

Mencius, Readings 5

Timeliness and “Fate” (*ming*)

Like Confucius, Mencius was ultimately a failure, at least in political terms. The *Analects* deals with Confucius’s failure through a teleology that pictures him as Tian’s agent in awakening the world to morality after centuries of ethical chaos – Confucius as the “wooden bell.” The Mencius does not develop any comparably teleological device, but it seems likely that its great interest in issues connected with the doctrine of timeliness and its very innovative treatment of a “fate”-like concept expressed by the term *ming* both arise from attempts to work through the implications of Mencius’s failure – attempts that Mencius himself may have initiated.

I. Mencius’s political failure and the issue of timeliness

Book II of the Mencius is set in the state of Qi, and it opens with a conversation between Mencius and a disciple who was from that state. If Book I is a portrait of Mencius’s overall career as a wandering persuader, Book II seems to be an overview of his career solely from the standpoint of Qi, beginning optimistically with a discussion of Mencius’s prospects for success, and ending with a sad series of passages depicting his final retreat from Qi in failure.

2A.1 Gongsun Chou asked, “If you, Sir, were able to command the course of Qi, would not achievements on a par with Guan Zhong and Yanzi be possible?”

Mencius said, “Really, you are such a native of Qi! All you know about are Guan Zhong and Yanzi. Someone once asked Zengzi’s son Zeng Xi, ‘Master, who is the worthier, you or Zilu?’ Zeng Xi answered with furrowed brow, ‘My father held Zilu in awe.’ So his questioner said, ‘Well then, what about you and Guan Zhong?’ At this, Zeng Xi flushed with displeasure. ‘How could you compare Guan Zhong and me? Guan Zhong gained such utter control of his lord and monopolized the reins of government for so long, yet his accomplishments were so base – why would you ever compare me to such a man?’ Even Zeng Xi felt that Guan Zhong was beneath him, and now you wish to compare me to him.”

“But Guan Zhong led his lord to rule as hegemon over the states, and Yanzi made his lord illustrious. Are these men unworthy of emulation?”

Mencius said, “To make the lord of Qi rule as a True King would be as easy as turning over one’s hand.”

“If this is so, then I’m more confused than ever. After all, King Wen, for all his great virtue, lived to be a hundred and had not yet brought the world under his rule. King Wu and the Duke of Zhou succeeded him – only then did their rule prevail. Now you speak of ruling as a True King as though it were a simple thing. Does that mean that King Wen is unworthy of emulation too?”

Mencius said, “How could we compare this situation to King Wen’s? From the time when Tang founded the Shang Dynasty to the time of the Shang king Wuding, there were six or seven kings who were sage worthies. The world had cleaved to the Shang for a long time, and what has long persisted is difficult to change. Wuding commanded the many lords at his court and presided over all the world as if he were turning it in his palm.

“The last ruler of the Shang, Zhòu, was not far removed in time from Wuding. The traditions inherited from his predecessors, their influence and good policies, were all still present. Moreover, his closest advisors, Weizi, Wei Zhong, Wangzi Bigan, Jizi, Jiao

Ge – all were worthy men who assisted Zhòu and provided their support. It was for these reasons that it was only after many years that Zhòu lost his grip. Not a foot of territory was not his land, not a single man was not his subject – while King Wen was just rising to prominence from a territory only one hundred li square. This is why it was so difficult for him.

“The people of Qi have a saying:

Though you may be clever and wise,
The fortunes of circumstance are better to ride.
Though you may farm with the blade of a hoe,
The time of the season is what you must know.

It is the nature of the present time that makes True Kingship easy to attain.

“Even at the height of their powers, the Xia, Shang, and Zhou kings never held a territory of more than a thousand li under their direct control, and Qi is certainly as big as this. The crowing of farmyard cocks and the barking of family dogs can be heard everywhere within the state from border to border – Qi certainly has the necessary population. Without expanding its borders or adding new manpower, if state governance were to accord with policies of *ren*, no one could stop Qi’s lord from ruling all as a True King.

“Moreover, never has the world waited longer for a True King to arise, and never have the people suffered under tyranny more cruel than they do now. It is easy to provide food for the hungry and drink for the thirsty. Confucius said, ‘The influence of virtue spreads faster than an order sent through the stations of the post.’ In a time like the present, if a state of ten thousand chariots were to practice *ren* governance, the people would rejoice as though they had been released from the torture of being hung by their heels. With half the effort of the ancients, twice the achievements can be accomplished now. It is the times which make it so.”

*Guan Zhong and Yanzi were high ministers of Qi during the Spring and Autumn Period (Guan Zhong lived in the seventh century BC; Yanzi was an older contemporary of Confucius). Mencius responds particularly to Guan Zhong, who advised the Duke of Qi so well that he became acknowledged as “hegemon” of all the feudal lords in his day. This was a celebrated role, but for Mencius, it was false eminence because it was based on power, rather than morality, the hallmark of a True King (such as the Zhou founders).

This passage provides us with the rationale Mencius used to justify his effort to become involved in politics and violate the rule of timeliness, “When the *dao* prevails in the world, appear; when it does not, hide.” Mencius embarks on his career as a wandering persuader late in life, having already established his reputation, in the belief that the desperation of the world has created a new rule for timeliness – “With half the effort of the ancients, twice the achievements can be accomplished now.”

1B.10 The armies of Qi attacked the state of Yan and prevailed. King Xuan asked, “Some tell me to annex Yan, others say not to. For one state of ten thousand chariots to attack another and prevail within fifty days is something beyond the reach of human power. If I do not annex Yan, surely there will be some disaster sent by Tian. What is your view of annexation?”

“If the people of Yan will be pleased by your annexation, then do it. King Wu is an example of an ancient ruler who followed this course. If the people of Yan will not be pleased by your annexation, then don’t do it. King Wen is an example of an ancient ruler who followed this course. When one state of ten thousand chariots attacks another and its armies are met by people bringing baskets of food and jugs of drink, how could it not be that the people are turning toward that state as men flee from flood or fire? But if the flood turns out to be deeper and the fire hotter, they will surely turn back round.”

Qi invaded Yan in 314 B.C., and, as the next passage makes clear, Qi did annex Yan. Qi occupied Yan for a number of years, inciting increasing resentment of Qi among the populace of Yan. In time, Qi’s troops withdrew having set up a puppet ruler, King Zhao, who, after the withdrawal of Qi’s troops did all he could to seek revenge. Thirty years later, the armies of Yan invaded Qi and occupied the capital, forcing the King Xuan’s successor into exile, where he died.

We know from other texts that the court of Qi claimed that Mencius had voiced support for the invasion of Qi, and given that the outcome was, in the long run, disastrous for Qi, the *Mencius* seems to make a concerted effort to explain that Mencius’s advice was actually not heeded, and that he was not implicated in this fiasco. (See below, 2B.8.)

1B.11 Having attacked Yan, the state of Qi annexed it. The rulers of the other states plotted ways to come to the rescue of Yan. King Xuan said, “Most of the lords of the states are plotting to attack me. What should I be doing to respond to this?”

Mencius replied, “I have heard of one who ruled over a state merely seventy li square rising to rule the world; Tang was such a man. I have never heard of one who ruled over a state a thousand li square fearing others. The *Documents* says: ‘Tang’s campaign of unity began against Ge.’ The world then came to have faith in him: when he turned eastwards to campaign, the barbarians of the west complained; when he turned south to campaign, the barbarians of the north complained, saying, ‘Why has he put us last?’ The people looked towards him as men look towards storm clouds and rainbows during a drought. Those who went to market continued to go to market, and those who tilled the land continued to till, for he executed their rulers and comforted the people like the fall of timely rain. The people were so greatly pleased! The *Documents* says: ‘We await our lord; when he comes, we shall spring back to life.’

“Now Yan was a state that treated its people with cruelty, and when Your Majesty sent your troops to campaign against it, the people of Yan met them like rescuers in times of flood or fire, bringing baskets of food and jugs of drink. How then could you have thought it proper to kill their elders, bind their youths in fetters, destroy their ancestral temples and carry off from them their precious vessels. The world was already in awe of the strength of Qi – and now your territories are doubled and you still fail to carry out humane (*ren*) governance. It is this that has mobilized the armies of the world. If Your Majesty will swiftly issue orders to release all captives old and young, leave all valuables where they were, and make plans with the people of Yan to set up a new ruler and withdraw your armies, there is time yet to stop the coming war.”

The text now turns to the series of events that led up to Mencius’s later departure from Qi, after he had risen to a high advisory position. The reason Mencius resigned his post was the invasion of Yan, which we encountered in Book 1 (1B.10-11). Yan had become a target because its ruler, Zikuai, a hereditary monarch like all others, had ceded his throne to a minister, Zizhi, rather than to his son. Rulers elsewhere were outraged – their own legitimacy had been challenged – and Mencius, whose conservative views on this matter are clear from passage 1B.7, apparently agreed

that this was simply a power play by an ambitious minister, hoodwinking a dimwitted lord. In the passage below, his views are solicited privately by a minister of Qi.

2B.8 Shen Tong asked Mencius in private confidence, “Do you think Yan ought to be attacked?”

Mencius said, “Yes. Zikuai had no authority to give Yan away, and Zizhi had no authority to receive it from Zikuai. Let’s say there was a gentleman here whom you liked; what if you, without consulting the King, privately granted to him your court rank and salary, and he accepted them without any commission from the King? What difference is there in the case of Yan?”

The armies of Qi attacked Yan, and someone said to Mencius, “Is it true that you urged Qi to attack Yan?”

“Never!” said Mencius. “Shen Tong asked whether Yan ought to be attacked and I said yes in response to his question. Then they went off and attacked Yan! If he had asked me. ‘Who should attack Yan?’ I would have replied, ‘He who acts as the agent of Tian should attack Yan.’

“Let’s say there were a murderer here, and someone asked, ‘Should this man be executed?’ I would say yes. If he asked, ‘Who should execute him?’ I would reply, ‘The Minister of the Guards should execute him.’

“As it is, this is simply one Yan attacking another Yan – why would I ever urge such a thing?”

The passages that end Book 2 all concern Mencius’s departure from Qi after the fiasco of the Yan invasion and the subsequent revolt of the people of Yan against Qi’s occupation army.

2B.12 As Mencius was departing from the state of Qi, a man called Yin Shi said, “If he didn’t realize that our King could never be a ruler like Tang or King Wu, then he is surely a very unperceptive man. If he did realize it and came to court anyway, then he’s just a fortune seeker. He traveled a thousand li to appear before the King; now that he’s met with no success he’s leaving, but he’s been on the road for three nights and has only just got past the town of Zhou. What’s the point of this dawdling? It seems most distasteful to me.”

Mencius’s disciple Gao reported this comment, and Mencius said, “What does this Yin Shi know of me? It was my wish to travel a thousand li to visit the King, but how could it be my wish to have met with no success? I simply have no alternative but to leave. To me, it feels all too fast that after three nights I’ve already left Zhou – the King might still change his ways! If he did, he would certainly call me back. Only after I’d passed Zhou and the King had sent no message pursuing me did I feel the true impulse to return home. And even so, how could I simply abandon the King? He is still capable of turning to goodness. If he would only use my counsels, it would not merely be the people of Qi to whom peace would come, it would be the entire world. And the King might still change his ways – I look for it every day! How could I behave like those petty courtiers who remonstrate with their rulers and, when their advice is not followed, stalk off frowning in anger and race all day to get as far away as possible before seeking an inn.”

When Yin Shi heard of this response he said, “I am a petty man indeed!”

2B.13 When Mencius was leaving Qi, Chong Yu accompanied him on the road and asked, “You are wearing an unhappy expression, Sir. Yet I have heard you say, ‘The *junzi* does not complain against Tian, nor does he blame men.’”

Mencius said, “That was one time, this is another. Every five hundred years a True King should arise, and in the interval there will always be ages famed for excellence. But since the time of the Zhou founders it has now been over seven hundred years. By the calendar calculation, it is overdue; considering what the times are like, the world is ready. But Tian does not yet wish to bring peace to the world. If it did, in this generation, who apart from me could it turn to? Why should I be unhappy?”

In the *Analects*, Confucius laments that he has failed to attract the recognition of a ruler that would employ him, but adds, “I do not complain against Tian, nor do I blame men.” Mencius seems to have passed this teaching on to disciples like Chong Yu, but now, he says that while it was appropriate for Confucius in his era, the times have changed. This passage reinforces the idea that for Mencius, the rules of timeliness applied differently in his age and in Confucius’s. Note the calendrical numerology in this passage – it resonates with the language of 2A.1 (which began this reading), and we will see it echoed in the final passage of the text (which ends this reading).

2B.14 Mencius had left Qi and was dwelling in Xiu. Gongsun Chou asked, “Is it traditional practice to serve at court without accepting a stipend?”

“No,” said Mencius. “But when I had my first audience with the King at Chong, I determined as I retired from his presence that I would ultimately resign. Not wishing to appear to be changeable, I never accepted my stipend. Then the war began and it would not have been proper to ask leave to depart. It was never my intent to remain long in Qi.”

II. “Balancing”: the art of rule violation

The two passages in this section focus on a notion closely related to timeliness – when are we licensed to violate rules? Confucian texts grant the *junzi* who is truly at the level of sage full violation to do so, but do not want to grant that authority to everyone. After all, *li* are rules, and if they are not important, what basis is left for a ritualist tradition like Confucianism?

6B.1 A man from Ren asked Mencius’s disciple Wuluzi, “Which is more important, the *li* or food?”

“*Li* is more important,” said Wuluzi.

“Which is more important, sex or *li*?”

“*Li* is more important.”

“What if you would starve to death if you insisted on *li*, but you could get food if you didn’t. Would you still have to abide by *li*? What if by skipping the ritual groom’s visit to receive the bride you could take a wife, but otherwise you could not? Would you still insist on the groom’s ritual visit?”

Wuluzi was unable to reply, and the next day he went to Zou to consult with Mencius.

Mencius said, “What’s difficult about this? An inch long wood chip could measure higher than a building if we hold its tip up above and ignore the difference in what is below. When we say that gold is heavier than feathers, we don’t mean a buckle’s worth of gold and a cartload of feathers. If you compare the extremity of need for food with a minor ritual, it’s not just food that can seem more weighty. If you compare the

extremity of need for joining of the sexes with a minor ritual, it's not just sex that can seem more weighty.

“Go back and respond to him like this: ‘What if you could get food you need only by twisting your elder brother’s arm – would you twist it? What if you could get a wife only by climbing over your neighbor’s east wall and dragging his daughter off – would you do it?’”

The metaphor of weighing things in a balance that underlies 6B.1 gives the name to this process, “balancing.” In a text that was probably in its earliest phase of development during Mencius’s time, a version of a historical chronicle called “The Guliang Commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*,” the rule of balancing is explained this way: “‘Balancing’ refers to cases where one must violate the norms to be good.”

4A.17 Chunyu Kun said, “Is it true that according to *li*, men and women must not touch one another?”

“That is the *li*,” said Mencius.

“If your sister-in-law were drowning, would you extend her your hand?”

Mencius said, “A man who would not extend his hand to a drowning sister-in-law would be a wild beast. That men and women must not touch one another is *li*; extending one’s hand to a drowning sister-in-law is balancing circumstances.”

Chunyu Kun said, “Today, the world is drowning. Why do you, Sir, not extend your hand to it?”

“When the world is drowning, you extend the Dao to save it. When a sister-in-law is drowning you extend your hand – do you wish me to save the world with my hand?”

We may ask whether balancing is not, after all, simply a matter of a utilitarian calculus – always act to create the most good. But the *Mencius* denies that this is so. It too is a rule, and for the *Mencius*, no rules are truly authoritative. In the following passage, he applies this to evaluation of his two major adversaries, the hedonistic/egoistic philosopher Yang Zhu (about whom we know very little) and Mozi. He also names a thinker about whom we know nothing else, Zimo, whose “rule” is always to choose the balance between extremes. This too fails for Mencius – it is, after all, a rule.

7A.26 Mencius said, “Yang Zhu’s motto is ‘act for oneself.’ If he could profit the world by plucking out a single hair he would not do it. For Mozi the motto is ‘universal love.’ If it would profit the world, he would scratch his head bald and walk his heels off. Zimo advocates holding to a middle course. Holding to the middle comes near to it, but if you insist on holding to the middle without considering the balance of circumstances it is really no different from grasping one extreme. What is detestable about grasping one extreme is that it cuts down the Dao, raising up a single part and casting of hundreds.

III. Timeliness and the sage

5B.1 Mencius said, “Bo Yi would not look at improper sights not listen to improper music. He would not serve a lord who was not his proper ruler; he would not direct a person who was not his proper subordinate. When there was order, he presented himself; when there was chaos, he absented himself. He could not bear to remain in any place

where either government or population was perverse. He felt that to be together with common villagers was like sitting in mud and ashes wearing court robes and cap. During the rule of the tyrant Zhòu he withdrew to dwell on the shores of the Northern Sea, awaiting a day when the world would again be pure. Hence when they hear the themes of Bo Yi's conduct, the avaricious man becomes incorruptible and the timorous man becomes steadfast.

Yi Yin said, 'What lord may I not serve? What person may I not direct?' Whether in times of order or chaos, he would present himself nevertheless, saying, 'In giving birth to the people, Tian obliges those who first gain understanding to awaken those who gain understanding later, and those who awaken earlier must awaken the others. I am among those who have awakened first, and I will use this *dao* to awaken the people.' He felt about the people of the world who had not enjoyed the benefits of Yao and Shun's bounty as if he himself had shoved them into a ditch. Thus did he burden himself with the weight of the world.

"Liuxia Hui felt no disgrace in serving a corrupt lord and no office was so petty that he would decline to serve in it. When he took his place at court he never failed to call attention to worthy talent in others, and he always acted according to the Dao. When he was dismissed, he was never resentful; when he was in impoverished circumstances he was never anxious. When together with common villagers he was all at ease and could not tear himself away. 'You are you and I am I. Though you may sit half clothed or naked by my side, what stain would that leave on me?' Hence when they hear the themes of Liuxia Hui's conduct, the narrow man becomes open minded and the miserly man becomes generous.

"When Confucius withdrew from the state of Qi, he rinsed his rice bowl and set right out. When he departed his home state of Lu, he said, 'Go slow, go slow. It is my parents' land I leave.' When speed was appropriate he was fast, when delay was appropriate he was slow. Where it was appropriate to dwell apart he dwelt apart, where it was appropriate to serve he served."

Mencius concluded, "Bo Yi was the sage of purity; Yi Yin was the sage of responsibility; Liuxia Hui was the sage of harmony; Confucius was the sage of timeliness. We call Confucius 'the great coda.' By this we mean that he is like the great musical climax, where the brass gongs peal and the jade chimes ring. The peal of the brass gongs signals the start of the culmination and the ring of the jade chimes brings the coda to its close. The start of the culmination is like the work of wisdom; the close of the coda is like the work of sagehood. Wisdom can be compared to craft and sagehood to strength. Like an arrow shot from beyond a hundred paces: that it reaches the target is a matter of strength; that it hits the bull's eye is not a matter of strength.

This passage, which substantially overlaps *Analects* 18.8, provides a clear statement of how the doctrine of timeliness relates to the actions of the sage. The men who are named in this passage are all great historical (and legendary) exemplars of virtue. Bo Yi was a man of the late Shang who withdrew from society during a time of immorality, preferring to starve than to eat food harvested in a state controlled by an unjust lord. Yi Yin was a commoner living in the last, evil days of the Xia Dynasty, who gave up a carefree life in order to tutor the lord who, under Yi Yin's tutelage, ultimately overthrew the Xia and founded the Shang Dynasty. Liuxia Hui was a man of Lu, said to have lived about two generations before Confucius, about whom a variety of legends emerged; he develops an heroic profile in Confucian texts. The greatness of all these men is here

interpreted in terms of their adherence to some thematic rule. It is in contrast to their greatness that Confucius's embodiment of timeliness makes him greater still.

The following two passages extend this notion of timeliness more broadly. They can be compared to *Analects* 4.10: "The *junzi*'s stance towards the world is this: there is nothing he insists on, nothing he refuses, he simply aligns himself beside right (*yi*)."

4B.6 Mencius said, "Ritual *li* that are not legitimate *li*, righteous (*yi*) acts that are not legitimately right – the great man does not perform these."

Once again we see rules subjugated to the judgment of the ethically perfected actor; 4B.11 is a further example, closely echoing *Analects* 4.10.

4B.11 Mencius said, "A great man will not always keep his word, nor will he always see his action through. He follows only what is right."

IV. The Mencian view of *ming* ("fate"; destiny)

The *Mozi* charges Confucianism with being "fatalistic," that is, preaching a doctrine that everything is governed by an impersonal force that human effort cannot influence. In Chinese, the term for this is *ming* (see the online Glossary for a detailed discussion of the term). In the *Analects*, the following passage uses *ming* in a sense that seems to bear out the Mohist charge of fatalism:

Gongbo Liao made accusations against Zilu at the Ji family court. Zifu Jingbo reported this, saying, "My master harbors uncertain feelings towards Gongbo Liao. My effort would still suffice to have his corpse splayed in the market and court." The Master said, "Will the *dao* prevail? That is a matter of fate (*ming*). Will the *dao* be cast aside? That is a matter of fate. What can Gongbo Liao do about fate?" (14.36)

In this passage, Confucius dismisses the need for or the efficacy of human effort with regard to a matter whose outcome is yet to be determined. That is surely suggestive of determinism, though in the case of the *Analects* passage, there may be other ways to interpret its meaning (such as that Confucius is unwilling to incur a heavy debt to a courtier like Zifu Jingbo, who was a significant power in the warlord Meng clan).

In this section, we include a number of passages concerning *ming* that appear in the *Mencius*, where the concept plays a much more important role than it does in the *Analects*. These are not easy passages to understand, and we'll analyze them further in class.

7A.1 Mencius said, "He who exhausts his mind knows his nature; to know one's nature is to know Tian. The way to serve Tian is to preserve the mind and nourish the nature. The way to stand waiting for Tian's commands (*ming*) is this: never waver for fear of death, just cultivate your self and await them."

In dealing with the term *ming*, it's very important to understand the basic meanings that the word commonly denoted. A *ming* was, most fundamentally, a "command" or "order." In this sense, it was future-oriented and reliant upon the notion of effort – effort is necessary to follow a command. However, *ming* had also come to mean "lifespan," which was viewed as a fully determined feature of human beings, set by powers beyond human control at birth. (A person could fail to fulfill their *ming* – destined lifespan – if they died a violent death, but they could not exceed their *ming* by outliving their "destined" lifespan.) This was also a command – perhaps from Tian – but it was one that was not given to us to execute (in Chinese popular religion, the command was given to a "spirit official" called the "Minister of Lifespans," who, like Europe's Grim Reaper, "cut down"

people when their time came). This dimension of *ming* is, explicitly, outside the range of human effort. In 7A.1, we don't gain much information about *ming*, but the term seems likely to involve something effortful, since we appear to await our *ming* in order to take action in Tian's service, not in order to have something beyond our control happen to us.

7A.2 Mencius said, "Everything is decreed (*ming*): obey by receiving those commands proper to you. Thus, those who know their commands do not stand beneath high walls. A man's proper command is to follow the Way to the end and die. To die in shackles cannot be a man's proper command."

If everything is decreed, what can we do about it? The initial phrase sounds fatalistic. Yet effort turns out to be involved: we obey (or not); we "know" our commands (or not); we have "proper" commands – which means there are commands that may be in some way not proper, and which we should avoid following. This is not the language of fatalism, which is most essentially defined as the belief that human effort cannot determine outcomes. The injunction to view one's experience in the world as an encounter with commands whose appropriateness one must interpret in the midst of living is, however, very much the language of the doctrine of timeliness.

7A.3 Mencius said, "Strive for it and get it; let it go and lose it': in this saying, striving helps to get it, because what I strive for lies within me. 'There is a way to strive for it; getting it lies with *ming*': here striving does not help to get it, because what I strive for lies outside of me."

This passage contrasts two "sayings." In the second, the term *ming* indicates that accomplishing the goal of action "lies outside of me," that is, beyond my power to determine. Here, *ming* functions "fatalistically" (our effort cannot determine the outcome), yet this fatalism is sharply constrained by the context of "striving" in which it occurs. We must strive, but we cannot determine the outcome. For comparison, consider this passage from the *Analects*, which is almost next to the "fatalistic" passage cited above:

Zilu stayed the night by Stone Gate. The morning gate keeper said, "Where are you coming from?" Zilu said, "From the Kong home." "Is that the one who knows it can't be done and keeps doing it?" (14.38)

Here too, there is internal tension in the picture of Confucius as a man who understands that he is "fated" to fail, but whose effort is undiminished by that knowledge.

7B.24 Mencius said, "The response of the mouth to flavor, of the eye to beauty, of the ear to music, of the nose to fragrance, of the body to ease: these belong to the nature. But they are inescapable (*ming*), and the *junzi* does not speak of them as the nature. The response of the sense of *ren* to one's father or son, of the sense of right to one's lord or minister, of the sense of ritual to one's host or guest, of the sense of wisdom to able men, of the Sage person to the Way of Tian: these are inescapable. But they belong to our nature, and the *junzi* does not speak of them as *ming*."

Even human nature seems to have a "fated" dimension – after all, we can't help it that our eyes see, nor can we see better than we do, and the same applies to other sense organs with which we are endowed at birth. These are clearly part of our natures, but Mencius here excludes them from *his* meaning of the term "human nature." On the other hand, although our moral senses are, according to Mencius's theory of human nature, just as much part of our "hard wiring" as our physical senses – and thus "fated" – he excludes these from any portrait of personal attributes beyond the control of the person. What distinguishes our "fate" from our "potential?" The distinction lies in the issues of effort and efficacy.

V. Fatalism and Mencius's failure

There is a sharp distinction between the significance of a “fatalistic” statement before an event has taken place and after it has taken place. When, in *Analects* 14.36, Confucius cites *ming* in declining to take action to help Zilu escape danger, he is speaking fatalistically because he is denying the usefulness of exerting effort (“*ming*” will take care of it). (Note that this kind of “fatalism” can work in positive ways that Mohists do not imagine – when Confucius says in *Analects* 7.23, “Tian has engendered virtue in me – what harm can Huan Tui do to me?” he is not speaking in a spirit of resignation, but to embolden his disciples.) When an event that is in the past is *explained* as “fate,” the statement may not operate fatalistically if it is not tied to any notion of future effort. In the following two passages, this issue is central to interpreting the message that the text means to convey.

1B.16 Duke Ping of Lu was about to leave his palace when one of his favorites, a man named Zang Cang, asked, “On other days when Your Highness has gone out, you have always told the court officers where you are going. Now your carriages are already yoked and ready to depart, but the officers do not know where you will be. May I inquire?”

The Duke said, “I am going to visit Mencius.”

Zang Cang said, “What’s this? Your Highness plans to debase himself by initiating acquaintance with a common fellow? You think him a worthy? The worthy are those from whom ritual and right flow, yet Mencius is a man who permitted the funeral of his mother to be more lavish than that he had earlier held for his father! I beg you not to go see him.”

“Alright,” said the Duke.

Mencius’s follower Yuezheng Ke appeared before the Duke. “Why did Your Highness fail to visit Meng Ke?”

“Someone told me that Mencius permitted the funeral of his mother to be more lavish than that he had earlier held for his father, that is why I did not go.”

Yuezheng Ke said, “What’s this? What Your Highness refers to as being more lavish, was simply a matter of Mencius earlier having been a common gentleman and later being a court grandee, was it not? The former case entails three burial tripods and the latter five.”

“No, I was referring to the beauty of the inner and outer coffins and of the grave clothes.”

“This was not a matter of lavishness. He was simply wealthier at the later time.”

Yuezheng Ke went to see Mencius. “I told the Duke about you and he was planning to come see you. But one of his favorites, a certain Zang Cang, obstructed him, and that is why he never came.”

Mencius said, “When things go forward it is because something causes them to do so; when they are halted it is because something drags them back. It is beyond a man’s power to make things go forward or stop. The fact that I did not encounter the ruler of Lu was the work of Tian. How could the son of some clansman of the Zangs prevent this encounter?”

Because this passage appears at the end of Book I, which seems to be a chronological account of Mencius's persuasions to rulers, it is generally regarded as a portrait of the end of Mencius's career – the snuffing of a final chance at political success after he had left the state of Qi to live in retirement in Zou, which was by that time a district of Lu quite close to the duke's capital. If this is correct, then when Mencius invokes “the work of Tian,” he is simply ascribing to forces beyond human control the final failure of his mission. Whether this is fatalistic or not depends on whether this is the text's ultimate *explanation* for Mencius's failure, or whether it is a lesson to readers about the fruitlessness of effort. A mediate position would be to interpret it in the context of timeliness – Mencius's efforts were not ill made, but the times were ill suited, a fact he could learn only by putting the times to the test. This would be little different from the *Analects'* solution. However, the final passage of the *Mencius*, which ends this reading, gives us little sense of a teleological view that Mencius's failure was to be redeemed in some ultimate, future success (the approach which the *Analects* seems to take in picturing Confucius's failure in terms of his role as a “wooden bell”).

7B.38 Mencius said, “From the time of Yao and Shun to the time of Tang it was over five hundred years. Men like Yu and Gaoyao saw Yao and Shun with their own eyes, while men like Tang only heard about them. From the time of Tang to the time of King Wen it was over five hundred years. Men like Yi Yin and Lai Zhu saw Tang with their own eyes, while men like King Wen only heard about them. From the time of King Wen to the time of Confucius it was over five hundred years. Men like Grand Duke Wang and Sanyi Sheng saw King Wen with their own eyes, while men like Confucius only heard about him.

“From the time of Confucius to the present it is only a century and over – we are still not far from the time of the sage, and we are dwelling so near to his homeland. Yet if there is no one to follow him, well then, there is simply no one to follow him.”

We saw in 2A.1 (which started this section), that Mencius embarked on his career as a persuader in the belief that the “times” were ripe for change – far riper than in Confucius's day (a point we noted in 2A.13, also in Section I of this reading). In 2B.13, Mencius supplements the notion of the “ripeness” of the times with a numerological notion that the rise of True Kings and coming of sages obeys some sort of deterministic calendrical rhythm, based on cycles of five hundred years. Here we see that notion reemerge, but now, it is a puzzle – not only is the time ripe for a True King, but his coming is statistically “overdue.” The “wooden bell” – Confucius – has already been ringing. There is no *reason* why Mencius would have failed. If there is any truly fatalistic sentence in Confucian texts, perhaps it is the final one of the *Mencius*. It is not uttered as a doctrine about fate or a claim about the futility of human effort. But what could better convey fatalistic resignation than this sighing coda, followed by silence as we confront the text's end.