Meta-theories, interpretability, and human nature:
A reply to J. David Velleman[*]

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My thanks to David Velleman for a clear and constructive response to my article. He raises two issues that might benefit from some further brief remarks. The first concerns the error-theory I put forth to explain why the early Confucians (as I understand them) were not relativists. The second concerns the extent to which the Confucian notion of harmony is at odds with Velleman's notion of interpretability or coherence. I consider each in turn, below.

I - Functionalism and Relativism

In the epilogue of my article, Velleman's avatar suggests that exposure to other stable and enduring *dao*s should undermine the early Confucians' confidence in the unique efficacy of the Zhou. I imagined this would be Velleman's own reaction to the Confucian commitment to absolutism, and so was happy to read his acceptance of it.

However, I also think this is correct; the Confucian view of morality *should* be friendly to relativism, even though they themselves were absolutists. This is because Kongzi and Xunzi (my two main sources for the Confucian view) had what we might call functionalist accounts of the origins of their favored *dao*: it was created by brilliant sages of the past so as to allow humans to get along and flourish. Without the institutions and practices they created we would still be sustaining ourselves with raw foods, living in caves during winter and in nests during summer, and otherwise eeking out a miserable existence (to use a memorable description from the *Record of Rites* 禮 記).

The key question for such a functionalist view is: could the sages have created a *different* social ontology to serve the *same* purpose? Xunzi would answer in the negative. What the sages created was perfect and unimprovable; there is only one true, workable set of doables: "none under Heaven can add to or subtract from it… those who do not follow it will be endangered… will perish" (Hutton 2014, 205). However, were he aware of the relevant facts— namely, that there are other advanced civilizations that persist and do not perish— it would be difficult to insist on the unique correctness of the Zhou (which, after all, perished itself).

I am less sure about Mengzi, though, who grounds morality in a Heavenly-endowed human nature, setting him apart from the classical thinkers we now label Confucian in philosophically deep ways. (Indeed, I left him out of my initial account altogether.) Mengzi's signature claim is that human nature is good and contains moral content organized (ahead of any experience) into four beginnings or 'sprouts' of virtue: compassion, disdain, deference, and affirming/denying (2A6, 6A6). These sprouts reveal themselves through spontaneous reactions to relevant stimuli—such as when the otherwise callous King Xuan feels unexpected compassion at the sight of a terrified ox being led to slaughter (1A7). Under ordinary conditions the sprouts develop on their own without need for a specific or detailed curriculum of formal study (e.g. 2A6, 7A17). A nutritive environment (e.g. a loving family and favorable socio-economic circumstances) is sufficient to lead most people to develop the corresponding virtues of benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom, while those seeking higher levels of moral excellence can engage in various forms of engaged reflection to further strengthen them (Van Norden 2007, 228-246).

Mengzi emphasizes that this pre-structured moral content is the 'one root' of all morality. For example, the rituals surrounding burials were not, in his view, *created* by brilliant sage kings but were instead pre-ordained *expressions* of human nature, summoned forth by the sight of deceased kin rotting and besieged by pests (3A5). These rites can be refined and embellished, but not changed; they must, for example, be ever *lavish* (e.g. 2B7, 3A5), even in the face of vigorous argumentation and criticism (such as those leveled by the rival Mohists, who found the wastefulness of lavish burials beyond the pale). Attempts to alter the rituals fail to gain traction because they are inconsistent with human nature.

On the one hand, the organic nature of Mengzi's view about the dawn of burial rites brings to mind Velleman's characterization of groups of persons converging upon

ways of being ordinary as their interactions with one another unfold. For Velleman, diversity results inevitably from this process (as groups interact in locally contingent ways). Yet Mengzi maintains that human nature yields very specific moral inclinations, judgments, and practices that align with his own normative theory—his own version of Confucianism. If one were to argue that lavish funerals are wasteful and ought to be replaced with more modest ones, for example, this would be akin to introducing a second 'root' to morality, something that is not Heaven's intent (3A5).

Can Mengzi, in spite of his absolutism on such matters, be made friendly toward relativism? For the reasons just cited, it seems unlikely. Facts about human nature constrain the range of true *dao*s sharply (more on this in a moment).

II - Interpretability or harmony?

Velleman ends his response by drawing a distinction between his own notion of interpretability on the one hand and the Confucian notion of harmony on the other. He acknowledges that Confucians would find more harmonious ways of life to be superior ways of life, but claims that only a minimal notion of harmony is compatible with his own view.

> I can agree, but only if 'harmony' is given a fairly deflated interpretation. If it means something like "coherence", then it comes very close to intelligibility and can therefore stand as the necessarily ubiquitous aim in relation to which ways of life can count as more advanced or less advanced, in my view. But if it means social harmony of a sort that requires cooperation or mutual sympathy, then I must demur.

This has proved to be a complex issue, and I can only offer a few suggestions. What makes it difficult (at least in part) is the lack of precision when it comes to the concept of harmony itself, which can have a range of meanings and can apply to various groups or collectives (e.g. Li, 2014; Wong, 2020). What is more, harmony can come in degrees. At one end we can imagine a group being harmonious in a minimal sense if it is not experiencing active internal conflict and persons continue to participate in the shared way of life despite lacking mutual affection or engaging in any substantive collaborative projects. At the other end there is a richer conception of harmony, which is characterized by a sense of belonging, appreciation, and even mutual enrichment and aesthetic edification.

Velleman seems to have something akin to the former notion in mind in the

following example:

> There are revisions and amendments to our way of life that would enable us to make better sense to one another and to ourselves, thereby advancing our way of life with respect to the necessarily ubiquitous aim of intelligibility. I believe that many of the progressive social changes of recent centuries can be explained and evaluated in just this way — for example, the erasure of unnecessary social distinctions. Mill, in *The Subjection of Women*, certainly seems to argue, at bottom, that our social relations would make a lot more sense if men and women were treated alike simply as people.

This seems plausible; Mill did argue for greater coherence in the treatment of all persons. Given other commitments and values it made no sense, from his perspective, to treat men and women in diverging ways. But what sparked this call for change? What would indicate or signal that things were not making sense? A Confucian would, I believe, highlight Mill's language in that work of women's suffering and humiliation (Mill 1870, 18), of a "chronic state of bribery and intimidation combined" (20), of necks in yokes (22), of active resistance (24-28). These are signs of discord, of a need for accommodation and harmonization. So the two— discord and strife on the one hand, and the need for cohesion on the other— would seem to be intertwined; trying to disentangle them is difficult (like trying to peel a grape).

We might be tempted to say that the absence of strife is what signals internal coherence and mutual intelligibility, and anything more (such as mutual affection or appreciation) would no longer advance intelligibility but instead some other contingent aim that is not a *necessary* feature of well-functioning ways of life but simply a *favored* one.

> I do believe, as I have mentioned, that the pressure to coordinate on a shared way of life militates in favor of cooperative *mores,* because cooperation is the preferred point of spontaneous coordination. More advanced ways of life are therefore likely to feature a fair degree of harmony in this sense of the word. But this result will be strictly contingent. There may be fairly advanced ways of life that are not harmonious in this robust sense of the word.

For Confucians, shared ways of life without fellow feeling, mutual respect, or simply goodwill are unlikely to persist. What is more, it seems difficult to imagine how one might be able to *rank* ways of life as being better or worse in terms of internal

coherence and interpretability; a merely interpretable way of life would seem hard to distinguish from any other interpretable one. Perhaps this is to be expected. It does seem hard to make such comparisons.

III - Human Nature and Possibility

Ultimately, diverging assumptions about human nature and the possibilities of human social organization might best explain why Velleman and the Confucians would disagree on what kind of harmony characterizes well-functioning moralities.

Every classical Confucian source maintains that humans desire to live in the company of one another, and especially with kin. Even Xunzi, who emphasized that uncultivated human nature is bad since it leads to interpersonal competition and strife, nonetheless believed that love of kin is a part of the nature of all sentient creatures, and strongest among humans (Hutton 2014, 213). Living together with kin can, of course, be difficult. Nonetheless, persons cannot live apart and still have meaningful lives. We may thus distinguish well-functioning daos, by their lights, by how well they accommodate not only general facts about human nature but also this more specific fact concerning humankind's love for their own kin.

In *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, Velleman similarly claims that facts concerning human nature constrain the range of possible ways of life.

> The eligible points of convergence are constrained by human nature. There are some attitudes on which we humans cannot help but converge. They include an aversion to pain, separation, and frustration; an inclination toward pleasure, connection, and the fluid exercise of skill; the inborn and automatic fight-or-flight response; an interest in the human face and form; an initial dislike of snakes, spiders, blood, and the dark; plus an array of physiological appetites. (Velleman 2013, 64)

However, as we have seen, these constraints are not enough to rule out ways of life wholly lacking "cooperation or mutual sympathy". Why? On Velleman's view, the

drive toward sociality… is inchoate and multiply specifiable. It can be described

as a drive toward connection with other people, a drive to function as a person among other persons, indeed simply to *be* a person, insofar as sociality is essential to personhood or personhood is a social status. (Ibid, 54)

For Confucians, love of kin is a brute fact that cannot (and should not) be attenuated in any proper way of life. Yet nothing like this appears in Vellemans own account of human nature.

What's more, Velleman sees today (whereas the Confucians back then did not) humans converging on ways of life in quite different ways— where children are raised so as to be independent from their parents, for example, or where it is normative for persons to live alone. Radical changes in socio-political organization and material conditions allow persons to lead radically different lives, where the sort of cooperation, coordination, and intimacy required for a meaningful life is simply far less extensive than the Confucian thinkers would have imagined. From the current perspective, it can seem that a more fully cooperative or enmeshed way of life is simply one contingent outcome of spontaneous human organization.

This is just perhaps a long way of saying that it is very difficult to ask questions of the sort 'what would Kongzi say about *dao* if he lived today?'. I have gestured here at some possibilities. Hopefully others will pick up the slack.

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