

Mencius on Xin and Xing

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Abstract For Masters

Mencius on Xin and Xing

Zechen Wang

‘Human nature’ is a widely discussed ethical concept in both philosophical traditions in the West and the East. In ancient China, Mencius, one of the most influential philosophers, claimed that human nature is good. However, he did not appeal to logic when presenting his argument, instead he provides seemingly anecdotal evidence to his claims. How can we provide a plausible interpretation for Mencius’ claim? One problem arises as one assess his arguments. Mencius held the belief that human nature, attributed to tian (‘Heaven’ or ‘Sky’), lies beyond human influence. However, he also contended that human nature embodies a normative aspect and is inherently virtuous. This raises the question of how Mencius reconciles the innate and normative aspects of human nature.

In my paper, I argue that *xin*, a concept introduced by Mencius, plays a vital role to understand his argument of human nature is virtuous. In Chinese philosophy, *xin*, though literally means heart, serves the dual functions of feeling and thinking. According to Mencius, the *xin* is where moral tendencies are rooted, and our moral actions are motivated. I argue that the very concept of *xin*, is fundamental for Mencius to reconcile the innate and normative aspects of human nature. It is also key for helping us to understand Mencius’ argument that human nature is good.

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Introduction

Before we begin, I need to clarify two crucial terms I used in this paper. Human nature is translated from the Chinese word ‘*ren xing*’. Kwong-loi Shun argues the word *xing* derives from ‘*sheng*’ (‘life’). The use of ‘*hsing (xing)*’ has evolved to refer to not only the direction of growth of a thing over a lifetime, but also the needs and desires that thing has in being alive. Such tendencies may or may not be ethically desirable (Shun, 1997, 1). Irene Bloom and Angus Graham both support that ‘human nature’ is a proper translation of *xing* (Graham 1976, Bloom 1997). Therefore, in this paper, I also use the term ‘human nature’ as the translation of *xing*.

Mencius’ argument begins from his response to Gaozi, who claims that human nature is neither good nor bad, it is neutral. To argue against this, Mencius claims that human nature is good. The background of their debate is the different solutions of reconciling the decree of Heaven (*tian ming*) and human action (*ren shi*). All that is outside human’s control, which human must accept as the unalterable conditions of human’s existence, including his own nature, is decree of Heaven; all that is within human’s control belongs to the sphere of human action (Graham, 1976, 41); For naturalist (Gaozi, or the Daoists), the decree of Heaven and human action is naturally reconciled, because the Heaven is responsible both for the way things are and the way they ought to be, so the best human can do is to follow the decree of Heaven. The better we follow the way of heaven, the better we can achieve the highest state that humans can reach, so that the aim of human action is to approach the decree of Heaven.

Accordingly, it is easy to argue that human nature is morally neutral. Because human nature is endowed by the decree of Heaven, and the decree of Heaven is outside of human’s control, it doesn’t contain any normative sense. However, for Confucians, on one hand, Confucianism shares the worldview that it is the Heaven endows human beings their nature; on the other hand,

Confucianism insists that the moral standards or virtues are also the part of unalterable conditions of human's existence. But it would be not convincing to directly claim that the moral standards are also the unalterable condition of our existence. Because the moral standards and virtues are normative conceptions which must involve moral judgement and other human actions. It is lacking observable evidence to show that we already know the moral standards and virtues when we are born. For example, just like finding the evidence to prove that a puppy knows how to be a good dog once it born.

To solve this problem, Mencius must find a way to prove that the moral standards and virtues come with our birth. In this sense, Mencius constructs his famous metaphor— we all have the heart of compassion when seeing a child falls into a well. According to this, he further argues that all humans innately have the heart/mind of compassion, the heart/mind of shame, the heart/mind of modesty, and the heart/mind of right and wrong. These four aspects of heart/mind are the sprouts of four Confucian virtues: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Humans possess four sprouts, much like they have four limbs, and their proper development depends on a healthy environment and self-cultivation (*Mencius* 2A6, Van Norden 2008, 45). If the environment is unhealthy or self-cultivation is problematic, the growth of these sprouts may be directed in the wrong direction. However, this misdirection is not the fault of the moral inclinations themselves (*Mencius* 6A8, Lau 2004, 154). But Mencius' argument still cannot be unpacked merely through reading these words. The problem remains, what does Mencius really means that all humans innately have the four sprouts? It doesn't show clearly how these moral tendencies being innate. Many scholars try to provide their interpretation of Mencius' arguments about human nature. A.C. Graham points out that Mencius' concept of human nature includes both innate desires and moral virtues and potentials, which he describes as the factual aspect and the

normative aspect. And the normative aspect is what humans should cultivate in moral development (Graham, 1976, 54-57). Slightly different with Graham, Bloom thinks that Mencius' notion of human nature should be described as descriptive aspect and normative aspect. The descriptive aspect refers to how Mencius describes human nature as inherently possessing certain qualities and tendencies, as Mencius posits that all humans are born with the seeds of virtue, such as compassion, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. These seeds are innate and part of human nature. Meanwhile, Mencius also describes how people naturally react with empathy and moral concern, such as our instinctive reaction to help the child who fallen into a well. The normative aspect, on the other hand, concerns Mencius' ethical prescriptions regarding how humans should cultivate and develop their innate moral potentials. Bloom's interpretation explores how these two aspects interplay in Mencius' thought, emphasizing the importance of both understanding human nature as it is and striving towards the ideal of what it can become. By doing so, Bloom particularly highlights how Mencius balances the description of human nature with prescriptive moral guidance, and emphasizes human have a moral responsibility to nurture these inherent virtues and to strive towards moral virtues. As Bloom suggested, Mencius' concept of human nature is a Confucian response to the naturalistic challenge from Gaozi. As I mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Gaozi claims that if *tian* bestows human nature in us, then human nature must be morally neutral. The only thing what human being should do is following what *tian* gives us. Bloom points out that Mencius' concept of human nature, unifies what of us given by *tian* and what we can become from the normative aspect (Bloom, 1994, 25-28). I agree with Graham and Bloom's observation that Mencius' concept of human nature comprises two distinct facets: one pertaining to its innate inclinations, and the other concerning its moral attributes. However, it

remains unclear how human nature can embody both innate inclinations and moral attributes. In essence, what reconciles these two aspects within the framework of human nature?

Further, David Wong and Jing Hu provide a constructive strategy to understand Mencius' concept of human nature. Wong thinks that Mencius' concept of human nature is a developing concept, there is a developmental progress from moral emotions to its virtuous ends. We must downplay the divide between reason and emotion to understand it (Wong 1991, 2015). Following Wong, Hu pointed out that Mencius' use of human nature should be understood from a dynamic and development perspective; it is a predisposition and a potential towards certain ethical ends rather than a fundamental property (Hu, 2019, 3). Even though these authors have different focuses, they seem to all agree that there is a developmental progress from innate features to the ethical ends within the Mencian conception of human nature. This progress requires us to adopt a dynamic perspective in understanding it. Agreeing with these authors, this paper argues that it is essential to stress the significance of the Mencius' concept of *xin* (heart/mind) in grasping Mencius' conception of human nature. I propose that the concept of *xin* (heart/mind) serves as both the biological basis for this dynamic perspective and the seat of human agency in converting innate characteristics into ethical outcomes. Delving into the discussion surrounding the concept of heart/mind will aid us in constructing a plausible interpretation of Mencius' argument, which suggests that human nature is intrinsically moral because the heart/mind inherently directs individuals towards virtuous behavior.

My argument will be divided into three parts. Firstly, I will clarify Mencius' concept of heart/mind by pointing out that it has the functions of both feeling and thinking. I will also explore Mencius' concept of *xin* as the biological basis for the human nature's developmental characteristic. Secondly, I will examine how *xin* functions as the seat of human agency in Mencius' conception

of human nature, to explore the process by which *xin* enables individuals to convert their innate characteristics into ethical outcomes. In the end, I will provide an interpretation that human nature is intrinsically moral due to the inherent direction of *xin* towards virtuous behavior.

1. *Xin* as the biological foundation

In Chinese philosophy, *xin*, though literally means heart, serves the dual functions of feeling and thinking. ‘Heart/mind’ is used to translate the Chinese word *xin*. In D. C. Lau’s translation of Mencius’ work, *xin* is translated to heart, and he emphasizes *xin* as an organ in Mencius’ (Lau, 2004, 171). Van Norden also translated *xin* as heart (Van Norden, 2008, 171). Some scholars use the heart/mind to translate *xin*, focusing on both its existence as an organ and its properties as an organ to know and think (Bloom 1994, Shun 1996, Sung 2016). The heart is used to emphasize its function of feeling, and the mind is used to emphasize its function to think. In this paper, I use ‘heart/mind’ to translate *xin*, since this translation can cover all the features of *xin*. According to Mencius, the *xin* is where moral tendencies are rooted, and our moral actions are motivated. In this section, based on textual evidence from Mencius, I am going to firstly clarify Mencius’ concept of heart/mind by pointing out that it has the functions of both feeling and thinking. Then I will explore Mencius’ concept of *xin* as the biological basis for the human nature’s developmental characteristic.

1.1 The functions of *xin*

In *Mencius*, there are no direct texts dividing the different functions of the heart/mind, but we can still conclude two major functions from the texts. The two functions are feeling and thinking. It is worth to note that making this classification doesn’t imply these two functions operate independently. Conversely, most texts indicate that these two functions consistently interact within

our cognitive processes. The logic behind is that Mencius doesn't even make distinction between emotion and rationality (Wong, 1991, 32-33). In this paper, making this classification aims to demonstrate that Mencius emphasizes the interconnectedness and complementarity of feeling and thinking in shaping moral development. Therefore, these two functions can be likened to two perspectives that illustrate the intricate processes occurring within human cognitive activity according to Mencius' theory.

Keeping this in mind, we can look at the representative text showing the heart/mind has the function of feeling and thinking. In 2A6¹: "All humans have hearts/[minds] that are not unfeeling toward others. ... Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion" (*Mencius* 2A6, Van Norden 2008, 45). In the 'a feeling (or heart) of alarm and compassion', the Chinese text is '*chuti ceyin zhixin*', the direct translation should be 'a feeling of shock, alarm, and sympathy'. According to this, we can see Mencius actually demonstrates a whole cognitive progress here. There are three parts of emotions involved in this progress: shock, alarm, and sympathy. And all these emotions exist as the outcomes of heart/mind. Hu analyzes this progress through three aspects: cognitive, affective, and motivational. The cognitive aspect involves recognizing salient features of a situation, such as anticipating danger to a child. '*Ce*' and '*yin*' represent the affective response typically elicited by witnessing a child in danger, highlighting sensitivity to others' suffering. The motivational aspect of *ceyin* manifests as an action tendency, preparing one for potential actions (Hu, 2019, 4). These facets illustrate the functions of the heart/mind. The affective aspect engages the heart/mind in feeling, as the child's peril triggers immediate emotions like shock and alarm. The cognitive and motivational dimensions entail the act of thinking. Concepts such as "anticipating danger to a child" and "preparing for potential actions" pertain to cognitive processes.

While some argue that these actions may not explicitly involve conscious thought due to their lack of immediate outcomes, I contend that thinking doesn't always require tangible results as proof. For instance, silence doesn't negate the presence of thought. The key distinction between feeling and thinking lies in agency; feelings arise from sensory stimulation without necessarily involving agency, whereas thinking inherently requires human agency. As Hu suggests, “the motivation associated with *ceyin* may not be a fully formed thought or plan, though it may eventually lead to one” (Hu, 2019, 4).

In addition to this, in *Mencius* 6A15, Mencius explicitly presents the heart/mind as an organ of thinking, elucidating, “The organs of hearing and sight are unable to think and can be misled by external things. ... The organ of the heart can think” (*Mencius* 6A15, Lau 2004, 158). This statement highlights Mencius' recognition of the heart/mind as an organ comparable to the ear and eye. Just as the ear and eye serve as sensory organs for hearing and sight respectively, Mencius asserts that the heart/mind functions as the organ responsible for thinking. This implies that while the senses of hearing and sight may be influenced by external stimuli and can be deceived, the heart/mind possesses the unique capability of engaging in cognitive processes, such as reasoning, contemplation, and reflection. By characterizing the heart/mind as an organ can think, Mencius underscores its central role in cognitive activities.

In all, from Mencius' texts, the heart/mind is depicted as having two primary functions: feeling and thinking. Despite this classification, it's important to note that these functions are not isolated but rather operate in tandem within the cognitive process. For example, in 1A7, King Xuan of Qi was sitting in the hall. He saw someone leading an ox to be killed for a ceremony, and then asked the one spare the ox, since he “cannot bear to see it shrinking with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution.” Mencius then states that the heart/mind behind the King's action

is sufficient to enable the King to become a true King, for an exemplary moral person's heart/mind towards animals should be like this: "once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die, and once having heard their cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh" (*Mencius* 6A15, Lau 2004, 53-54). In this story, Mencius illustrates what the heart/mind of an exemplary model should be like when treating animals. On one hand, "the cannot bear things" represents the feelings that an exemplary moral person's heart/ mind should encompass. On the other hand, these feelings are integral to the character traits that make the moral agent an exemplary moral person. By using the concept of heart/ mind, Mencius emphasizes the interconnectedness of feeling and thinking in shaping moral development, highlighting the intricate processes within human cognitive activity.

1.2 *Xin* as the biological basis

In 2A6, Mencius states that, "the heart/mind ² of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The heart/mind of [shame] is the sprout of righteousness. The heart/mind of deference is the sprout of propriety. The heart/mind of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom. People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs" (*Mencius*, 2A6, Van Norden, 2008, pp. 46-47). This paragraph from *Mencius* emphasizes the interconnectedness between moral virtues and the heart/mind. Mencius describes four fundamental moral potentials—compassion, shame, deference, and discern right from wrong—and likens each of them to a "sprout." He suggests that these sprouts are essential for the development of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Also, Mencius uses the analogy of having four limbs to highlight the integral role of these moral potentials in human nature and virtues.

To understand this text, we need to unpack two terminological metaphors in this paragraph. Mencius uses two terms referring to the heart/mind. The first one is 'sprout', the second one is 'limb'. In addition, related to 6A15, Mencius directly names the heart/mind as an organ. From

‘sprout’, ‘limb’ and ‘organ’, why Mencius uses these biological metaphors to describe our heart/mind? What is the reason behind the choice of these metaphors? It is not hard to observe that Mencius actually sees the heart/mind in a biological sense. First, Mencius sees the heart/mind as an organ to feel and think, as mentioned previously. So, using organisms or part of organism as metaphors is a plausible choice. Second, Mencius uses the growth of these organisms and their parts to illustrate the moral development that occurs in the heart/mind. Both ‘sprout’ and ‘limb’ can grow. The sprouts contain the ability to grow and a certain direction of growth, and limbs are no exception. Mencius also used the growth of plants to analogize moral development, such as “the ox mountain” metaphor in 6A8, “the mahogany tree” metaphor in 6A13 and the seed of “five domesticated grains” in 6A19 (*Mencius*, 6A8, 6A13, 6A19, Van Norden, 2008, 151-157). As Graham suggests, Mencius viewed these sprouts as inherent potentials within human nature, akin to seeds waiting to be cultivated and nurtured. Just as seeds require the right conditions to grow into healthy plants (Graham, 1976, 54-57). Combine with what Mencius pointed out in 2A6, the progress of moral development begins from the moral potentials (compassion, shame, deference, and discern right from wrong), to the four Confucian virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom). And the heart/mind grounds this process.

The four sprouts or the four aspects of heart/mind represent inherent moral potentials within human nature, analogous to seeds awaiting growth. Mencius employs biological metaphors such as “sprout” and “limb” to illustrate this developmental process, suggesting that moral development is akin to biological growth, requiring nurturing and cultivation, likening the moral potentials to the growth of seeds under the right conditions. Therefore, Mencius views moral development as something like a biological growth process rooted in the heart/mind, wherein moral potentials gradually evolve into fully realized virtues.

2. *Xin* and the moral development

In the last section, I argue that the heart/mind is the biological basis of moral development under Mencius' conception of human nature. And I mentioned the functions of heart/mind in this development. Now, let us get back to Mencius argument, Mencius thinks human nature is generally regarded as inherently good, since human beings are born with innate moral tendencies, which he referred to as "sprouts". He argued that these innate tendencies incline people towards virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Mencius used the analogy of cultivating these innate tendencies to nurturing plants: if properly cultivated, they will grow and flourish, leading individuals toward moral excellence (*Mencius*, 6A6, Van Norden, 2008, 149). So, if these innate tendencies incline people towards virtues, then how exactly does it happen? In the last section, I argued that the heart/mind is the biological basis of this progress, but it is still unclear that how these inclinations transformed to its ethical ends. In this section, I am going to further argue that *xin* takes the role as the seat of human agency, shedding light on how it serves as the cornerstone of ethical decision-making. By investigating how *xin* facilitates the transformation of innate characteristics into ethical outcomes, we could gain deeper insights into Mencius' conception of human nature and the moral development process.

2.1 *Xin* functions as the seat of human agency

In 6A15, Mengzi's disciple Gongduzi asks,

We are the same in being humans. Yet some become great humans, and some become petty humans. Why? Mengzi replied, [t]hose who follow their greater part become great humans. Those who follow their petty part become petty humans. ... The function of the heart is to think³. If it thinks, then it will get it. If it does not think, then it will not get it. This is what

Heaven has given us. If one first takes one's stand on what is greater, then what is lesser will not be able to snatch it away. This is how to become a great person (*Mencius*, 6A15, Van Norden, 2008, 156).

In this text, Gongduzi questions why some individuals become great people while others become petty. Mencius responds by explaining that greatness stems from following one's greater inclinations, while pettiness arises from yielding to lesser inclinations. Further, Mencius asserts that the heart's function is to think, emphasizing the importance of conscious thought in achieving greatness. According to Mencius, prioritizing one's higher aspirations allows one to attain greatness, as lesser impulses are unable to overpower them. This passage underscores Mencius' belief in the power of deliberate thought and the importance of aligning oneself with 'greater' aspirations to achieve greatness. To explain this, Graham argues that Mencius' conception of human nature contains both factual and normative aspects. The factual aspect represents all the natural desires in human nature, while the normative aspect represents the moral tendencies of these natural desires (Graham, 1976, 54-55). I think Graham is right on pointing out that there are both factual aspect and normative aspect in the Mencian notion of human nature. But it is still not clear that how can human nature be both factual and normative. In other words, what reconciles these two aspects in the conception of human nature? Graham further interpreted Mencius' argument as containing three steps: (1) Mencius thinks that there are moral potentials in human nature to pursue virtues; (2) the moral potentials are what make us distinctive from other species; (3) we prefer moral potentials than other non-moral desires (such as appetite, sex, etc.) (Graham, 1989, 250). The first step (1) suggests that moral potentials are innate, but this idea requires further explanation. For instance, compassion is considered a moral potential for Mencius because it involves a desire to help others and is one of the four virtues. However, it is not clear if compassion

is entirely innate because it involves a complex interplay between innate predispositions and environmental influences. While compassion may have some innate components, it is challenging to conclude that it is an entirely innate moral potential. The third step (3) implies that it is ‘us’ preferring the moral potentials rather than natural desires. So, our preferences are the essential to reconcile the factual aspect and the normative aspect. If so, we need to further explain how ‘our preference’ works in the ethical decision-making. Firstly, we need to clarify what is ‘greater’ part, what is ‘lesser’ part?

I say that mouths have the same preferences in flavors, ears have the same preferences in sounds, eyes have the same preferences in attractiveness. When it comes to hearts, are they alone without preferences in common? What is it that hearts prefer in common? I say that it is order and righteousness. The sages first discovered what our hearts prefer in common. Hence, order and righteousness delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths (*Mencius*, 6A7, Van Norden, 2008, 151).

In this text, Mencius argues that just as mouths, ears, and eyes have common preferences in flavors, sounds, and attractiveness respectively, hearts also share a common preference. He suggests that what hearts universally prefer is order and righteousness. Mencius emphasizes that sages were the first to recognize this preference, indicating that order and righteousness bring joy to our hearts in the same way that delicious food pleases our mouths. In linking Mencius’ assertion to 6A15, we discern a profound insight into the nature of human preferences. Mencius analogizes the preferences of different sensory organs to elucidate the different levels of human inclinations. He argues that while ears are drawn to melodious sounds, eyes are captivated by physical

attractiveness, and the mouth savors flavors, the heart/mind's true preference lies in propriety. These preferences, Mencius argues, reflect different facets of human nature, with the sensory desires representing the lesser part and the heart/mind's inclination towards propriety embodying the greater part. In essence, Mencius contends that human nature encompasses both sensory pleasures and moral principles. However, it is the heart/mind's preference for propriety that transcends mere sensory gratification and aligns with the higher moral order. This distinction between the lesser and greater parts underscores the complexity of human nature, wherein sensory impulses coexist with moral aspirations. Moreover, Mencius suggests that through the faculty of thinking, individuals have the capacity to discern between these competing inclinations and consciously follow to prioritize the greater part. By engaging in reasoned thinking, humans can elevate themselves beyond the immediate gratification of sensory desires and align their actions with the moral dictates of propriety. Thus, Mencius' teachings invite us to recognize the tension within human nature between sensory impulses and moral tendencies. Yet, they also offer space by affirming our capacity for moral reasoning and conscious choice. For example, in 1B5, the King Xuan of Qi said to Mencius, "I have a weakness. I am fond of money ... , I have a weakness, I am fond of women." But Mencius did not advise the king to abandon the sensory desires, conversely, he suggested the king that "[y]ou may be fond of money (or women), but what is it to you so long as you share this fondness with the people", to make his people become rich or having their own wife (*Mencius* 6A15, Lau 2004, 63). From this conversation, we see that Mencius advises King Xuan of Qi to recognize the different levels of preference: the well-being of his people and the pursuit of his own sensory desires. The transition from focusing solely on personal pleasures to prioritizing the needs of others signifies progress in moral development. In this process, King Xuan's agency is crucial, he must recognize the "greater part" of his nature and follow the moral

standards rather than be led solely by sensory pleasures. Mencius argues that when we fully recognized the greater part, we will follow it, as the satisfaction derived from sharing enjoyment with others surpasses the fleeting pleasure of solitary (Mencius 6A15, Lau 2004, 58). The fulfillment of aligning with the “greater part” of our nature exceeds that of merely gratifying the “lesser part.” In embracing the pursuit of propriety over fleeting pleasures, individuals can aspire towards a more virtuous existence, in alignment with the deeper inclinations of the heart/mind. Also, the presence of human agency is essential for the application of moral reasoning and the conscious. Here, in the discourse on human agency and developmental progress, I argue that the heart/mind assumes a pivotal role as the epicenter of human agency. This assertion harmonizes with the implications drawn from 6A7 and 6A15, where the narrative suggests that individuals exercise their agency through the cognitive process of thinking—an activity intricately entwined with the functions of the heart/mind. Furthermore, as underscored in section 1.1, the faculty of thinking emerges as an indispensable element of human agency.

From this perspective, it becomes evident that the heart/mind serves as the conduit through which individuals’ agency finds expression. It acts as the hinges where cognitive processes intersect with volitional impulses, thereby shaping the course of developmental progress. By recognizing the heart/mind as the locus of agency, we acknowledge its pivotal role in guiding human actions, decisions, and aspirations.

2.2 How the heart/mind makes human nature a dynamic concept

In 7A1, Mencius claims that “for a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. The retention of his heart and the nurturing of his nature are the means by which he serves Heaven” (*Mencius*, 7A1, Van Norden, 2008, 171). From the text, Mencius argues that understanding one’s nature hinges on

realizing the depths of the heart, suggesting that a profound comprehension of the heart leads to self-awareness. Here, Mencius underscores the importance of comprehending our heart/mind thoroughly as a prerequisite for understanding our nature fully. In essence, to grasp the intricacies of our nature, it is imperative to achieve a comprehensive understanding of our heart/mind. This raises the question: Why is familiarizing ourselves with the heart/mind a necessary precursor to comprehending human nature? Mencius' discourse in 7A21, "which an exemplary moral person⁴ follows as his nature, that is to say, benevolence, rightness, the rites and wisdom, is rooted in his heart" (*Mencius*, 7A21, Lau, 2004, 174), further elucidates the intrinsic connection between the heart/mind and virtuous tendencies inherent in human nature. Here, Mencius identifies benevolence, rightness, the rites, and wisdom as the core virtues rooted within the heart/mind. These virtues, deeply ingrained within the fabric of the heart/mind, serve as guiding principles for moral conduct and ethical living. This proves that the heart/mind is in a leading position in the transformation between the innate characteristics and the moral potentials, or, in Graham's words, the factual and normative aspects. After recognizing the heart/mind's the leading position and functions in this transformation, also acknowledging its capability to carry human agency in application, we can now explore how Mencius' conception of the heart/mind exactly forms the concept of human nature.

The exploration of Mencius' argument through the lenses of scholars like Wong and Hu unveils a nuanced understanding of the dynamic nature of human nature and its intricate relationship with the heart/mind. In detail, Wong's examination of Mencius thought experiment, particularly regarding compassion, illuminates a transformative process wherein innate tendencies evolve into altruistic moral motivations. Wong posits that compassion serves as a foundational sprout that matures into a virtuous disposition, guiding individuals towards altruistic actions and

ethical conduct (Wong, 2015, 27). This transformative journey underscores the developmental progress inherent in Mencius' conception of human nature, wherein the sprouts of virtue gradually flourish into moral virtues through the nurturing influence of the heart/mind. Hu delineates three components—cognitive, affective, and motivational—that contribute to this comprehensive understanding of human nature's evolution (Hu, 2019, 3). By recognizing the multifaceted nature of the sprouts and their cognitive, emotional, and motivational dimensions, Hu highlights the intricate process through which human nature evolves from its factual aspect to its normative dimension. This integrated perspective underscores the pivotal role of the heart/mind in facilitating this transformative journey, wherein innate tendencies are refined and elevated into virtuous qualities. Building upon these insights, we discern a profound interconnection between the heart/mind and the dynamic nature of human nature. This progression is facilitated by the transformative influence of the heart/mind.

To sum up, Mencius argues that human nature is inherently good, attributing innate moral tendencies, or “sprouts,” to individuals. These inclinations toward virtues like benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are likened to seeds that, if nurtured, grow into moral excellence. The narrative then shifts to exploring the function of *xin* as the seat of human agency, elucidating its role in ethical decision-making. Mencius' dialogue with Gongduzi in 6A15 highlights the importance of conscious thought in achieving greatness, suggesting that prioritizing higher aspirations over lesser impulses leads to moral excellence. This passage underscores Mencius' belief in the power of reasoned thinking to guide individuals toward virtuous conduct. Furthermore, Mencius argues in 6A7 that the heart/mind universally prefers order and righteousness, indicating a common moral inclination among humans.

3. A possible interpretation of Mencius' argument

Expanding on the analysis presented in the previous sections, we have established that the heart/mind possesses innate preferences that drive individuals towards virtuous behavior. When our decision-making aligns with these preferences, it elicits a sense of pleasure, indicating a harmony between our actions and ethical ideals. However, while Graham's three-step explanation and the distinction between the factual and normative aspects of human nature provide valuable insights, they fall short in fully addressing how these aspects are reconciled and how human agency contributes to moral development. Enter Wong and Hu's dynamic approach to moral development, which introduces a crucial element to the discussion. By recognizing the dynamic nature of moral growth, we find a framework that accommodates Mencius' concept of human nature and its inherent virtuosity.

In Mencius' construction of the argument that human nature is inherently good, he does not explicitly state that human nature itself is good. Instead, he focuses on the inherent goodness of the four aspects of the heart/mind, which can also be understood as the goodness of the four sprouts. This approach, as discussed in preceding sections, implying that the preferences of the heart/mind determine the trajectory of human nature. As previously elucidated in section 2.1, these preferences of the heart/mind are both innate and virtuous, suggesting that the direction of human nature is likewise innate and virtuous (*Mencius*, 6A7). In light of this perspective, it can be asserted that human nature is inherently virtuous. To substantiate this claim, the primary focus lies in understanding why the preferences of the heart/mind dictate the course of human nature and how these preferences shape its tendency. Addressing the former question, as previously discussed, two conditions support this assertion. Firstly, the heart/mind occupies a leading position in its relationship with human nature (*Mencius*, 7A1, 7A21). Secondly, the heart/mind serves as the

locus of human agency, enabling individuals to actively engage in moral development (*Mencius*, 6A15). Regarding the latter question, as explored in section 2.2, there exists a transformative process within human nature when moral development is applied, rendering human nature a dynamic concept. It can be concluded that the preferences of the heart/mind indeed determine the tendency of human nature, and since these preferences are inherently virtuous, human nature itself is virtuous. In summary, Mencius' argument regarding the inherent goodness of human nature is framed not in terms of human nature per se, but rather in the inherent goodness of the four aspects of the heart/mind.

Some may contend that the sprouts, analogous to seeds, are subject to environmental influences and nurturing, suggesting that their growth is independent of the preferences of the heart/mind. Graham frames Mencius' perspective by likening these sprouts to inherent potentials within human nature, akin to seeds awaiting cultivation and nurturing in suitable conditions (Graham, 1976). However, this argument overlooks two crucial points. Firstly, the sprouts serve as a metaphor for the four aspects of the heart/mind. Therefore, if the sprouts dictate the direction of moral development in human nature, it logically follows that it is the heart/mind that determines this trajectory. Secondly, while the argument posits that environmental factors and nurturing are decisive for sprout growth, it does not conflict with the interpretation presented here. This is because the presence of the heart/mind serves as both a sufficient and necessary condition for individuals to engage in moral development or cultivation. Furthermore, in 6A2 Mencius said, "Human nature being good is like water tending downward. There is no human who does not tend toward goodness. There is no water that does not tend downward" (*Mencius*, 6A2, Van Norden, 2008, 144). In this statement, Mencius likens human nature's innate goodness to the natural tendency of water to flow downwards. He asserts that just as water naturally flows downward,

every human being inherently inclines towards goodness. Therefore, the direction of human nature, like the flow of water, may be influenced by individuals and their environment, but its fundamental inclination remains unchanged. This analogy emphasizes the intrinsic moral orientation of human beings, independent of external factors. Moreover, the concept of the heart/mind plays a crucial role in reconciling the factual and normative aspects of human nature, thereby implying a natural direction. Additionally, it facilitates the reconciliation of the effects of human agency and the environment within the dynamic progress of moral development. Therefore, this objection does not contradict the interpretation presented in this paper. On the contrary, the interpretation provided here offers a more comprehensive and detailed explanation to support the claim. In essence, while some may argue that the growth of the sprouts depends solely on environmental factors and nurturing, this objection fails to consider the metaphorical representation of the sprouts as manifestations of the heart/mind. Furthermore, Mencius' analogy of human nature to water's natural tendency emphasizes the inherent goodness of human beings, independent of external influences. Thus, the interpretation presented in this paper not only addresses this objection but also provides a deeper understanding of Mencius' perspective on the virtuosity of human nature.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have undertaken a comprehensive exploration of Mencius' philosophical framework, focusing on the inherent goodness of human nature and the pivotal role of the heart/mind in moral development. Through a thorough analysis of Mencius' texts and scholarly interpretations, we have elucidated the intricate relationship between the heart/mind, human agency, and the dynamic nature of human nature. The examination of Mencius' thought has revealed that the heart/mind possesses two primary functions: feeling and thinking. While these functions are interdependent,

they play distinct roles in shaping moral development. The heart/mind, as depicted by Mencius, serves as the conduit through which individuals experience emotions, contemplate moral principles, and make ethical decisions. Through textual analysis, we have discerned how Mencius illustrates the interconnectedness and complementarity of feeling and thinking within human cognitive activity, underscoring their role in shaping moral character. Moreover, our exploration has shed light on the pivotal role of the heart/mind as the seat of human agency. Mencius asserts that greatness stems from aligning oneself with the greater inclinations of the heart/mind, emphasizing the importance of conscious thought in achieving moral excellence. By prioritizing moral virtues over lesser impulses, individuals exercise their agency and elevate themselves towards ethical ideals. Furthermore, we have delved into Mencius' conception of human nature as a dynamic concept, shaped by the transformative influence of the heart/mind. Through Mencius' discourse on the four sprouts and the transformative journey from innate tendencies to moral virtues, we have elucidated the developmental progress inherent in human nature. The heart/mind emerges as the catalyst for this transformative journey, facilitating the evolution of human nature from its factual aspect to its normative dimension.

In synthesizing these insights, we have articulated a nuanced understanding of Mencius' argument regarding the inherent virtuosity of human nature. While Mencius does not explicitly state that human nature itself is good, he underscores the inherent goodness of the four aspects of the heart/mind, which in turn determines the virtuous trajectory of human nature. Through the dynamic interplay between the heart/mind, human agency, and moral development, Mencius offers a profound exploration of the complexities of human nature and its potential for moral growth. In conclusion, Mencius' philosophy provides a compelling framework for understanding the inherent goodness of human nature and the transformative role of the heart/mind in moral development. By

elucidating the interconnectedness between feeling and thinking, the centrality of human agency, and the dynamic nature of human nature, Mencius offers valuable insights into the ethical dimensions of human existence. Through continued scholarship and philosophical inquiry, we can further deepen our understanding of Mencius' teachings and their relevance to contemporary ethical discourse. While the interpretation offered in this paper undoubtedly has areas that require additional scrutiny and investigation, I maintain the conviction that incorporating the concept of the heart/mind into our understanding of human nature presents a promising perspective for elucidating Mencius' assertion regarding the innate goodness of human nature.

Endnotes:

1. The translation of *Mengzi*, this paper use both Bryan Van Norden's and D.C Lau's translations of *Mengzi*. In 2A6, 6A15 7A1 I use Van Norden's translation; in 6A15 7A21, I use Lau's translation.
2. Van Norden translated *si* into reflect, this paper prefers to use the direct meaning of *si*, which is thinking.
3. Van Norden, translated *junzi* into gentleman, this paper chooses to use 'exemplary person' because 'gentleman' shows strong cultural connotation in the English language.
4. Van Norden translated *xin* into feelings, this paper use *xin*'s direct meaning heart/mind.

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