

INTERPRETING MENCIUS

JOHN MAKEHAM
University of Adelaide

The history of Chinese thought has something of the character of a great conversation, carried on over time, with the most significant contributors continuing to be involved in the discussion long after their own natural lifetimes. In the course of this great conversation, there is hardly a major thinker who does not address the issue of xing [human nature] directly and is not mindful of previous reflections on the subject.¹

Despite being known as the ‘second sage’, Mencius, has exerted a greater influence on East Asian ethical thought than Confucius, and thus has claim to being one of the influential moral philosophers in human history. He lived towards the end of the 4th century B.C., a period in which many thinkers were troubled by a profound metaphysical doubt as to whether ‘heaven’ (*tian*) underpins human moral values. According to Mencius, our natures are “what heaven has given us” (6A.15). Human nature is what links us with the non-human universe, the normative order of heaven. Indeed, the quality of this relationship is such that Mencius is able to claim that “If one knows one’s nature, one will know heaven” (7A.1). Many of his contemporaries had begun to ask to what extent human behaviour is conditioned by social institutions (*nurture*) and to what extent it springs directly from our own innate qualities (*nature*). Mencius maintained that humans are beings born for goodness; at birth, there exists a natural tendency for goodness, as inevitable as the natural tendency of water to flow downward.² This natural tendency is a function of human nature, that course of development proper to humans. When left unhindered and properly nurtured, our innate good tendencies will become manifest of their own accord. For Mencius, the heart (or mind) is the seat or locus of our moral capacity and our thinking capacity. As the locus of our moral capacity, it has a natural inclination for what is morally good, just as the mouth takes pleasure in the flavours of food, and the eyes in sexually attractive bodies. It is not only the case that goodness is natural; moreover, it

John Makeham (john.makeham@adelaide.edu.au) is Reader in Chinese Studies, Centre for Asian Studies, Adelaide University. He has recently completed a book-length study of the Chinese commentary tradition on the Analects and is now engaged in research on Contemporary New Confucianism.

¹ Irene Bloom, “Human Nature and Biological Nature in Mencius”, *Philosophy East and West*, 47.1(1997), 21.

² *Mencius*, 6A.3.

is natural to prefer the moral to other inclinations.³ There is a certain pleasure to be derived from acting morally and this sense of pleasure marks the moral life as the natural course of human development. According to Mencius, there are four incipient moral tendencies in the heart. These he calls ‘the heart of pity and compassion’, ‘the heart of shame and aversion’, ‘the heart of deference and compliance’; and ‘the heart which approves and condemns’ (2A.6). These are the so-called four beginnings, inclinations, dispositions or impulses (*si duan*). These four spontaneous dispositions are part of one’s nature in the same way as the physical growth of the body. They germinate spontaneously without having to be learned or worked for. They are present in the child from the beginning and remain latently present even in the corrupted adult. Each of these four dispositions has its fully developed form and these fully developed forms are the four cardinal virtues: pity and compassion grow into the virtue of humaneness/benevolence; shame and aversion grow into the virtue of rightness; deference and compliance grow into the virtue of ritual propriety; approval and condemnation grow into the virtue of knowledge/wisdom. The appeal of Mencius’ theory is that because everyone is born with the same innate moral dispositions, everyone has the potential to become a sage, the ideal expression of human existence. This idea had a profound impact on subsequent Confucian thought (and Sinitic Buddhism), especially Neo-Confucian thought of the Song and Ming dynasties. Even today, Mencius’ views on the heart and the nature continue to undergird the moral metaphysics of key figures retrospectively identified with the so-called Contemporary New Confucian movement or school.

Despite Mencius’ importance, he remains a relatively overlooked and understudied figure in the West. More than sixty years ago, Arthur Waley (in)famously dismissed his arguments as “nugatory”.⁴ In a 1963 essay on Mencius’ use of the method of analogy in argument, D.C. Lau observed that it “is not unusual for a reader of the *Mencius* to be left with the impression that in argument with his opponents Mencius was a sophist with little respect for logic.”⁵ Lau, of course, was not one such reader. Lau’s contribution to our understanding of *Mencius* is his influential translation of *Mencius* under the Penguin imprint. To this day, this remains the standard English translation and it has done more than any other publication in introducing Mencius (the man and the book) to a Western audience. Lau’s lengthy introduction and numerous appendices provide detailed historical, textual and interpretative information. The introduction has also been instrumental in promoting the interpretation that Mencius conceived of human nature (*xing*) as innate rather than as something that is only realised in a process of development. “The incipient moral tendencies are there in human nature originally” (22).

As the writings of A.C. Graham have gained in influence, this interpretation has gradually fallen out of favour. Most significant has been his seminal essay, “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature” which was originally published in the scholarly but relatively obscure journal,

³ On this point, see A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, Open Court, La Salle, 1989, 130.

⁴ Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, London, 1939, 194.

⁵ D.C. Lau, “On Mencius’ use of the Method of Analogy in Argument”, 235, reprinted and included as an appendix to his translation, *Mencius*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1970.

Tsing-hua hsiieh-pao, 6 (1967), 215-71. The impact of this essay was really only felt when it was republished twenty years later in his *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*, The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, Singapore, 1986, 7-66. Even then, many scholars were unable to obtain a copy of this book until it was subsequently republished by SUNY Press in 1990. In this essay—which ranks as one of the most important Western studies of Mencius’ thought—Graham surveys and analyses the controversy over human nature in pre-Han literature. Graham’s principal interpretative innovation is his thesis that early Chinese thinkers did not conceive of human nature as some essential quality that is fixed at birth:

Early Chinese thinkers who discuss *hsing* [*xing*, human nature] seldom seem to be thinking of fixed qualities going back to a thing’s origin...; rather they are concerned with developments which are spontaneous but realise their full potentials only if uninjured and adequately nourished.... This accords with one’s general impression when groping towards an understanding of early Chinese concepts, that often tend to be more dynamic than their nearest Western equivalents, and that English translation freezes them into immobility.⁶

The extension and development of these views are especially evident in the writings of Roger T. Ames.⁷ Graham’s characterisation of *xing* has also exercised a formative influence on Kwong-loi Shun’s interpretation of the concept as it operates in *Mencius*, as will become clear below. In the context of related scholarship, Shun’s book and the scholarly issues it raises are the subject of this article.⁸

Beyond the walls of Sinology, to this day Mencius still remains largely unheard of.⁹ Even within these walls, one of the more rigorous studies of Mencius’ thought had to undergo extended periods of gestation before publication. Here I am thinking of David S. Nivison’s studies included in his *The Ways of Confucianism*, edited by Bryan W. Van Norden, Open Court, LaSalle, 1996. (Nivison did, however, generously circulate his unpublished

⁶ Graham, “The Mencian Theory of Human Nature”, 8.

⁷ In particular, I have in mind Ames’ two essays, “Meaning as Imaging: Prolegomena to a Confucian Epistemology,” In Eliot Deutsch (ed.), *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991, and “The Mencian Conception of Ren Xing: Does it Mean ‘Human Nature’?,” in Henry Rosemont, Jr., (ed.), *Chinese Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, Open Court: LaSalle, 1991. See also, Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1998. Drawing, in particular, on a comparative methodology that Ames has been developing for some years in fruitful collaboration with David L. Hall, he and Rosemont propose that “English (and other Indo-European languages) are basically *substantive* and *essentialistic*, whereas classical Chinese should be seen to be more as an *eventful* language” (20). This thesis is applied in many of their translations to portray both Confucius and early Chinese thought as far more dynamic than earlier translations have allowed. The implication they draw from this linguistic distinction is that, in each case, the world will be experienced differently.

⁸ Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, ISBN 0-8047-2788-0 (cl.); ISBN 0-8047-4017-8 (pbk.).

⁹ A fact which makes I.A. Richards’ 1932 publication, *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments on Multiple Definition*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, all the more remarkable.

studies and Kwong-loi Shun, amongst others, has benefited from them.) In Nivison's collection of essays, seven focus specifically on Mencius and *Mencius*. Nivison is a comparative philosopher, and his essays draw substantially on concepts and issues in Western philosophy (both classical and contemporary) to engage Chinese philosophical issues. His sustained attention to the problem of *akrasia* (weakness of will) is a prominent example in his essays on *Mencius*. Nivison also draws useful comparisons of Mencius' thought with later 'Mencians' such as Wang Yangming (1472-1529) and Dai Zhen (1724-1777). These essays cover a range of closely related philosophical issues and themes, including Mencius' views of moral motivation and how it is translated into moral action; the guiding role played by the innate moral feelings and dispositions of the heart; and the relationship between human motivation and moral obligation. Other essays discuss interpretative issues concerning particular passages (including the important cluster at 6A.3-5, which are also analysed by Kwong-loi Shun and Graham). One essay is devoted to a critical evaluation of English translations of *Mencius*. (On this point, it is fair to say that there is still no philosophically rigorous translation of *Mencius* in English.)

The revival of interest in virtue ethics over the last decade or so has prompted other Western scholars to take a renewed interest in Mencius' ethical thought. Lee H. Yearley's *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1990, is an outstanding early example. Yearley's study is a detailed comparison of Mencius and Aquinas' (1225-74) respective conceptions of the virtues, with the principal focus being on the virtue of courage. It stands out as pioneering the comparative study of virtues drawn from the Chinese and Western traditions. Unfortunately, subsequent scholars have not followed up the sort of detailed cross-cultural comparative work undertaken by Yearley. If Yearley's study is to be faulted, it is perhaps in the lack of attention he pays to the comparative assessment of different readings of key passages in Mencius.

Philip J. Ivanhoe's *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yangming*, Scholars Press, Atalanta, was also published in 1990. As the title suggests, it is a comparative study of the ethical thought of Mencius and Wang Yangming. The study covers a range of issues including the nature of morality, human nature, the origin of evil, self-cultivation, and the achievement of sagehood, and is a useful primer for gaining a background understanding of philosophical links between Mencius and Wang Yangming. These links remain important in the moral metaphysics of Contemporary New Confucians. In fact, Wang Yangming's development of aspects of Mencius' thought has been seized upon by Confucian revivalists during the 20th century (the so-called Contemporary New Confucians) as a nodal point in their revised concept of *dao tong* (interconnecting thread of the way).

In recent Western scholarship, Kwong-loi Shun's 1997 study, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, has provided us with the most detailed analyses of key concepts and arguments informing Mencius' moral psychology. He has also done more than any other Western-based scholar to restore to Mencius his best philosophical voice (just as Chad Hansen did for the Mohists, ironically in his *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*). *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* is the first volume of a projected trilogy of studies on "Confucian-Mencian moral thought." The first two volumes are textual

studies of Mencius' thinking and its later interpretation. The third volume will "provide more of a philosophical discussion of the spirit of Confucian-Mencian ethical thought" (vii).¹⁰ As such, this first volume does not engage in comparative philosophy nor does it critique Mencius' philosophical ideas. This volume is concerned with interpreting key passages of text by paying close attention to philological and contextual detail. By contextual detail, I mean the reconstruction of the philosophical concerns, premises and nuances that Mencius and his interlocutors brought to their discussions.

In particular, two features of the book distinguish it. The first is Shun's painstaking and rigorous approach to reconstructing these philosophical contexts. His efforts in this regard single the book out as an exemplary piece of interpretative textual scholarship. They also distinguish it as a book for the specialist, for whom it will prove to be an essential reference tool—essential because Shun has lifted the scholarly benchmark to a new level. The second feature is the hermeneutic that Shun has adopted. Unlike most studies of *Mencius*,¹¹ Shun gives ample attention to the reception of the text by later commentators, both pre-modern and modern. He consistently reflects on the merits of later interpretations and translations to judge how viable they are both in terms of the specific interpretative context being addressed and also the larger context of Mencius' thought. Of particular interest in this regard is Shun's acknowledgement of the influence of Tang Junyi, Xu Fuguan and Mou Zongsan on his own interpretations. (This influence is also evident in the bibliography and endnote references). Since the early eighties, these three scholars have come to be identified as key representatives of a putative second generation of Contemporary New Confucian thinkers, a retrospectively identified philosophical movement whose intellectual and spiritual 'roots' — its particular version of the *dao tong* ['interconnecting thread of the way'] — are generally identified with the Xiong Shili (1885-1968) 'line' of Contemporary New Confucianism, which is identified as transmitting the 'thread' from the so-called Lu-Wang (Lu Jiuyuan (1139-1192) and Wang Yangming) tradition of Neo-Confucian thought. The Lu-Wang tradition is, in turn, traced to Mencius. While in this first volume the influence of these three thinkers is limited to textual matters,¹² it will be fascinating to see how Shun deals with their philosophical reconstructions of Mencius' ethical thought in his projected third volume. This is because of the dominant influence of the Lu-Wang tradition of moral psychology (*xin xing zhi xue*) on New Confucian thought. According to this particular moral psychology, the nature is identified with the heart (unlike Zhu Xi (1130-1200) who regarded the heart to be the locus of the nature). Furthermore, our natures are innate, already complete within us, and

¹⁰ Rudolf G. Wagner has also recently published the first volume of a projected trilogy on an early Chinese thinker: *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2000. I discuss Wagner's book in "Commentary and Craft", *Early Medieval China*, 6(2000), 104-23.

¹¹ Two obvious exceptions here are those of David Nivison and to a lesser extent, P.J. Ivanhoe. Ivanhoe was a student of Nivison, and Shun acknowledges the influence of Nivison on his own methodology and interpretation.

¹² Sometimes Shun's rigid adherence to his non-philosophical agenda in this first volume is frustrating for the reader. Shun sidesteps the key issue of whether *tian* in the *Analects* and *Mencius* carries an immanent or transcendent dimension on quite feeble grounds (see pp. 207-210). We look forward to this treatment of the subject in volume three.

constituted of nothing but pure pattern (*li*). Unfortunately, most people fail to apprehend their natures fully because of the impediment of selfish desires. The Contemporary New Confucians further develop these views by characterising our moral natures as both immanent and transcendent. This is because even though our natures are bestowed by heaven (*tian*) — which is transcendent — they continue to remain connected to heaven, and share the same nature as heaven itself. There is thus a fundamental incommensurability between the nature conceived of as something that is only realised in the process of developing incipient moral tendencies, and the nature conceived of as something already complete and identified with pattern and heaven. Shun's interpretation (based on Graham's) is clearly at odds with the New Confucian interpretation and I believe represents a serious philosophical challenge to the New Confucian position. Even though some intellectuals in China and Taiwan have started to refer to a new phase of "post-Contemporary New Confucian" philosophy, the issue of moral psychology is central to the metaphysics of Confucian revivalist discourse.

In the brief introduction-cum-first chapter, Shun is careful to distinguish between "Mencius' thinking" and "the thinking of Mencius as it can be reconstructed from this text as it has been transmitted by compilers and editors." This is a prudent strategy, for while Shun does acknowledge that no serious doubts have been raised about the integrity of the text (p. 235), he leaves himself room to manoeuvre should such evidence be forthcoming.¹³ Having outlined a number of the assumptions he brings to the study, he argues the case for why it is legitimate to approach Confucian thought "by making its constitutive ideas an object of intellectual inquiry" (p. 5). For this reader, this exercise (in which Shun's own persuasion is never in doubt) risks being perceived as disingenuous, if not an exercise in re-inventing the wheel. After all, Chinese, Japanese and Western intellectual historians have been productively engaged in this task for some time now.

Chapter 2, "Background", first reviews the changing attitudes to the concepts of *tian* and *ming* from the early Zhou to the time of Confucius, based on the evidence of early texts. The proposal to distinguish between two dimensions of these concepts — a normative and a descriptive — proves to be heuristically rewarding, as is demonstrated in chapter 6. It is also a distinction that deserves to be more widely adopted.¹⁴ Unfortunately, while Shun here promises to return to the discussion of whether *tian* carries a transcendent as opposed to an immanent dimension in the *Analects* and *Mencius*, as noted above, in chapter 6 the discussion is curtailed and deferred indefinitely. Shun next turns his attention to another group of terms — *de*, *ren*, *li* and *yi* — to argue that their "evolution... reflects the emergence of a broader ethical concern by the time of Confucius" (p. 21). Care needs to be

¹³ In fact, in a chapter included in a forthcoming volume on *Mencius*, E. Bruce Brooks challenges the textual integrity of the *Mencius* text based on a two schools theory of the text's composition and transmission. The forthcoming volume, *Mencius: Context and Interpretation*, is edited by Alan Chan and Juan Heng, Hawaii University Press, 2001. I have yet to see this latest offering by Brooks, but one may anticipate the likelihood that it will be controversial.

¹⁴ This distinction may have been inspired by the "factual"/"normative" distinction that A.C. Graham, "The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature", 54-57, brings to his analysis of Mencian *xing*.

taken here, particularly in regard to the extensive use to which Shun puts the *Analects* text. Earlier in this chapter (14-15) he had accepted that the *Analects* is a composite text compiled over an extended period and “datable to a period extending from Confucius’s time to maybe a few generations after this death”. On this (conservative) reckoning, “a few generations” could place parts of the *Analects* well into the fourth century B.C.¹⁵ As such, the *Analects* would be an inappropriate text from which to draw evidence for this argument. Shun then provides an account of the Mohist and Yangist challenges to early Confucianism, with discussions of Mo Zi’s conception of *yi* (propriety) and *li* (profit, benefit), and his implicit picture of human psychology, and a reconstruction of a Yangist conception of the nature (*xing*). The examination of the use of the word *xing* in early Chinese texts reveals that in early texts such as *Zuo zhuan* and *Guo yu*, *xing* already has a dynamic quality associated with growth rather than fixed innate qualities. Shun provides a strong argument for his conclusion that the Yangist’s concern for ‘oneself’ did not amount to an indifference to others or to political order, as is conventionally supposed.

In Chapter 3, “The Ethical Ideal”, Shun examines Mencius’ attitude to the four virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li* and *zhi*; his concept of the unmoved heart and his attitude toward *ming*. He chooses not to refer to the four virtues as “virtues”, but rather as “ethical attributes”, on the grounds that “It is unclear that the use of ‘*te*’ [*de*] had evolved by Mencius’s time to allow references to particular desirable attributes as different *te*” (48). Recent evidence from the Guodian corpus¹⁶ (published a year after Shun’s book) would suggest that the concept had, in fact, so evolved. The tomb from which the bamboo-strip manuscripts were excavated has been dated circa 300 B.C., thus making the composition and copying of the manuscripts earlier than that date. The most relevant manuscript is the one the editors have named “Liu de”, based on its contents.¹⁷ The manuscript identifies the following as the six ‘virtues’ (*de*): sageliness (*sheng*), wisdom (*zhi*), humaneness (*ren*), rightness (*yi*), doing one’s

¹⁵ Others have proposed much later dates for parts of the *Analects*. Published a year after Shun’s book, E. Bruce & A. Taeko Brooks’ *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, date parts of the text to the second century B.C. In Appendix 2 of their book, the Brookses also propose a developmental sequence in which *li* becomes more important than *ren*. This conflicts with Shun’s claim that *li* in the *Analects* evidences a broadening of its ethical scope which in turn is reflected in the emphasis on *ren* as an all-encompassing ethical ideal. Of course, the Brookses particular accretional theory is just that, a theory, and one which I have argued is fundamentally unstable. See my review in *China Review International*, 6.1(1999), 1-33.

¹⁶ Over the past three decades, an important body of archaeologically recovered texts in China has stimulated debate about how early Chinese books were formed and transmitted, and how they should be interpreted. The ‘philosophical’ texts excavated from tombs at Mawangdui, Dingxian and Guodian are of especial importance, as are the many previously unattested texts that have also been recovered. The Guodian bamboo strips (about 800 of them) were excavated in 1993 and subsequently published in 1997. Their early date and unique content has already enabled scholars to re-write the early history of the *Dao de jing*. Much work is currently being undertaken on what the strips reveal about Confucian thought before and during the lifetime of Mencius. In addition to these materials, present indications are that another collection of bamboo strip texts purchased by the Shanghai Museum and due to be published next year, will be of similar importance.

¹⁷ “Liu de” in Jingmenshi bowuguan (eds.), *Guodian chumu zhujian*, Wenwu chubanshe, Beijing, 1998.

best for others (*zhong*) and living up to one's word (*xin*). Shun's discussion of the four virtues in this chapter is principally concerned with identifying and defining their ethical attributes. He draws some finely nuanced distinctions between the qualities that Mencius himself used to describe the core virtues. For example, in the case of the virtue *yi*, one of the terms Mencius employs to characterise it is *xiu* ('to regard as below oneself'). Shun informs us that the closely related notion of *chi* is "probably more focused on the thing that reflects badly on oneself", while *xiu* "is focused more on the badness or the low standing of oneself as reflected in...the thing that occasions *hsiu*" (59). He characterises the ethical attributes of *ren* as "affective concern" (which is reminiscent of Mark Elvin's "sensitive concern"). We learn that the ethical attribute of *li* is "a general disposition to follow *li* and a mastery of the details of *li*" with the appropriate attitude. In comparing *li* with *yi*, Shun argues that *yi* "underlies both the observance and departure from *li* and governs one's behavior in contexts in which *li* does not provide guidance" (58). On this account, we might thus infer that even the quality of *quan* ("the ability to weigh circumstances without adhering to fixed rules" [70]) was subject to the exercise of the virtue of *yi*. Shun further characterises *yi* in terms of a capacity to judge in accordance with certain ethical standards. To the extent that this requires a capacity for knowing (the ethically appropriate), we can see why some scholars find significant congruence of meaning between *yi* and *phronêsis*.¹⁸ Yet where would this leave *zhi* (wisdom)? Is not *zhi* an even more obvious candidate for knowing what is the ethically appropriate thing to do? Shun makes the following neat distinction: with *yi*, it is the "firmness of commitment rather than the ability to tell what is proper that is emphasized"... while with *zhi*, "it is the ability to tell what is proper rather than the commitment to proper behavior that is emphasized" (71). He also provides us with evidence of the unity of some of the Mencian virtues. In the case of *ren* and *yi*, he demonstrates that "a person cannot be said to be *jen* unless his affective concern is regulated at least to some extent by *yi*." *Yi* plays a similar role in deciding when it is appropriate to observe a particular *li* activity and when it is appropriate to depart from its observance. In the case of *yi* and *zhi*, the relationship seems to be more one of mutual entailment or, at least, mutual reliance. Both the discussion of the "unmoved heart" and more particularly, the renewed discussion of Mencius' attitude to *tian* and *ming*, while coherent in themselves, are not well integrated into the main structure of in this chapter. The latter discussion, especially, should have been incorporated either in chapter 2 or later in chapter 6. Thematically, it is out of place here.

¹⁸ For example, in a paper presented at workshop on the topic of "The Unity of the Virtues in Western and Chinese Philosophy", held last November at Melbourne University, John Hanafin contended that "in both the classical Chinese and Aristotelian case the notions of *yi* and *phronêsis*, as 'ethical knowing', describe a *virtue* possessed by an *agent* whose *acts* are (ethically) *appropriate* or *fitting*.... The choice of the term 'ethical knowing' to translate both *yi* and *phronêsis* is based on the belief that it reflects the ethical as well as the intellectual nature of these notions more adequately than their traditional translations do." Hanafin's distinction between agent and act in respect of this virtue matches Shun's distinction between *yi* as an ethical attribute of a person and as a quality of actions. Hanafin's paper will appear in a future issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*.

In Chapter 4, “Yi (Propriety) and Hsin (Heart/Mind)”, Shun defends the interpretation that Mencius believed that the heart has certain predispositions already directed to the ethical ideal. This involves an analysis of several key passages in which Mencius debates with or distinguishes himself from his philosophical opponents. Shun explains that his main purpose is to understand Mencius’ thinking and how Mencius understood his adversaries. To this end, he sets himself the task of making sense of all stages of the each debate “in a way that other interpretations do not”. In my opinion, this is the most rigorous (if somewhat clinical) chapter in the book. It is where Shun’s detailed analyses are deployed to their best effect. He assiduously lists the merits of a range of the different interpretations at each stage of the debate, based on grammatical possibilities, to argue that his own interpretation “is the only one which makes sense of each stage of the debate in such a way that all stages cohere” (86).

The detail involved in these analyses does not make for an easy summary — one needs to have the detail to appreciate the interpretative achievement. Accordingly, rather than rehearsing and summarising Shun’s position on each of these debates I will limit my remarks to those few points where I think further comment is warranted. The first debate to be analysed is the debate with Gao Zi about *xing* in 6A:1-3. In regard to passages 6A:1-2, Shun shows us how Mencius and Gao Zi understood the analogies differently and the consequences of these differences. He establishes that from Mencius’ perspective Gao Zi believed that there is neither good nor bad in human nature; it could be made to develop in either direction and it would still be human nature. In 6A:3, Gao Zi explicates *xing* in terms of the concept of *sheng* from which Mencius then develops the following analogy. (I have reproduced Shun’s rendering of this short passage, converting the romanization to pinyin):

6A:3

Gao Zi said, “*Sheng zhi wei xing.*”

Mencius said, “Is ‘*sheng zhi wei xing*’ like ‘*bai zhi wei bai*’?”

Gao Zi said, “Yes.”

Mencius said, “Is *bai* feather *zhi bai* like *bai* snow *zhi bai*, and *bai* snow *zhi bai* like *bai* jade *zhi bai*?”

Gao Zi said, “Yes.”

Mencius said, “Is it then the hound *zhi xing* is like ox *zhi xing*, and ox *zhi xing* like human being *zhi xing*?”

This intriguing and much celebrated passage has stimulated a variety of interpretations. Shun objects to interpreting *sheng* to mean ‘what is inborn’, or ‘the qualities that one has at birth’, (as opposed to ‘the tendencies one has by virtue of being alive’, or ‘the life processes’) on two grounds. First, that it is not clear that *xing* had acquired the meaning of inborn at that time. Second, if this interpretation were adopted, then “it would be unclear why Mencius believed it follows from Kao Tzu’s [Gao Zi] explication of *hsing* that the *hsing* of a hound, an ox, and a human being are the same” (93). My response to the first point is that there is no evidence that *xing* had *not* already acquired that particular meaning, and hence this reading should remain an open possibility. As for the second point, I do not agree that it is

the case that Mencius held this belief. On the contrary, surely Mencius is poking fun at Gao Zi, ridiculing him by drawing this clearly absurd conclusion (i.e. that the natures of hounds, oxen and humans are the same?)

This interpretation remains consistent with Shun's analysis of 6A:1-2: that from Mencius' perspective Gao Zi believed that there is neither good nor bad in human nature. Gao Zi's being committed to the view that the nature has no predisposition for the direction in which it is developed, paves the way for Mencius to secure his implicit agreement that this is analogous to the colour white having no predisposition to be manifest in one form rather than another: it is white in all cases. In short, just as human nature can be good in one case and bad in another, so too white can just as readily be applied to the form of a feather or a piece of jade. Thus, for Gao Zi, what is 'inborn' in humans is their lack of any particular tendency to develop either in a morally good or a morally bad direction. (Indeed, even if we were to interpret *sheng* to mean 'vitality' or 'to be alive' or 'the life process' as opposed to 'inborn', this interpretation would still work: human vitality does not predispose humans to any form of moral behaviour.)

On the basis of this line of reasoning, Mencius is then able to ridicule Gao Zi by drawing the specious claim that this commits him to accepting the conclusion that *xing* is the same, whether it be manifest in humans, hounds and oxen. Given the evidence of common sense and everyday experience, this is clearly absurd. Pace Shun, it is not the case that Gao Zi's 'real' position is that "the biological life process, the biological tendencies that continue life or that one has by virtue of being alive, are similar in an ox, a hound, and a human being" (93). Gao Zi nowhere makes the claim that the *xing* of humans, oxen and hounds are the same/similar. Rather, this is Mencius ridiculing the implications of Gao Zi's line of reasoning, as represented by Mencius. As for Mencius' own understanding of *xing*, following my suggested interpretation would not conflict with Shun's substantive point that Mencius' "viewed the *hsing* of human beings as something that distinguishes them from other animals, rather than as biological tendencies common to all."

In the passages at 6A:4-5, the debate shifts to whether the quality of *yi* is internal or external. Again, Shun analyses the debate in terms of how Mencius viewed the nature of the disagreement. Sixteen pages of detailed analysis are devoted to the passage. On several occasions Shun provides as many as four different interpretations of a given line, each of which reflects one (or more) interpretative difference. In the course of his analysis of 2A:2, Shun turns to the issue of Gao Zi's intellectual affiliation by examining the "Jie", "Nei ye" and "Xin shu xia" chapters (*pian*) from *Guan Zi* as well as parts of *Zhuang Zi*. Although he concludes that it is not possible to determine that affiliation, his discussion does touch upon a curious aspect of the "Nei ye" chapter. Shun quite correctly identifies passages XI and XXII¹⁹ as championing some 'Confucian' sentiments. While some commentators regard the line in XI which says "heaven models itself on humaneness while earth models itself on rightness" to be an interpolation, passage XXII is not so easily

¹⁹ Here I am following the divisions used in Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

dismissed.²⁰ In that passage, odes, music, ritual and reverence (*jing*) are listed as particularly useful in the practice of self-cultivation. Rather than regarding XXII as “very suspicious”, surely the significance of passages such as this, lies in the evidence of syncretic tendencies, an observation which surely brings into question Roth’s claim that “Nei Ye” represents “the first text of Taoism.”²¹

Chapter 5, “Self-Cultivation”, discusses Mencius’ views on this topic. Subjects covered include how the ethical predispositions (the ‘four sprouts’²²) indicate an ethical direction; self-reflection; the role of *qi* (‘vital energy’) in self-cultivation; political order; and ethical failure. How do ethical predispositions indicate an ethical direction? Sometimes ethical direction is revealed in certain situations on the basis of one’s spontaneous reaction (the famous child and the well example, for instance). Sometimes it is revealed by reflecting (*si*) on how one reacts in certain contexts and applying it to new contexts. While the heart can be as automatic as the senses in responding spontaneously to a situation, it differs from the senses in that it also has the capacity to reflect on what is proper and regulate behaviour accordingly. Shun describes this reflexivity as a process that is guided by the ethical predispositions of the heart. Mencius regarded self-cultivation as affecting not just the mind but also *qi*, to which Shun ascribes a mediating role between the heart and the body. In the discussion of *qi* and the body, Shun presents evidence to support the interpretation that Mencius shared the view that self-cultivation involves developing *qi* in a direction already implicit in it and the body (160). In the previous chapter, Shun had made a similar claim about *qi* having an ethical direction in the “Nei Ye” and “Xin shu shang” chapters of *Guan Zi* (122). There, however, the claim is not supported by textual evidence.

Chapter 6, “Hsing (Nature, Characteristic Tendencies)”, is the most philosophically stimulating chapter in the book. Shun opens the chapter with an enquiry into the difference between how *xing* is used in *Mencius* and how Mencius understood *ren xing*. He argues that when used verbally in *Mencius*, the most likely meaning of *xing* is ‘to embody something’; ‘to make it part of oneself’. He concludes that the nominal sense which best fits this verbal use, is “tendencies characteristic of a thing.” Further support for this interpretation of *xing* is forthcoming from Shun’s analysis of the use of the concept *qing* (‘what is genuine’; ‘characteristic features of something’) in early texts.²³ He argues that while *xing* has no necessary connotation of unlearned characteristic tendencies of a thing, *ren xing* can be interpreted as comprising of tendencies that are unlearned — a human cannot acquire the tendencies of what it is to be human. Given Mencius’ insistence that ordinary people have the potential to lose that which distinguishes them from animals (while the gentleman does not; 4B:19; 4B:28; 6A:8), then presumably this

²⁰ See Roth, *Original Tao*, 222, n. 59.

²¹ Roth, *Original Tao*, 222, n. 59.

²² ‘The heart of pity and compassion’, ‘the heart of shame and aversion’, ‘the heart of deference and compliance; and ‘the heart which approves and condemns’ (2A.6).

²³ He also makes a useful distinction between the two related concepts in *Mencius*: “Whereas ‘*ch’ing*’ emphasizes the fact that X’s [*sic*] have certain characteristic tendencies, ‘*hsing*’ emphasizes the presence of such tendencies as part of the constitution of X’s [*sic*].” (185-86).

opens up the possibility for there to be ‘humans’ who are not really humans.²⁴ While acknowledging that, for Mencius, the ethical predispositions are shared by all *ren* (‘humans’), Shun pauses to question just what the scope of ‘human’ is for Mencius. Favours Roger T. Ames’ thesis that *ren* is fundamentally an achievement concept, like Ames, he finds that what distinguishes *ren* from animals is their capacity for certain cultural accomplishments.²⁵ Shun concludes: “Since human beings as a species are characterized in terms of the capacity for such cultural achievements, it also follows that one who lacks such predispositions or responses is not a *jen*” (p. 191). I would suggest that this has very real implications for the degree to which Mencius’ theory of human nature is, in fact, compatible with modern human rights thinking.²⁶

The final part of this chapter is devoted to identifying just in what sense Mencius understood human nature to be good. It is not enough to say that “human nature is good” amounts to the claim that humans are capable of becoming good, as this would not be inconsistent with Gao Zi’s view. Rather, Shun reiterates the view that he has been developing throughout the book: to say that human nature is good is to make the claim that the heart has predispositions towards the ethical attributes of *ren*, *yi*, *li* and *zhi*. This strikes me as a reasonable and defensible interpretation.

As we know, Mencius’ moral psychology was developed in response to other philosophical views current in this day. The Mohists, in particular, had posed a serious challenge to Confucian ethical claims, arguing that moral values could not rest on purely traditional standards. Mencius’ response was to ground morality as an innate capacity possessed by us all. Our ethical predispositions are endowed at birth by heaven. By some good fortune, these particular dispositions just happen to point in the direction of those traditional virtues that had already been given a privileged place in the Confucian scheme of things. Mencius was thus able to argue that this is so because the ethical

²⁴ This became an issue in medieval Chinese Buddhism. The *Mahāparinirvāna sūtra* is best known for its doctrine that the Buddha-nature (*fo xing*) is common to all sentient beings. Two versions of this sūtra were translated into Chinese in the early fourth century. The earlier version, entitled *Da ban ni huan jing* in 6 *juan*, was translated by the pilgrim Faxian in collaboration with Buddhahadra between 416-17 in the southern capital of Jiankang. The later and more complete version, entitled *Da ban nie pan jing* in 40 *juan*, was translated by Dharmakṣema in 422 (although it did not reach Jiankang until 430). One crucial difference between the two versions was that in the earlier version Buddha-nature is explicitly denied to a class of human beings called *icchantika* (*yi chan ti*), thus making it permissible even to kill them. In the later version, by contrast, the intrinsic possession of Buddha-nature is also extended to this class of human beings. Later, the *Cheng wei shi lun* — the representative text of the Faxiang lineage of the Yogācāra tradition (associated with the famous monk, Xuanzang [600-664], and his disciple, Kui Ji [632-682]) — re-introduced the claim that the *icchantika* is beyond redemption.

²⁵ Roger T. Ames, “The Mencian Conception of Ren Xing: Does it Mean ‘Human Nature’?”, in Henry Rosemont, Jr., (ed.), *Chinese Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, Open Court, LaSalle, 1991.

²⁶ See, for example, the parallels that Irene Bloom draws between Mencius’ purported belief in human equality and contemporary human rights thinking, in her “Fundamental Intuitions and Consensus Statements: Mencian Confucianism and Human Rights”, in Wm. Theodore de Bary & Tu Weiming (eds.), *Confucianism and Human Rights*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998.

predispositions and their matching virtues gave rise to the traditions rather than vice versa. There are a number of problems with Mencius' account.²⁷ One which seems to be at the back of Shun's mind throughout the book is Mencius' less than convincing account of how, by reflecting on our ethical predispositions, we are given ethical direction. Some fourteen hundred years after Mencius, Zhu Xi (1130-1200) removed this particular problem and in doing so gave new life to the thesis that human nature is good. He did so by inverting the relationship between Mencius' cardinal virtues and the ethical dispositions: by making the virtues themselves an innate endowment of the heart, and the dispositions a reaction to that endowment. Thus, whereas Mencius theory of the virtues rests on a development model,²⁸ Zhu Xi's is a discovery or reclamation model.

Shun's study is exemplary in the meticulous — if, at times, daunting — attention he pays to the detail of the debates selected for analyses. It is, without doubt, a book for the specialist rather than the general reader. With the Guodian manuscripts now in print, we look forward to the integration of Shun's insights into this related material — especially its philosophical significance²⁹ — in the two projected volumes. We can only hope that Stanford University Press' recent decision to publish even fewer pre-modern, scholarly Chinese Studies works will not scuttle these plans.³⁰

²⁷ For example, assuming we accept that ethical predispositions can somehow be innate, how does one know that the scope of our innate ethical predispositions is as Mencius describes it? Xun Zi certainly had difficulties with Mencius' account. Moreover, just because they are innate or because they give us pleasure in following them, does that mean that we should follow them?

²⁸ As Lee H. Yearley expresses it, "Mencius's model is developmental because capacities produce proper dispositions and actions only if they are nurtured and uninjured. If improperly developed, capacities either attain only a truncated form or become so weak that animating them becomes virtually impossible." See his *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, 60.

²⁹ In this connection, it is pertinent to note that some scholars consider passages from the Guodian corpus to provide important new insights into the human nature debate before the time *Mencius* was edited into a book. Pang Pu, "Kong Meng zhi jian: Guodian Chu jian zhong de Rujia xin xing shuo", *Zhongguo zhixue*, 20(1999), 22-35, for example, identifies a number of passages which he argues are consistent with Gao Zi's view on human nature.

³⁰ In this connection, we also note with regret the imminent demise of the Cambridge University Press series, *Chinese History, Literature and Institutions*. Princeton University Press also seems also to have stopped publishing in the area.

Glossary

bai zhi wei xing 白之為性
bai 白
chi 恥
Dai Zhen 戴震
dao tong 道統
de (te) 德
fo xing 佛性
Gao Zi 告子
Guodian 郭店
Jie 戒
jing 敬
li (pattern) 理
li (profit, benefit) 利
li 禮
liu de 六德
Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵
ming 命
Mou Zongsan 牟宗三
Nei ye 內業
qi 氣
qing 情
quan 權
ren xing 仁性
ren 仁
sheng zhi wei xing 生之為性
sheng 生
sheng 聖
si duan 四端
si 思
Tang Junyi 唐君毅
tian 天
Tsing-hua hsüeh-pao 清華學報
Wang Yangming 王陽明
Xin shu xia 心術下
xin xing zhi xue 心性學
xin 信
xing 性
Xiong Shili 熊十力
xiu 羞
Xu Fuguan 徐復觀
yi chan ti 一闡提
yi 義
zhi bai 之白
zhi xing 之性

zhi 智
zhong 忠
Zhu Xi 朱熹