

## Mencius on Moral Responsibility

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Is there a theory of moral responsibility in Confucian ethics? The answer seems to depend on how “moral responsibility” is understood. It has been argued that not only is there no account of moral responsibility in Confucian ethics, but also there is no appropriate context for such an account. The argument is made on the following grounds: whereas a theory of moral responsibility is associated with an action-based ethical theory, which seeks to establish moral rules or formulas, Confucian ethics is not an action-based ethical theory but a virtue-based one that rejects the formulation of abstract rules. Therefore, there is not a theory of moral responsibility in Confucian ethics. The reason why the account of moral responsibility relies on an action-based ethics is this: if to be moral is to follow moral rules, moral failure means failing to perform acts according to moral rules. Since there always will be some exceptions to rules, there is a need to define those conditions under which one ought not to be morally blamed for failing to act according to moral rules. If we call those conditions “excusing conditions,” then, theories of moral responsibility are philosophical attempts to systematize and justify excusing conditions. If an ethical theory does not emphasize the application of moral rules, it will have no need to define excusing conditions and therefore no need to account for moral responsibility (see Hansen 1972, 169-186). However, such an argument is problematic. Even if we take it for granted that Confucian ethics is totally virtue-based and has no account for moral action, we still cannot conclude that there is no Confucian theory of moral

responsibility. If “moral responsibility” is defined in a much broader sense and connected with character development and moral duty as well, undoubtedly, Confucian ethics provides a rich account of moral responsibility.

In a virtue ethics, we might not define the exceptional conditions to the rules in order to excuse an agent’s action, but we do need to ask about the conditions under which one fails to form a virtuous character. If in an action-based theory moral failure is related to the failure to observe rules, in a virtue-based theory moral failure is related to the failure to cultivate virtue. Hence, if a theory of moral responsibility is to define excusing conditions under which one ought not to be morally blamed for his/her moral failure, virtue ethics also needs an account of moral responsibility. The difference of a virtue-based theory from an action-based theory might suggest that it requires a different theory of moral responsibility, but this is no reason to deny it such a theory. Confucian ethics, especially Mencius’ ethics, does address those excusing conditions for moral failure in character. Furthermore, Confucian theory of moral responsibility goes beyond the problem of moral failure. It also addresses moral responsibility in terms of moral obligation in social context. This paper is a tentative explanation of Mencius’ view on moral responsibility.

Mencius proposes that for the formation of moral character, there are two indispensable conditions: certain environmental conditions and self-cultivation. On the one hand, a minimally good environment is necessary for one to obtain sound moral beliefs and good character. Such a necessary condition for moral development is external to individuals. Therefore, when it is not met, the agent cannot be held responsible for what he/she is. On the other, self-effort is crucial in moral development, and no one can be virtuous without self-cultivation. Given a minimally good environment, it is up to individuals to cultivate their character. One is responsible for his/her moral failure due to the lack of self-effort. Furthermore, once one’s morality and character are established, one not only can overcome adverse environmental influences but also can transform the environment. Based on these beliefs, Mencius holds that those who lack a necessary environment for moral development can be

morally excused for their moral failure, and that those who are in the position to make social changes and provide the environment necessary for moral development are not only responsible for their own character but are also at least partially responsible for the character formation of others. They have a heavy moral responsibility for building up a good society and producing more responsible agents. That is why Mencius urges the ruling class to practice benevolent government (*ren zheng* 仁政) and teaches intellectuals to take the responsibility for the world.

## I

To understand Mencius' position on moral responsibility, we first need to discuss his well-known theory that human nature is originally good. For it is this belief in the goodness of human nature that provides the foundation for Mencius' theory of moral responsibility.

At Mencius' times, the term "nature" (*xing* 性) was often used to refer to a thing's tendency and inclination. The *xing* of an animate thing meant the course on which life completes its development if not injured and adequately nourished (Graham 1967, 232; 1989, 124). *Xing* was both a descriptive and prescriptive concept. On the one hand, the *xing* of a thing referred to the course of life proper to the thing; on the other, it referred to the way the thing will develop when free from interference (Graham 1989, 125). Given this understanding of *xing*, we can see that, by "human nature," Mencius refers to the natural and proper tendency of human beings.

According to Mencius, human beings are disposed to be virtuous just as water is disposed to flow downward (*Mencius*, 6A:2). All human beings have the four beginnings or innate seeds of virtues: the heart (*xin* 心) of commiseration, the heart of shame and dislike, the heart of deference and compliance, and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of commiseration is the beginning of benevolence. The heart of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness. The heart of deference and compliance is the beginning of propriety. And the heart of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom (*Mencius*,

2A:6). These four beginnings are four kinds of senses or feelings.<sup>1</sup> They consist of human nature and distinguish human beings from other species. If they are properly developed, the person will become virtuous, just as a seed of a tree will become a tree if it is properly nurtured.

Clearly, by “human nature is good,” Mencius does not mean that the human being is born with perfect virtues—like a sage. Instead, he means that every human being has some seeds of virtues and has a natural basis for moral perfection. Speaking of human moral potential, every person can be Yao and Shun<sup>2</sup> (*Mencius* 6B:2). “The sage and I are of the same kind” (*Mencius* 6A:7). However, to be capable of attaining sagehood is not the same as to actually become a sage. The fact that every one has some seeds of virtues does not mean that these seeds can be actually developed. The goodness of human nature does not entail that each human being will naturally or spontaneously become a virtuous person. For Mencius, moral development is a long and dynamical process. Good seeds need to grow up. To become a virtuous agent, one must have his/her seeds of virtues, i.e., his/her four beginnings or four feelings, properly nurtured.<sup>3</sup>

It is within this context that the issue of moral responsibility arises in Mencius. If for moral development it is essential to make the seeds of virtues grow, what, then, is responsible for their growth?

For Mencius, whether one’s good nature can be properly nurtured is dependent on both internal and external conditions: the agent’s self-attention and self-effort, and outside economic, political and social environments. In other words, the lack of self-attention or cultivation and the lack of a suitable environment are two factors responsible for the failure of the innate good nature of human beings to develop. Although the former is up to the individual’s effort, the latter is not. When one’s failure in moral development is due to an

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of innate sympathy is also put forward by some Western philosophers such as Rousseau and Hume, but no Western philosopher has proposed the other three moral senses discussed by Mencius.

<sup>2</sup> Yao and Shun were both legendary sage-rulers of the 3rd millennium B.C.

<sup>3</sup> See Jiang 1997 for a more detailed discussion on human nature and moral cultivation.

external reason that is beyond one's control, one could not be responsible for it. Therefore, necessary external conditions for moral development are also preconditions for moral responsibility. In the next section such external conditions will be discussed in some detail.

## II

Since whether those external conditions for moral development can be met is not determined by the individual, whether one can be responsible for his/her morality is not totally up to oneself. In this aspect, Mencius would agree with those contemporary Western philosophers such as Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel who believe that morality is subject to luck, and moral life is not free from external contingency.<sup>4</sup>

For Mencius, the most important external condition for one's being virtuous is the environment in which one grows up and lives. Although human nature is disposed to morality, a person can be made bad by an external force, just as water can be forced to go uphill (*Mencius*, 6A:2). Although human nature is the same in everyone, people may behave differently under different environmental circumstances. He says in 6A:7 that in good years most young people behave well, while in bad years they abandon themselves to evil. Such a difference in behavior is clearly not caused by the difference in human nature but by differences in the environment. In 6A:8, the same point is illustrated by the metaphor of Niu Mountain.

The trees of Niu Mountain were once beautiful. But can the mountain be regarded any longer as beautiful since, being on the border of a big state, the trees have been hewed down with axes and hatchets? Still, with the rest given them by the days and nights, and nourishment provided them by the rains and the dew, they were not without buds and sprouts springing forth. But then the cattle and the sheep pastured upon them once and again. That is why the mountain looks so bald. When people see that it is so bald, they think that there was never any timber on the mountain. Is this the true nature of the mountain? Is there not

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<sup>4</sup> See Bernard Williams 1981, 20-40, and Thomas Nagel 1979, 24-38.

[also] a heart of humanity and righteousness originally existing in man? The way in which he loses his originally good mind is like the way in which trees are hewed down with axes and hatchets. (Chan's trans., 56)

This metaphor of Niu Mountain first shows that people's bad behavior does not indicate that they are not originally good, just as the mountain's being bald now does not prove that it is not the nature of the mountain to grow buds and sprouts. Furthermore, the metaphor suggests that despite their original good nature, people might become bad and remain bad due to external forces, just as the mountain became bald as the result of overwhelming external destruction and cannot restore its original beauty unless its environment is changed. This shows that, as certain external conditions are necessary for the mountain to maintain its original natural beauty, the economic, social and political environment is extremely important for preserving and developing good human nature. "Therefore with proper nourishment and care, everything grows, whereas without proper nourishment and care, everything decays"(ibid. 57).

What, then, are the minimal environmental conditions for being morally good? When may we judge that one's being bad is due to environmental reasons? For Mencius, the first indispensable environmental condition is that people have the necessities of life without which their survival is impossible. Extreme poverty will force people to do whatever helps them survive. That is why Mencius strongly believes that those who become criminals, because of extreme poverty caused by corrupt rulers and unfair distribution in society, should not be blamed. Instead, those rulers who put their people in such terrible living conditions are largely responsible. Such a point is clearly made in passage 1A:7.

When they are thus involved in crime, to follow them up and punish them—this is to entrap the people. Therefore, a wise ruler will ensure the livelihood of the people, so that, above, they have wherewithal to serve their parents and, below, sufficient wherewithal to support their wives and children; in good years they shall always be abundantly satisfied, and in bad years they shall

escape death by starvation. Only then does he drive them toward goodness; in this way the people find it easy to follow him. (Yang's edition, 17)<sup>5</sup>

This passage suggests that, though Mencius and contemporary philosophers do not have the same terminology of "moral responsibility," they are concerned with the same issue. Mencius might not say that those who have committed crimes for the sake of survival are completely free from responsibility for their wrong doing and character, but he is clearly saying that the ruler's failure to provide for their people's necessities of life is mainly responsible for those people's wrong doing. Obviously, Mencius believes that such unfortunate people are morally excused for their crimes, and the punishment imposed on them is unfair.

With the belief in the goodness of human nature, Mencius holds that people will not do evil if they are properly educated and are not driven to evil by external forces, just as Niu Mountain will grow trees if it is free from external destruction. Therefore, for Mencius, the efficient way to make people moral is to remove those conditions that force people to do evil. More specifically, the main means to bringing about morally responsible agents is not imposing legal punishment but providing good economic, social, and political environments and proper moral education. In practice, Mencius does not advocate abolishing legal punishment. He might not deny the expressive function of punishment, that is, to announce in the strongest terms the society's disapproval of certain behaviors.<sup>6</sup> But he seems not to believe that punishment is the most efficient means to stop crimes and develop moral persons. First, for those criminals who commit crimes due to their lack of the necessities of life, punishment will not stop their crimes. As long as their necessities are not met, they will continue to commit crime. Second, for those who commit crimes due to flaws in their character, punishment cannot make them morally good but encourages sophisticated selfishness.

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<sup>5</sup> This is my translation from Yang's edition, but I have referred to some other translations.

<sup>6</sup> Lawry Finsen brought to my attention some contemporary discussions on the expressive function of punishment.

They will not commit a crime when they believe that they can be caught, but they will whenever they think they can get away with it. This is in line with Confucius' following remarks:

Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by law and punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honor and shame. (*Analects*, 2:3. Chan's trans., 22)

The Confucian attitude to punishments has been summarized by Chad Hansen as follows: according to the Confucians, governing by laws will produce endless litigation and nurture the selfish instinct for avoiding punishments. The essentially immoral population will only consider ways to enrich themselves through loopholes in laws. Under such circumstances, it is almost impossible to develop a morally good person (Hansen 174). Such a Confucian belief explains why Mencius did his best to urge rulers to practice the kingly way to rule and establish the benevolent government. Due to the influence of such Confucian philosophers as Mencius, in traditional Chinese culture law is regarded as the last resort to appeal, and rulers are expected to be moral examples and love their people as parents love their children. Although very few rulers actually lived up to such a Confucian ideal, most rulers labeled themselves as practitioners of such a Confucian benevolent government and take this as the moral basis of their rule.

For Mencius, those who have to work all the time in order to survive and live in extreme poverty have the same human nature as others and have the potential to be moral sages, but their moral potential cannot be developed because of their terrible living conditions. Therefore, they are objects of love and pity but not of blame. In the *Mencius*, there are many passages which show Mencius' deep sympathy for the working poor, as well as great anger at corrupt rulers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> What Mencius has said about working people who constantly struggle to obtain the necessities of life is also compatible with some contemporary analyses of conditions of responsibility. Contemporary philosophers, such as Herry Frankfurt, Gary Weston, and Richard Taylor, all agree that in order for an agent to be responsible, the agent must have freedom of will in the sense that he or she not



However, for Mencius, extreme poverty is not the only external force which can make a person lose his or her good nature and therefore become a morally bad being. Mencius clearly recognizes the moral relevance of socialization. Sometimes, socially corrupting forces can impede one's moral development to such an extent that one becomes morally blind or unavoidably embraces mistaken values. For example, if a person is surrounded by evil people all the time and has never had a chance to understand what a morally good person is, it will be impossible for him or her to know what is right and what is wrong. Just as in order to learn a language one needs to have a proper language environment, so also in order to be morally good, one needs to have a proper social environment. The following passage from the *Mencius* shows this point.

Mencius said to Dai Busheng, "Do you wish your king to be good? I shall speak to you plainly. Suppose a Counselor of Chu wishes his son to speak the language of Qi. Would he have a man from Qi to tutor his son? Or would he have a man from Chu?"

"He would have a man from Qi to tutor his son."

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only can act according to his or her desires but also can act according to those desires endorsed by his or her true self (see Frankfurt, 1971, 5-20, Watson, 1975, 205-20, and Taylor, 1976, 281-99). For all of them, human beings have the ability to evaluate, reflect on, and correct selves and therefore are able to choose their first order desires. Because children, insane people and animals do not have this ability, they are not responsible for themselves. Because victims of mental manipulation are not acting upon the values they choose, they are not responsible either. Susan Wolf labels the Frankfurt-Watson-Taylor type of theory as "the deep-self view" since it holds that one is responsible only if one's will is governed by one's deep self (see Wolf: 1987, 50-51). If we apply such a theory to those who have been constantly struggling for the necessities of life such as food and clothing and have never had time and opportunity to speculate about anything, it is not hard to see that such people cannot have deep selves as long as their living conditions are not changed for the better. Although as human beings they have the ability to form deep selves, they do not have the opportunity to use this ability and fulfill their full humanity. If "the deep self" is a necessary condition for responsibility and these people are not able to form deep selves due to extreme poverty, they cannot be responsible for themselves.

“With one man from Qi’s tutoring the boy and a host of Chu men chattering around him, even if you caned him every day to make him speak Qi, you would not succeed. Take him away to some district like Zhuang and Yue (names of streets in Qi) for a few years, then even if you caned him every day to make him speak Chu, you would not succeed. You have placed Xue Juzhou near the King because you think him a good man. If everyone around the King, old or young, high or low, is a Xue Juzhou, then who will help the King to do evil? But if no one around the King is a Xue Juzhou, then who will help the King to do good? What difference can one Xue Juzhou make to the King of Song?” (*Mencius*, 3B:6. Lau’s trans., 111-12)

If a child is placed among evil people all the time, there is no way for him or her to distinguish what is right from what is wrong and become a morally good person. In Susan Wolf’s words, in such a situation, the child cannot have “a sane deep self.”<sup>8</sup> By “a sane deep self” she refers to a self which contains the ability to know right from wrong and therefore enables the agent to correct and improve himself or herself. Whether one can have a sane deep self is not up to oneself, but as long as one has a sane deep self, one is a responsible agent. Therefore, Wolf believes that we who have sane deep selves may not be metaphysically responsible for ourselves in the sense that we did not create ourselves from nothing, but we are morally responsible for ourselves, because we are able to understand and appreciate right and wrong, and to change our characters and our

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<sup>8</sup> Wolf uses the following example to make the same point Mencius shows above. Let us call Wolf’s example “the example of JoJo.” JoJo is the favorite son of Jo the First, an evil and sadistic dictator of a small, undeveloped country. JoJo is allowed to accompany his father and observe his daily routine. Since little JoJo takes his father as a role model, he develops values very much like his father’s. When he becomes an adult, he does many of the same sorts of things his father did, including sending people to prison or to death or to torture chambers on a whim. It seems that it is not very plausible to say that JoJo is really responsible for what he has become. JoJo acts according to his desires and values, therefore he has a deep self that controls his desires and actions (see Wolf 53-54). But, unfortunately, his deep self does not have the ability to know right from wrong and therefore lacks the resources and reasons that might have served as a basis for self-correction. Wolf calls the JoJo type deep self “insane deep self” and deep selves of people who live in a normal environment “sane deep self” (see Wolf 56-59).

actions accordingly (Wolf 1988, 59). A sane deep self is a necessary condition for being morally responsible, and those who have insane selves are not responsible for themselves. Such a theory is in total agreement with Mencius' view that some human beings are not responsible for their moral failure since adverse external forces such as extreme poverty and bad upbringing are so overwhelming that they are not able to be morally good.

It is because of Mencius' sensitivity to the influence of the environment on one's moral development that he cares so much about social and political affairs. He advocates social changes from top down due to his belief that the best strategy for inculcating morality in society is to win over a ruler who will provide the environment necessary for moral growth.

Certainly, Mencius's view on the significance of the minimally good environment for moral growth does not accord with our intuitive and widely shared understanding of moral responsibility. According to the latter, one is morally responsible as long as one's actions and character do not directly result from coercion and involuntary movement. If such a concept of moral responsibility is correct, extreme poverty and bad upbringing cannot exempt one from being morally responsible, even though they make the formation of one's sane deep self impossible. But, this concept of moral responsibility, as Nagel points out, is deeply paradoxical. The paradox lies in this:

A person can be morally responsible for what he does; but what he does results from a great deal that he does not do; therefore he is not morally responsible for what he is and is not responsible for. (Nagel 1979, 34)

The concept of responsibility that is so deeply paradoxical cannot provide the justification for moral blame and praise. So, to hold those who are not able to obtain a sane deep self responsible for what they are and what they do in this sense does not make them deserve blame and punishment. If the concept of responsibility ought to justify moral blame and praise, those who are not able to form a sane deep self due to external reasons are not responsible for their moral failure.

### III

The discussion above shows that, in Mencius' ethics, the excusing condition for moral failure is the lack of a minimally good economic environment or the lack of a minimally good social environment for moral development. Basically, when people do not have such a minimal economic or social environment for their moral development, they are not responsible for their moral failure. Then, who is responsible, or at least mainly responsible for it? Logically, those who are in the position to create or change people's economic or social environments are responsible. To release moral responsibility from those who lack the external conditions necessary for moral development and to put heavy moral responsibility on the elite are two indispensable sides of Mencius' theory of moral responsibility. In this section, I will focus on the latter and show why members of the elite, such as rulers and intellectuals, are more responsible than are others for the wellbeing of society and people's moral development.

Chinese culture has been a culture of responsibility in the sense that it emphasizes that every person has certain responsibilities to others, to the state, and to the whole world, given his/her social role. On the one hand, to a certain degree each person is responsible for building up a good society. This idea is expressed in the old Chinese saying "Everyone has a share of the responsibility for the fate of his/her country." On the other hand, not all people are equally responsible for it. Given their special positions in society, members of the ruling class and intellectuals have heavier responsibility than other members of society have. Confucian ethics definitely represents such a way of thinking on responsibility. "Intellectuals' responsibility is heavy and their road is long" is a well-known saying from Confucius' *Analects*.<sup>9</sup> Both Confucius and Mencius were good examples of responsible intellectuals. They did their best to bring about desirable social changes. Although they did not have much success in it, they never gave up trying. They regard that as what they

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<sup>9</sup> Confucius' *Analects*, 8:7.

ought to do no matter whether they could attain desirable consequences.

One's moral responsibility needs to be understood in a social context. There is a close relation between one's responsibility and one's social role. As far as such a relation is concerned, one's responsibility might be either an activated one or a deactivated one, as Robert Neville has classified (Neville 1995, 151). A person's activated responsibilities remain with the person because they belong with the person's social role and because no one else has taken them over. A person's deactivated responsibilities are set in abeyance because other people have roles to fulfill them (ibid.).

A primary element of social bonding is that each person serves as a token to fulfill some of the responsibilities of others; ... together the society can address the array of its obligations with some hope of success. (Neville 1995, 151)

In an ideal situation, as long as individuals take their responsibilities according to their social roles, the full range of obligations in society will be addressed. But, if the social organization fails to effectively address certain obligations, everyone's responsibilities to those obligations are activated and therefore individuals' ranges of activated responsibilities increase (ibid.). Nevertheless, one will always have those activated responsibilities derived from his/her social roles. Given the social roles of rulers, according to Confucianism, to provide people with the necessities of life and to teach people virtue are among rulers' activated responsibilities. As parents are largely responsible for their children's moral development and wellbeing, rulers are greatly responsible for the moral development and wellbeing of their people. If rulers fail to take such responsibilities, they should be morally blamed. As far as intellectuals' social roles are concerned, their activated responsibilities at least include educating the ruling class and common people to be virtuous, setting up good examples of virtue, and directly or indirectly contributing to a good government. If they fail in such responsibilities, they are morally blameworthy too. Those responsibilities of rulers and intellectuals are

not just for the past and present, but more about the future. Therefore, they are prospective rather than retrospective.<sup>10</sup> Rulers and intellectuals have a heavy responsibility for bringing about a better society in the future. What Confucianism emphasizes is such a kind of forward-looking responsibility.

In Confucian ethics, there is no dichotomy between private and public morality. On the contrary, for Confucians, one's taking responsibilities for others and society presupposes one's being a virtuous agent. Self-cultivation is the foundation of the fulfillment of moral responsibility for society. In China, "to cultivate one's character, to regulate one's family, to govern the state well, and to make the world tranquil and happy" is a well-accepted idea from Confucianism.<sup>11</sup> In order to fulfill their responsibility for society, rulers and intellectuals need to take responsibility for their own moral development first. As discussed earlier, the formation of good character requires a minimally good environment and self-cultivation. Rulers and intellectuals in general do not have a problem in attaining a minimally good environment (economically and socially). Then, self-cultivation is the main issue for their moral development.

An important characteristic of Mencius' ethics is the emphasis on self-cultivation. Given a minimally good environment, it is one's responsibility to preserve and develop one's good nature and to form moral character. The growth of the goodness in one's nature requires one's constant self-effort. But, why does moral development require so much self-effort if one's nature is disposed to virtue and if one has a minimally good environment? Because there is also a part in one that may drive one to immorality. For those who have minimal environmental conditions for the satisfaction of moral development, the key to being morally well-developed is to cultivate the noble part inside (the four moral seeds) so much that the lower part becomes minimal. Although for Mencius human nature is good in the sense

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<sup>10</sup> I borrow this distinction from Michael S. Moore. Moore classifies responsibility for some event in the past as "retrospective responsibility," and responsibility for the future as defined by individuals' social roles as "prospective responsibility" (see Moore, 1984, 50). It was Robert Shope who brought my attention to Moore's distinction.

<sup>11</sup> This idea is from the *Great Learning*. See its chapters 4-5.

that unique human qualities incline us to be moral, there is part of the innate nature of human beings that is shared with animals and that may lead to evil. What we share with animals is the lower part inside human beings. It consists of those natural desires and instincts for material and physical needs. These desires and instincts are not evil in themselves, but the pursuit of the satisfaction of them without regulation will make people part from morality. Therefore, to be virtuous, one needs to build up the nobler part of his nature and overcome the lower part. Given similar environments, the reason why some people become moral but some do not is that they do not cultivate their inner selves to the same degree. So Mencius believes:

Those who follow the greater qualities in their nature become great men and those who follow the smaller qualities in their nature become small men. ... If we first build up the nobler part of our nature, then the inferior part cannot overcome it. It is simply this that makes a man great. (*Mencius*, 6A:15. Chan's trans, 59)

In the course of the process of growth of the innate goodness, one gains greater and greater moral strength. When one achieves a high level of moral perfection, one will obtain what Mencius called *hao ran zhi qi* (浩然之氣 flood-like *qi* or energy). Although *qi* (氣 vital energy or force) was widely used in Chinese philosophy before Mencius, *hao ran zhi qi* is a term invented by Mencius (Fung 1948, 78). According to Mencius, the flood-like *qi* is not a kind of ordinary vital force. It unites the moral ideal with physical force. It is, to the highest degree, vast and unyielding. It is accompanied by righteousness and the Way. It is produced by the accumulation of righteous deeds but not by incidental acts of righteousness (2A:2). As one's moral strength grows, one is able to perform more and more difficult moral actions. The person who has obtained flood-like *qi* will display great moral courage and be able to face great dangers for the sake of righteousness with an unmovable mind.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, one will be an ideally moral person like this:

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<sup>12</sup> I have discussed Mencius' view on courage in detail elsewhere. See Jiang, 1997.

When he achieves his ambition he shares these with the people; when he fails to do so he practices the Way alone. He cannot be led into excesses when wealthy, and honoured or deflected from his purpose when poor and obscure, nor can he be made to bow before superior force. This is what I would call a great man. (*Mencius*, 3B:2. Lau's trans., 107)

The morally ideal person portrayed above has been the moral inspiration of Chinese intellectuals for more than two thousand years. It still inspires and will continue to inspire the Chinese—especially Chinese intellectuals—to take moral responsibility and keep integrity under any circumstance.

Although, for Mencius, adverse external forces can make a person whose virtues have not been developed morally bad, they cannot make a truly virtuous person non-virtuous. Proper environment and education are indispensable for developing the goodness of human nature and forming good character. But once the goodness in one's nature has been well developed, and one's character has formed, one will be able to transcend the environment. The stronger the nobler part of one's nature is, the less the environmental influence. When one has achieved a high degree of moral perfection, no environment can negatively affect one's morality. That is why Mencius says "Only men of education can have a constant heart without a certain livelihood" (*Mencius*, 1A:7).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, a virtuous agent may become morally stronger by overcoming and transforming adverse environments. So Mencius said:

When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent. (*Mencius*, 6B:15. Chan's trans., 78)

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<sup>13</sup> This is my translation from Yang's edition, but I have referred to some other translations.



Clearly, according to Mencius, a truly virtuous person will regard extreme hardship and adverse environments as a means to test and strengthen his character. Therefore, as Tu puts it, “a difficult personal ordeal may turn out to be a blessing in disguise” (Tu 1976, 62). Mencius does not deny that, in general, adverse environments impede moral development. Nevertheless, negative influences of adverse environments on virtuous agents are much smaller than on other people. Furthermore, virtuous agents may turn the negative environmental forces into positive factors for moral cultivation.

When one cultivates his person so well, he is ready to take great responsibility for the world. That is why Mencius says that the virtuous person starts with self-cultivation and aims at bringing order to the world (7B:32). Deeply influenced by Confucianism, typical Chinese intellectuals from ancient times to the present always have had a strong sense of mission and responsibility. That is why most Chinese intellectuals regard bringing happiness to the people as their duty.

In general, in Mencius’ ethics, sensitivity to the influence of the environment on moral development, and the emphasis on responsibility coexist without any contradiction. Meanwhile, given Mencius’ belief both that all human beings have the same moral potential and that certain minimal environmental conditions are indispensable for moral development, there is no inconsistency for Mencius to hold both that all people are morally equal and that, realistically, not all people have the same degree of moral responsibility for their moral development. To minimize the inequality of this responsibility among people, improvements in economic, political, and social conditions must be made. Furthermore, those who are in the position to bring about such changes in society not only have responsibility for their own self-cultivation but also have a heavy responsibility for the world.<sup>14</sup>

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