Mencius and Xunzi on Xing (Human Nature)

Sung, Winnie

2016

Sung, W. (2016). Mencius and Xunzi on Xing (Human Nature). *Philosophy Compass*, 11(11), 632–641. doi:10.1111/phc3.12363

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/144894>

<https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12363>

© 2016 The Author(s). *Philosophy Compass* © 2016 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. All rights reserved. This paper was published in *Philosophy Compass* and is made available with permission of The Author(s) and *Philosophy Compass*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Downloaded on 26 Apr 2023 23:06:15 SGT

Mencius and Xunzi on *Xing* 性 (Human Nature)

Winnie Sung

Penultimate Draft forthcoming in *Philosophy Compass*

Abstract

This article introduces and analyses the debate between Mencius and Xunzi on *xing* 性 (human nature). While Mencius claims that *xing* is good, Xunzi claims that *xing* is bad. A common way of interpreting these two different claims is to determine the scope of *xing*. It is generally agreed that, for Mencius, it is the heart/mind that falls within the scope of *xing*, for Xunzi, the sensory desires. This article also explores a different way of approaching Mencius's and Xunzi's different claims about *xing*. It is suggested that Mencius's and Xunzi's different views on *xing* can be understood in terms of their different views on the heart/mind (*xin* 心). While Mencius thinks that the heart/mind has a morally good natural tendency, Xunzi thinks that the heart/mind has a morally problematic tendency.

1. Introduction

One major debate in pre-Qin Chinese thought concerns whether human nature is good. The two major thinkers who hold opposing views on this issue are both from the Confucian tradition: Mencius (ca. 385BCE- 312BCE) and Xunzi (ca. 310 BCE- ca. 215BCE). This article focuses on introducing and explicating the Mencian-Xunzi debate on human nature. Not only is this debate itself philosophically interesting, a clearer grasp of it can further our understanding of other aspects of Mencius's and Xunzi's thought and their early influence on later Confucian thinking.

The Chinese term that is often rendered into English as “human nature” in the context of Mencian-Xunzi debate is “*xing* 性”, which is derived from the term “*sheng* 生”. In early Chinese texts, the usage of “*xing*” probably refers to the direction of growth, tendencies, or desires of a living thing.¹ Since the early usage of “*xing*” could be quite different from what contemporary philosophers broadly refer to as “human nature”, I will leave “*xing*” untranslated and take “*xing*” in the texts *Mencius* and *Xunzi* to be short for the *xing* of human beings. It will be assumed throughout this article that both Mencius and Xunzi have a robust conception of *xing* and that they do respectively mean that *xing* is good and *xing* is bad.² In the following, I will provide an overview of the state of the debate in the field. In sections 3 and 4, I respectively discuss the relation between *xing* and the heart/mind in Mencius's and Xunzi's thought. In section 5, I will explore an alternative way of understanding the debate in terms of the two thinkers' different conceptions of the heart/mind.

2. State of Debate

Mencius famously says that *xing* is good, whereas Xunzi says that *xing* is bad. When Mencius's interlocutor Gaozi asks Mencius what he means by his statement “*xing* is good (性善),” Mencius replies:

As far as what is genuinely in him is concerned, a man is capable of becoming good [...] This is what I mean by good. As for his becoming bad, this 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 [*ren*], the heart of shame to [propriety (*yi*)], the heart of respect to the observance of the rites [*li*], and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom [*zhi*]. Benevolence, [propriety], observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a luster from the outside; they are in me originally. [It is just that I have not reflected upon it (*si*)]. That is why it is said, “Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it. (*Mencius* 6A:6; trans. Lau, modified.)

Chapter 23 of the *Xunzi*, entitled “*Xing e* (bad)”, is devoted to arguing that *xing* is bad. It begins with the famous opening line:

Xing is bad (*e* 惡); its goodness (*shan* 善) is a result of artifice (*wei* 偽). (*Xunzi* 23/1; Cf. K 23.1a)

Xunzi defines “*xing* 性” as:

That which is so from birth is called *xing*. That which is generated out of the harmony of *xing*, merges with the quintessential, is aroused and responds, is not worked at but is so is called *xing*. (*Xunzi* 22/2-3; Cf. K 22.1b)

Xing is what brought to fruition by Heaven. (*Xunzi* 22/63; Cf. K 22.5b)

What cannot be learned, cannot be worked at, and yet resides in humans is called *xing*. (*Xunzi* 23/12; Cf. K 23.1c)

Wei 偽, a concept that contrasts with *xing*, is defined as:

The heart/mind deliberates and because of this, one is able to put [what is deliberated] into action is called *wei*. Deliberations accumulate and one is able to practice repeatedly and is later completed is called *wei*. (*Xunzi* 22/4; Cf. K 22.1b)

What can be learned and then one is able to do it, what can be worked at and then can be achieved by human beings is called *wei*. (*Xunzi* 23/13; Cf. K 23.1c)

Xunzi defines goodness (*shan*) as “what is correct, put into order, impartial, and orderly,” and badness (*e*) as “being partial, dangerous, contrary to the right, and disorderly.” (K 23.3a)

Xunzi’s claim about *xing*, if taken literally, seems to be a sharp break from *Mencius*’s view on *xing*. It is puzzling how two avowed Confucians could take such seemingly opposing views on *xing*. Throughout Chinese intellectual history, *Mencius*’s view on *xing* was regarded as a faithful representation of the Confucian ethical outlook. In pre-modern Chinese language scholarship, the predominant approach is to defend *Mencius*’s claim and attack *Xunzi*.³ Han Yu

韓愈 (618-907), an important literary writer of the Tang dynasty, suggests that Mencius is the last transmitter of the Confucian way and that Xunzi's understanding of the Confucian way is not thorough enough. In the Song dynasty, the prominent neo-Confucians Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) revered Mencius and criticised Xunzi's theory of *xing* as being "biased and impure". Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) followed the Cheng brothers and held a low opinion of Xunzi. When Zhu Xi compiled the Four Books and excluded the *Xunzi*, it became obvious that Xunzi's teaching was marginalised.

Another approach, which is more prevalent from 1950 through the 1980s, is to downplay the differences between Mencius and Xunzi. This is usually done by (1) shifting the focus from the differences between the two thinkers to their similarities, (2) explaining away the differences between their claims about *xing*, or (3) arguing that Xunzi's attack against Mencius misses the point. In this article, I will set aside considerations for (1). It may well be the case that both Mencius and Xunzi believe that humans can be good, that humans can be bad, and that making moral effort in the Confucian way is important. However, the presence of these similarities do not entail that there are no substantial differences between these two thinkers' views on *xing*. What concerns us here is whether there are any differences in Mencius's and Xunzi's views on *xing* and, if there are any, how we can make sense of their differences. (2) and (3) are relevant for our purposes. (2) says that there are no substantial differences. (3) acknowledges the differences but says that there is no substance to the debate because Xunzi has missed Mencius's point.

Chen Da-qi's interpretation is a typical example of (2). Chen argues that while by "*xing*" Xunzi refers to desires, Mencius refers to the heart/mind (Chen 403-6). According to Chen, these differences are trivial because what is significant is that both thinkers subscribe to the same ethical picture. On Mencius's side, Mencius cannot say that goodness comes entirely from *xing* because good sprouts still need to be cultivated by human effort (Chen 406-7). On Xunzi's side, since *xing* is the raw material and since there is no way to create goodness or transform something into goodness without the raw material, goodness must arise from *xing* (408-410). Hence, like Mencius, Xunzi must have also assumed that goodness, to some extent, originates in *xing*.

A. C. Graham's interpretation is an example of (3). Graham argues that Xunzi's criticism against Mencius is "not quite to the point" because Mencius includes what is learned in *xing* but Xunzi does not (Graham 1967, 256-7; 1989, 250). Xunzi includes sensory desires in *xing* but Mencius does not (Graham 1967, 244). Xu Fu-guan similarly argues that the content of *xing* for Xunzi and for Mencius is different. Since Xunzi has included sensory desires in his concept of *xing* but Mencius has not, Xu thinks that there is no point for Xunzi to launch his criticism against Mencius on the issue of *xing* (Xu 238).⁴

Characteristic of the strategy adopted by both (2) and (3) is a focus on identifying the scope and content of Mencius's and Xunzi's usages of the term "*xing*". A common assumption shared by these earlier commentators is that Mencius's *xing* includes the heart/mind and excludes sensory desires, whereas Xunzi's *xing* includes sensory desires and excludes the heart/mind. Although these studies shed light on Mencius's and Xunzi's concepts of *xing*, there is the lingering worry that there are some deeper differences between Mencius and Xunzi that are not captured by merely listing what each thinker include or exclude in their usages of "*xing*".⁵

An alternative approach that has the potential of moving the investigation forward is to explicate what Mencius and Xunzi are trying to convey with their respective statements about *xing*.⁶ Van Norden (2000), for example, suggests that underlying Xunzi's and Mencius's

different views on human nature is their different view on the mechanism of moral agency. Instead of focusing on the way Mencius and Xunzi have construed the scope of *xing*, Van Norden points us to the possibility that the two thinkers' respective statements about *xing* could convey their different views on the heart/mind (*xin* 心)⁷, for both thinkers take the heart/mind to be the source of agency. In the following, I attempt to explore this alternative approach and explicate the Mencian-Xunzi debate on *xing* in terms of their different conceptions of the heart/mind.

3. *Xing* and the Heart/mind in Mencius

The connection between *xing* and the heart/mind is clearer in the case of Mencius. Recall from section 1 that Mencius explains his claim that *xing* is good by identifying four aspects of the heart/mind (6A:6). All humans have the heart/mind of compassion 惻隱, the heart/mind of respect 辭讓, the heart/mind of shame 羞惡, and the heart/mind of right and wrong 是非.⁸ In 2A:2, these four aspects of the heart/mind are identified by Mencius as the sprouts or beginnings (*duan* 端) of the four cardinal ethical ideals: *ren* 仁 (benevolence), *yi* 義 (propriety), *li* 禮 (ritual), and *zhi* 智 (wisdom). To illustrate that all human beings are endowed with these four sprouts, Mencius gives the example that all human beings will have a heart/mind that is alarmed and distressed upon seeing a child who is about to fall into a well. Another related example says that people would immediately sweat upon seeing the remains of their parents being eaten by foxes and sucked by flies and accordingly be prompted to bury their parents (3A:5).

Mencius also discusses *xing* in relation to everyone's heart/mind having a common preference for moral goodness. In 6A:7, he observes that the sense organs have common preferences in things. For example, everyone's ears are fond of the music of Shi Kuang 師曠 and everyone's eyes are fond of the beauty of Zi Du 子都. Just as the senses have similar tastes, so too, Mencius claims that everyone's heart/mind has a common preference for propriety (*yi*).⁹ If we understand the analogy between the senses and the heart/mind strictly, we can take Mencius to mean that the heart/mind has the natural tendency to be drawn to moral goodness.

In 2A:2, Mencius identifies *zhi* 志 (will, goal of the heart/mind)¹⁰, which is a state in which the heart/mind is oriented towards a goal, as the commander of *qi* 氣 (vital energies). In return, vital energies are also capable of moving *zhi*.¹¹ Ideally, when *zhi* leads vital energies and if the vital energies have been properly nourished and developed, one will have an unmoved heart/mind.¹² This idea about the heart/mind being focused on its proper goal is also expressed in 6A:9, where Mencius explains why the "sprout" of a king is not growing by an analogy with chess-playing.¹³ According to Mencius, a student will not master the art of the game if his heart/mind is not focused enough to bring about the goal of the heart/mind. Mencius's emphasis on focusing the heart/mind on its goal, along with his claim that vital energies can move the goal of the heart/mind, altogether suggest that the heart/mind can be distracted from orienting towards its proper goal. What distracts the heart/mind is most likely to be sensory desires that arise from interaction with external objects. Mencius says that the sensory desires belong to the "smaller body" (*xiao ti* 小體). If the heart/mind is not properly established, the "smaller body" could seize the command of the heart/mind (6A:15). This is probably why Mencius maintains that there is no better way to nurture the heart/mind than reducing bodily desires (7B:35).

Even if Mencius thinks that the heart/mind can be distracted in its pursuit of moral goodness, Mencius clearly does not want to say that the heart/mind itself has bad predispositions. According to Mencius, those who let the body take charge of things are those who have abandoned the heart/mind (6A:8, 6A:11). It is not that the heart/mind is distracted by the objects of one's desire; it is the senses that are being distracted. For Mencius, the heart/mind is the greater part and these sense organs are smaller part (6A:15). Since the sense organs do not have the capacity to reflect, they will be obscured (*bi* 蔽) and led astray by external objects. The heart/mind can establish itself and rule over the bodily senses in virtue of its capacity to reflect and direct attention (*si* 思) to propriety.¹⁴ This suggests that when the heart/mind is distracted, it is somehow not in an activated state that enables it to rule over the senses.

In order to make coherent sense of Mencius's claim that the heart/mind can be distracted from its proper goal and the claim that the heart/mind itself is good, we can understand Mencius as saying that the heart/mind is in an inert state when it is distracted. This further suggests that although the heart/mind is the seat of moral exertion, it is not necessarily in a ruling position because it is not always active. In a dialogue with King Xuan, Mencius says it is not that the King is not able to be kind (*bu neng* 不能) to his subjects. Rather, the king is simply not acting out his kindness (*bu wei* 不為) (1A:7). In Mencius's view, the king has all the resources ready in his heart/mind to pursue goodness (7A:4). It is just that he is not exercising his heart/mind. For the king to claim that he cannot show kindness to the people is like someone who can lift up something that weighs hundreds of kilograms but claims that he cannot lift up a feather. This echoes another analogy Mencius draws between an unused trail overgrown by grass and an unused heart/mind stuffed with grass (7B:21). The problem is not that the heart/mind does not have the resources or motivating power but that the heart/mind is unused.

Mencius also notes that if one likes both fish and bear's paw, and if one cannot choose both, one will certainly choose bear's paw over fish because bear's paw is more valuable (6A:10). Likewise, when one cannot choose both life and propriety, one will certainly choose propriety over life. Mencius then concludes that those who choose material gains at the expense of violating propriety have lost their original (*ben* 本) heart/mind. This is consistent with the idea that a great person does not lose her infant-like heart/mind (4B:12). Mencius's point seems to be that one will not make moral mistakes if she acts in accordance with her heart/mind. Problems occur only when one does not exercise her heart/mind.

4. *Xing* and the Heart/mind in Xunzi

As mentioned earlier, it is commonly held that Xunzi only includes emotions and sensory desires in the scope of *xing* and excludes the heart/mind.¹⁵ One plausible explanation for why scholars are reluctant to hold that Xunzi includes the heart/mind in the scope of *xing* is that Xunzi says goodness comes from *wei*, which he defines in terms of the heart/mind's deliberation (K 22.1b). However, as Kwong-loi Shun points out, "Even if [Xunzi] had allowed *xing* to include the capacities of [the heart/mind], *xing* would still be evil in exactly the same sense – unless the heart/mind exercises control over the emotions and desires, strife and disorder will result" (Shun 228). On this understanding, it is still possible to take Xunzi's statement about *xing* to be conveying something about the heart/mind. Even if Mencius and Xunzi construe the scope of *xing* differently, *pace* Chen Da-qi, Mencius and Xunzi could still be subscribing to quite

different ethical pictures.¹⁶ Let us now consider Xunzi's claim about *xing* in relation to his conception of the heart/mind.

For Xunzi, it is the *xing* of human beings that everyone has inborn preferences for self-interest (*li* 利)¹⁷ and the content of self-interest is the objects of desire, such as material goods, wealth, and prestige (e.g. K 11.7b;). Elsewhere, he notes that the heart/mind has a predisposed preference for self-interest (K 23.1b, 23.2a) and that the objects of desire can, as it were, make the heart/mind tilt (K 21.7b). Xunzi's is not concerned about human beings having these inborn likes and dislikes. He acknowledges that, since human beings are born with desires, it is inevitable one wants to pursue the objects of desire (K 19.1a). In Xunzi's view, desire (*yu* 欲) does not fall into the category of order and disorder but into the category of "life and death" that are beyond human control (K 22.5a). What concerns Xunzi is the disastrous consequences of going along with (*shun* 順) these natural preferences. And what makes going along with our natural preferences possible is the heart/mind's approval. In a famous passage, Xunzi says:

Desire does not depend on whether its obtainment is possible/permissible (*ke* 可), but the one who pursues follows what is possible/permissible. That desire does not depend on whether the obtainment of their objects is possible/permissible is received from Heaven. That the one who pursues follows what is possible/permissible is received from the heart/mind (*Xunzi* 22/57-8; Cf. K 22.5a).

Xunzi makes it clear that desire is not the source of the problem, for the pursuit of the objects of desire is made possible/permitted (*ke* 可)¹⁸ by the heart/mind. Hence, it is not likely that by "*xing* is bad," Xunzi means that desire is bad. When the heart/mind approves, the pursuit of objects of desire will be carried out; when the heart/mind disapproves, the pursuit will be blocked. This suggests that the source of moral failure lies in the heart/mind, which makes possible the potentially problematic pursuits of objects of desire. Although the heart/mind could have blocked these problematic pursuits of objects of desire, it does not necessarily do so if it does not deliberate or if it deliberates wrongly (K 3.13; 22.5b). This happens when the heart/mind does not know *Dao*, the correct ethical standards (K 21.5a). What prevents the heart/mind from knowing *Dao* is that the heart/mind is in a state of obsession with self-interest or lack of knowledge of *Dao* (*bi* 蔽) (K 21.1).¹⁹ And since the heart/mind has no preference for *Dao*, there is no inherent inclination in the heart/mind that will enable it to make right decisions that will lead to order. Nonetheless, *xing* is also the sort of raw material (*cai* 材) that can be developed and transformed. It is through learning and practising, *wei*, that the heart/mind can acquire knowledge about *Dao* and subsequently come to abide by *Dao*.

However, just because the heart/mind is capable of deliberating and making the right decisions, it does not mean that the heart/mind must have some ethical predisposition. The capacity for knowing *Dao* could be a morally neutral capacity that can be developed in different ways.²⁰ The term that Xunzi uses to discuss the capacity for knowing *Dao* is "*zhi* 知" and it is used in at least three different senses in the text. In one sense, *zhi* refers to a mere capacity that enables one to understand things. Xunzi uses "*zhi*" in this sense when he refers to the capacity of the heart/mind to form an understanding of things in a way that the senses cannot (K 22.2e). It is also in this first sense of *zhi* that Xunzi says humans are all born with *zhi* (K 21.5d) and that the superior person and the petty person have the same *zhi* (K 4.8). In a second sense, "*zhi*" refers to knowledge of a specific object and it is not necessary that what one knows is *Dao*. Xunzi thinks

that there can be knowledge of the sages, of the superior person, of the petty person, and of the servant (K 23.6). It is said that without the help of a teacher or a model, even if one has knowledge, one will not be able to put knowledge into good use (K 8.11). In a third sense, “zhi” is used to refer to knowledge of *Dao*. Xunzi is emphatic that the heart/mind must exercise its capacity in a way that aims at knowing *Dao* (K 21.5a). These observations indicate that the capacity that enables one to know *Dao* is itself a neutral capacity. Without learning and knowing *Dao*, the heart/mind will by default approve of the pursuit of the objects of desire. All Xunzi needs to assume is that the heart/mind is always in an activated state to motivate actions.²¹ It does not require some additional force, such as knowledge of *Dao*, to activate its mechanism. Hence, before knowing *Dao*, the heart/mind would motivate actions that pursue the objects of desire. But why would the heart/mind motivate actions that pursue the objects of desire before knowing *Dao*? One plausible explanation is that the heart/mind, in Xunzi’s view, has the natural inclination to seek satisfaction of desire.²² According to Xunzi, the heart/mind has an inborn preference for self-interest (*li* 利) in a way that is akin to the senses having their preferred sensory objects (K 11.7). Without learning, the heart/mind probably by default takes the objects of desire to be what can satisfy self-interest. This can explain why the heart/mind has a propensity to be attracted to objects of desire and is therefore predisposed to make possible pursuits of objects of desire.²³ If this interpretation is correct, then Xunzi’s claim that “*xing* is bad” is directed at the natural tendency of the heart/mind to seek only self-interest and motivate actions that will bring about strife and disorder. This is probably why Xunzi says:

The *xing* of human beings is bad; any good in human is acquired by artifice. Now, the *xing* of human beings is such that they are born with a preference for self-interest. Following this *xing*, fights and scrambles will grow while courtesy and deference, culture and order will perish. (*Xunzi* 23/1; Cf. K 23.1a)

One possible reason few scholars have considered the proposed interpretation of Xunzi’s claim that “*xing* is bad” is the reluctance to ascribe to the heart/mind a natural tendency to pursue the objects of desire, for that will make whatever goodness that is later developed not “pure” enough in the Confucian sense. The main worry, voiced by Lau, is that this kind of “transformed goodness” or “enlightened goodness” might not be grounded in one’s nature and is therefore less pure or less real than the kind of goodness that is originally in human nature. In Lau’s view, acquired goodness “does not possess the same significance as it would if it were part of original human nature” (Lau 1953, 61). This hesitation to accept acquired goodness as having the same status as “true” goodness often stems from the belief that if goodness is acquired, the heart/mind has no substantial attachment to goodness.²⁴ To address this challenge, one may draw a distinction between acquired goodness and invented goodness. We may agree with Lau that invented goodness is based on social conventions and customs.²⁵ However, just because goodness is acquired through learning does not mean that the heart/mind is passively conforming to conventions and customs. For Xunzi, since the heart/mind has no innate knowledge of *Dao*, the heart/mind has to learn and adopt *Dao* as the basis for judgements in order to genuinely abide by *Dao*. This implies that for one to truly acquire goodness, one’s heart/mind must be appropriately aligned with and motivated by *Dao*. It is not obvious why the goodness that ensues from learning and transformation is less pure or less real.

5. Mencius and Xunzi on *Xing*

On the proposed interpretation, the main difference in Xunzi's and Mencius's conception of *xing* lies in their different conceptions of the heart/mind. In making their respective statements on *xing*, what Mencius and Xunzi are primarily conveying is their disagreement on what the natural preference of heart/mind is, and what makes it possible for the heart/mind to find pleasure in goodness. While Xunzi thinks that the heart/mind naturally prefers self-interest, Mencius thinks that the heart/mind naturally prefers propriety. To illustrate their differences, we can first sort out two implications of Mencius's view as stated in 6A:7:

- (a) The heart/mind naturally prefers propriety and this preference is akin to taste preference;
- (b) The heart/mind has the capacity to distinguish and enjoy propriety just like the sense organs have the capacity to distinguish and enjoy their proper objects.

Xunzi disagrees with (a) in two ways. First, Xunzi does not regard the heart/mind as having any natural preference for propriety. Second, he believes that the heart/mind has a natural preference for what is opposed to propriety, namely, self-interest. In Xunzi's metaphorical words, the heart/mind is naturally attracted to objects of desire and has the propensity to tilt. It is through learning and knowing *Dao* that the heart/mind can be rectified into an upright position so that it is not blindly attracted to the objects of desire but follows the correct ethical standards. This observation allows us to better understand the substance of Xunzi's disagreement with Mencius. Let us assume that propriety, for both thinkers, is an attribute of moral goodness. If Xunzi thinks that the heart/mind prefers neither self-interest nor propriety, he could still be committed to the weaker claim that *xing* is neither good nor bad. If Xunzi thinks that the heart/mind prefers both self-interest and propriety, he could still be committed to the claim that *xing* can be good or bad. But if Xunzi thinks that the heart/mind naturally prefers only self-interest, then he must be committed to the stronger claim that *xing* is bad.

In relation to (b), Xunzi argues that the heart/mind does not have the capacity that specialises in distinguishing and taking delight in propriety. All Xunzi can concede is that there is a distinguishing capacity of the heart/mind that makes the enjoyment of propriety possible but the capacity itself does not have any predisposed content or direction of development. In its natural state, the heart/mind, for Xunzi, would take delight in the wrong objects. Since the heart/mind does not have this capacity with predisposed content or direction of development,²⁶ its fondness for moral goodness has to be acquired externally from learning. That the heart/mind is capable of taking delight in propriety does not necessarily imply some distinguishing capacity that has propriety as its content or goal. It is because the heart/mind has a capacity to know that it can come to know *Dao* and make choices that are in accordance with *Dao*. It is possible that in the process of learning, the heart/mind has to juggle between goals and is uncertain about what is right (*huo* 惑). On Mencius's side, there is no suggestion that the heart/mind itself is confused or can be confused. For Mencius, the distinguishing capacity of the heart/mind already has moral goodness as its content, or at least, the development of this distinguishing capacity is naturally directed towards moral goodness. Because of this distinguishing capacity, the heart/mind's fondness of moral goodness springs naturally from what is inherent in the heart/mind. Mencius does not think the heart/mind will ever delight in problematic objects. Only the senses will be distracted by problematic objects of desire.

This article has reviewed different interpretations of Mencius's and Xunzi's views on *xing* and suggested a different way of understanding their disagreement that is consistent with textual evidence. Instead of adjudicating how the two thinkers construe the scope of "xing", this article invites the reader to consider the substantive differences between Mencius and Xunzi in terms of what the two thinkers try to convey with their respective statements about *xing*. On the proposed reading, the disagreement between Mencius and Xunzi on *xing* is to be construed as a disagreement on the natural tendency of the heart/mind. Xunzi is disagreeing with Mencius's view that the heart/mind naturally finds moral goodness pleasing. For Mencius, the heart/mind is predisposed to appreciate goodness and has an inbuilt orientation towards goodness. If the natural inclination of Mencius's heart/mind is followed without external interference, goodness will ensue. For Xunzi, the heart/mind has a predisposed inclination to seek only what satisfies self-interest and has no natural tendency to seek or appreciate goodness. If the natural inclination of the heart/mind is followed without intervention, disastrous consequences will ensue.

ENDNOTES

All translations of passages from the *Xunzi* are mine. All reference numbers, except otherwise noted, are to the chapter and line numbers in *Xunzi yinde* 荀子引得. I have consulted Knoblock's translations and provided references to Knoblock's translation in brackets (K chapter.section numbers).

¹ See Graham 1967, Fu Si-nian 2006, and Shun pp. 37-40 for discussion for the use of "xing" in early Chinese texts.

² Some scholars question whether Xunzi has a well thought-out position on *xing*. Munro 1996, for example, argues that Xunzi cannot be very serious in developing a theory of human nature. See also Dan Robins's in-depth study (2001) of the centrality of Xunzi's "*xing e*" claim in his philosophy. I am indebted to the reviewers for prompting me to make this qualification.

³ See Dubs 1956 for an overview of pre-modern scholarly discussions on this matter and the Neo-Confucian defense of Mencius's position.

⁴ Xu 1969, p.238.

⁵ See Ahern 1980 for argument along this line.

⁶ See Shun 1997 for suggestion along this line.

⁷ In this article, all instances of the term "heart/mind" are renderings of the Chinese term "xin 心".

⁸ I follow D. C. Lau's translations of Mencius's four descriptions of the heart/mind.

⁹ "Yi" in this context probably refers more broadly to what is morally good.

¹⁰ "Zhi" is usually translated as "the will" but in the context of *Mencius*, it does not denote a kind of power that pertains only to the mental realm. Rather, it is primarily concerned with the heart/mind being oriented towards a goal.

¹¹ I am indebted to Kwong-loi Shun for helping me think through this point.

¹² *Mencius* 2A:2 is a passage that has been extensively explored by scholars. See, for example, Riegel 1980, Nivison 1996a, Shun 1997, Chan 2002.

¹³ In this passage, Mencius uses the term "meng 萌," which can be literally translated as "sprout." Presumably, it is another metaphorical way of referring to the ethical predispositions of the heart/mind.

¹⁴ The English translation "reflect" for "si" is far from adequate but since it does not significantly affect our current discussion, I will follow the general translation of *si* as "reflect" for convenience. See Shun 1997 pp. 150-153 for a detailed discussion of *si*.

¹⁵ Tang Jun-yi, for example, argues that *xing* and the heart/mind are separate for Xunzi (Tang 78). Benjamin Schwartz similarly understands Xunzi's *xing* as referring to the "realm of the passions and desires" but not the tendency of the heart/mind (Schwartz 293). More recently, Aaron Stalnaker echoes the view that Xunzi's concept of *xing* excludes the heart/mind and its capacities (Stalnaker 58-9).

¹⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer and Andrew Forcehimes for prompting me to clarify this point.

¹⁷ In the text, "li 利" (self-interest) for Xunzi only concerns what benefits the self exclusively and is juxtaposed with "yi 義" (propriety), which requires one to abide by standards and disregard considerations about what benefits the

self. When *li* is contrasted with *yi*, the emphasis is usually on which one should be the underlying consideration or motivation of an action. For example, Xunzi distinguishes actions made on considerations of *li* from actions made on considerations of *yi* (e.g. K 22.1b/3/127). When one is motivated by *li*, one will do anything; on the contrary, when one follows *yi*, there are certain things that one will not do regardless (K 3.11/1/180; K 4.4/1/188). My usage of “self-interest” here is restricted to this narrower sense of *li* that Xunzi has in mind.

¹⁸ “Ke 可” can be taken to mean “possible” or “permissible.” The two senses of *ke* can be related since they both prevent certain actions from being carried out. It suffices our present purpose to simply understand *ke* as a condition that makes the pursuit of objects of *yu* possible.

¹⁹ “Bi 蔽” is variously interpreted in the literature. Yang Liang understands *bi* as one’s being stuck in a corner as if there is an object obstructing us from getting to the bright side or to the light.¹⁹ Watson translates *bi* as “obsession” (Watson 125). Although Knoblock also agrees that *bi* refers to what obsesses us, he chooses to render *bi* as “blindness” (K 21.1).

²⁰ Nivison 1999b also suggests a similar idea that Xunzi could have taken *yi* (propriety) to be a bare nonmoral capacity.

²¹ This reading of Xunzi is substantiated by Xunzi’s claim that the heart/mind never stops moving (K 21.5d).

²² See Sung 2012 for a more detailed argument for this reading.

²³ This is also consistent with Xunzi’s point that objects of desire can easily “tilt” the heart/mind. Xunzi agrees that human beings naturally have feelings that are not limited to self-interest. For example, Xunzi thinks that human beings naturally have affection for their own kind; however, even animals like small birds love their own kinds (K19.9b). Xunzi does not seem to regard such natural affection as distinctively human. He also does not regard such natural affection, before they are being shaped by artifice into ethical feelings, as having any ethical tendency. By contrast, the heart/mind’s natural preference for self-interest has the tendency to motivate one to pursue objects of desire (*yu*), which has problematic ethical implications. When self-interest is at stake, even brothers who have natural affection for their own kind would end up fighting among themselves and robbing each other (K 23.2a).

²⁴ In a similar vein, Lao Si-guang and Xu Fu-guan think that the heart/mind is not actively present in the process of acquiring goodness but only passively reflects objective knowledge (Lao, 256-7; Xu, 258-260). Heiner Roetz suggests that it is on utilitarian grounds that the heart/mind signs up to be good (Roetz, 226). Common across these views is the worry that one’s heart/mind is not attached to goodness.

²⁵ Lau 1953, 561 n1.

²⁶ See Wong 1996 and Nivison 1996b for discussions of how Xunzi, unlike Mencius, does not hold that there is any innate moral propensity or direction even if we have the capacity to be moral. See Fung 2012 for an argument that there are some factors in human nature that encourage ethical behaviours.

Bibliography

(Original publication dates in square brackets)

Ahern, Dennis M.. “An Equivocation in Confucian Philosophy.” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 7 (1980):175-185.

Chan, Alan K.L.. “A Matter of Taste: Qi (Vital Energy) and the Tending of the Heart (Xin) in Mencius 2A2.” In Alan K.L. Chan, ed., *Mencius: Contexts and interpretations*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002.

Chen, Da-qi 陳大齊. “Mengzi xing shan shuo yu xunzi xing e shuo de buxiangdichu 孟子性善說與荀子性惡說的不相牴觸.” In *Chenbainian xiansheng wenji vol. 1: kong meng xun*

xueshuo 陳百年先生文集第一輯: 孔孟荀學說, pp.396-411. Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1987 [1967].

Dubs, Homer H.. "Mencius and Sun-tzu on Human Nature." *Philosophy East and West* 6, no.3: 213-222, 1956.

Graham, A. C.. "The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature." *Ching-hua hsueh-pao (Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies)* 6 (1967): 215-271.

_____. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle, Ill: Open Court, 1989.

Fu, Si-nian 傅斯年. *Xing ming guxun bianzheng* 性命古訓辯證. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2006 [1938].

Fung Yiu-ming, "Two Senses of 'Wei': A New Interpretation of Xunzi's Theory of Human Nature." *Dao* 11 (2012): 187-200.

Knoblock, John. *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, 1990, 1994.

Lao, Si-guang 勞思光. *Xinbian zhongguo zhixue shi vol.1* 新編中國哲學史一卷. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005.

Lau, D.C.. "Theories of Human Nature in Mencius and Shyuntzzy." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 15.3 (1953): 541-565.

_____. trans., *Mencius*. London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1970].

Munro, Donald J. "A Villain in the Xunzi," In Philip J. Ivanhoe, ed., *Chinese Language, Thought and Culture: Nivison and His Critics*, pp. 193-201. La Salle, Ill: Open Court, 1996.

-
- Nivison, David S.. *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed., Bryan W. Van Norden. Chicago: Open Court, 1996a.
- _____. "Critique of David B. Wong, 'Xunzi on Moral Motivation.'" In Philip J. Ivanhoe, ed., *Chinese Language, Thought and Culture: Nivison and His Critics*, pp. 323-331. La Salle, Ill: Open Court, 1996b.
- Riegel, Jeffrey. "Reflections on an unmoved Mind: An Analysis of Mencius 2A2." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 47.3S (1980): 433-457.
- Robins, Dan. "The Development of Xunzi's Theory of Xing, Reconstructed on the Basis of Textual Analysis of *Xunzi* 23, 'Xing E' 性惡 (Xing is Bad)." *Early China* 26 (2001): 99–158.
- Roetz, Heiner. *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Schwartz, Benjamin I.. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985,
- Shun, Kwong-loi. *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Sung, Winnie. "Yu in the *Xunzi*: Can Desire by Itself Motivate Action?" *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 11 (2012): 369-388
- Stalnaker, Aaron. *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006.
- Tang, Jun-yi 唐君毅. *Zhongguo zhexue yuanlun: daolun pian* 中國哲學原論: 導論篇. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005 [1966].

Van Norden, Bryan W.. “Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency.” In *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, eds., T. C. III Kline and Philip J. Ivanhoe. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000 [1992].

Watson, Burton. trans.. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.

Wong, David. “Xunzi on Moral Motivation.” In Philip J. Ivanhoe, ed., *Chinese Language, Thought and Culture: Nivison and His Critics*, pp. 202-223. La Salle, Ill: Open Court, 1996.

Xu, Fu-guan 徐復觀. *Zhongguo renxinglun shi* 中國人性論史:先秦篇. Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1969.

Xunzi. 1950. *A Concordance to Hsun Tzu* 荀子引得. Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 22. Beijing: Yenching University Press.