

Mencius, Readings 2

Teachings on Self-Cultivation and *Qi*

I. The anti-Mohist background

The *Analects* does not have much to say about “human nature”; the only passage to deal with it explicitly is 17.2, which tells us that by nature people are similar, but they grow different through practice. The *Mencius*, however, foregrounds the issue of human nature. Part of its reason for doing so is probably tied to Mencius’s practical political mission. To persuade rulers that they possessed the moral potential necessary to aspire to True Kingship, Mencius needed the presumption that *any* person, even a warlord, had the necessary moral instincts to become a Yao or a Shun. (In 1A.7, we see him conjure proof of this from the reaction that King Xuan of Qi has to the lowing of an ox.)

Philosophically, Mencius’s doctrine that human beings have certain moral response hard-wired as part of our species-specific destiny was a potentially effective response to Mohist claims that right actions had to be determined through objective, rational criteria that tied morality to the calculus of maximizing action “benefits” (*li* – a term that Mencius always uses with the pejorative, self-regarding sense of “profit”), and that called on us to override apparently ethical responses, such as preferential love of family, that might undermine obedience to Mohist utilitarian precepts.

To begin this reading’s focus on the issue of human nature, here are several passages in which the *Mencius* is at pains to refute the Mohist utilitarian message.

3A.5 A Mohist named Yi Zhi wished to visit Mencius, and asked an introduction from Mencius’s disciple Xu Bi. Mencius said, “I have long wished to meet him, but I am ill now. When I’m better, I’ll go pay him a visit. There’s no need for him to come here.”

But later, Yi Zhi pressed Xu Bi for an introduction once again. Mencius said, “I can see him now. If one is not straightforward, then the Dao will not become clear. I’ll straighten him out. I hear that Yi Zhi is a Mohist. Mohists make frugality in funerals part of their *dao*. Yi Zhi aspires to change the world in this way, and it must be that he believes frugal funerals to be honorable, yet he himself gave his parents lavish funerals – it would seem that he treated his parents dishonorably.”

Xu Bi reported this to Yi Zhi, who said, “The Confucian *dao* holds that the ancients prized acting towards others with as much care as one gives a newborn babe in arms. What would this mean? I believe it means loving all without distinction, beginning with one’s parents.”

Xu Bi reported this to Mencius, who said, “Does Yi Zhi truly believe that men can love their neighbors’ children as much as their brothers’? His argument actually relies on that special example picturing how we’d feel if we saw some innocent baby crawling to the edge of a well. When Tian gives birth to a thing, it gives it only one set of roots. Yi Zhi’s arguments seem to work because he gives them two roots.

“Most likely, in past ages men did not bury their parents, but simply consigned their bodies to an open ditch when they died. But some days later, passing by, they would have seen how the foxes had gnawed on the corpses and the flies sucked. Sweat would have stood out on their brows as they averted their eyes. Now that sweat was not conjured up for others to see – it would have been the feelings of their inmost hearts pouring forth on their faces. Then they would have returned to their homes to get shovels

and baskets to cover the corpses over. If burying them thus was truly the right thing, then when filial sons and men of *ren* bury their parents it is certainly in accord with the Dao.”

Xu Bi reported this answer to Yi Zhi, who stared blankly for a time and then said, “I have taken his point.”

Note in particular that the critical argument offered in 3A.5 pictures the origins of burial rituals not in terms of social benefits, rationally calculated, but in terms of what the text suggests is a universal, innate affective response, something all people would spontaneously share. (Mencius’s reference to “that special example” [words I’ve added] – the child by the well – actually seems to point to his own argument for universal moral dispositions in 2A.6, below; we can infer from this either that the Mohists developed a response to Mencius’s anti-Mohist deployment of that argument, or that 2A.6 shows Mencius turning a Mohist argument back against them.)

6B.4 Song Keng was on his way to Chu. Mencius encountered him at Shiqiu and asked, “Where are you going, Sir?”

Song Keng said, “I have been told that the armies of Qin and Chu have gone to war, and I shall visit the King of Chu and persuade him to call it off. If the King of Chu does not appreciate my argument, I will visit the King of Qin and persuade him likewise. Between the two I shall surely encounter success.”

“I shall not presume to ask in detail, but I would like to hear the main gist of your argument.”

Song Keng said, “I will explain that there is no profit (*li*) in it.”

Mencius said, “Your intentions are certainly lofty, but your formula is unacceptable. If you persuade these kings on the grounds of profit and they call off their armies on the grounds of profit, all the men in the armies, pleased with war’s end, will favor profit. If subjects cherish profit in service to their masters, if sons cherish profit in service to their fathers, if juniors cherish profit in service to their seniors, then the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger will ultimately be drained of humanity and right, all engaging one another solely through a love of profit. Never has the ruler of such a state survived.

“Sir, you should persuade these kings by arguments of humanity and right, for if they call off their armies on the grounds of humanity and right, then all the men in the armies, pleased with war’s end, will favor humanity and right. If subjects cherish humanity and right in service to their masters, if sons cherish humanity and right in service to their fathers, if juniors cherish humanity and right in service to their seniors, then the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger will ultimately be drained of profit seeking, all engaging one another solely through a love of humanity and right. Never has the ruler of such a state failed to rule as a True King. Why must you speak of profit?”

Although there is disagreement about the intellectual affiliations of Song Keng historically, he is clearly presented here as a Mohist, setting off in an effort to prevent aggressive war. By “profit,” he means welfare to the state, but as in 1A.1, Mencius insists on interpreting the term pejoratively, in accord with Confucian understanding.

7A.25 Mencius said, The man who rises at cockcrow and sets off to do good all day is a follower of the sage king Shun; the man who rises at cockcrow and sets of to pursue

profit (*li*) all day is a follower of the bandit Zhi. If you wish to know the difference between Shun and Zhi, there is nothing but this: the difference between good and profit.”

The bandit Zhi is a stock legendary figure, like Robin Hood without the good stuff (though the *Zhuangzi*, in typical Daoist fashion, pictures him as enlightened).

II. Building morality into human beings: Step 1

We will begin our discussion of Mencius’s response to the Mohists with a first look at his well-known theory of the “four sprouts,” which is introduced first in Book 2 and developed further in Book 6.

2A.6 Mencius said: All people possess within them a moral sense that cannot bear the suffering of others. The former kings had such a moral sense and thus they devised means of government that would not allow people to suffer. If a ruler were to employ the moral sense that makes human suffering unendurable in order to implement such humane government, he would find bringing the entire empire into order to be simple, as though he were turning the world in his hand.

Why do I say that all people possess within them a moral sense that cannot bear the suffering of others? Well, imagine now a person who all of a sudden sees a small child on the verge of falling down into a well. Any such person would experience a sudden sense of fright and dismay. This feeling would not be one that they summoned up in order to establish good relations with the child’s parents. They would not purposefully feel this way in order to win the praise of their friends and neighbors. Nor would they feel this way because the screams of the child would be unpleasant.

Now by imagining this situation we can see that one who lacked a sense of dismay in such a case could simply not be a person. And I could further show that anyone who lacked the moral sense of shame could not be a person; anyone who lacked a moral sense of deference could not be a person; anyone who lacked a moral sense of right and wrong could not be a person.

Now the sense of dismay on another’s behalf is the sprout of *ren* planted within us, the sense of shame is the sprout of righteousness (*yi*), the sense of deference is the sprout of ritual *li*, and the sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom. Everyone possesses these four moral senses just as they possess their four limbs. For one to possess such moral senses and yet to claim that he cannot call them forth is to rob oneself; and for a person to claim that his ruler is incapable of such moral feelings is to rob his ruler.

As we possess these four senses within us, if only we realize that we need to extend and fulfill them then the force of these senses will burst through us like a wildfire first catching or a spring first bursting forth through the ground. If a person can bring these impulses to fulfillment, they will be adequate to bring all the four quarters under his protection. But if a person fails to develop these senses, he will fail to protect even his own parents.

Although Mencius here identifies four innate moral senses, three of these are only claimed, not illustrated or proven to be universal and spontaneous within us. There is, however, a demonstration meant to persuade us that the sprout of *ren* is universal and spontaneous, and therefore innate. It is important to think through this proof, as the interest of the *Mencius* as a

serious philosophical work rests very largely on the intellectual quality of this proof, whether one regards it as valid or not. The significance of the child-by-the-well example has nothing to do with whether the imagined person – *any* person – would or would not save the child. The focus is entirely on whether any imaginable person would or would not – if presented the situation with no warning – experience “fright and dismay.” Mencius’s goal is to find a single, strong, non-self-regarding impulse that could plausibly be claimed to be both universal and unmediated by any cognitive act of reference to “external” moral standards. Any such component of our “natural” heart/mind will refute the Mohist claim that there is no Tian-endowed barrier to adopting the counter-intuitive, rational imperatives of universality and action choice by rational calculus.

III. Self-cultivation and *qi*: Mencius 2A.2

2A.2

This important passage is of such length, interest, and complexity, that section titles have been added to the translation to help clarify the course of the argument.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM: ATTAINING AN ‘UNMOVED MIND’

Gongsun Chou asked, “If you, Sir, were to receive a high post among the grandees of Qi and were able to implement your *dao*, it would not be startling if the ruler were to rise to the position of hegemon or even a true King. If this were to occur, would your heart be moved by this?”

“No,” replied Mencius. “By the age of forty I had cultivated a heart that could not be moved.”

“If that is so, then you, Sir, have exceeded the valor of the warrior Meng Ben by far!”

“That is not difficult,” said Mencius. “Actually, the philosopher Gaozi attained an unmoving heart earlier than I.”

“Is there a *dao* for achieving an unmoving heart?” asked Gongsun Chou.

“Yes,” replied Mencius, “there is.”

It will help to bear in mind throughout this long passage that the primary topic is how Mencius attained the condition of having an “unmoving heart.” The word for “heart” is often rendered “heart-mind” by translators, because it may refer to elements of emotion and affect as well as to cognitive aspects of the person. In these readings, I have selected either “heart” or “mind,” depending on what seems the dominant component. In 2A.6 below, and some other places, I have translated the word as “sense” (as in “sense of shame,” rather than “heart of shame”). Recently, a young scholar named John Behuniak has suggested the reading of “feelings,” and that too will work in many cases.

Mencius, a Confucian, was presumably a ritualist and textual scholar who did not cultivate the arts of war, so it is somewhat surprising that he begins his description of the *dao* of the unmoving heart by speaking of warriors.

THE MARTIAL ARTS EXEMPLARS

Mencius continued. “The formula by which the warrior Bogong You nurtured his valor was this: ‘I shall not allow my skin to recoil in the least or let my stare flinch. I shall consider the slightest touch of another to be as insulting as if he were whipping me publicly in a market or court. What I would not accept from a coarsely clad commoner, I

will not accept from the ruler of a state of ten thousand chariots. I shall look upon stabbing a great ruler as though I were stabbing a coarsely clad commoner. I shall have no fear of patrician lords. Any insulting sound that reaches my ear I must return.”

“The formula by which the warrior Mengshi She nurtured his valor was this: ‘I shall regard defeat as the same as victory. To advance only after having measured the enemy or meet the enemy only after having plotted for victory shows fear of the enemy armies. How could I guarantee victory? All I can be assured of is that I will be fearless.’” “Mengshi She resembles Confucius’s disciple Zengzi; Bogong You resembles Confucius’s disciple Zixia. I do not know which type of valor is the finer, but Mengshi She was a man who preserved self-control.

“Once, Zengzi addressed a man named Zixiang thus: ‘Do you delight in valor? I once heard from the Master about Great Valor. “If I search inwardly and find that I am not fully upright, though I face a mere coarsely clad commoner, I shall not threaten him. If I search inwardly and find that I am fully upright, though I face ten million men I will attack.’” The manner in which Mengshi She preserved his *qi* is not as fine as Zengzi’s.”

Zixia was a disciple of Confucius who was known for specializing in text study and focusing his own followers on the minor points of ritual as a discipline. Zengzi (Master Zeng in your *Analects* translation) was a younger disciple who was known for his attention to capturing the ethical spirit of Confucius’s *dao*, without such deep emphasis on textual and ritual study. Zengzi’s influence during the Warring States era was particularly great, and Mencius was trained in his teaching tradition. Zengzi is generally authoritative when quoted in the *Mencius*.

FORMULAS USED BY GAOZI AND MENCIOUS

Gongsun Chou said, “May I inquire about the formulas that you and Gaozi used to attain an unmoving heart?”

Mencius replied, “Gaozi’s rule was, ‘If you cannot find sanction for a course of action in the teachings, do not search for it in your heart. If you cannot find sanction for a course of action in your heart, do not search for it in your *qi*.’ I agree to the formula, ‘If you do not find it in the heart, do not search for it in the *qi*.’ But it is unacceptable to say, ‘If you do not find it in the teachings, do not search for it in your heart.’”

“The will is the leader of the *qi*, and *qi* is something that fills the body. Wherever the will leads the *qi* follows. Thus there is a saying, ‘Grasp your will and do not dissipate your *qi*.’”

Gongsun Chou said, “On the one hand you have said, ‘Wherever the will leads the *qi* will follow.’ But you have also said, ‘Grasp your will and do not dissipate your *qi*.’ Is there not an inconsistency?”

Mencius answered, “When the will is unified it moves the *qi*. But when the *qi* is unified, it can move the will. For example, when you see a man stumble or rush about, this is the action of his *qi*. In such cases, it has turned back upon the heart and moved it.”

Gaozi appears in the *Mencius* principally as an adversary, arguing that human nature is neither good nor bad – the debates on this point appear below. Some commentators speculate he was a Mohist, but in the few other Warring States texts that portray him, he seems to be a Confucian, though not of Mencius’s school. Note that there is a core disagreement between Mencius and

Gaozi here on whether “the teachings” or “the heart” should have authority over one’s actions. They agree that the heart should have authority over the *qi*, and this is probably an anti-Mohist position, designed to counter the Mohist teaching that one should discipline oneself to follow the rationally derived imperative of universality over the spontaneous tendency to love one’s intimates more than others.

The passage above presents a detailed portrait of how the body, heart (or heart-mind), and motivation are linked. Here is the description of the problematic term *qi* from the course Glossary:

This important term is so difficult to translate that throughout this course, we will simply leave it in its transcribed form as *qi*. For us, the most important of the many meanings of meaning of *qi* is “bodily energy.” This has a very specific referent in experience. One way to identify the *qi* in your own body is to drink three cups of coffee before bed and then, as you lie awake two hours later, take note of the light feeling of nerves racing around, keeping you awake - that’s your *qi*. In ancient China, this *qi* was pictured as a type of vaporous substance that penetrated the cosmos - it made the stars shine and water flow, and in people, it was a powerful force (the original graph seems to suggest steam). If properly harnessed, *qi* could help people achieve great things in the world and could also nourish the body and keep it healthy. If dissipated through careless living or unfocused activity, it could sabotage the ability to follow through in action and undermine physical health. *Qi* cultivation was a basic aspect of the training of many schools, including Confucianism and Daoism. There were also schools whose Daos consisted of nothing other than *qi* cultivation. (An important product of such schools was martial arts training, both in the Classical period and later. Many contemporary East Asian martial arts still place *qi* at the center of their training.)

THE FLOOD-LIKE *QI*

Gongsun Chou said, “May I presume to inquire how you, Sir, excel?”

“I can interpret what speech means,” replied Mencius, “and I nurture well my flood-like *qi*.”

Gongsun Chou asked, “What do you mean by ‘flood-like *qi*?’”

“It is hard to describe,” said Mencius. “This is a *qi* that is as great and hard as can be. If one nurtures it by means of straightforward action and never injures it, then it will fill all between heaven and earth. It is a *qi* that is a companion to righteousness and the Dao. Without these, it will starve away. It is generated through the long accumulation of acts of righteousness. It is not something that can be seized through a single righteous act. If in your actions there is any sense of inadequacy in your heart, it will starve away.

“This is why I say that Gaozi never really understood righteousness. He looked for it in external standards other than the heart. But your task must always be before you and you must not go making small adjustments. The task of nurturing this *qi* must never be forgotten by the heart, but you must not meddle and try to help it grow. Don’t be like the simpleton from the state of Song.

“There was a man of Song who was concerned that the sprouts in his field were not growing well, so he went and tugged at each one. He went home utterly exhausted and said, ‘Oh, I’ve made myself ill today! I’ve been out helping the sprouts to grow.’ His sons rushed out to look and found the stalks all shriveled up.

“There are few in the world who do not ‘help their sprouts grow.’ There are those who do not ‘weed’ – they have simply given the whole task up as useless. But the ones

who tug on the sprouts to help them grow – they are worse than useless, for they do harm!”

The attack on Gaozi’s “externalization” of right (*yi*) is also central to the 6A debates on human nature. It is a reformulation of the earlier position ascribed to Gaozi, that one should take direction from “the teachings” rather than from one’s heart.

Note Mencius’s comment when asked to describe the flood-like *qi*: “It is hard to describe.” Comments like this are rare in the mouths of the early philosophers – after all, the texts are edited so that the thinkers can say whatever the text editors wish to have conveyed to readers. A comment such as this suggests an echo of a real statement, made either by Mencius himself or others, reporting the elusiveness of an actual experience, particularly because the comment is followed by an attempt (rather detailed) at a description, rather than simply a statement that the idea in question is “ineffable” (a tactic quite familiar to the Daoist text *Dao de jing*, leaving us to wonder whether the author was reporting real experience or simply a doctrine with vague content). The obvious inference is that such a statement is more likely to be a report of actual experience than the formulation of some theoretical doctrine.

SPEECH AND SAGEHOOD

Gongsun Chou asked, “What do you mean when you say you can interpret what speech means?”

“When I hear biased speech, I can tell what has obscured the man’s understanding. When I hear excessive speech, I can tell what trap the man has fallen into. When I hear deviant speech, I can tell where the man has strayed. When I hear evasive speech, I can tell at what point the man has exhausted his reasons. When these defects are born in the mind they bring harm to self-governance, and when proclaimed as policies of state, they bring harm to its affairs.”

“Confucius’s disciples Zai Wo and Zigong excelled in the persuasive arts of speech, while Ran Niu, Minzi, and Yan Yuan excelled in expressing virtue in words. While Confucius excelled in both, he said, ‘I have no ability when it comes to the arts of speech.’ Thus you, Sir, must already have reached the level of a sage.”

Mencius said, “What sort of thing is that to say! Once, Zigong asked Confucius, ‘Are you a sage?’ and Confucius replied, ‘Sage? My abilities are not at that level. I’m just one who never tires of study or wearies of teaching.’ Zigong said, ‘To study without tiring is wisdom; to teach without wearying is *ren*. Both *ren* and wise, you, Master, are indeed a sage.’ Confucius was unwilling to accept the title of sage – what sort of thing is that to say of me?”

Gongsun Chou said, “I have heard it said that Confucius’s disciples Zixia, Ziyou, and Zizhang each was like the Master in one respect, while Ran Niu, Minzi, and Yan Yuan each resembled the Master in full, but at a lesser level. May I ask which of these fits you?”

“Let us put that aside for now.”

SAGES OF THE PAST AND CONFUCIUS

In this section, Confucius is compared to two ancient sages, Bo Yi and Yi Yin. Bo Yi, together with his brother, Shu Qi, was a late Shang Dynasty man of pure righteousness, who withdrew from society so as to keep a distance from the evil of the last Shang ruler. When King Wu conquered the Shang, he and his brother reappeared, but judging King Wu to be an imperfect ruler, they returned to their hermit lives and starved. Yi Yin was the prime minister and sagely advisor

of Tang, the founding ruler of the Shang Dynasty. This section can be compared with 6B.1, which is translated in the fourth set of readings on the *Mencius*, as well as with *Analects* 18.8.

“What would you say of the ancient men Bo Yi and Yi Yin?”

Mencius said, “They followed different *daos*. For Bo Yi, one should serve no man other than one’s ruler and rule over no people but those one had a right to rule; when order prevails in the world one should come forward; when chaos prevails withdraw. For Yi Yin, one may serve any ruler or rule any people; when order prevails in the world one should come forward; when chaos prevails, come forward as well. For Confucius, though, one should serve when one should serve and stop when one should stop, dally in a state when one should dally and depart quickly when one should depart quickly, all as circumstances require. These were all sages of old, and I have not yet been able to practice any of their *daos*. My wish, however, would be to emulate Confucius.”

“Were Bo Yi and Yi Yin in this way the equals of Confucius?”

“No. Since the birth of mankind, there has never been another like Confucius.”

“But did they share aspects in common with him?”

Mencius said, “Yes. Had any of them ruled over a territory one hundred li square, the lords of the states would have served him at his court, and he would have possessed all the world. Had any of them been offered the chance to gain the world merely by doing one unrighteous deed or killing one innocent person, he would not have done so. In this, they are alike.”

“May I ask in what respect they were different?”

“Confucius’s disciples Zai Wo, Zigong, and You Ruo all had intelligence enough to recognize a sage, and none would have been so base as to show a bias towards a man they loved. Zai Wo said, ‘In my view, the Master far surpasses Yao and Shun.’ Zigong said, ‘The Master sees the rituals of a state and from them knows the nature of its governance; he hears its music and from it knows its virtue; he looks back on a hundred generations of kings and appraises all of them such that no one can contradict him. Since the birth of mankind, there has never been another like the Master.’ You Ruo said, ‘It is not thus only with people. The unicorn is a beast like other beasts, the phoenix a bird like other birds, Mount Tai a hill like any mound, the Yellow River and the sea are bodies of water like the stream in a ditch, but all these stand out from their kind, far above the crowd. Since the birth of mankind, there has been nothing as outstanding as Confucius.’”