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Classical Debates about the Moral Character of Human Nature in Ancient China

Lauren F. Pfister

Prolegomenon to Questions about Human Nature in Ancient China

Is human nature inherently good or bad, or initially neutral, or even of a mixed kind so that it can develop either toward excellence or evil? Or are there different kinds of human nature that are based upon a variety of factors that are not universal, even though they may be generalized to a certain extent? These questions involved issues for Chinese intellectuals, ancient and contemporary, that entailed further questions about personal cultivation, public education, religious orientation, and political policies. As a consequence, these questions became themes which all major ancient Chinese thinkers addressed in the years before the initial unification of the Chinese mainland under the Qín 秦 emperor (221 BCE).

The main arguments regarding whether human nature was good, neutral or evil appeared in what 21st century sinologists and Chinese philosophers consider to be the major classical works reflecting key interpretive trends in pre-Qín Ruist (“Confucian”) and Daoist teachings. Though archeological findings in the late 20th century have shed some special interpretive light on these debates, the main arguments are still found in two influential texts: the book associated with Master Mèng (c. 370-c. 289 BCE), known as the *Mencius* or *Mèngzǐ* 孟子 and the book of essays written by Master Xún (340 – 245 BCE), known as the *Hsun-tsze* or *Xúnzǐ* 荀子.

Our approach to these arguments about human nature found in these two major ancient Chinese texts also follows a generally agreed upon historical understanding of the timing of their appearance. The dates related to the texts of the *Mèngzǐ* and the *Xúnzǐ* reflect the dates for the historical persons related to them, and so we will similarly assume that they are properly ordered in this way, the former appearing probably sometime in the early years of the 3rd century BCE (the 290s) and the latter several decades later. As we will see, internal evidence within these texts confirms this historical conclusion.

As a consequence, then, we will begin by summarizing the arguments presented by Master Mèng, pointing out in the following section why these arguments appear to be vulnerable to a variety of criticisms. Following this, we will present the counter arguments addressing the question of human nature articulated by Master Xún. In our concluding statements, we will compare the basic positions taken by these two ancient Chinese philosophers, and consider the significance of their differences as well as offer a final evaluation regarding the style and character of their argumentation.

I. The Character of Arguments on Human Nature in the *Mèngzǐ*

Though there is a number of passages within the *Mèngzǐ* which discuss the problem of the status of human nature, there are two key passages which reveal what has been called Master Mèng's major arguments related to his position that "human nature is good" (*xìng shàn lùn* 性善論). Both passages refer to his theory of the Four "Sprouts" of human nature (*sì duān lùn* 四端論 which D. C. Lau refers to as four "germs", as seen in the Appendix). In this section we will first of all focus on the development of Master Mèng's arguments within the earlier passage, and then compare and contrast those arguments with those in the latter passage. In the following section we will point out certain apparent logical weaknesses that made his arguments vulnerable to criticism. This will lead us into a new section where discussion of Master Xún's self-conscious response to the problematic created by Master Mèng's ambiguous claims and insufficiently strong arguments will be described and evaluated.

As will be seen by an initial reading of *Mèngzǐ* 2A: 6 (see the first passage in the Appendix), Master Mèng starts his argument by giving a story in order to explain how it is that no human lacks an inner sensitivity which is not responsive to others' sufferings. After telling this famous story regarding a man seeing a small child about to fall into a well (which in ancient Chinese settings was always simply an open hole in the ground, without any protecting wall around it), Master Mèng justifies his claim by offering important counter possibilities. Essentially, he argues that the inner sensitivity of that man, which was catalyzed into consciousness by the perceived danger the young child faced, was generated spontaneously from within him, and not because of other "external" reasons that he would have considered or calculated before taking up that sympathetic concern. On the basis of this story, then, Master Mèng goes on to argue that all human beings have all four of these "sprouts" or "germs" of moral life within them. Put into a simple chart, they can be summarized as follows:

<i>Initial “Sprout” or “Germ”</i>	<i>Related Virtue or Virtuous Attitude</i>
Heart of compassion	Benevolence / Cultivated Humaneness
Heart of shame	Dutifulness / Right(eous)ness
Heart of courtesy and modesty	Observance of the rites (or propriety)
Heart of right and wrong	Wisdom

When ancient Chinese persons spoke about the “heart” (*xīn* 心), they were referring to an inner organ within the human body that generated feelings, responded to external stimuli, and was capable of rational analysis. Because of this, some English translations of the term in its use within Ruist texts refer to it as “heart-mind”, placing the “heart” first in order to emphasize the emotional dimensions engaged and expressed by this inner human organ. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the chart above, the four sprouts involve not only explicit emotional components that putatively are spontaneously arising in human consciousness in various contexts, but also a rational component that allows for the discernment of “right and wrong”. On further reflection we may suggest that this fourfold basis for moral growth, while being analytically descriptive of different states of orientation toward others as well as toward situations, are not meant to imply that these four “heart-mind” conditions are unrelated to each other. In fact, in another part of the *Mèngzǐ* (4A: 27), Master Mèng explicitly places these four virtues into two separate levels: benevolence and dutifulness are identified as the foundational virtues specifically nurtured within familial relationships, while propriety and wisdom help to refine these two foundational virtues by adding a panoply of cultured expressions and activities which make it possible to embody them (propriety) as well as justifications and insights into their moral value for personal growth and social engagement (wisdom).

Not only are each of these sprouts already within human beings, they are the seeds of moral maturity that can grow within any person’s life. Master Mèng indicates this first of all by relating each sprout (‘S’) to a virtue (‘V’), describing that initial state of feeling and consciousness as the “S of V”, so that S¹ is the S of V¹, S² is the S of V², and so on. In order to indicate how these sprouts are related to a person, Master Mèng compares them to a person’s arms and legs; this is to say, these moral sprouts are intimate to that person’s living and acting in the world.

This spontaneous capacity for each sprout to mature into a virtuous state is explained by another pair of analogies. If a person “is able to develop” these sprouts, then they will advance toward becoming mature virtues; their growth will be just like a fire that consumes all that is combustible once it is started, and a spring of water that continues to flow once its subterranean source has been tapped, so that the water is made accessible to people on the terrestrial surface.

Woven into this argument are two other elements that are not fully explained,

but are adequately described, so that the direction of Master Mèng's argument is manifest. First of all, it is possible for a person not to develop these sprouts, and when this happens, even the most basic attitudes and actions necessary for familial harmony (he specifies "serving one's parents") will not be realizable. On the other hand, when a person does cultivate these sprouts so that they become the basis for a virtuous and mature life, the implications are that such a person will be a significant social and cultural agent of stability. For this reason, Master Mèng also insists that subjects in a country or kingdom should not deny the reality of these sprouts in the life of their ruler or "prince", because it is by means of such a virtuous life that the leader would be able to provide social stability for all in the country or kingdom.

Later in his book (6A: 6, the second passage in Appendix), Master Mèng once again addresses the problem of human nature by reference to the four sprouts. Yet in this passage there are a few differences from the first passage that are noticeable. First of all, the third sprout is not a "heart of courtesy and modesty", but one described as "a heart of respect". In the original Chinese text, the former may be seen as a passive aspect, involving "yielding" to others, while the latter describes an active approach to others through the positive expression of respect. In this sense they appear to be describing the same basic attitude from two different perspectives, and so are not seen as contradictory in any logical sense of the term. Secondly, though the initial statement of Master Mèng in response to the question he is asked underscores his belief that humans "are capable of becoming good", and in another passage he defines what is good as "the desirable" (7B: 25). In this way, then, Master Mèng confirms what would seem to be an awareness of the difference between the potential state of the sprouts and the actualized state of their related virtues. Nevertheless his following statements involve a form of argument which does not appear to coincide with this claim. When put into symbolic formulae to indicate the character of his argument at this point, Master Mèng writes in Chinese what would be the most simple sentence possible: $S^1 = V^1$, $S^2 = V^2$, and so on.¹ When compared with the formulae employed in the earlier passage (S^1 is the S of V^1 , S^2 is the S of V^2 , and so on), the two kinds of statements are not logically compatible. In fact, this single problem has been a source of discussion among Ruist scholars ever since.

While this second passage indicates that the will of a person is central in "seeking" to have these sprouts develop into their virtuous glory, Master Mèng adds a further clarification about how these seedlings of virtue relate to one's person. They are not the result of "external" factors, that is, of education or something coerced from outside the specific person. In fact, they are what the

1 The translator D. C. Lau uses a clever locution here, "is pertaining to", as seen in the Appendix, but this is his interpretive addition to the text.

translator calls a “native endowment” in one place, and here, something in me “originally”. The problem here is that the term “originally” in the standard Chinese text is not so strong or clearly descriptive; the term’s meaning is more like the word “certainly” or “unquestionably”. But for something to be “in me unquestionably” does not mean that it is necessarily in me “originally”. Here is where a further quandary developed in the history of the interpretations of Master Mèng’s theory. One of the major tendencies developed by later commentators, particularly a group of famous Ruist scholars who lived nearly 1500 years later during the Sòng 宋 dynasty, was to add new metaphysical concepts in order to explain this problem in the manner that is mirrored in the translator’s rendering in the Appendix.

II. Problems in Master Mèng’s Argument that “Human Nature is Good”

We started our account of Master Mèng’s arguments in support of his thesis that “human nature is good” by referring to the story of a person (*rén* 人) who responds with emotional concern (“compassion”) when seeing a small child of about two or three years of age (*rú* 孺) in danger. Wandering instably around a public square in a village setting, this young child is apparently unaware of the danger in its immediate environment, and all of a sudden finds itself about to fall into a deep well. Though it is unstated, the possibility that such a child would survive a fall into a well of this sort is unlikely, and so this heightens the tension within the story. Nevertheless, when we consider the details of the story and its related claims, a number of counter-arguments might be raised, particularly once we (as 21st century readers) consider what is being said in this nearly 2300 year old Chinese text.

It is significant that the “man” or “person” who observes this small child is presumably an adult, one who is already socially attuned to general human relationships and probably also knows the parents of the child (as would have been the case in any ancient village or face-to-face community). What if we made this observer another child of the same age? Would the reaction be the same? Or would there be a similar lack of self-consciousness that might be relatively or completely unaware of the impending danger? The initial point to consider here, then, is whether the Chinese concept of *rén* found here in the *Mèngzǐ* carries the same universalist implications found in our modern concepts of the generic “man”, “human” or “person”. It seems highly possible that a child of a similar age as the one about to fall in the well would *not necessarily* have the same spontaneous anticipation of perceived danger and compassion (though it may

respond to some degree with a sense of distress or confusion after the playmate has fallen into the well, survives the fall, and begins crying). The hidden advantage in Master Mèng's story is that the observer he chose to include in this vignette is already a mature person, a person who is assumed to be fully socialized into the Chinese lifeworld in which she or he is placed.²

This train of questioning becomes all the more pertinent when we consider other claims made by Master Mèng about the status of the “four sprouts” of human moral life. On the one hand, he tells us that they can be “lost”, but on the other hand, he insists that they are a “natural endowment” and that every “human” has them. So, we might continue to ask, what happens to a human who “loses” one or more of these sprouts? Is that person then considered to be non-human, or a dehumanized humanoid who simply looks like they are human, but in fact are not so? If a “human” in Master Mèng's sense of the term necessarily possesses all four sprouts, are there “humans” who do not have all four, or who are so young that they are not yet aware of them, and yet are still human? Is there some calculus which discerns that a human may become non-human because they at any point in time have acted inhumanely or are unable to respond humanely? For example, mentally deficient (“mentally challenged”) persons, senile persons, children below the age of three, those who are ill and unable to respond: Would any or all of these kind of persons be considered vulnerable to this kind of reclassification?

Though these kinds of questions reveal a moot point never addressed by Master Mèng in his extensive writings, the significance of this inquiry leads us toward a more substantial problem. If a child of two or three years of age does not have a “heart of compassion” like an adult, and in fact may not be culturally sensitive and self-conscious enough to demonstrate shame or propriety, much less to be spontaneously aware of what is understood to be right or wrong in any larger social context, then there is a major problem in understanding when and how a person becomes aware of these facets in their life. If these four sprouts are like one's own four limbs, the fact is (we might argue from a 21st century non-Chinese setting) that one may have an accident, lose an arm, and yet still be alive and be considered as fully human. Is that the case also for a humanoid who loses one of these moral sprouts? If it is claimed that these sprouts are internal and not given to one from outside one's own embodied consciousness, then when do these sprouts become “activated” or “functional” in a normal human being's experience? Must one be five years old, eight years old, or twelve years old before one has reached the age of moral sensitivity and accountability? Unfortunately, Master Mèng answers none of these questions, even though we know that his

² As a side comment it should be noted that the Chinese concept of *rén* (“human”) is not necessarily gender oriented, and so might be either a female or a male person.

understanding of the “goodness” of humans is that they “can become good” at some point.

We have already noted above that the two passages in the *Mèngzǐ* portray two different accounts of the relationship between the sprouts and their virtues, so that a logical inconsistency troubles the general theory about these four sprouts. But an even more puzzling problem arises from how Master Mèng in the first passage deduces his claims about the four sprouts from the story mentioned above. After telling the story about a person who shows a spontaneous “heart of compassion” towards the small child in danger, he draws the reader to a conclusion: “From this it can be seen that whoever. . .” Now the question that comes to mind at this point can be stated as follows: If the story informs us about one of the four sprouts, then how could its helpful lesson be used to indicate that *all four sprouts* exist in a person? Is the “heart of compassion” somehow involved necessarily with all the others? Since it is not yet a full expression of benevolence (for example, Master Mèng never says that the observing adult runs over to pick up the child and save it from falling into the well, which a truly benevolent person would do), does it still entail the existence of the other three moral sprouts? From this point of view, it appears that Master Mèng has not fully justified his claim that the story reveals how all four sprouts exist within human beings, and so we might ask whether there are other stories that might support his case. Unfortunately, there are no easily identifiable and similarly clever stories in the *Mèngzǐ* which provide clear answers to our questions here.³

Ultimately, we are left with a few very basic problems that do not receive clear answers from Master Mèng’s teachings. Significantly, outside of his explanation of what he means by “good”, we find no guiding definitions for the key terms employed in his argument (particularly “human nature” or “nature”). Beyond this, there is no clear explanation about when the four moral sprouts become activated within a person’s life and consciousness. Are they “inborn” or not? This is never explicitly stated by Master Mèng in any of his writings. Furthermore, we have shown that his claim that the story’s meaning entails the conclusion that “all four moral sprouts exist in human beings” is not fully justified. It is difficult to understand how he can logically link up the content of

³ Later on in *Mèngzǐ* 6A: 10, Master Mèng does refer very briefly to two situations – one involving a beggar, and another a poor wanderer or tramp – who both refuse food offered by persons who mistreat them. Though the context reveals this has something to do with “observance of the rites” or a sense of propriety, whether or not it also involves the “heart of shame” or the “heart of right and wrong” is very unclear. More significantly, Master Mèng did not explain these features of these two illustrations with the same detail that he did with regard to the story of the young child about to fall into a well. Because of this, unfortunately, we cannot reach a comprehensive account of how he justifies the spontaneous and inner nature of all four of the sprouts on the basis of the stories or analogies he provides within the *Mèngzǐ*.

the story to the other three moral sprouts that are not explicitly mentioned there. Otherwise, if he had offered us some other clever stories to indicate the spontaneous arising of these three remaining sprouts, we would welcome them, but there are no such articulate and demonstrable vignettes in the text. Finally, we are troubled by the inconsistency in the way Master Mèng relates each of the sprouts to its accompanying virtue. Significantly, we are not the only one's who finds these problems puzzling or frustrating. These questions were obvious enough to some of Master Mèng's readers that they provoked a vigorous and thorough challenge in the writings of his younger contemporary, Master Xún.

III. Master Xún's Response to the Argument that "Human Nature is Good"

Among the 32 chapters of the book prepared by Master Xún, one is specifically devoted to the question about human nature raised by Master Mèng.⁴ Though the title of the essay by Master Xún assumes what appears to be the diametrically opposite position to Master Mèng's claims, a more careful study of the key terms as defined by Master Xún in the essay suggests that it should be rendered more sensitively as "[human] nature is bad" (*xìng è* 性惡). Unlike his predecessor, Master Xún defined both "good" (*shàn* 善) as "what is correct, in accord with natural principles, peaceful and well-ordered" (*zhèng lǐ píng zhì* 正理平治) and "bad" as "what is wrong through partiality, what wickedly contravenes natural principles, what is perverse, and what is rebellious" (*piān xiǎn bèi luàn* 偏險悖亂).⁵ As can be seen from these definitions, Master Xún is not merely interested in "moral goodness" in some internal virtuous sense, but in a social goodness that stands in contrast to what is disorderly and chaotic. In this regard, he is concerned with what we would generally call "bad", for it may be morally neutral ("wrong through partiality"), and can be made "good" once it is properly dealt with. Neither is it an "evil" that is incorrigible, as we will see by following his argument carefully.⁶

4 This is chapter 23, which the most recent translator and commentator to the work, John Knoblock, entitles "Book 23: Man's Nature is Evil". We take it, that that this title should be rendered in a different manner. Nevertheless, the paragraph and page numbers of Knoblock's translation will be the standard English rendering referred to in the following discussion. See Knoblock 1994: 17–32.

5 Knoblock 1994: 155, sec. 23.3a.

6 So also Knoblock himself explains that the term we render above as "bad" is not like "evil" because it "does not carry the sinister and baleful overtones of the English word". Similarly, it does not suggest that humans are "inherently depraved and incapable of good" (Knoblock 1994: 139). For this reason and other reasons developed in further explanations of Master

The main position argued by Master Xún in contrast to Master Mèng (whom he directly names four times in the essay⁷), summarized in a statement that is repeated numerous times in the essay, is that “human nature is bad; any good in humans is acquired by conscious exertion”.⁸ What Master Xún intends by the terms “[human] nature” (*xìng* 性) and “conscious exertion” (*wèi* 偽) is made explicit by definition once more. Essentially they are seen to be opposites. The former is “what is spontaneous from Nature, what cannot be learned, and what requires no application to master”.⁹ He illustrates this claim by pointing out that once born, babies see with their eyes and hear with their ears without having to learn the basic functions of “seeing” and “hearing”; in contrast to Master Mèng, he goes on to argue that “what is desirable” to the eyes and ears tends to satisfy the selfish desires of a newborn and growing child, and so these natural desires need to be groomed until they respond with appropriate civility and concern for others in order to become “good”. If “nature” is therefore “inborn nature”, its opposite is one that leads to the attainment of goodness. For this reason, Master Xún defines *wèi* 偽 as “what must be learned before a man can do it, and what he must apply himself to before he can master it, yet is found in man”.¹⁰ While he also uses metaphors to illustrate this quality of human experience, paralleling the learning from a good teacher or the application of law and punishment by a ruler as actions similar to a carpenter’s shaping of a piece of wood or a potter’s creation of a shapely jar from a lump of clay, Master Xún cleverly applies his own specific definitions to indicate how Master Mèng’s arguments must be wrong. Human nature cannot be good from birth, because a newborn child’s desires are selfish and not yet sensitized to respond to values such as respect and deference to elders and social politeness in the context of competing desires. These must be learned by conscious exertion applied from outside, by either the cultivated means (“ritual and moral principles”) of a good teacher, or by the more forceful means of restrictive disciplines or penalties applied by a ruler, depending on the relative degree of responsiveness or resistance that a particular person may manifest.

While agreeing with Master Mèng that all humans have the same nature, and that they all can become sages, Master Xún explains the differences in the characters of human beings on the basis of the varying degrees of their

Xún’s interest in social order (see Knoblock 1994: 149 – 150), a more appropriate rendering of the term 惡 惡 seems to be “bad”.

7 See Knoblock 1994: 152, 155 and 156, at sec. 23.1c, 23.1d, 23.3a, and 23.3b.

8 For the repetitions of this central claim, see Knoblock 1994: 150 – 153, 155 – 158, generally appearing at the very end of a section; specifically secs. 23.1a, 23.1b, 23.1e, 23.2b, 23.3a, 23.3b, 23.3c, and 23.4a.

9 Knoblock 1994: 152, sec. 23.1c.

10 Knoblock 1994: 152, sec. 23.1c.

realization of their same inner capacities. It is not that they have “lost” something that was internally present as a “germ” or a “sprout”, but their characteristic differences occur because of different levels of “valor” (*yǒng* 勇) which lead to different attainments in “knowledge” (*zhì* 知), ultimately leading to attained goodness. All humans have the same capacity (*néng* 能), but they apply their will and thoughtfulness to this capacity in varying degrees. This is what distinguishes the attainments of the sage from the “scholar and gentlemen, the petty man, and the menial servant”.¹¹

Logically, however, there appears to be an Achilles’ heel within this argument, one that appears to generate an endless series of causal assumptions (classically referred to as a *reductio ad absurdum*) that threatens the justifications employed in Master Xún’s argument. If all human beings are inherently bad in nature and require a teacher or guide to teach them how to be good, then even a sage must have such a teacher. But, we need to continue to ask, how did *that* teacher become good? This teacher must also have a teacher as well, and so the problem of an “originally good teacher” appears. If there is a teacher who is “originally good” and does not require another to teach her or him, then all humans do not have the same nature. So, it seems, Master Xún’s argument either leads us into a logical series of unending precedents, or it must admit a contradiction to the main premise of his claim that “all human beings have the same nature”. Does Master Xún offer any resolution to this problem?

He does. By “accumulating thoughts and ideas” the sage is able to breakthrough the selfish tendencies of inborn nature and so can practice what is acquired by this means, leading to the creation of ritual and moral principles as well as laws and standards needed by other humans.¹² This suggests, then, that the sage’s “knowledge” is at another qualitative level than most humans, but it is a form of knowledge possible for all humans to attain. What distinguishes the sage is her or his capacity to “accumulate thoughts and ideas” without the guidance of a teacher. All other human beings still need an “acquired exertion” that leads to the constructive and creative achievement of the ritual and moral standards as well as legal and punitive measures that will lead them to the same kind of awareness. In this sense, then, Master Xún’s position is a consistent and carefully thought out alternative to Master Mèng’s claims.

11 Explicitly described with characteristic straightforwardness and detail in Knoblock 1994: 160–161, sec. 23.6b.

12 Quoted and summarized from Knoblock 1994: 153–154, sec. 23.2a.

IV. Summary and Conclusions

From the accounts provided above, we can see that the differences in Master Mèng's and Master Xún's arguments about human nature appear to have some similar conclusions, but they are in principle based upon different basic positions. Both ancient Chinese philosophers argue that human beings are capable of becoming good, and that they may all become sages. But while they agree on these basic points, they disagree on the status of human nature and the means by which human beings are able to become good. For Master Mèng, one can achieve goodness by cultivating the inner and desirable sprouts of moral attunement already inherent within one's natural endowment. This Master Xún denies in principle, because normal human beings are bad, and the vast majority are unable to realize the goodness that is required of moral life in and of themselves. Though he admits that a sage may do so by the conscious effort of creative thinking and accumulation of experiences from those meditative exercises, the vast majority of human beings cannot do so and therefore require the external guidance of a good teacher or a determined ruler. Precisely in this sense, therefore, these two ancient Chinese philosophers develop overall positions about human nature that carry significantly different implications for personal cultivation and educational development. Though both men argued that education was important for society, these educational institutions were necessary for personal cultivation in Master Xún's scheme, while they are helpful but not necessary in Master Mèng's account. Also, Master Xún clearly admits that there are human beings who are not only morally questionable but are willfully rebellious, and so his description of the possible negative qualities which human character can develop varies widely from the more limited account of "losing one's sprouts" as described by Master Mèng. For this reason, Master Xún anticipates the need for rulers to apply laws and punishments to the resistant and most rebellious characters, while Master Mèng in principle avoids this political implication, believing it would counter his understanding of the nature of benevolent government. On this basis, then, even though they share a hope for the moral amelioration of human beings, the social implications of the arguments of these two ancient Chinese philosophers are significantly different and lead to distinct kinds of institutional development.

From the view of the nature of the arguments both Chinese philosophers employ, it has been asserted that Master Mèng's style of argumentation lacks thoroughness and clarity. This occurs because his use of stories and analogies are not always consonant with his subsequent claims, even to the point that some deductions are unwarranted. He leaves a reader guessing what he might actually mean in concrete details, and offers very few helpful definitions of the key terms in his arguments. Contrary to these tendencies, Master Xún offers a remarkably

well thought out series of definitions and logical deductions from his basic premise that “human nature is bad”. His engagement of Master Mèng’s arguments shows that he was aware of the weaknesses in his predecessor’s account of human nature, and that he himself realized that an alternative position must take up a more consistent and alternative way of accounting for the diversities of human character by describing how their shared natures can be developed in conscious ways which differ in the degree of knowledge and valor that they apply to their nature. Rhetorically speaking, Master Xún cleverly inserts his own definitions of key terms into Master Mèng’s arguments. In this way, while he is not being “fair” to his predecessor in trying to explain what he probably meant by those statements, Master Xún nevertheless indicates how Master Mèng’s arguments are inherently contradictory. Intriguingly, both men considered “knowledge” or “wisdom” to be a basic quality of human nature, but it is Master Xún’s advantage that he employed it to resolve his own logical problem related to the nature of the sage, and so his general argument appears to be more consistently articulated and carefully considered.

Appendix

Relevant Passages from the *Mencius* (Master Mèng 孟子) (translated by D. C. Lau)

2A: 6¹³

“My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human. The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom. Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs. For a man possessing these four germs to deny his own potentialities is for him to cripple himself; for him to deny the potentialities of his prince is for him to cripple his prince. If a man is able to develop all these four germs that he possesses, it will be

13 Lau, D. C. (trans.) 1970: 82 – 83.

like a fire starting up or a spring coming through. When these are fully developed, he can take under his protection the whole realm within the Four Seas, but if he fails to develop them, he will not be able even to serve his parents.”

6A: 6¹⁴

“Kao Tzu [Master Gàò] said, ‘There is neither good nor bad in human nature,’ but others say, ‘Human nature can become good or it can become bad, . . .’ Then there are others who say, ‘There are those who are good by nature, and there are those who are bad by nature. . . .’ Now you say human nature is good. Does this mean that all the others are mistaken?”

“As far as what is genuinely in him is concerned, a man is capable of becoming good,” say Mencius [Master Mèng]. “This is what I mean by good. As for his becoming bad, that is not the fault of his native endowment. The heart of compassion is possessed by all men alike; likewise the heart of shame, the heart of respect, and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of compassion pertains to benevolence, the heart of shame to dutifulness, the heart of respect to the observance of the rites, and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom. Benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom are not welded on to me from the outside; they are in me originally. Only this has never dawned on me. This is why it is said, ‘Seek and you will find it; let go and you will lose it.’”

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