Bryan W. Van Norden, “The Emotion of Shame and the Virtue of Righteousness in Mencius,” in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 2 (Winter, 2002): 45-78.

ities. But if there is something that can straighten it, one will not consider the road from one end of the world to the other too far, because one's finger is not as good as other people's. If one's finger is not as good as others people's, one knows to dislike it. But if one's heart is not as good as other people's, one does not know to dislike it. This is what is called not appreciating the categories of importance." (6A12)

Mengzi also appealed to the intuition that anything that interferes with or destroys our nature is undesirable. Thus, in response to Gaozi's suggestion, "To make human nature benevolent and righteous is like making a willow tree into cups and bowls," Mengzi responded,

"Can you, sir, following the nature of the willow tree, make it into cups and bowls? You must violate and rob the willow tree, and only then can you make it into cups and bowls. If you must violate and rob the willow tree in order to make it into cups and bowls, must you also violate and rob people in order to make them benevolent and righteous? If there is something that leads people to regard benevolence and righteousness as misfortunes for them, it will surely be your doctrine, will it not?" (6A1)

Since following the nature of a thing accords with its own tendencies for growth, natural development is likely to require less coercion. Thus, Mengzi said that to follow the nature of a thing was to be like Sage King Yu, who, "in guiding the waters, guided them where no effort was required" (4B26, my translation).

II. Responses to Some Common Objections to Mengzi's View

However, the appeal to human nature as a foundation for ethics is also open to several kinds of objections. Some of these can be answered fairly definitively.

Objection: Becoming virtuous cannot be natural, because (as Mengzi acknowledged) it typically requires education and a cultural context conducive to it.

Response: Something similar to this objection was formulated by Xunzi, the next major Ruist after Mengzi.¹⁵ However, natural characteristics and activities can require nurturing and education in order to develop, even among non-human animals.¹⁶ For example, in order to realize its nature, a cat must receive not only water and food (of sufficient quantity and quality) but also the nurturing of another

¹⁵See Xunzi's essay, "Human Nature Is Bad," in Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, pp. 284-291.

¹⁶Graham both noted this fact and anticipated the response I outline here (Graham, "Background," pp. 28-29). It seems likely that, by Xunzi's time, the notion of *xing* had shifted in meaning, so that Mengzi and Xunzi were, at least in part, arguing at cross-purposes. However, this does not entail that Mengzi and Xunzi do not have a significant disagreement over human nature. See Bryan W. Van Norden, "Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency," in Kline and Ivanhoe, *Virtue*, pp. 103-134.

cat (usually its mother) for at least two, and usually closer to six, months after birth in order to have a good chance of survival.¹⁷ Furthermore, cats are unlikely to learn how to hunt and eat their prey unless shown how to hunt by other cats.¹⁸ Consequently, for cats (as for humans) a healthy environment involves active nurturing and even education by other members of their species.¹⁹

Objection: The effort to derive conclusions about what humans should do or what characteristics they ought to have from claims about human nature violates the fact-value distinction (or the is-ought distinction).²⁰

Response: David Hume is often taken to have established the is-ought distinction in his *Treatise*. However, it is controversial what this distinction is, whether it even exists, and even whether Hume himself wished to endorse it.²¹ One way of explaining the distinction is that one cannot validly derive any conclusion that is evaluative from any set of premises that are completely non-evaluative (that is, have no evaluative content whatsoever).²² Now, Mengzi would have violated the distinction (thus interpreted) *if* he had regarded the notion of human nature as completely non-evaluative but then attempted to draw evaluative conclusions from that conception of human nature. However, it seems clear that Mengzi regarded the notion of human nature as already evaluative.

One might then present a follow-up objection that Mengzi should have appealed to a value-neutral conception of human nature. But, is there such a conception? James Wallace has argued that “[a]ny study of living creatures as such,

¹⁷Desmond Morris, *Catwatching* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), pp. 91-92.

¹⁸“Although it is clear that there is an inborn killing pattern with kittens, this pattern can be damaged by unnatural rearing conditions. Conversely, really efficient killers have to experience a kittenhood that exposes them to as much hunting and killing as possible” (ibid., p. 96; also see pp. 77-78).

¹⁹For an intriguing discussion of whether cats also have “cultures,” see Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, *The Tribe of Tiger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), especially pp. 109-113.

²⁰Something like this seems to be one of Chad Hansen’s major objections to Mengzi’s view: “Mencius confuses his implausibly [*sic*] specific moral psychology with normative theory” (Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 168). “In standard philosophical terminology, Mencius . . . is trying to get an *ought* from an *is*” (Hansen, *Daoist*, p. 180, emphasis in original).

²¹See Hume, *Treatise*, III.i.1, for the *locus classicus*. Mackie presented a sympathetic account of Hume’s view but acknowledged that it “leaves open the possibility that there should be objectively prescriptive moral truths” (J. L. Mackie, *Hume’s Moral Theory*, repr. [New York: Routledge, 1993], p. 63). See John Searle, “How to Derive ‘Ought’ from ‘Is,’” *Philosophical Review* 73 (January, 1964): 43-58, for a famous, but controversial, argument that the is-ought gap can be bridged.

²²The is-ought distinction is too big an issue to address adequately here. I shall content myself with observing that, if we phrase the distinction as I did above, then I believe that it is true. However, it then seems trivial. Consider an analogy. I cannot derive any conclusions about dolphins from any set of premises that makes no reference to dolphins. This does not show anything interesting about the ontological status of dolphins or about the semantic status of claims made about them.

including modern biology, inevitably involves normative considerations.”²³ After all, in describing and classifying animals, we do not focus on injured specimens or even on the statistically most common specimen (since in many species the majority of newborn animals do not survive to adulthood).

Objection: Mengzi’s view of human nature is logically circular, because a natural way of life is defined in terms of a thing’s potential and healthy conditions of development, but a thing’s potential and its healthy conditions of development are identified in terms of the resulting natural way of life.²⁴

Response: This objection assumes that there is something suspect about adjusting theoretical concepts in light of one another. However, I subscribe to the now-common view that we must accept some version of theoretical holism. For example, in physics, the concepts of space, time, mass, and energy are interrelated. Consequently, the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics required a simultaneous adjustment of our understanding of each of these concepts in light of the others. A further holism is introduced if we reject (as I think we should) the “myth of the given.” In other words, our observations are *not* theoretically innocent and incorrigible reports or pure sense-experience. Rather, all our observations are theory-laden, made in terms of some background theoretical beliefs. The Michelson-Morely experiments were taken to provide empirical evidence for Special Relativity, but even the most basic observations involved in these experiments (for example, the absence of interference patterns) were comprehensible only against a background of theoretical beliefs. Holism does not, I think, make our theories contentless and subjective. We can evaluate our (comparatively) theoretical beliefs in light of (comparatively) empirical evidence, and some conceivable theoretical adjustments can be ruled out as *ad hoc* or otherwise implausible. We also interpret and evaluate putative evidence in light of our theoretical commitments.²⁵

Similarly, the relationship between our understandings of a healthy environment and of human nature are holistic, since we interpret each in light of the other. This does not mean that every adjustment of the two notions is equally plausible. Furthermore, empirical data can lead us to modify our understandings of these two concepts. For example, it was commonly believed at one time that homosexuality was the result of an abnormal childhood sexual development and that it was part of a larger fabric of psychological problems. However, evidence suggests no

²³James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices*, Contemporary Philosophy (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 18.

²⁴Cf. Graham, “Background,” pp. 14-15.

²⁵As Quine famously wrote, it is “folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements, which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system [of our statements]. Even a statement very close to the [experiential] periphery [of our system] can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision” (Willard van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in his *From a Logical Point of View: 9 Logico-Philosophical Essays*, 2nd ed., rev. [Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1953, 1980], p. 43).

correlation between either of these factors and homosexuality. These factors do not make it impossible to continue to hold that homosexuality is unnatural, but they do make it considerably less plausible.

Objection: The notion of naturalness assumes a teleological worldview, which is metaphysically implausible.

Response: Mengzi's worldview was teleological in the sense that living things (at least) are intentionally created (by Heaven) to meet certain standards. However, an appeal to human nature does not *require* a worldview that is teleological in this particular way. All that naturalness requires metaphysically is that there be, for a given kind of living thing, certain facts about its pattern of development to maturity, its characteristics and activities when mature, and the environmental conditions that allow for these. Evolutionary theory could be used to provide a non-teleological explanation for why these facts obtain.

In particular, Mengzi's conception of human nature asserted that humans have incipient dispositions toward benevolence, righteousness (a sense of shame), and some other virtues. Biology offers three evolutionary explanations for why we find such ethical dispositions in humans and some other animals (despite the fact that such inclinations often seem to reduce the likelihood of their owner's survival): kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and group selection.²⁶ To understand the mechanism of kin selection, suppose that I am disposed to share my resources with my own kin and to risk my life to protect them. Even if these dispositions make it less likely that I will survive to pass on my genes, these dispositions make it more likely that my kin will survive to pass on their genes, and kin are genetically quite similar. Consequently, ethical dispositions end up being more likely to be transmitted.

Reciprocal altruism occurs when animals perform some service(s) for one another under the following conditions: There is a cost to the performer of the service but a benefit for the receiver, and there is a time-lag between performing the service and receiving it back oneself. Reciprocal altruism can be adaptive if there is a sufficient degree of reliability that others will reciprocate. It is possible for reciprocal altruism to occur among purely self-interested animals. However, such an arrangement is highly unstable. Effective long-term employment of reciprocal altruism is facilitated by dispositions such as honesty, loyalty, and benevolence. Consequently, insofar as reciprocal altruism increases a creature's chance of survival, the dispositions that support it will be selected for.²⁷

Group altruism is the most controversial of the three mechanisms; many biologists deny that it occurs. However, Charles Darwin himself argued that a "tribe" among whom dispositions such as courage are comparatively more common is more likely to survive than its neighbors, and, hence, the members of the tribe are more likely to pass on the genes that account for these dispositions.

²⁶Darwin adumbrated all three of these explanations in Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 2nd ed., repr. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), Part I, chaps. 4-5, pp. 100-138.

²⁷The classic paper on this topic is Robert L. Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46 (March, 1971): 35-57.

Objection: The only kind of ethics that respects the dignity of a person is one that grounds all morality in a human's free choices. A person should, of course, make informed choices that take into account information about one's own psychology, as well as facts about the culture of which one is a part and its history and traditions. However, it is not only illegitimate, but also morally objectionable, to attempt to arrive at any conclusions about what one ought to do based on anything external to one's own freely choosing will. (Some philosophers will make this point by saying that a morality that tries to judge human choices by anything external to that choice is "heteronomous," or that a person who tries to shift the responsibility for one's choices to anything beyond oneself is "inauthentic.")²⁸

Response: Any ethics of human nature suggests that we are ethically bound by something other than our own freely choosing will, so such an ethics must be heteronomous in the technical Kantian sense or inauthentic in the Sartrean sense. However, many of us are unsatisfied with Kantian or existentialist foundations for ethics. Charles Taylor has brilliantly documented the way in which the conception of a self that stresses "autonomy" and "authenticity" is the product of a parochial historical progression in the West.²⁹ Taylor also gave powerful arguments that it is ultimately incoherent to suggest that moral value comes solely from free individual choice. After all, if nothing has value independently of our choices, what difference does it make what we choose? However, it seems that it often does make a great deal of difference what we choose. This is why our choices are often momentous.³⁰ At the very least, I would say that an ethics of human nature such as Mengzi's is a helpful corrective to the extreme emphasis on individual choice found in many modern Western moral views.

In addition, there is a way in which an ethics of human nature can satisfy part of the intuition that may underlie the view that heteronomy is bad. Since an ethics of human nature is based on facts about *our* characteristics, needs, and processes of development as human beings, it is not imposed on us as something alien to us as embodied, natural creatures. This will not satisfy a strict Kantian (or his bastard

²⁸I think that it is partly this intuition that led Roger Ames to describe a position like the one I find in Mengzi to be "repugnant" (Roger Ames, "Mencius and a Process Notion of Human Nature," in Alan K. L. Chan, ed., *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations* [Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002], p. 74). Ames did not use this as the basis for a criticism of Mengzi but, instead, as a motivation for reading Mengzi in an alternative way.

²⁹Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). The fact that our current conceptions of "autonomy" and "authenticity" and the ethical intuitions that go with them are very recent Western inventions should make us cautious about accepting any interpretation of native Chinese philosophy that (like that of Hall and Ames) appeals to similar intuitions.

³⁰To illustrate our radical freedom to choose, Jean-Paul Sartre gave the example of a young man in France under the Nazi occupation, who was trying to decide whether to stay and care for his aged mother or go and join the Resistance. Most of us would share Sartre's intuition that there is no one "right" choice in this situation. (When I say "most of us," I do not include most Ruists, who I think would unequivocally favor staying to care for one's aged mother.) However, as Taylor observed, we can imagine a number of other choices (e.g., leaving one's mother in order to open a candy shop in Paris) that would simply seem like wrong choices, even if the young man freely chose them.

progeny, the Sartrean existentialist), but it may help address one intuition that leads people down those paths.

Objection: Study of other cultures has demonstrated that there is no such thing as human nature, or at least that there is insufficient content to human nature to provide a basis for any substantive ethical claims.

Response: A similar line of argument to this was used by the Chinese Mohists prior to Mengzi,³¹ but it is more familiar to most Westerners as a conclusion of cross-cultural anthropology. Although this argument is often used in a facile way, it is potentially much more powerful than the previous objections we have considered. However, anthropological opinion on this topic has vacillated. Nineteenth-century anthropology largely ignored the great variety in what appear to be healthy and successful ways of life in favor of Procrustean developmental patterns that located contemporary Western cultures at the apex, and relegated other cultures (and earlier stages in Western culture) to lower rungs on the ladder. In reaction against this, twentieth-century anthropology, of which the work of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict is paradigmatic, has stressed cross-cultural variety, to the point of sometimes suggesting that human nature is infinitely malleable.³²

However, many of the paradigmatic studies that were used to support this claim have been shown to be unreliable, including Mead's study of adolescent sexuality in Samoa, Benedict's studies of Japanese culture, Benjamin Whorf's study of the Hopi language, and Branislav Malinowski's supposed counter-example to the Oedipus Complex among the Trobriand.³³ As a result, some have come to agree with anthropologist Donald E. Brown, who has made the (admittedly controversial) claim that, "[w]hatever the motive may be for resisting the idea that there is a human nature whose features shape culture and society, its intellectual foundations have all but collapsed."³⁴ Equally controversial is Brown's claim that there is some evidence for a list of universal or nearly universal characteristics of human societies: the use of narrative and poetry, facial expressions such as smiling and crying, marriage (in some form), incest taboos (especially against mother-son incest), rituals (of some form) to mourn the dead, rules (of some kind) regulating

³¹See David S. Nivison, "Weakness of Will in Ancient Chinese Philosophy," in his *The Ways of Confucianism*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1996), p. 83; idem, "Philosophical Voluntarism in Fourth-Century China," in his *Ways of Confucianism*, p. 130; and the Mohist essay, "Impartial Caring," in Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, especially pp. 71-72.

³²See Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: Morrow, 1928); Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1934); and Donald E. Brown, *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw-Hill; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), chap. 3.

³³See Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of a Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Ekkehart Malotki, *Hopi Time* (Berlin: Mouton, 1983); Melford Spiro, *Oedipus in the Trobriands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Brown, *Human Universals*, chap. 1.

³⁴Brown, *Human Universals*, p. 144.

theft and the use of violence, and others.³⁵

I think we should walk away from this controversy with at least two lessons. First, anthropological studies are relevant to the issue of whether there is a human nature and, if so, what its content might be, so it would be irresponsible for those working on ethics of human nature to ignore them. Second, it is premature to conclude that the non-existence of human nature has been demonstrated; the controversy is very much a live one.

³⁵Ibid., chap. 6.