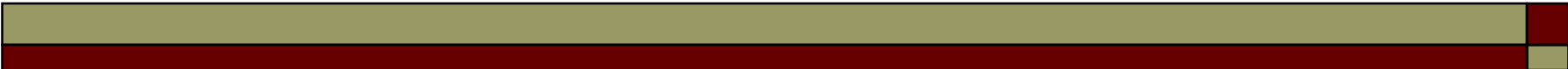


Chinese Conceptions of the Self

Lecture 3: Self, human nature and Identity in
Mengzi (Mencius) and *Xunzi*



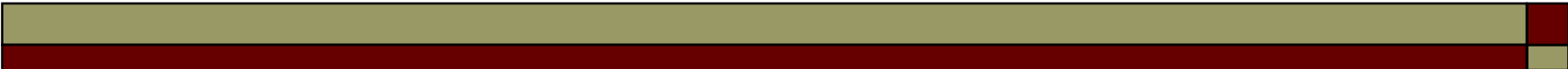
Susan Wolf, “Moral saints”

“By moral saint I mean a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be. Though I shall in a moment acknowledge the variety of types of person that might be thought to satisfy this description, it seems to me that none of these types serve as unequivocally compelling personal ideals. In other words, I believe that moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive.” (Wolf, “Moral Saints”, p. 419)

Moral self vs perfect self

- ❑ Moral self: person who adheres to moral codes and tries to be as morally good as possible
- ❑ Perfect self: seeks to nurture within itself the defining characteristic of being human (which is also the ultimate human good)

“For Mencius, the perfection of the self is a state of oneness with heaven, whereas for Aristotle, it is a state of contemplation, of being one with God.” (Yu Jiyuan, “The Moral Self and the Perfect Self,” p. 236)



Mencius 2A2: The man 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!”

Mengzi 2A2 (1) Attaining an “unmoving heart”

Gongsun Chou asked, “If you, Sir, were to receive a high post among the grandees of Qi and were able to implement the 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 heart¹ 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 Meng Ben² by far!”

“That is not difficult,” said Mencius. “Actually, Gaozi³ attained an unmoving heart earlier than I.”

“Is there a *dao*⁴ for achieving an unmoving heart?” asked Gongsun Chou.

“Yes,” replied Mencius, “there is.”

Mengzi 2A2: ‘Will’ and *qi*

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 will¹ 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.”

Mengzi 2A2 (4): ‘Flood-like *qi*’

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

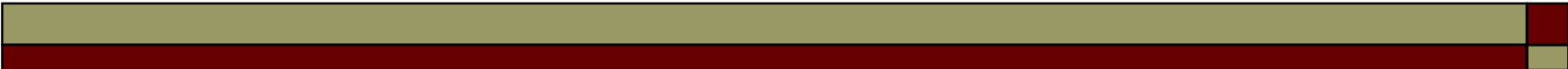
“I can interpret what speech means,” replied Mencius, “and I nurture well my flood-like *qi*.”

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 vast and firm as can be. If one nurtures it by means of straightforward action and never impairs 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 right (*yi*). 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 man from the state of Song.¹

“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!”



Mengzi 6A2

6A.2 Gaozi said, “Human nature is like water swirling at a wellspring. If you dig a channel towards the east it will flow east; if you dig a channel towards the west it will flow west. Human nature makes no distinction between good and bad, just as water makes no distinction between east and west.”

Mencius said, “It is true that water makes no distinction between east and west, but does it make no distinction between up and down? The good disposition of human nature is like water’s tendency to flow down. There are no men who are not innately good, just as there is no water that does not flow down. Now, by splashing you can make water leap up higher than your forehead, and by churning it you can make it flow up a hill, but how could this be the nature of water? It is merely a result of force. The fact that men can be made to act badly merely shows that human nature is like this as well.”

Mengzi 6A6: The Four Seeds

6A.6 Gongduzi said, “Gaozi says that human nature is neither good nor bad. Others say human nature is such that people can become good or become bad, and that this is why when the sage Kings Wen and Wu arose the people loved to be good, and when the tyrannical Kings You and Li arose people loved to be violent. Still others say there are people whose nature is good and people whose nature is bad, and that is why there could be a bad man like Shun’s brother Xiang living under Yao’s sagely rule, why Shun could be a sage even though his father was a bad man like Gusou, and why Weizi Qi and Prince Bigan could be outstanding, though Zhòu was their brother’s son and their ruler as well. Now you say human nature is good – is everyone else wrong?”

Mencius said, “What I mean by saying it is good is that there is that in our nature which is spontaneously part of us and can become good. The fact that we can become bad is not a defect in our natural endowment. All men possess a sense of commiseration; all men possess a sense of shame; all men possess a sense of respect; all men possess a sense of right and wrong. The sense of commiseration is the seed of humanity (*ren*); the sense of shame is the seed of righteousness (*yi*); the sense of respect is the seed of *li*; the sense of right and wrong is the seed of wisdom. Thus humanity, righteousness, *li*, and wisdom are not welded to us from outside. We possess them inherently; it is simply that we do not focus our minds on them. This is the meaning of the saying, ‘Seek for it and you will get it; let it go and you will lose it.’ The reason why some men are twice as good as others – or five or countless times better – is simply that some men do not exhaust their endowment to the full. The *Poetry* says:

Tian gave birth to the teeming people,
For every thing there is a norm.
The constant for people, within their grasp,
Is love of beautiful virtue’s form.¹

xing 性

“The *xing* of a living thing was commonly understood to be the way in which it develops and declines from birth to death when uninjured and adequately nourished.” (A. C. Graham, “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” pp. 27-28)

Self-actualization in *Mencius*

7A.1 Mencius said, “He who exhausts his mind knows his nature; to know one’s nature is to know Tian (Heaven, TJ). 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 person and await them.”

- person fully actualizes their nature not in oneness with society, but in oneness with Heaven → if the way of heaven prevails, there is no tension between these two unities
- Self-cultivation does not mean to be habituated (to be formed and determined by social habit or custom) → there is higher value than social value
- The moral self and the perfect self are different stages in the growth of the same self. They are not contradictory.

Happiness/living well according to Aristotle

“Living well consists in doing something, not just being in a certain state or condition. It consists in those lifelong activities that actualize the virtues of the rational part of the soul.” (From:

Kraut, Richard, "Aristotle's Ethics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aristotle-ethics/>>. Accessed: 14/02/2021)