

Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: *Confucianism II*

Mencius and Xunzi



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Summary

I. *Mencius*

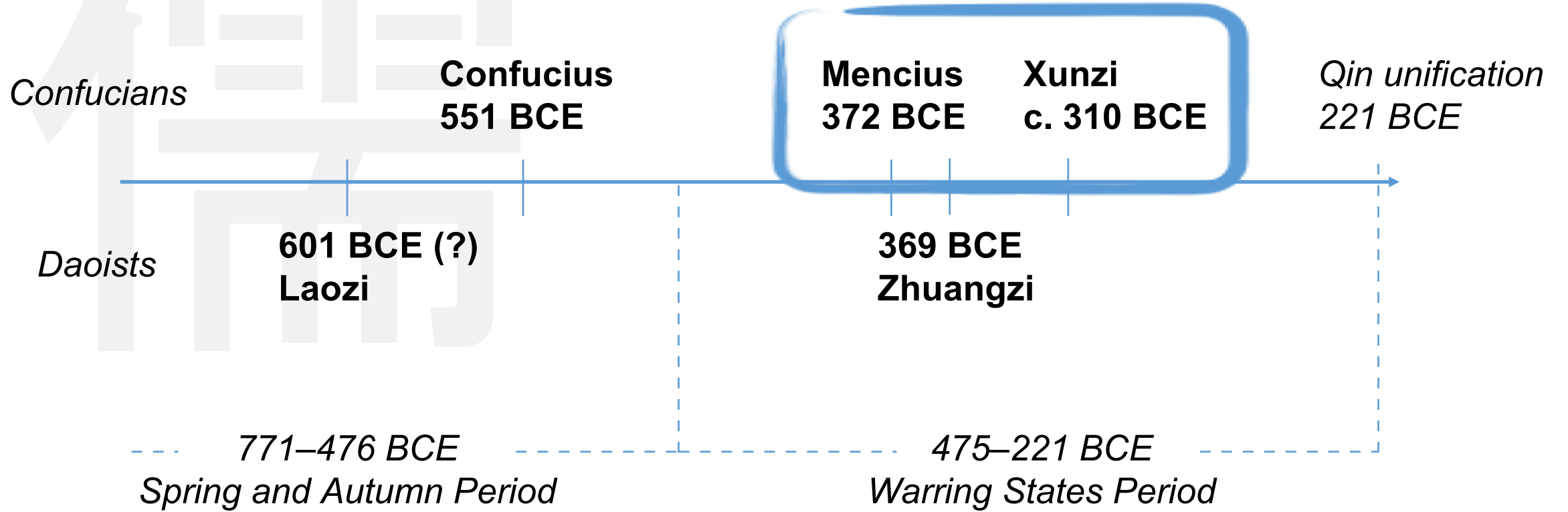
- The Person
- The Text
- Concepts

II. *Xunzi*

- The Person
- The Text
- Concepts

III. Discussion on Selected Extracts

- *Mencius*
- *Xunzi*





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德而

Human Nature Is Good

Mencius

- Meng Ke (孟軻), 372–289 BCE
 - Mother moving thrice
 - Disciple of Zisi (grandson of Confucius)
 - Jixia Academy
- *Mencius* the text
 - Written by Mencius' disciples during Mid-Warring States Period
 - Anecdotes and dialogues
- Orthodoxy
 - Enshrined as one of the “Four Books” by Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi in the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE)
 - Influence on contemporary Chinese politics
 - Confucian apologetics



portrait of Meng Ke [cropped], from *Half Portraits of the Great Sage and Virtuous Men of Old*, from Taipei National Palace Museum¹



Key Concepts from the *Mencius*

- (1) Nature
- (2) Heartmind
- (3) Four sprouts



(1) Nature

- “Gaozi said, ‘Human nature is like the willow tree; rightness is like cups and bowls. **To make humaneness and rightness out of human nature is like making cups and bowls out of the willow tree.**’

Mencius said, ‘Are you able to make cups and bowls while following the nature of the willow tree? You must do violence to the willow tree before you can make cups and bowls. If you must do violence to the willow tree in order to make cups and bowls, **must you also do violence to human beings in order to bring forth humaneness and rightness?** The effect of your words will be to cause everyone in the world to think of humaneness and rightness as misfortunes.’” (*Mencius 6A1*)



(1) Nature

- “Gaozi said, ‘Human nature is like swirling water. Open a passage for it in the east, and it will flow east; open a passage for it in the west, and it will flow west. **Human nature does not distinguish between good and not-good any more than water distinguishes between east and west.**’
Mencius said, ‘It is true that water does not distinguish between east and west, but does it fail to distinguish between up and down? **The goodness of human nature is like the downward course of water. There is no human being lacking in the tendency to do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency to flow downward.** Now, by striking water and splashing it, you may cause it to go over your head, and by damming and channeling it, you can force it to flow uphill. But is this the nature of water? It is force that makes this happen. While people can be made to do what is not good, what happens to their nature is like this.’” (6A2)



(1) Nature

- “Gaozi said, **‘Life is what is called nature.’**
Mencius said, ‘When you say that “life is what is called nature,” is this like saying that “white is what is called white”?’
‘Yes.’
‘Is the whiteness of a white feather like the whiteness of snow, and the whiteness of snow like the whiteness of white jade?’
‘Yes.’
‘**Then is the nature of a dog like the nature of an ox, and the nature of an ox like the nature of a human being?**’ (6A3)



(1) Nature

- Nature [*xing* 性] as Heaven-endowed
- Debate over its normative significance
 - cf. Yang Zhu (a proto-Daoist):
 - “... If by pulling out a single hair from his own body [Yang Zhu] could have benefited the entire world, he would not have done it.” (7A26)

| | Gaozi | Mencius |
|-----|--------------------------------------|---|
| 6A1 | Virtue is artificially imposed | Virtue is naturally grown |
| 6A2 | Human nature is non-morally oriented | Human nature is morally oriented |
| 6A3 | Human nature is merely living | Human nature is more than merely living |



(2) The Heartmind

- “... Mencius said, ‘The faculties of hearing and sight do not think and are obscured by things. When one thing comes into contact with another, it is led astray. The faculty of the **heartmind** is to think. By thinking, it apprehends; by not thinking, it fails to apprehend. This is what Heaven has given to us. If we first establish the greater part of ourselves, then the smaller part is unable to steal it away. It is simply this that makes the great person.’” (6A5)
- “Mencius said, ‘By fully developing one’s **heartmind**, one knows one’s nature. Knowing one’s nature, one knows Heaven. It is through preserving one’s **heartmind** and nourishing one’s nature that one may serve Heaven. It is through cultivating one’s self in an attitude of expectancy, allowing neither the brevity nor the length of one’s life span to cause any ambivalence, that one is able to establish one’s destiny.’” (7A1)



(2) The Heartmind

- Heartmind [*xin* 心]
 - Heaven-endowed
 - Cognitive, affective, and volitional centre of the body
 - Reflexivity
 - Possessed by all human beings
 - Lost through lack of nourishment (6A8)
 - Moral exemplars are able to avoid losing it (6A10)



(3) Four Sprouts

- “Mencius said, **‘One’s natural tendencies enable one to do good; this is what I mean by human nature being good. ... Benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom are not infused into us from without. We definitely possess them. It is just that we do not think about it, that is all. Therefore it is said, ‘Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it.’ That some differ from others by as much as twice, or five times, or an incalculable order of magnitude is because there are those who are unable fully to develop their capacities. The ode says,**

**Heaven, in giving birth to humankind,
Created for each thing its own rule.
The people’s common disposition
Is to love this admirable Virtue.**

Confucius said, “How well the one who made this ode knew the Way!” Therefore, for each thing, there must be a rule, and people’s common disposition is therefore to love this admirable Virtue.” (6A6)



(3) Four Sprouts

- “... Human beings have these four sprouts just as they have four limbs. For one to have these four sprouts and yet to say of oneself that one is unable to fulfill them is to injure oneself, while to say that one’s ruler is unable to fulfill them is to injure one’s ruler. **When we know how to enlarge and bring to fulfillment these four sprouts that are within us, it will be like a fire beginning to burn or a spring finding an outlet.** If one is able to bring them to fulfillment, they will be sufficient to enable him to protect ‘all within the four seas’; if one is not, they will be insufficient even to enable him to serve his parents.” (2A6)



(3) Four Sprouts

- Four Sprouts [*siduan* 四端] (also *trans.* ‘four tips’)
 - Feeling of pity & compassion → Benevolence
 - Feeling of shame & aversion → Ritual propriety
 - Feeling of modesty & compliance → Rightness
 - Sense of right & wrong → Wisdom
- Kinds of proofs offered
 - Snap reactions (1A7)
 - ‘Child in the Well’ thought experiment (2A6, 3A5)



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Human Nature Is Bad

Xunzi

- Xun Kuang (荀况), c.310–c.235 BCE
- Taught Han Feizi
 - Key Legalist philosopher
 - Advisor to the Qin Empire
- *Xunzi* the text
 - Written by himself during late Warring States Period
 - Treatises
- Known in his day as 'the most revered of teachers'
 - Heterodoxy post-Han Dynasty (post-220 CE)
 - Revival in contemporary scholarship
 - Best preserved body of work



portrait of Xunzi²



Key Concepts from the *Xunzi*

- (1) Nature [2.0]
- (2) Heartmind [2.0]
- (3) Model



(1) Nature [2.0]

- **“There is a constancy to the activities of Heaven. They do not persist because of Yao. They do not perish because of Jie.** If you respond to them with order, then you will have good fortune. If you respond to them with chaos, then you will have misfortune. ... Heaven does not stop producing winter because humans dislike cold, Earth does not stop being broad because humans dislike huge distances, and the gentleman does not cease his conduct because of the chatter of petty men. **Heaven has a constant way, Earth has a constant measure, and the gentleman has a constant substance. The gentleman makes his way based on what is constant, whereas the petty man calculates what he can accomplish.**” (*Xunzi*, Ch. 17 “Discourse on Heaven”)
- **“The Way is not the way of Heaven, nor is it the way of Earth. It is that whereby humans make their way,** and that which the gentleman takes as his way.” (Ch. 8 “The Achievements of the Ru”)



(1) Nature [2.0]

- **“To be as noble as the Son of Heaven and to be so rich as to possess the whole world—these are what the natural dispositions of people are all alike in desiring. However, if you followed along with people’s desires, then their power could not be accommodated, and goods could not be made sufficient. Accordingly, for their sake the former kings established ritual and rightness in order to divide the people up and cause there to be the rankings of noble and base, the distinction between old and young, and the divisions between wise and stupid and capable and incapable. All these cause each person to carry out his proper task and each to attain his proper place. After that, they cause the amount and abundance of their salaries to reach the proper balance. This is the way to achieve community life and harmonious unity.” (Ch. 4 “On Honour and Disgrace”)**



(1) Nature [2.0]

- Heaven vs Human
 - Human beings as composite of natural and cultural
 - Special position among the myriad things
 - Amorality of nature alone
- State of nature
 - Chaos due to over-desiring and lack of material resources
 - Historical vs hypothetical account?



(2) The Heartmind [2.0]

- “Thus, I say that **human nature is the original beginning and the raw material, and deliberate effort is what makes it patterned, ordered, and exalted. ... When human nature and deliberate effort unite, then all under Heaven becomes ordered.** For Heaven can give birth to creatures, but it cannot enforce distinctions among creatures. Earth can support people, but it cannot order people. **In the world, all members of the myriad things and the human race must await the sage, and only then will they be appropriately divided up.**” (Ch. 19 “Discourse on Rituals”)
- “... In every aspect of human nature, the nature of Yao and Shun was one and the same as that of Jie and Robber Zhi. The nature of the gentleman is one and the same as that of the petty man. ... Everything that one values in Yao and Shun and the gentleman is **due to the fact that they were able to transform their nature and to establish deliberate effort. In establishing deliberate effort, they produced ritual and rightness.** Thus, the relationship of the sage to ritual and rightness and the accumulation of deliberate effort is like mixing up clay and producing things.” (Ch. 23 “Human Nature Is Bad”)



(2) The Heartmind [2.0]

- Heartmind
 - Heaven-endowed
 - vs the Five Faculties [*wuguan* 五官]
 - Distinctions [*bian* 辨] and social divisions [*fen* 分]
 - Cognition
 - Perception
 - Things
 - Persons
- Deliberate effort [*wei* 偽]
 - Heartmind reflects and chooses to act on a disposition responding to what is cognised



(3) Model

- **“Mencius says: people’s nature is good. I say: this is not so. In every case, both in ancient times and in the present, what everyone under Heaven calls good is being correct, ordered, peaceful, and controlled. What they call bad is being deviant, dangerous, unruly, and chaotic. This is the division between good and bad. ... Therefore, for the people’s sake [the sage kings] set up the power of lords and superiors in order to oversee them. **They made ritual and rightness clear in order to transform them. They set up models and standards in order to make them well ordered. They multiplied punishments and fines in order to restrain them. As a result, they caused all under Heaven to come to order and conform to goodness.**” (Ch. 23 “Human Nature Is Bad”)**



(3) Model

- **“In most cases, the problem for people is that they become fixated on one twist and are deluded about the greater order of things. If they are brought under control, then they will return to the right standards.**

- ... **In whatever respect the myriad things are different, they can become objects of fixation to the exclusion of each other. This is the common problem in the ways of the heart.**

- ... **These various approaches are all merely one corner of the Way. As for the Way itself, its substance is constant, yet it covers all changes. No one corner is sufficient to exhibit it fully.**

- People of twisted understanding observe one corner of the Way and are unable to recognize it as such. So, they think it sufficient and proceed to embellish it. On the inside, they use it to disorder their own lives. On the outside, they use it to confuse other people.” (Ch. 21 “Undoing Fixation”)**



(3) Model

- Model [*fa* 法] (also *trans.* ‘law’)
 - Rectification of Names (cf. *Analects* 13.3)
 - Language
 - Action
 - Role
- Fasting of the heartmind [*xinzhai* 心齋] (Ch. 21 “Undoing Fixation”)
 - Traditionally Daoist (Zhuangzian) practice
 1. *Emptiness*: “Not to let what one is already holding harm what one is about to receive”
 2. *Single-mindedness*: “Not to let one idea harm another idea”
 3. *Stillness*: “Not to let dreams and worries disorder one’s understanding”



Discussion Questions

Referring to Mencius 6A1–10; *Xunzi* Chs. 5, 17, 22, 23,

1. What do the Mencian and Xunzian theories of human nature add to the *Analects*' discussion of virtue? And how do they differ between themselves?

Referring to Mencius 1B8, 6A6, 6A8; *Xunzi* Chs. 19, 23,

2. Mencius states that if someone turns out bad, it's not the fault [*zui* 罪 *lit.* 'crime'] of her natural endowment. Nor does it seem that Mencius thinks that the cultivation of virtue is completely up to her. On what basis then would Mencius think we blame/punish or praise/reward someone? How is it different in the case of Xunzi?

Referring to Mencius 3A5, 6A1–10; *Xunzi* Chs. 4, 5, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 27,

3. How and why do Mencius and Xunzi understand the Zhou rituals to be grounded in human nature differently?



References

Primary Texts

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Recommended Secondary Texts and Further Readings

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Centre for Open Learning
The University of Edinburgh
Paterson's Land
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ

T: 0131 6504400

E: col@ed.ac.uk

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