

## My Understanding of the Human Nature of Mencius

In the tradition of Confucianism, the human nature is one of the most **controversial** topics, but still remaining a large place where we can talk about or reevaluate it and especially it is more meaningful and significant to talk about the human nature in the tradition of Confucianism in today's world which is full of problems, such as wars, discriminations, poverty, violence, dictatorship and non-humanitarian depravity.

Somehow, in Confucianism, human nature is not a controversial topic, if we agree that Mencius won over Xunzi and that from that time until now, all Confucians agreed with Mencius' s position which works as a foundational belief. But, the problem facing Confucian tradition was again and again to explain how this belief could be worked out in the society as you say full of problems.

Nonetheless they had very different ideas, approaches and explanations to the issue. Firstly Kongzi restored and propagated the records of golden age, so he handed down the tradition fully embodied in the virtuous kings, such as Yao, Shun, King of Wen, King of Wu. Due to the fact that the turmoil of the states at that time, Kongzi thought himself as a prophet to call on the people to revive the tradition of golden age by showing filial piety to parents, respect to the elder brothers in the family, loyalty to the king, performing Rituals, maintaining benevolence, showing sympathetic concern to others and following the Way. But he left us at the meantime a question to ask, is it all that Kongzi claimed? Is there more than just revitalizing the tradition, or how can it be justified that people should follow the Way of Yao Shun and pursuit benevolence?

Usually all the western authors use Confucius that is the name brought by the missionaries to Europe: Kong-fu-zi in its Latin form. If you prefer using the name Kongzi to Confucius, you shouldn't use the term Confucianism, but Rujia instead.

Then over 100 years later, Mencius came up with a new-oriented view to reset the foundation of Confucianism, a shift from the outside rituals, and family concern to internal human nature, heart-mind and moral concern. It would not be too far if I compare this shift as the "Copernicus's revolution" of Kant. Mencius not only developed or furthered the thoughts of Kongzi, but also he sowed the seeds of Confucianism from a small vast into a boundless field, where the Confucianism has been growing and being enriched or reshaped by many other traditions, such as Buddhism, Taoism and in the future, I believe it is Christianity.

I agree to the importance of this shift, which may seem as a progress in term of rationality and universality. At the same time, some Confucianists like Tang Wenming refuses the mencian way of inner heart as foundation, and prefers to stay with the Heavenly Providence 天命(tianming) or Heaven 天 tian as foundations.

Mencius was famous for his “four sprouts” theory, and his belief or premises that “the human nature is good” or every person has natural moral capacity, which were manifested and developed in family relationship. Nevertheless he also had many disputes with some other contemporary thinkers, such as Gaozi, Mozi, Yizhi and Yangzhu, who presented so different aspects about human nature, benevolence and sagehood. One of the most important points of their argumentations was whether the human nature or benevolence, goodness were from outside. According to Gaozi, the human nature is inherently directionless and the principles came from doctrines, moral maxims, or as he said “What you do not get from words, do not seek for in your heart.” Mencius often illustrated his thoughts by using metaphors, which was one of his main distinctiveness in unfolding his philosophical thoughts, that all human beings have natural tastes, ears have the ability to hear, eyes have the ability to look and mouth has the ability to taste, similarly our hearts and minds tend to have ability to reflect, to think and to appreciate and practice righteousness and goodness (principles.) Therefore moral motivation of human beings or four sprouts are based on the human nature; it is *internal* but not *external*. What human beings should do is to extend his own moral motivation, sympathetic concern, and affection for parents and respect for elder to others in kind and to use the moral capacity properly.

However the process of extending is not like extending one’s arm, it requires self-development, in which one nurtures but does not force the moral sprouts in the heart, in other words, it needs a proper course of development for four sprouts to germinate and bloom. Therefore he criticized Mozi and Yi Zhi for the deficiency in proper course of development, because Mozi and later Mohists did not start from the natural feelings, which human beings have for their parents, Mozi’s notion of benevolence has no root or starting point. Yes we easily tend to judge Mozi’s “impartial love or care” as very impracticable or abstract for human being to engage in, but I think this is his ideal or a kind of solution when he saw the world was in a total sorry mess and was confronted with so many corruptions, tumults and wars of his age. While Mencius started from the natural feelings to figure out the outline of human nature, therefore what Mozi tried to claim is what life should be, in a comparative sense saying, but what Mencius purported to justify is what we human beings should do, in a pragmatic sense saying. One traced back to the origin of the river, while the other saw the sea as the place where the river should merge. Therefore each of sides should not be understood in a separate way, but interconnected, even Mencius applied Mohists’ theory and so did Mohists. In order to grasp the wholeness of each side, either of them cannot be ignored, when we engage in extending our affection for parents, respect for the elder and moral concern be starting from our families, we, nevertheless, should know that it is just a starting point and it is a long run in which we are bound to extend our moral concern to all the people of the world but not only our own family members, otherwise we will be misled to a “family-selfishness” in and by which the feudalism was generated and strengthened, because the kings or emperors thought the states as part of their properties, or belonged to his family, so he had the right to deal with by any means. *Like the*

following words “谁家天下? to whose family the state belong to?” or as a proverb said: “皇帝轮流做, 明年到我家。Every family has the honor of one member being a emperor, but only time is a problem.”

I agree with you that Mencius view is more pragmatic than Mozi and that in fact the two views should not be opposed but complement each other. This point is very important since Mozi's universal love is somehow quite close to the Christian love. For both Mencius and Mozi, the objective is Tianxia.

Therefore based on this family-engendering political or governmental system, the king was always obscured by such an occupation desires and earthly vanity, and always the imperial court or the emperor's family began decayed and had downfallen because of its benefit controversies and conspiracies against each other among the imperial family members. This also shaped the people in the long history and became one of the strongest propensity, *acedia and akradia* took root in our hearts. Here I want to unfold my thoughts fully that it can be easily seen in the long history of China that how the individual existence and personality were ignored, distorted and even destroyed in such a so called family-engendering political or governmental feudal system and this is why the individualism and democracy could never flourish but be covered and buried. It can be understood that people proclaimed when the benefits of family and state conflicted with the benefit of individuals, the benefits of family and states overweighed everything, but because of the narrowness of both the kings' and the people's hearts, they failed to extend their moral sprouts to others, but the most appropriate objects of their concern were their families and themselves. So in the family-based system, the individual worth, including one's own independent thoughts and even virtues were often suffocated by the *akradia* (weakness of the will) and *acedia* (laziness or numbness) of the people, often in the name of protecting the benefits of the family and the state. Now it is not difficult to find why Chinese people lack the creativeness or scientific spirit. It can be psychologically explained as a model of if there is nothing doing with my family, I do not care for. On one hand, we start from our family, but on the other hand, we have a much bigger family, that is the world.

I agree with you. The focus into too narrow human relationships (family, friends) is such that the extension to the other, to the stranger, to the poor practically does not occur, because of the energy is put into the inner circle of relations.

For Mozi's impartial care, it was actually served as a solution for disorder and tumults of that time, but his claims were just understood as a building without ground or basis, because he presented no justification to convince the people to love, or had no starting point. So it was one of his ideals of what life should be rather than a practicable pattern for people to follow. But why do not we start performing an ethical deed or extend our moral concern while at meantime maintaining the intention of impartial love in our heart, so that neither of them can be lost and each of sides will

no longer remain contravened with each other, but complement and unite each other to reach the fulfillment of human nature. Thus we can find accessibility to combining Mencius and Mozi, but a problem also emerged “How can we maintain the intention of impartial love or universal love before we have already extended our moral sprouts fully to others?” In other words, we cannot have the intention of impartial love in our minds unless we are virtuous already or we cannot succeed to both going to the origin of the river and reaching the sea simultaneously, because it lacks the proper course of the river. According to David S. Nivison, this is “the paradox of virtue.” Mencius tried to solve the problem by emphasizing on the moral sprouts, which were inherently endowed and manifested in the family situation, and the classics, such as rituals, the records of sages and poetries were useful nourishments for our moral growth. He also shed highlights on the importance of consistent attention or concerted effort of human beings on the process of fulfilling the human nature. My question for Mencius is why do we depend so much on the external factors since the human nature is good and benevolence is internally given? For Mozi, the solution is to set up a state structure in which everyone is commanded to accept the same set of rules or principles. My question for Mozi is where do love and care come from? How can the people be moral or virtuous or be self-taught if we resorted to the enforcement of a set of external rules?

So far as I go, I do not want to be involved in retelling the controversy of the human nature is good or bad and the wickedness of the human nature. Here I am inclined to talk about the problem based on the spectrum of Catholicism, and I think the transcendental dimension of Catholicism can complement and sublime what Mencius and Mozi contributed to the human kind. “Already not yet” every person is already virtuous, because Jesus redeemed each of us from the sin of the world, the fear towards death, the depravity of human nature, but not yet, because we are still on the way and we are destined to practice the already-virtuousness in our daily lives experience the limits, the ups and downs and vicissitudes and withstand all the tests and trials happened in our lives. Theologically this paradox seemed to be resolved, because Mencius ignored the dimension of “already,” the human nature is already good rather than it is good, It is right now a reality, we need do nothing to change or reshape it but live in accordance with the reality. We do because it is reality, otherwise we go wrong way. Thus we will not depend on so much on the 5 classics or resort to the external rules, politics even our own virtues and we will not extend our sympathetic concern for extending our sympathetic concern. However the tradition still plays a very important role although tradition forms do restrict and guide but they need not bind. Chess is a game with very strict and firmly established rules, but it leaves open an infinitely rich field of play. For Mozi, he ignored the dimension of “not yet” thus his advocates were strongly opposed by Mencius. Yes, the impartial care or love is very appealing to people, but how can people realize it is not yet a reality in our lives; we need a proper course of development and move our eyes to our own hearts and minds. So internally we are already good, but externally not yet or dialectically saying, internally we need to externalize the already-goodness of human

nature and externally we need to internalize the already-goodness of human nature.

The frame “already not yet” you are suggesting here is very interesting to think moral nature. I think you should stress even more that “already here” means fully, completely, the full thing and not only Mencius’ sprouts. I think what you want to say is that we are already fully moral people, and at the same time, we all lack morality, we are all bastard, we are all selfish.

I also think both Mencius and Mozi belittled the importance of childhood education or pedagogy and the emotion or feelings of human beings on the process of fulfilling the human nature. In comparison with Plato, he thought that we were not born virtuous, but nature gave us the capacity to become so. This capacity is fulfilled by habits. Therefore we become virtuous by doing virtuous acts and also it resulted such a conclusion that the childhood education was definitely important and essential for human beings to fulfill this moral capacity. In my experience, the childhood education played a decisive role in my life. There were two teachers shaped my life: one taught me the perseverance in pursuing the truth in diligent learning through reading books, the other taught me the integrity on the way of looking for God in my devoted religious life. Their lives were no less the best manifestation of the two mental characteristics. Wherever I go and whatever I do, I will not forget them and their words because it was they who enlightened my childish hearts to know what the life should be and what we should do. Mencius and Mozi failed to appreciate the emotion of human beings, while some modern western philosophers, such as Husserl 胡塞尔, 加达默尔, 海德格尔 Heidegger, fully developed and upgraded the emotion or the imagination of human kinds as the primitive type or ontological basis in stead of a stiff corpse-like *die Begriff* (concept). Thus the existential condition of human kinds is a fathomless or endless abyss shaped or screened by infinite imagination ability. This change or shift can also be found in the modern painting art, music and literature; in other words, the aesthetic satisfaction can be served as an access to complementing and transcending their moral concerns.

If we draw our attention and open our eyes to look around the world today, each of us might not be so optimistic about the situation where the human beings live. In comparison with the age of Mencius, it is not difficult to find that the moral concern now is undergoing a process of fading or decaying in today’s world. What have the human beings done to their own kinds? Terrorism, violence, war, drugs and discrimination, all of this results in the big threat to the world peace, damage to the human nature, abuse of the moral capacity and the impediment to the development of the moral concern. Probably some people ascribe this to materialism, utilitarianism and hedonism, 霸权主义, but I think all of these tragedies showed the degeneration or depravity of the human nature. It is human being itself killed the moral sprouts and suffocated them in our minds and hearts, therefore the people does not live in accordance with the reality because their eyes, minds and hearts are obscured by their own selfish desires and benefits. “Benefit-oriented model” is applied in individuals

and politics, in families and in countries even in the religions. This exerted a very bad influence on the human beings; it made us blind mentally and spiritually, like a cloud covering the sunny sky, to fail to see the reality or the true nature of the human kinds. Gradually we go astray further and further from the reality. However, it is an irony to talk about the depravity of the human nature while ignoring the woe, blood, tears and torment of the victims and refugees in today's world. Every Confucian is confronted with such a question of how he can locate the practice-oriented moral concern of Mentius in a condition where he can involve himself in anti-terrorism, antiwar and anti non-humanitarianism and engage himself in revitalizing the moral capacity of the human nature and extending his moral concern among people and nations. Maybe it is even harder for those who claimed as a Confucian to find a feasible solution to the question. Aside from it, the authority of the country may not identify him as a person as the early Confucians had claimed. But on the other hand, the identity of Confucian does not depend on whether or not he is acknowledged by the authority at all, he has a personal independence in performing his mission as a Confucian both in the time of the Way prevailing and in the time of the Way declining.

Mentius and the contemporary thinkers offer profoundly moving examples of what it means to work at the improvement of both self and society. Individually and-as I have presented them-side by side, they also offer revealing examples of what it is to participate in an ethical tradition while working to adapt and transform its beliefs and practices to fit with the needs and assumptions of one's own age. Like what Philip J. Ivanhoe said: "Their lives of study, practice, reflection, teaching, and social action offer us examples of a kind of life which remains appealing and for some perhaps even inspiring.