

Mencius and Augustine on Evil: A Test Case for Comparative Philosophy

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Mencius was a Confucian philosopher of the fourth century B.C.E.* His teachings are known to us today through an eponymous collection of his sayings, and his dialogues and debates with rulers, rival philosophers, and disciples. Augustine was a Christian saint and philosopher of the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., who left behind a number of texts in a variety of genres. Mencius and Augustine are among the greatest and most influential thinkers in their respective traditions. Neither knew of the other, or even had any inkling that another major intellectual tradition existed far beyond the boundaries of what was, to them, “the world.”¹

This essay is an exercise in comparative philosophy, taking as a test case Mencius’s and Augustine’s explanations of human wrongdoing. I take comparative philosophy to be concerned both with understanding what is distinctive about two thinkers or traditions, and with trying to determine whether there are any respects in which one thinker or tradition might provide a philosophical “challenge” to another. (I hope it will become more clear over the course of my essay what forms such a “challenge” might take.) We shall see that the differences between Mencius and Augustine are very great. Indeed, we might think that a *comparison* between them, in any substantive sense of that term, is impossible.

I shall begin by outlining and applying the comparative philosophical methodology of Alasdair MacIntyre, because I think he has said much that is illuminating on this topic. However, I shall present some evidence against MacIntyre’s view on one key point. MacIntyre argues that there are some intellectual traditions which are “incommensurable.” I certainly cannot prove in the space of

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1. There have probably been contacts between Indo-Europeans and Chinese since the second millennium B.C.E. (See J. P. Mallory and Victor H. Mair, *The Tarim Mummies: Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West* [Thames & Hudson, 2000].) However, Mencius would not have known of either Platonism or Christianity (the major influences on Augustine), and the Roman Empire did not know about Confucianism.

one paper that there exist no two traditions that are incommensurable. However, the views of Mencius and Augustine represent two extremely different intellectual traditions. One might expect that their views would prove to be incommensurable if any do. I hope to show that the philosophies of Mencius and Augustine can not only be substantially compared, but can also challenge one another philosophically in a manner that is more direct than MacIntyre's methodology allows. In particular, I shall try to show that in his *Confessions* Augustine's narrative of his adolescent theft of some pears cannot be accounted for by Mencius's philosophical psychology.

1. MacIntyre's View in Brief

MacIntyre holds that "[l]ogical incompatibility *and* incommensurability may both be present" between the claims or theses of two competing traditions.² Logical incompatibility requires that "two communities . . . are able to agree in identifying one and the same subject matter as that identified, characterized, and evaluated in their two rival systems and are able to recognize that the applicability of certain of the concepts in the one scheme of belief precludes certain concepts in the other scheme from having application. . . ."³ Incommensurability, as MacIntyre uses the term, obtains when "no or insufficient common standards are available by which to judge between the rival standpoints."⁴ One of the implications of incommensurability is that adherents of rival intellectual traditions cannot fruitfully engage in *direct* argument with one another, because "there is no set of independent standards of rational justification by appeal to which the issues between contending traditions can be decided."⁵

MacIntyre also holds that not all languages are intertranslatable. One set of such cases involves

those situations in which the task of translation is from the language of one community whose language-in-use is expressive of and presupposes a particular system of well-defined beliefs into the different language of another such community with beliefs which in some key areas are strongly incompatible with those of the first community.⁶

In understanding MacIntyre's claim about translatability, it is important to keep in mind both what he means by "translation" and the relationship he sees

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 351 (emphasis in original).

3. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 380.

4. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 351.

5. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 351.

6. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 379.

between language and beliefs. MacIntyre is not denying that it is possible for a speaker of any given natural language to *learn* any other natural language. Nor is MacIntyre denying that it is possible to *modify* an existing language so that it comes to have expressive resources that had previously only existed in some other language. In fact, MacIntyre writes that

when Greek philosophy came to be written in Latin, those who continued the Greek tradition of philosophical enquiry had to be able to recognize . . . the previous singularly unphilosophical character of Latin, thus acknowledging the extraordinary achievement of those who like Cicero both translated from Greek and neologized Latin, so that it acquired new resources.⁷

However, MacIntyre argues that, if we attempt to translate between linguistic communities whose languages presuppose mutually incompatible beliefs, there will be cases in which translation by “same-saying and paraphrase” will fail.⁸ MacIntyre gives the example of an ode by Horace that, if we tried to translate it out of Latin and into first-century B.C.E. Hebrew, would result in a statement that was “at once false and blasphemous; the Hebrew explanation of the Roman conception of a god could only have been in terms of an idolatrous regard for evil spirits.”⁹ One might object to MacIntyre at this point that one *could* translate from Latin into Hebrew; however, the corresponding sentences in Latin and Hebrew would be deemed to be *true* by Horace and *false* by the Jews in question. MacIntyre would respond, I think, that Horace’s conception of the gods simply has no conceptual place in the worldview of the Jewish community in question. Yahweh could not be anything like Jupiter, much less the deified Roman emperors. Consequently, the Jews in question could not even express what Horace was trying to express in order to disagree with it. (I shall offer additional examples of untranslatability below.)

Surprisingly, MacIntyre holds that the combination of logical incompatibility, untranslatability, and incommensurability does not entail relativism. One reason for this is that two competing traditions can write narratives of one another and attempt to show through these narratives how the other tradition’s problems are insoluble from within that tradition, but can be both diagnosed and circumvented from within the first tradition. If a narrative achieves this condition, those who have learned to be “bilingual” in the two traditions can come to recognize this fact.¹⁰

7. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 372. See Augustine’s comments in *The City of God* XII. 2 on the Latin neologism “*essentia*.”

8. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 379.

9. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 380.

10. Interestingly, the 1958 “Neo-Confucian Manifesto” by Mou Zong-san, Xu Fu-kuan, Zhang Jun-mai, and Tang Jun-yi is such a narrative, written prior to and independently of MacIntyre’s work. It attempts to give narratives of both “the Western” and the Chinese traditions,

It is important to recognize that, according to MacIntyre, such comparisons must take the *indirect* form of competing narratives. If two traditions are incommensurable, a person in one tradition cannot, while still occupying a position in only her own tradition, pose an objection to a person in another tradition that can present a genuine challenge. MacIntyre holds that one can only mount a genuine challenge to another incommensurable tradition through the kind of competing narratives I referred to above.

2. MacIntyre's Methodology Illustrated

The philosophies of Mencius and Augustine might seem to provide an illustration of the combination of logical incompatibility, incommensurability, and mutual untranslatability of which MacIntyre speaks. Logical incompatibility seems clearly to be present. Consider, for example, the issue of human sexuality. Augustine favors celibacy for those who are able to maintain it and become "eunuchs for love of the kingdom of heaven."¹¹ Mencius, in contrast, says that "For a man and a woman to dwell together in one home is the greatest of human relations" (5A2),¹² and that "[t]here are three ways of being a bad son. The most serious is to have no heir."¹³ Indeed, one suspects that Mencius's attitude toward sexuality and reproduction was closer to that of Augustine's father (whom Augustine criticizes): one day at the public baths, Augustine's father "saw the signs of active virility coming to life in [Augustine] and this was enough to make him relish the thought of having grandchildren."¹⁴

It might seem that there could not be untranslatability between the languages of Augustine and Mencius. After all, Augustine wrote in Latin, and the writings of Mencius *have* been translated into Latin (by Jesuits, no less!).¹⁵

and to show how the West must come to incorporate certain features of Chinese culture. The Manifesto is a fascinating and revealing document. However, I submit that it is vitiated by its reliance upon oversimplified and monistic conceptions of both "Western culture" and the Confucian tradition. (For a critique of the Manifesto, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, "On the Metaphysical Foundations of Neo- and New Confucianism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 22 [1995]: 81–89.)

11. Augustine, *Confessions*, R.S. Pine-Coffin, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), II. 2, 44, citing Matthew 19:12. Augustine also cites the Apostle Paul freely on this point. Here and elsewhere Augustine's debt to earlier texts and thinkers (both Christian and Pagan, especially Platonist) is evident. It would take us too far away from my main purpose in this paper to trace Augustine's influences, but we should keep in mind that they are many (as are his distinctive innovations).

12. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Mencius* are from Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001). An "*" indicates that the passage is translated by Van Norden, but is not included in *Readings*. Reference is to the standard sectioning of the *Mencius*.

13. *Mencius* 4A26. D.C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), in loc.

14. *Confessions* II.2 (Pine-Coffin, 45).

15. *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (first published C.E. 1687) includes selections from the *Four Books*, including the *Mencius*. (For a discussion of this translation and its influence, see Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1997], 121 ff.) Additional Latin translations may be found in Stanislaus Julien, *Meng Tseu, vel Mencium* (Paris:

However, it is not clear that such renderings count as genuine translation. Consider the Classical Chinese term *tian* 天, which is standardly rendered as "Heaven" in English, and as *caelum* in Latin. There is some basis for this translation, since *tian* can refer to the sky, which is also a legitimate meaning for "Heaven" or *caelum*. However, *tian* often refers to a sort of higher power, which is responsible for implanting an ethical sense in humans, and for managing some of the things that we might describe as "fate." On this basis, it might seem more appropriate to translate *tian* as "God" or *Deus*. However, many of the characteristics that are central to Augustine's conception of God are either absent or significantly less prominent in Mencius's conception of *tian*. For example, Mencius would never have conceived of *tian* as "eternal" in the precise way that Augustine conceives of God as eternal (that is, as existing outside of time). Furthermore, Mencius's *tian* seems less personal than Augustine's God. One cannot imagine Mencius crying out to *tian* in the manner that Augustine (or Job) cries out to God.¹⁶ Clearly, there is no possibility of translation as "same-saying" between Augustine's Latin and Mencius's Chinese.

This is not to deny, of course, that one can *explain*, using the resources of Latin, Mencius's conception of *tian*. One can do this in Latin, just as one can do it in English. (And it is worth reminding ourselves that we have no real translation of *tian* into English either.) But it seems to me that it is one thing to *explain* to someone, using the resources of a particular language, the use of a term from another language, and quite a different thing to translate a term from the latter into the former. To translate, I submit, there must be either a term or a commonly used phrase in the home language onto which the term in the target language can be mapped. This might seem like an arbitrarily narrow conception of "translation." However, if we introduce a neologism or a new expression into a language, we are expanding the conceptual possibilities that are, practically speaking, available to speakers of that language.

Working in the other direction, from Latin into Chinese, we can also see untranslatability. Augustine is clearly a figure for whom the notion of "being," and of degrees of being are central. As we know, the Indo-European traditions link notions of existence, predication, and truth through forms of the verb "to be." However, A.C. Graham has pointed out that, in Classical Chinese, existence, predication, and truth are not linked through some common word

1824–1829), and Seraphin Couvreur, *Ouvres de Meng Tzeu* (1895). (The latter has a Latin translation in addition to the French.) MacIntyre would be quick to point out, though, that Mencius's writings were never translated into *Augustine's* Latin, and, on his view, "there can be no such language as English-as-such or Hebrew-as-such or Latin-as-such. There are not even, it must seem, such languages as classical Latin or early modern Irish. There is only Latin-as-written-and-spoken-in-the-Rome-of-Cicero and Irish-as-written-and-spoken-in-sixteenth-century-Ulster." (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 373)

16. *Mencius* 5A1 might seem to present a counterexample, though.

or grammatical structure, and that this has implications for the two metaphysical traditions.¹⁷ Here it is especially clear that explanation is possible, but not translation. Consider for example, Exodus 3:14, a passage especially important to Augustine. Moses asks God what His name is, and He responds (in a translation of Augustine's Latin), "I am the God who is," or (in one contemporary English translation), "I am who I am."¹⁸ This statement is evocative for anyone, I think, because of its elusive meaning. However, for Augustine this Scriptural statement about God takes on special meaning, because he saw connections between it and Platonistic notions of being and eternity.¹⁹ Even in modern Chinese, though, there is no way to express the line from Exodus. The closest one can come is to use a form of the verb *you* 有 which means "to have," and to leave off the subject of the verb. Thus, one modern Chinese translation of Exodus 3:14 gives, 上帝對摩西說, 我是自有永有的。²⁰ It is not possible to literally translate this into English (any more than the Chinese is a literal translation from the Hebrew), but a close (although inelegant) version would be "God to *Moshe* said, 'I am-a-sort-of-thing which it has naturally and has forever.'"²¹ If we translate more idiomatically, we get, "God said to Moses, 'I am something that exists naturally and forever.'" Ironically, part of the problem here is that the Chinese and the back-translated English are less paradoxical and much easier to understand than the original Hebrew! All the mystery of God's statement to Moses is lost in translation. In the Classical Chinese of Mencius's era, Exodus 3:14 would probably come out as something like 天對摩西曰, 有我. Literally, "Heaven said to *Moshe*, 'It has me,'" or idiomatically, "Heaven said to *Moshe*, 'I exist.'" That Heaven "exists" would seem true, but not a profound or challenging statement. Even worse, Mencius would interpret the exchange between Moses and God in terms of his own concept of Heaven, and Mencius thinks that Heaven "does not speak." Consequently, he would regard the story as a barbarian superstition.

Is there incommensurability between the philosophies of Mencius and Augustine? It might seem, at first, that there clearly is. Ironically, an issue on which they agreed seems to provide a basis for incommensurability: the power and role of human reason and dialectic. The views of Mencius and Augustine on this topic are subtle. Even those who know either Mencius or Augustine well sometimes caricature his position. But I would argue that both of them saw an important role for dialectic (in a broad sense of that term), but also

17. A.C. Graham, "'Being' in Western Philosophy Compared with *Shih/fei* 是非 and *Yu/wu* 有無 in Chinese Philosophy," in Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 322-59.

18. *Confessions* VII.10 (p. 147). English translation of Exodus is the New International Version.

19. Cf. *The City of God* XII.2.

20. 聖經 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Bible Society, 1984).

21. There is nothing in the Chinese corresponding to the word "it" in the translation, but we need a "dummy pronoun" to fill out the grammar in English.

thought that human reason, by itself, was incapable of discovering or demonstrating the most important truths.

Mencius clearly was well acquainted with the dialectical techniques of his era, and sometimes shows a powerful command of rational argumentative techniques such as *reductio ad absurdum*.²² However, Mencius also announced that he was not “fond of disputation” (3B9). Furthermore, his failures in attempting to persuade rulers to adopt a policy of “benevolent government” seem to have suggested to him that human virtue and wisdom are influenced by one’s environment (6A9), as well as factors involving fate (1B16) and inscrutable human commitments (6A15).²³

For his own part, Augustine began his career as a well trained and powerful rhetorician, and his capacity to argue forcefully and rationally is clear throughout his work. However, he was also fond of a quotation attributed to the prophet Isaiah: “Unless you believe, you will not understand.”²⁴ That understanding requires belief follows from Augustine’s distinctive psychology: he holds that the human will makes a choice between a commitment to God and a commitment to this world, and that this choice influences one’s beliefs and the operations of one’s reason.²⁵ (There is, I think, a nontrivial similarity between Augustine’s view here, and Thomas Kuhn’s view of how commitment to a paradigm influences one’s perception of and reasoning about the world.) Consequently, although Augustine recognizes the value of human reason, he also thinks that “for those who seek to learn great and hidden truths authority alone opens the door.”²⁶

In acknowledging the limits of reason, Mencius and Augustine have more in common with one another than with rationalists like Descartes. However, this similarity means that neither is likely to expect to be able to convince the other. Augustine accepts the Bible as authoritative, saying that its “divine authority puts it above the literature of all other people and brings under its sway every type of human genius. . . .”²⁷ Furthermore, Augustine accepts as authori-

22. His exchange with Chen Xiang in 3A4 and with Gaozi in 6A3 are both worthy of Socrates.

23. Some scholars have gone as far as to argue that Mencius has no real interest or confidence in rational argumentation whatsoever, and that what are apparently rational arguments in his text are actually purely rhetorical efforts to gain financial support for the ritual activities that he (and other Confucians) regard as actually important. See, for example, Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990). For what I think is an insightful critique of Eno’s claim, see the review by Kwong-loi Shun, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 52, no. 2 (December 1992): 739–56.

24. *On Free Choice of the Will* I.2 and II.2. This phrase is found in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 7:9, but it is actually a mistranslation. The Vulgate gets the translation right, and Augustine did not read Greek, so he is presumably following some pre-Vulgate Latin translation.

25. Cf. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 156. More on Augustine’s notion of the will below.

26. Augustine, *On Order* II.9.26–27, cited in Vernon J. Bourke, ed., *The Essential Augustine*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1974), 26

27. Gerald G. Walsh, S.J., et al., trans., *The City of God* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1958), XI.1, 205.

tative the interpretive traditions of the Fathers of the Catholic Church. Mencius, in contrast, accepted neither of these, and *did* accept as authoritative the texts known as the *Odes* and the *Documents*, and the teachings of the ancient sages of China, especially Confucius.²⁸ In particular, Mencius endorsed the claim that "Since humans were first born there has never been another like" Confucius (2A2). Consequently, Augustine would probably dismiss Mencius as a pagan, while Mencius would dismiss Augustine as a "twittering . . . barbarian" (3A4*).

Despite these reasons to expect incommensurability to obtain between the philosophies of Mencius and Augustine, I shall argue that there is a basis for a substantial dialogue between the two philosophies. In order to make this case, however, I need to say more about what the views of each were.

3. Augustine's World View in Brief

According to Augustine, God is the entity that is most real, has the most being, and is most perfect. Everything else in existence is created and preserved by God. Created entities *share in* God's being and perfection, but in differing degrees (and none matches God's reality or perfection):

Among all things which somehow exist and which can be distinguished from God who made them, those that live are ranked higher than those that do not. . . . In that order of living things, the sentient are superior to the non-sentient, for example, animals to trees. Among sentient beings, the intelligent are higher than the non-intelligent, as with men and cattle. Among the intelligent, the immortal are superior to the mortal, as angels to men.²⁹

Broadly speaking, there are two classes of entities, the material and the immaterial, and the immaterial have a higher degree of being and perfection than the material. Thus, it is the possession of an immaterial soul that makes humans more real and perfect than inanimate objects. However, even a rock shares, to a minor degree, in the goodness and perfection of God.

Humans are created by God "in His image," not in the sense that human physical bodies resemble God's body, but in the sense that humans have souls which are endowed with reason and with a will. So what is the will (*voluntas*)? Most broadly speaking, the will is something internal to a person's psychology that is distinct from both simple beliefs and simple desires. The nature and functions of the will are subject to debate, but the will as a third aspect of human psychology is commonly thought to at least shape, and possibly

28. Mencius's faith in the *Documents* is not unconditional, though. See *Mencius* 7B3.

29. *The City of God*, XI.16, 223. See Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936) for the antecedents and later developments of the metaphysical view Augustine espouses here.

override, one's other beliefs and desires. Some scholars hold that Augustine himself is responsible for discovering (or inventing) the notion of human will.³⁰ One might dispute this claim, but it seems plausible that "we find no earlier parallels for [Augustine's] pervasive and explicit appeal to the will."³¹ Furthermore, it seems likely that Augustine introduces a distinctively "voluntarist" conception of the will.³² According to a voluntarist like Augustine, the choice of the will is undetermined by any recognition of the goodness of the objects of its choices. In other words, the will does not decide to pursue something *because* it recognizes that it is good; rather, the will decides to pursue something, and—because of that—a person sees value in the object of her choice.

Being endowed with will gives each human an immense dignity and value. However, the presence of will also creates a danger, because the will can be oriented either toward God or toward the material world. This orientation is fundamental, determining many other aspects of one's psychology. As I mentioned earlier, human reason does not operate independently of human desire and volition, since the orientation of the will determines how one interprets the world. In addition, until one's will is oriented toward God, genuine virtue is impossible. Thus, pagans can only be motivated by such things as the desire for worldly fame.³³ Furthermore, since the "fall of Adam," human souls have carried the imperfection of original sin, which impedes the operation of the will. Original sin makes it impossible for humans to make a commitment to God without the assistance of God in the form of divine Grace. Thus, humans can no longer choose freely to orient themselves toward God without divine assistance.

In addition to giving humans reason and a will, God also creates humans so that they can only ultimately find their happiness in God. Humans sense this, and have an inchoate feeling of love for God. Thus, Augustine writes,

Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. . . . since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.³⁴

Indeed, one way of reading Augustine's *Confessions* is as a love story—boy is alienated from God by original sin, boy seeks God, boy finds God and is finally happy.

30. The classic defense of this claim is Albrecht Dihle's *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). MacIntyre agrees with this assessment.

31. Terence Irwin, "Who Discovered the Will?" in James E. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspective*, vol. 6: *Ethics* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1992), 455.

32. Irwin, 468. (Irwin does not explicitly endorse this second hypothesis himself.)

33. See *The City of God* V.20 and XIX.25.

34. *Confessions* I.1, 21.

The gap between humans and God is so great—both because of the metaphysical difference in their beings, and because of original sin—that God must find some way of overcoming it. This he does by incarnating his “only begotten son,” Jesus.³⁵ Through incarnation, Jesus bridges the gap between God and humans. By being crucified even though he had never sinned, Jesus atones for the sins of humans, including original sin.³⁶

4. Mencius’s World View in Brief

The world view of Confucians like Mencius is, like that of Augustine, hierarchical. However, this hierarchy is not expressed in terms of degrees of being, nor does Mencius recognize any radical division in reality between the material and the immaterial realms. Mencius’s world view has been described as “organismic.”³⁷ This metaphor is helpful *if* we think of it as referring to a world view in which the elements of the universe are potentially parts of a harmonious whole, like the parts of a well functioning organism. Obviously, some parts of an organism will be more important than others, or will have a guiding function. The brain should tell the hand what to do. But the divisions among the parts are in no case categorical metaphysical divisions.

Cosmologically, the highest place in the hierarchy is occupied by Heaven. Heaven sometimes seems to have some anthropomorphic characteristics. Thus, Mencius approvingly quotes the *Documents* when it says that “Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear” (5A5*). However, Mencius does not address or talk about Heaven in the way one talks to the personal God of the Old or New Testaments.

Heaven endows humans with innate but incipient virtuous inclinations. Mencius refers to these inclinations, using a carefully chosen metaphor, as “sprouts.”³⁸ Our virtuous inclinations seem to be like sprouts in the following

35. The relationship between Jesus and God is subtle. Jesus *is* the son of God, but not in the way that Hercules is supposed to have been the son of Zeus. The belief that Jesus came into existence *after* God was condemned as the Arian heresy.

36. Christian theologians have long debated the precise significance of Jesus’s sacrifice. Contrast the views of St. Anselm (who holds that Jesus’s death is reparation to God for the offense of human sin) and Peter Abelard (who holds that Jesus’s death is a demonstration of God’s love for us). For excerpts from some of the relevant texts, see Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader* (New York: Blackwell, 1995), 182 ff.

37. Similar points have been stressed by David Hall and Roger Ames. See, for example, their *Anticipating China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) and *Thinking from the Han* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998). However, on the basis of these observations, Hall and Ames go on to assimilate Confucians to postmodernists. This seems to me to be a simple non sequitur. See my review of *Thinking from the Han* in *Pacific Affairs* 73, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 288–89.

38. I shall have occasion in explicating Mencius to cite the insightful commentary of Zhu Xi (C.E. 1130–1200). However, my interpretation of Mencius is importantly different from that of Neo-Confucians and the so-called New Confucians. For example, the Chinese word *duan* 端, which I would translate “sprout,” is glossed by Zhu Xi as *xu* 緒 (“tip” or “endpoint,” see *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注 2A6). I think that Zhu Xi is led to this interpretation because he has a metaphysical orientation very different from that of Mencius. For more on Zhu Xi and the

respects. Sprouts have a natural course of development that, given a proper environment, culminates in becoming a mature example of a particular kind of thing. However, sprouts are only the first stage of the mature entity, and do not have all the characteristics of the fully developed form. Nonetheless, sprouts are active. They respond to conditions in their environment.

We can illustrate these features with the sprout of the virtue of benevolence. In what is perhaps the most famous passage in the *Mencius*, our philosopher asks us to consider the following thought-experiment:

Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling 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. (2A6)

Mencius goes on to say in this passage that “The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence.”³⁹ Although having this sprout is a defining mark of being a human, most humans have not fully developed it. This is well illustrated in a conversation Mencius has with a king who had spared an ox he had seen being led to slaughter because he felt sorry for it (1A7). Mencius says, “In the present case your kindness is sufficient to reach birds and beasts, but benefits do not reach the commoners.” The king must thus “extend” his kindness from the cases in which his sprout of benevolence manifests itself to other cases in which his sprout does not currently manifest itself, although it should: “Hence, if one extends one's kindness, it will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas. If one does not extend one's kindness, one will lack the wherewithall to care for one's wife and children.”⁴⁰

When it has grown to maturity, a plant takes a particular form. Sprouts of millet do not mature into corn. Likewise, Mencius holds that the sprout of benevolence, when it grows to maturity, manifests itself in a particular way: in

development of Neo-Confucianism, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000).

39. See below for more on what Mencius means by “heart.”

40. For discussions of “extension” and of *Mencius* 1A7, see David S. Nivison, “Motivation and Moral Action in Mencius,” in Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 91–119; Kwong-loi Shun, “Moral Reasons in Confucian Ethics,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 16 (September/December 1989): 317–43; Bryan W. Van Norden, “Kwong-loi Shun on Moral Reasons in Mencius,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 18, no. 4 (December 1991): 353–70; David Wong, “Is There a Distinction between Reason and Emotion in Mencius?” *Philosophy East and West* 41, no. 1 (January 1991): 31–44; Craig Ihara, “David Wong on Emotions in Mencius,” *Philosophy East and West* 41, no. 1 (January 1991): 45–54; Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Confucian Self-Cultivation and Mengzi's notion of Extension,” in Liu Xiusheng and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Essays on Mencius' Moral Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001).

greater concern for one's own kin than for strangers. This view of benevolence is in sharp contrast to the contemporary philosophical movement known as "Mohism," which claimed that benevolence required treating everyone with universal love. However, Mencius argued that such universal love was a violation of one's natural (and Heaven-given) instincts (3A5).

In 2A6, Mencius also uses another one of his key technical terms, "heart" (*xin* 心). His use of this term is complex, but systematic. In its "focal meaning," *xin* refers to the psychological faculty that thinks and feels emotions.⁴¹ 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 Mencius's four cardinal virtues. Thus, when Mencius says that "The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence,"⁴² we might paraphrase this as, "The emotion of compassion is a manifestation of our incipient tendency toward benevolence."

Benevolence is one of four cardinal virtues that Mencius thinks we all have innately but incipiently: Benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, and propriety. "Righteousness" is manifested in one's disdain to perform or accept certain shameful forms of behavior (6A10).⁴³ "Wisdom" is manifested in understanding and being committed to benevolence (4A27), and in making good judgments about the likely consequences of actions, and the character of others (5A9). "Propriety" is hard to distinguish from righteousness, but it is connected with expressing deference and respect toward others through ritual forms.⁴⁴

The presence of the sprouts of these virtues is what leads Mencius to claim that human nature is good. As he says in 6A6, "As for what they genuinely are, they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential." But if human nature is good, and if Heaven has implanted in us incipient tendencies toward virtue, why do so many people do so many evil things?

41. On the notion of a "focal meaning," see Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 190–95. The focal meaning of a term need not be the same as its original meaning. Historically, the term *xin* 心 seems to have originally referred to the heart as a physical organ.

42. I take "heart" here to refer to an emotion, and I take it that the sentence is not asserting a strict identity. (Compare the following English phrase one might use in explaining how a computer works: "This window is the mail program.") My interpretation here is close to that of Zhu Xi: "One traces back from the manifestations of the emotions and then one can see what the nature is fundamentally like." (*Sishu jizhu*, in loc.) See also my comment on the use of "heart" in 6A6 (below, n. 46).

43. On righteousness, see Bryan W. Van Norden, "The Emotion of Shame and the Virtue of Righteousness," in David Wong and Kwong-loi Shun, eds., *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

44. On propriety, see Bryan W. Van Norden, "Yearley on Mencius," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 369–76.

5. Mencius on Evil

Mencius clearly acknowledges the significance of environment in influencing one's moral development. In illustrating this point, Mencius once again makes good use of his sprout metaphor:

In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are cruel. It is not that the potential 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)

Mencius also notes that it is possible for one's good nature to be almost destroyed by a bad environment, as he illustrates with the metaphor of "Ox Mountain":

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 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. (6A8)

Mencius is *not* an environmental determinist, though. There is a role for human agency in becoming (or failing to become) good. Mencius has a complex and nuanced view on human ethical cultivation and self-cultivation. Among the resources for cultivation he identifies are certain classic texts, wise teachers, and the companionship of other virtuous people (5B8). However, for the purpose of contrasting Mencius with Augustine on the issue of why humans do (or do not) become good, the key text is *Mencius* 6A15, which I here quote in full:

Gongduzi asked, "We are the same in being humans. Yet some become great humans and some become petty humans. Why?"

Mencius said, "Those who follow their greater part become great humans. Those who follow their petty part become petty humans."

Gongduzi said, "We are the same in being humans. Why is it that some follow their greater part and some follow their petty part?"

Mencius said, "It is not the office of the ears and eyes to concentrate, 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 person."

"Ears and eyes" is synecdoche for our various sense organs and their associated desires. These desires are "automatic," in the sense that, when we are confronted with an appropriate object for one of our desires, our desire is activated, and we are drawn to the object of that desire. Mencius expresses this in 6A15 by saying that our senses are thing-like in their propensity to be "simply led along" by other things. He makes a similar point elsewhere (7B24) by saying that our sensual desires are "mandated."

Since Mencius says that the sensual desires "mislead" us, it is tempting to assume that he thinks they are evil, or at least that their satisfaction does not play a significant role in the best kind of human life. However, it is clear from other passages that this is not Mencius's view. For example, in 1B5 he tells a king that his fondnesses for wealth and sex are no impediment to being a great ruler, because the sage kings of old also had such desires; the only difference is that the sages made sure that their own subjects were able to satisfy their desires for wealth and sex too. Consequently, Mencius's view seems to be that sensual desires are a less significant part of our nature, but nonetheless a part of it that will function in a fully flourishing life.

The "greater," or more important, part of our nature is the part that includes the virtuous inclinations. There is a certain extent to which these reactions are "automatic" too. Thus, we spontaneously feel "alarm and compassion" at the sight of a child about to fall into a well; we feel a sense of disdain when asked to cheat (3B1) or accept a handout given with contempt (6A10). However, our innate virtuous reactions are only incipient. They need to be "extended" and "filled out," so that we come to have virtuous reactions in every appropriate situation, and not just in some paradigmatic cases. This extension is *not* automatic. Extension is achieved through ethical cultivation. One of the factors in such cultivation is "concentration."

The Chinese word that I have rendered as "concentration" is *si* 思. *Si* has several related meanings. It can, for example, mean "to think longingly of," as it does in the very first of the *Odes*, where a noble longs for (*si*) his bride. Arthur Waley observes of the term that it often refers to

a process that is only a short remove from concrete observation. Never is there any suggestion of a long interior process of cogitation or ratiocination, in which

a whole series of thoughts are evolved one out of the other, producing on the physical plane a headache and on the intellectual, an abstract theory. We must think of [*si*] rather as a fixing of the attention. . . .⁴⁵

For Mencius, one of the objects of this “fixing of the attention” is one’s innate ethical inclinations. As he tells us in 6A6,

The heart of compassion is benevolence. The heart of disdain is righteousness. The heart of respect is propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is wisdom.⁴⁶ Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not concentrate upon them.

Given that one meaning of *si* is “to think longingly of,” we can assume that to *si* our “hearts” of virtue is to be aware of them, to think well of them, and to wish for them to flourish. And Mencius does say in 4A27, in what I take to be a reference to the sprouts, “If one delights in them then they grow. If they grow then how can they be stopped?”

We are now in a position to see how the sensual desires “mislead” us. When we are offered a chance to satisfy some of our sensual desires, we are automatically drawn to this opportunity. The desire is not in itself wrong. What *is* wrong is to attempt to satisfy sensual desires when doing so violates the demands of ethics. Thus, it is wrong to twist one’s brother’s arm to get food, or climb over your neighbor’s wall and seize his maiden daughter to get a wife (6B10). But a person often, when offered things that satisfy one’s sensual desires, simply doesn’t “notice propriety and righteousness and accepts them” (6A10). Evil actions, then, are the result of a failure to actively cultivate the “greater part of oneself” (that is, one’s ethical inclinations), so that it intervenes to prevent acting on sensual desires (that is, the lesser part of oneself), in those cases where doing so is unethical.

Are there any other “lesser desires” besides the sensual ones that Mencius adverts to in 6A15? In 6A17*, he writes that, “The desire to be exalted is a universal feeling among humans.” This desire apparently can be a lesser desire, but it can also become a greater desire, depending upon its object, for Mencius goes on to say that, “Everyone has within oneself what is exalted. It is simply that one never concentrates upon it. That which other people exalt is not what

45. Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1938), 45.

46. This seems importantly different from 2A6, in which Mencius says that the heart of compassion is the *sprout* of benevolence, the heart of disdain is the *sprout* of righteousness, and so on. However, I think Zhu Xi is basically correct in suggesting that the difference in wording merely reflects a difference in emphasis: “In the former passage, [Mencius] says that these four are the sprouts of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, but here he does not say ‘sprout.’ In the former passage he wants us to extend them. Here he traces back directly from their function in order to make evident their fundamental substance. Hence, there is a difference in the expressions” (*Sishu jizhu*, in loc.).

is most exalted. Those whom Zhao Meng exalts, Zhao Meng can debase.” In other words, what is truly exalted is one’s own ethical inclinations, which do not depend on the vagaries of human popularity.

Does Mencius have a conception of will? One reason for suspecting that he does *not* have a conception of will is that there is no word in Classical Chinese corresponding to will (or *voluntas*). This claim might seem surprising to those used to most English translations of the *Mencius*, which render the Chinese word *zhi* 志 as “will.”⁴⁷ However, there is no hint in the *Mencius* that *zhi* is some faculty distinct from the “heart” that determines the orientation of one’s psychology. For example, *zhi* is never described in the *Mencius* (or, to the best of my knowledge, in *any* early Chinese text) as influencing or affecting the *xin*. Rather, the *zhi* seems to be simply the heart itself “in motion,” as it were, toward some particular object.⁴⁸ Consequently, I prefer to translate *zhi* as “intention” or “resolution” (when it is used nominally), or “to set one’s heart on,” or “to be intent upon” (when it is used verbally). But if *zhi* is simply the heart’s “intention” to do something, then it cannot perform the function that the will is supposed to perform: to explain the orientation of one’s desires and perceptions.

Nonetheless, there is some reason to think that, whether he has a word for it or not, Mencius believes that humans have a capacity to orient their desires and perceptions. We can see this by carefully considering the implications of passages such as 6A15. Mencius thinks that our sensual desires are automatically drawn to their appropriate objects, but that our engaging in “concentration” (or our not engaging in concentration) is not automatic. Concentration upon our virtuous inclinations has the effect of strengthening those inclinations. Thus, engaging in concentration has an effect quite similar to what Augustine would describe as an act of will. Finally, Mencius stresses that humans are *capable* of acting virtuously. It seems likely that his motive in stressing this is to encourage them to elect to use the capacity for concentration that they have. In support of this, notice that, in 7A3, Mencius quotes his own statement in 6A6 about our capacity for virtue, “If one seeks, one will get it; if one abandons it, one will lose it,” and comments, “[i]n this case, seeking helps in getting, because the seeking is in oneself” (7A3). So it seems that electing to use the capacity for concentration is within human control. We may conclude, then, that Mencius believes that humans have something internal to their psychology that chooses (at least partially) the content and strength of their desires, beliefs, and the focus of their concentration.

47. See, e.g., James Legge, trans., *The Works of Mencius*, reprint (New York: Dover Books, 1970); D.C. Lau, trans., *Mencius*, op. cit.; David Hinton, trans., *Mencius* (Washington: Counterpoint, 1998).

48. Needless to say, the Mencian “heart” cannot perform the role of the Augustinian will either. The Augustinian will is something that would determine the general orientation of the desires, perceptions, and emotions that Mencius attributes to the heart.

6. Augustine on Evil

Augustine writes that the problem of why humans do evil is a "question that worried me greatly when I was still young, a question that wore me out, drove me into the company of heretics, and knocked me flat on my face."⁴⁹ The "heretics" to whom Augustine refers are the Manicheans, who claimed that good and evil are two equally real forces, battling for control of the universe.⁵⁰ Augustine was presumably attracted to this doctrine because its teaching expressed vividly his own feeling of the evil that humans must overcome. However, the reality of evil is difficult to reconcile with the existence of a God who is all good, all knowing, all powerful, and creator of all that exists. Consequently, Augustine became convinced that "evil has no positive nature; what we call evil is merely the lack of something that is good."⁵¹ Insofar as anything is real, it is good. God is both fully real and fully good. His creations are good insofar as they participate in the reality of God, but are imperfect because no creation can participate fully in the reality of the creator. Humans become sources of evil when they turn their wills away from that which is fully real, God, toward that which is less real, His creations. There is something of a mystery about this, though. Why do humans turn away from God, who is, after all, their creator and the only ultimately satisfying object of their love? Part of the answer has to do with the Fall. When Adam and Eve sinned, they corrupted human nature. Consequently, sensual desires distract us from God in ways that they did not for Adam and Eve. Nonetheless, we are left with at least two questions. Why did Adam and Eve violate God's command? And why did the fallen angels, who are not subject to physical desire, also violate God's command? Although he does not "flag" it as such, Augustine's answer to these questions grows out of his reflections on his own sinfulness as an adolescent.

In Book II of his *Confessions*, Augustine writes that "[t]here was a pear-tree near our vineyard, loaded with fruit that was attractive neither to look at nor to taste. Late one night a band of ruffians, myself included, went off to shake down the fruit and carry it away. . . ." What might seem, to most of us, to be an unremarkable incident of teenage naughtiness becomes, for someone as reflective as Augustine, an occasion for gaining greater insight. Augustine asks why people do evil, and observes that

The eye is attracted by beautiful objects, by gold and silver and all such things. There is great pleasure, too, in feeling something agreeable to the touch, and material things have various qualities to please each of the other senses. Again, it is

49. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, Thomas Williams, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), I.2, 3.

50. For an excellent discussion of Manicheanism and Augustine's relationship with it, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), chap. 5.

51. *The City of God*, XI.9, 217.

gratifying to be held in esteem by other men and to have the power of giving them orders and gaining the mastery over them. . . . Friendship among men, too, is a delightful bond, uniting many souls in one. . . .

When there is an inquiry to discover why a crime has been committed, normally no one is satisfied until it has been shown that the motive might have been either the desire of gaining, or the fear of losing, one of those good things which I said were of the lowest order. . . . A man commits murder and we ask the reason. He did it because he wanted his victim's wife or estates for himself, or so that he might live on the proceeds of robbery, or because he was afraid that the other might defraud him of something, or because he had been wronged and was burning for revenge.⁵²

So, normally, people do evil in order to get some worldly good. Augustine regards this as a terrible error, for the goods of this world are paltry in comparison with the goods of God, which one forfeits by doing evil; however, such actions seem at least *comprehensible*, because they aim at some good.

So far, Augustine's account of the origin of human evil seems very close to that of Mencius. We desire things, typically the objects of our various senses, and we do evil in order to get these things. Augustine even says some things that sound quite similar to Mencius's doctrine of the sprouts, for he speaks of "the law that is written in men's hearts and cannot be erased however sinful they are. For no thief can bear that another thief should steal from him, even if he is rich and the other is driven to it by want."⁵³ There are important differences between the metaphor of a "law written in men's hearts" and that of a sprout of virtue, but the example of a thief objecting to having something stolen from him could easily have been used by Mencius as an illustration of the sprout of righteousness.⁵⁴ Consequently, we might expect Augustine to develop an account of human evil that emphasizes focusing attention on our innate moral sense, so that our sensual desires cannot mislead us into doing what is wrong to satisfy them.

52. *Confessions* II.5, 48.

53. *Confessions* II.4, 47. Augustine is obviously influenced here by the Apostle Paul (Romans 2:14–15), but the example is his own. One might object that the reaction of a thief does not show the presence of actual *moral* reactions; instead, a thief would object to having something stolen from him only because it would be a loss of his goods. However, I think Augustine would say that a thief's *outrage* at being stolen from is different from the *sadness* and *frustration* he would feel if he lost something through simple bad luck (e.g., his house burning down), and that this reaction is not only an indication of an innate moral sense, but also of the fact that humans are made both by God and for God. (A similar indication of the fact that humans are made by and for God is the love humans feel that [whether they know it or not] can only be satisfied by God.)

54. Indeed, the sixteenth-century Neo-Confucian follower of Mencius, Wang Yangming, illustrates the existence of the sprouts by stating that even a thief will blush if you call him a "thief" to his face.

However, Augustine's account cannot be this similar to that of Mencius for at least two reasons. First, as we saw above, Augustine holds that, as a result of original sin, humans cannot choose to do good through the power of their own will. The belief that humans can achieve their own greatest good (which for Augustine would be the beatific vision of God) through their own agency is the heresy of Pelagianism, a doctrine which Augustine fought energetically. Thus, had he known of him, Augustine might have described Mencius's doctrine as a kind of "pagan Pelagianism."

Furthermore, the simple account of human evil that we gave above does not seem to apply to the theft that Augustine and his companions engaged in:

It is true that the pears which we stole had beauty, because they were created by you, the good God, who are the most beautiful of all beings and the Creator of all things, the supreme Good and my own true Good. But it was not the pears that my unhappy soul desired. I had plenty of my own, better than those, and I only picked them so that I might steal. For no sooner had I picked them than I threw them away, and tasted nothing in them but my own sin, which I relished and enjoyed. If any part of one of those pears passed my lips, it was the sin that gave it flavour.⁵⁵

Augustine asks, "Could I enjoy doing wrong for no other reason than that it was wrong?"⁵⁶ It seems that the answer must be, Yes, since Augustine stole the pears without being hungry, and was not attracted by the pears' taste or beauty. But this is especially puzzling to Augustine, since he does not regard evil as an entity: "I loved nothing in it except the thieving, though I cannot truly speak of that as a 'thing' that I could love. . . ."⁵⁷ How can one be drawn to something that does not exist?

Augustine struggles to understand his motivation in the remainder of Book II of the *Confessions*, and the result seems aporetic. Indeed, Augustine thinks that there is a sort of mystery about why a will chooses evil: "What 'makes' the will evil is, in reality, an 'unmaking,' a desertion from God. The very defection is deficient—in the sense of having no cause."⁵⁸ Furthermore, "[t]rying to discover causes of such deficiencies . . . is like trying to see darkness or hear

55. *Confessions* II.6, 49.

56. *Confessions* II.6, 50. Cf. the remarks of the narrator in Poe's "The Black Cat," who says that he hung his cat from a tree "because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence;—hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it—if such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God." (Poe, *Poetry and Tales* [New York: Library of America, 1984], 599–600 [emphasis in original].)

57. *Confessions* II.8, 51.

58. *The City of God* XII.9, 256.

silence.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Augustine does not regard the evil choice of a will as completely arbitrary.⁶⁰

All who desert you and set themselves up against you merely copy you in a perverse way. . . .

What was it, then, that pleased me in that act of theft? Which of my Lord's powers did I imitate in a perverse and wicked way? Since I had no real power to break his law, was it that I enjoyed at least the pretence of doing so, like a prisoner who creates for himself the illusion of liberty by doing something wrong, when he has no fear of punishment, under a feeble hallucination of power?⁶¹

I take Augustine's point to be the following. The free exercise of human will is a good. Indeed, to freely exercise the will is to act like God. Even without the Grace of God, humans recognize this, at least inchoately. Humans also recognize that, at least in some sense, freedom involves acting without any constraint that is alien to them. Consequently, acting in violation of moral law *appears* to be an expression of perfect freedom, since it shows contempt for a standard that *seems* to be external to oneself.⁶² Thus, part of the reason for Augustine's sin was that it gave him a God-like sense of freedom to intentionally violate morality.

A second factor in this sinning was the companionship of others: "By myself I would not have committed that robbery. It was not the takings that attracted me but the raid itself, and yet to do it by myself would have been no fun and I should not have done it."⁶³ It is significant, I think, that the two factors Augustine identifies as relevant for his sinning (companionship in sin, and a desire to be like God) correspond to the sins of Adam and Eve. In *The City of God*, Augustine writes that Adam "sinned knowingly and deliberately," in part because he "refused to be separated from his partner [Eve] even in a union of sin."⁶⁴ Recall also that the serpent tells Eve, "you will be like God," if she and Adam eat of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."⁶⁵ We see now, if we did not before, that Augustine's explanation of his own theft of

59. *The City of God* XII.7, 254.

60. Augustine might be comfortable with saying that, while there is no *efficient* cause of a will choosing evil, there is a *final* cause. However, this final cause does not necessitate the act of will, and it is, furthermore, an erroneous choice of the will, since it chooses a lesser good over a greater.

61. *Confessions* II.6, 50.

62. Of the five sentences preceding this note, Augustine would say that the first four are (properly interpreted) correct. However, Augustine thinks that the fifth sentence expresses crucial misperceptions. The human will can only really be free with the help of divine Grace. Furthermore, since humans are created to love and obey God, obedience to the divine commandments is not alien to them.

63. *Confessions* II.9, 52.

64. *The City of God* XIV.11, 307.

65. Genesis 3:3 and 2:17, respectively (Bible, New International Version).

those pears helps to explain why Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. In addition, the desire to be like God was a motivation for the fallen angels who rejected Him.

7. Mencius and Augustine in Dialogue

So far, it might seem that we have two interestingly different, but self-contained, world views. Perhaps incommensurability, as MacIntyre describes it, obtains between them. However, it seems that there are some important standards in common between Mencius and Augustine. For example, each hopes to account in some way for human wrongdoing. (Perhaps any world view concerned with ethics must offer some such account, at least implicitly.) Furthermore, Augustine's account of his theft, and large parts of his description of his psychological state (including his claims about what his motivation was *not*) would be perfectly comprehensible to Mencius from within his own conceptual scheme. Consequently, it is possible for an Augustinean to challenge a Mencian to explain why Augustine stole the pears. Can Mencius explain Augustine's theft using the resources of his own philosophical psychology?

The basic account of human evil that Mencius gives in 6A15 seems inadequate to explain Augustine's theft: Augustine did not steal the pears out of any sensual desire that overwhelmed his virtuous inclinations—because he really did not want to eat the pears anyway. Mencius may have the *beginnings* of an explanation, though, in his discussion of the universal human desire to be exalted or esteemed, for Augustine says that

among my companions I was ashamed to be less dissolute than they were. For I heard them bragging of their depravity, and the greater the sin the more they gloried in it, so that I took pleasure in the same vices not only for the enjoyment of what I did, but also for the applause I won.

I gave in more and more to vice simply in order not to be despised. If I had not sinned enough to rival other sinners, I used to pretend that I had done things I had not done at all, because I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity for weakness.⁶⁶

Although he does not make it a central part of his explanation of human evil, Mencius does acknowledge (in 6A17, as I discussed above) that humans desire to be “exalted” or “esteemed,” and that this desire is potentially dangerous ethically. Thus, Mencius can partially explain Augustine's theft by his desire to be esteemed by his peers. However, this is only the *beginning* of an explanation, for it leaves open the question of *why* it was the case that “the greater the sin the more [Augustine's companions] gloried in it.” Why, in other words, did

66. *Confessions* II.3, 46.

Augustine and his companions esteem those who seemingly did evil just because it was evil?

Augustine's psychology gives him a way of answering this question; as we saw, he thinks that we imitate the freedom of God, in a perverse way, by intentional action against the good. Why can't Mencius simply *add* Augustine's explanation to his own repertoire of explanations for human evil? One impediment is that Augustine's explanation appeals to God, an entity which has no place in Mencius's world view. But this is not, I think, a deep objection. Although Augustine's formulation invokes God, the *kind* of explanation he offers does not depend on the existence of a god. For what is really central to Augustine's explanation is the notion of human will. Augustine sees that humans can will to be god-like, in the sense of exercising their will without any external constraint, and that this can become a source of evil. And willing to be *god-like* in exercising one's will in this way does not depend on there actually being a god. Thus, Augustine's explanation can be adapted and then adopted by those who are not theists.

We also saw earlier that Mencius seems to need to appeal to something like the capacity to exercise the will to explain why one does (or does not) engage in concentration. So why can't Mencius (or a neo-Mencian) simply make explicit the role in Mencius's thought of something like the Augustinian conception of will, and then use that conception to explain actions like those of Augustine when he stole the pears? The answer is that Mencius, although he has some implicit conception of the will, does not attribute to the exercise of the will the sort of role and importance that Augustine attributes to it.

For Augustine, the presence of a will is what distinguishes God, angels, and humans from other kinds of creatures. Indeed, the will is part of what gives humans such great intrinsic value and dignity. Furthermore, the free exercise of the will is part of the highest good for humans. Given the importance of the free exercise of the will, and given the fact that humans at least inchoately recognize this importance, Augustine can explain acts like his own youthful theft as (misguided) efforts to exercise the will free of all constraints.

In distinction from Augustine, there is no hint in Mencius that the possession and exercise of this faculty is of immense value. (This is a reason why Mencius does not have a term for "will.") Mencius *does* think that there is something humans possess which gives them great intrinsic value, and distinguishes them from the "birds and beasts." However, this "greater part" of human nature is the virtuous inclinations themselves, not the capacity to choose to engage them (or not). Consequently, there seems to be no obvious place in Mencius's world view for a desire to exercise one's will (*per se*) without constraint.

Augustine takes a major step down a distinctively Western ethical path. There are, of course, other ways to proceed down the path Augustine began, but to take that first great step is to start heading toward a world view very

different from that of Confucianism. Augustine's path is one of choices, freedom, and authenticity. In contrast, Confucianism has been described, rightly to my mind, as "a Way without a crossroads."⁶⁷ It may be possible to somehow synthesize Mencian Confucianism with an Augustinian conception of the will, but doing so would require a genius as great as that of the "Dumb Ox" who synthesized Augustinianism and Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century.

8. Conclusion

The world views of Augustine and Mencius provide a good illustration of the sort of logical incompatibility and untranslatability that MacIntyre discusses. Furthermore, their differences seem so great that we might expect them to be incommensurable. (Indeed, we might think that there will be incommensurability between Mencius and Augustine if there is such incommensurability anywhere.) However, I hope to have shown that Augustine's narrative of his youthful theft of some pears presents a serious, and direct, challenge to Mencius's explanation of human evil.

Why? Mencius and Augustine both attempt to give an explanation for human wrongdoing. Mencius can understand, from within his own world view, *that* Augustine acted in a certain way in his youth, and Mencius would agree that the action in question was wrong. However, Mencius cannot, using the resources of his own philosophical psychology, explain *why* Augustine so acted.⁶⁸ Augustine, in contrast, *can* explain his own actions, using his notion of human will. Consequently, even in a case in which the world views are as radically different as those of Mencius and Augustine, we find a common standard that allows us to judge the superiority of one world view on at least one point.

This does not entail, of course, that the Augustinian tradition has "defeated" the Mencian tradition. (As Kuhn taught us, one anomaly does not bring a paradigm to its knees.) It may be that the Mencian tradition has advantages that recommend it over the Augustinian tradition, all things considered. It may also be, for all I have shown in this paper, that the Mencian and Augustinian traditions are genuinely incommensurable on so many other topics that we cannot adjudicate between the traditions overall. And even if the Mencian tradition is shown to have serious shortcomings in comparison with the Augustinian tradition, this should not by any means be taken to imply that there is nothing of value in Mencius's world view, or that an Augustinian cannot learn much by reading the *Mencius*. However, I hope to have shown

67. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius—the Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 18 ff.

68. Cf. Melville's Billy Budd, who is speechless when confronted with the malevolence of Claggart ("Billy Budd," section 20).

that, on this particular topic, we can be warranted in deriving a conclusion based on a direct dialogue, despite the immense differences between the traditions.

This has only been one test case. Even if I am right about this one comparison, there may be other cases in which there is genuine incommensurability of the kind MacIntyre describes. However, I submit that a case study like this one provides some hope that there may be enough in common even among seemingly quite disparate world views and traditions to allow for significant rational dialogue.⁶⁹

69. Martha C. Nussbaum and Lee H. Yearley have also argued independently that, despite the genuine and significant differences among world views, there is enough in common for rational dialogues. See Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in Peter French et al., eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. XIII (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 32-53, and Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas*, op. cit. Furthermore, anthropologist Donald Brown has called for a reevaluation of the reigning anthropological paradigm, which he claims has overlooked the evidence for genuine human universals. See his *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991).