

THE ROLE OF HUMAN NATURE IN MORAL INQUIRY: MACINTYRE, MENCIUS, AND XUNZI

Richard T. Kim

1. INTRODUCTION

Appeals to human nature in normative inquiry have fallen out of favor among contemporary philosophers. There are a variety of reasons frequently cited by those who see appeals to human nature as deeply problematic: (a) that the notion of human nature, which conceives nature as having a teleological direction, is incompatible with evolutionary biology; (b) that the manifest diversity of cultural values and traditions falsify any essentialist claims involving a common nature necessarily shared by all humans; (c) that appeals to human nature have been frequently employed throughout history to justify the oppression of women and other marginalized members of society; (d) that human nature, if seen as a descriptive account of how human beings naturally *are*, does not tell us anything about how we *ought to be*; and (e) that human nature, if seen as a normative account of how we ought to be, lacks explanatory power and cannot play any substantive role in moral inquiry. To fully defend the view that human nature has a substantive role to play in ethics, one would have to address at least each of these challenges. (For a response to such challenges, see Van Norden 2007, 341–50.) Such a defense is not the aim of this essay. Instead, I want to focus on the following question: Are there any good reasons to think that an account of human nature is indispensable for moral inquiry, here conceived as the systematic exploration of the nature of and the connections between such significant moral concepts as practical reason, virtue, and well-being? For, despite the various objections to the invocation of human nature listed above, if the answer to this question turned out to be in the affirmative, there would be at least a *prima facie* justification for continuing to appeal to the notion of human nature in moral inquiry.

I will argue that by examining the work of Alasdair MacIntyre in light of the disagreement about human nature between two ancient Chinese philosophers, Mencius and Xunzi, we can articulate at least one important reason for thinking that the notion of human nature has a significant role to play in moral inquiry, namely, its vital connection to theories of moral development and, hence, for the understanding of virtue. Of course, this argument will go through only if moral inquiry requires an account of virtue—those traits of character that dispose us to feel, judge, and act well—a claim that certain moral philosophers, including some consequentialists or Kantians, may deny. But in recent years, motivated in part by the pressure to provide normative theories grounded in an adequate philosophical psychology, both consequentialists and Kantians have started taking the notions of character and virtue seriously, working to accommodate them within their own normative frameworks.¹ So while there may be some philosophers who find themselves unmoved by the central argument of this essay, it should still be of interest to anyone who takes virtue and moral development as important features of a complete normative theory, a group that I believe is large enough to warrant this project.²

In the next section, I will discuss MacIntyre's views concerning human nature, focusing on the way that his position has shifted during the course of his scholarly career. As we will see, MacIntyre revised his beliefs about the proper relationship between human nature and ethics. But while MacIntyre makes some suggestive remarks about the reasons for revising his position, he does not offer a fully developed explanation. The central task of the latter sections will be to fill in the details of MacIntyre's eventual acceptance of the view that an account of virtue and human flourishing must be grounded in facts about human nature by exploring two contested accounts of human nature expounded by Mencius and Xunzi.

Before proceeding, it is worth pointing out that I am working on the assumption that all three thinkers possess a shared notion of "human nature," which we may roughly characterize as those fundamental inclinations and dispositions that, under a normal environment, develop in us spontaneously rather than through external imposition. This claim has been denied by some recent scholars.³ While a full exploration of this issue cannot be undertaken here, I would argue that given the widespread translation and understanding of *xing* (性) as "nature" by prominent sinologists and scholars of Chinese philosophy, my assumption that both Mencius and Xunzi do offer accounts of human nature is adequately justified.⁴ Moreover, as Schwitzgebel (2007) has argued, both Mencius and Xunzi seem to have a clear disagreement about whether morality is something that arises *naturally* or is imposed on human be-

ings through artifice—a disagreement that is rooted in issues pertaining to human nature, as we will see more clearly in due course.

2. MACINTYRE ON HUMAN NATURE

In his seminal work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the “Enlightenment Project” of modernity for establishing a foundation for ethics has failed. According to MacIntyre, this project, taken up by a litany of brilliant minds including David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Søren Kierkegaard, was bound to fail because the project aimed to justify morality by using a classical moral framework adopted from ancient Greek and medieval traditions while at the same time rejecting certain essential components of that framework, most importantly, its teleological foundation. As MacIntyre describes the classical view, “The moral scheme which forms the historical background to their thought had, as we have seen, a structure which required three elements: untutored human nature, man-as he could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos* and the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other” (2007, 54).

On this classical moral scheme, the moral precepts and virtues are given their point in the achievement of a distinctive human *telos*, the good or flourishing human life. The justification of morality, therefore, was based on morality’s teleological function, and the human *telos* was determined, on the Aristotelian version of this scheme, by the nature of human beings. This framework presupposed Aristotle’s metaphysical biology in which all living entities possess a specific nature that determines their proper ends. But since the Enlightenment thinkers rejected that teleological conception of nature, they looked to find an alternative way to justify the moral precepts and virtues without any appeal to teleology, an impossible task in MacIntyre’s view.

But despite MacIntyre’s account of the Enlightenment thinkers as engaging in a hopeless enterprise, he agreed with them in their rejection of Aristotle’s substantive understanding of nature. The main task of his positive project in *After Virtue* was, therefore, to reconstruct an Aristotelian account of the virtues as ordered toward a proper human *telos* by drawing on the concepts of practice, tradition, and the narrative unity of a life, without relying on Aristotle’s metaphysical conception of human nature. Here MacIntyre’s view was not that an account of human nature has no role whatsoever to play in moral inquiry, since he allows that understanding human nature can be important for instrumental reasons, for example, in figuring out the best way to get human beings to act virtuously. The point is that human nature does not bear any normative content; it does not in any way determine our proper end as human beings. Both the human *telos* and, therefore, the virtues, need

to be understood in terms of social practices, traditions, and community, rather than by an appeal to human nature.⁵ Instead of an Aristotelian metaphysical-cum-biological teleology, what we get from MacIntyre's positive view in *After Virtue* is a socially constructed teleology.

In his later works, however, most notably in *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), MacIntyre retracts his earlier position and comes to embrace the view that some conception of human nature as end-directed is necessary for any successful account of the virtues. Although MacIntyre never gives a detailed account of this shift, he gives us some clues in the following remarks in the preface for the third edition of *After Virtue*:

In *After Virtue* I had tried to present the case for a broadly Aristotelian account of the virtues without making use of or appeal to what I called Aristotle's metaphysical biology. And I was of course right in rejecting most of that biology. But I had now learned from Aquinas that my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding. It is only because human beings have an end toward which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do. (2007, x–xi)

While maintaining his earlier rejection of Aristotle's metaphysical biology, MacIntyre now affirms the indispensability of an appeal to a teleologically directed understanding of human nature for providing an adequate explanation for how it is that virtues, practices, and tradition merge together to constitute human flourishing; it is only because human nature is directed toward a particular end that virtues, practices, and traditions are necessary for achieving the human good. What we need is an understanding of human nature that furnishes us with normative content. In *Dependent Rational Animals*, he also makes a similar, although slightly different, point:

[N]o account of the goods, rules and virtues that are definitive of our moral life can be adequate that does not explain—or at least point us towards an explanation—how that form of life is possible for beings who are biologically constituted as we are, by providing us with an account of our development towards and into that form of life. That development has as its starting point our initial animal condition. (1999, x)

The main point again seems to be that a fully satisfying account of the place of virtues and goods in a good human life must also be connected to a conception of human nature that can explain how, given our biological constitution, we can realize the virtues and goods necessary

for flourishing. What is given more emphasis in this passage is that human nature needs to provide an intelligible story of the developmental process by which we move from our “initial animal condition” to the state of virtue.

These two passages make two different, albeit closely related, points. The main claim from the preface of *After Virtue* can be formulated as follows:

- (1) Any substantive account of the virtues and human flourishing must presuppose some conception of human nature as teleologically directed.

In *Dependent Rational Animals*, however, MacIntyre’s central claim appears to be the following:

- (2) Any plausible account of virtue must include an account of moral development that is anchored in biological facts about human nature.

As I see it, (2) expands upon (1) by showing just why an account of virtue requires an account of human nature, namely, because a plausible account of virtue must include an adequate picture of moral development that is anchored in our biological nature or, as MacIntyre characterizes it, “our initial animal condition.” The focus of the rest of this essay will be on (2): the connection between human nature and moral development. To clarify and support (2), I will turn to a disagreement about human nature between two ancient Chinese philosophers, Mencius and Xunzi. A close examination of their disagreement will illuminate why an appeal to human nature is indispensable for a proper understanding of moral development and, hence, moral inquiry.

3. DISPUTATION ON HUMAN NATURE: MENCIUS AND XUNZI

Mencius and Xunzi were two ancient Chinese philosophers who lived during the Warring States Period (403–221 CE), a time marked by considerable suffering and violence. Both thinkers believed that the key to bringing peace and order to society was implementing those ethical values contained in the moral teachings of Confucius, such as benevolence (*ren* 仁) and filial piety (*xiao* 孝). Although, in a number of ways, Mencius and Xunzi shared a Confucian moral vision—especially regarding the ethically ideal person and the kind of society that would best achieve the common good—historically, the two thinkers have been more often contrasted with one another for their conflicting views about human nature, with Mencius claiming that “human nature is good” and Xunzi claiming that “human nature is bad.” But, as I hope will become clear, the disagreement is much more nuanced than these two simple slogans suggest.

One way to understand their disagreement is to focus on their different conceptions of moral self-cultivation. Although they agree about the proper endpoint of moral development, that is, sagehood, they disagree about how human beings can achieve this end. Here a brief outline of their accounts of moral self-cultivation will be helpful. Let's begin with Mencius.

On Mencius's view of moral development, human beings carry certain innate moral tendencies or inclinations, what he calls "sprouts" (*duan* 端) that are directed toward certain virtues. For Mencius, these tendencies are naturally acquired in the normal course of moral development. He offers an elegant summary of this aspect of his thought:

[W]e can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of disdain, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of deference one is not human. If one is without the feeling of approval and disapproval, one is not human. The feeling of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The feeling of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom. People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts, yet to claim that one is incapable (of virtue), is to steal from oneself.⁶

What makes us properly human is the presence of these four moral sprouts that, when properly cultivated under suitable conditions, can be developed into the four Confucian virtues of benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智). One point worth emphasizing is that, while these sprouts carry within them the internal potential to develop into full-blown virtues, the potentiality can be actualized only when a number of conditions are satisfied, including consistent human effort and a proper social environment. Here the various agricultural metaphors Mencius draws upon throughout the text are especially revealing, since he compares these moral sprouts to barley seeds that ripen only given suitable conditions such as the right kind of soil, sufficient quantity of rain, and human effort (*Mengzi* 6A7). Similarly, our moral sprouts are also susceptible to a wide range of external conditions that can either nurture or impede their growth. Moral self-cultivation, for Mencius, primarily consists in strengthening and refining these fundamental moral dispositions through extension, reflection, and study. So, the meaning of Mencius's slogan that "human nature is good" is not that human beings for the most part behave virtuously but that human beings possess the seeds of goodness that can, given proper conditions, blossom into a virtuous character.

Xunzi, however, denies Mencius's moral psychology, especially the existence of moral dispositions that can be guided to move us toward virtue. Whereas Mencius believes that to achieve virtue we need to build up the various moral tendencies that are latent in our hearts, Xunzi believes that human nature primarily consists of powerful, egoistic tendencies aimed at private acquisition, rather than other-regarding actions (*Xunzi*, 161). To become virtuous, we need to reshape and build into our nature those moral values and dispositions that will enable us to live according to the Way (*Dao* 道). Despite Xunzi's view that human beings are naturally inclined toward self-absorption and vice, he is confident that we all possess the capacity to become a sage, which can be realized by undergoing a long, arduous process of moral development consisting in ritual practices, obedience to a teacher, and recitation of the classics. Like a piece of metal capable of being forged into a sharp blade through a long process of repeated blows, Xunzi sees our nature as capable of taking on a determinate moral shape through a long and steady course of moral development: "Achievement consists of never giving up. If you start carving and then give up, you cannot even cut through a piece of rotten wood; but if you persist without stopping, you can carve and inlay metal or stone" (*Xunzi*, 18).⁷

What Xunzi denies, contra Mencius, is the existence of innate dispositions that are naturally directed toward virtue. Whereas Mencius favors the use of organic, agricultural metaphors (which draws attention to the natural, innate tendencies that can be cultivated into morally good characteristics), Xunzi favors craft metaphors, drawing attention to the way that recalcitrant materials such as wood or metal, devoid of any internal principle of growth, can be shaped and reformed to fit our desired ends through rational guidance:

A piece of wood as straight as a plumb line may [with soaking and shaping] be bent into a circle as true as any drawn with a compass and, even after the wood has dried, it will not straighten out again. The bending process has made it that way. Thus, if [crooked] wood is pressed against a straightening board, it can be made straight; if metal is put to the grindstone, it can be sharpened; and if the gentleman studies widely and each day examines himself, his wisdom will become clear and his conduct be without fault. (*Xunzi*, 15)

Unlike sprouts that carry an internal principle of growth and maturation, a piece of wood or metal does not have a natural tendency toward taking on a particular shape. In appealing to such metaphors, Xunzi is denying Mencius's view that there is a natural tendency for human beings to move toward virtue. But, although Xunzi does not believe that we can rely on human nature to develop into moral beings, our nature is such that, given

time and pressure, we can become reliably good. One of the keys to this developmental process for Xunzi is ritual or rite (*li* 禮), which Benjamin Schwartz describes as referring to “all those ‘objective’ prescriptions of behavior, whether involving rite, ceremony, manners, or general deportment, that bind human beings and spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family, within human society, and with the numinous realm beyond” (1985, 67. See also Fingarette 1972). As this description implies, rituals form a broad category that includes not only significant events or ceremonies such as weddings, graduations, and funerals, but also everyday actions such as a bow or a handshake, holding the door for someone, and setting the dinner table. For Xunzi, through proper participation in the rituals we begin to rectify those wayward inclinations and emotions and initiate the formation of appropriate feelings and attitudes that accord with righteousness, all of which are ultimately accompanied by a deep and lasting joy.⁸ As he describes it, “all rites begin in simplicity, are brought to fulfillment in elegant form, and end in joy. When rites are performed in the highest manner, then both the emotions and the forms embodying them are fully realized” (*Xunzi*, 98).

Once a person has truly internalized the Confucian rituals, Xunzi insists, he will recognize the intrinsic value of living a morally ordered life and will discover new sources of satisfaction in righteous behavior (Ivanhoe 2000a, 34–35). So, even without possessing anything like the Mencian moral sprouts, Xunzi believes that, through persistent participation in rituals and through the guidance of good teachers, all human beings can become a sage.

At this point, we may draw the following comparison between Xunzi and the earlier views of MacIntyre (henceforth, “early MacIntyre”). Just like early MacIntyre, Xunzi believes that the most important elements of moral development are the socially embedded activities of rituals (or practices), teachers, social roles, and tradition. Both thinkers see the path to moral excellence as lying not in the development or cultivation of basic human inclinations but in the *re-formation* of our nature through the use of human artifice and social practices manufactured by culture and tradition.⁹

It is especially striking how their views converge on the importance of participating in certain complex forms of social activities, what early MacIntyre calls “practices” and Xunzi calls “rituals.” Two shared features, which I can only briefly draw attention to here, especially stand out: (a) the indispensable role that such activities play in the development of virtues and (b) their connection to external standards.¹⁰ In describing proper ritual practice, Xunzi emphasizes the role of good teachers: “The teacher is that by which to correct your practice of ritual. . . . If you are

without a teacher, how will you know that your practice of ritual is right?" (*Xunzi*, 175). In a closely related comment he says, "[In] learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person" (*Xunzi*, 165). To illustrate the importance of submitting to the authority of standards for the engagement of practices, MacIntyre remarks,

If, on starting to listen to music, I do not accept my own incapacity to judge correctly, I will never learn to hear, let alone to appreciate, Bartok's last quartets. If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fastball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch. (2007, 190)

The point stressed in these passages by both Xunzi and early MacIntyre is that we can learn to satisfy those standards of rituals and activities more adequately by first learning from those who are more competent than ourselves in a particular practice or skill. Given their resistance to taking human nature as offering normative guidance, their heavy reliance on teachers and other external influences is unsurprising.

Neither early MacIntyre nor Xunzi claims, however, that an account of human nature has no role whatsoever to play in moral inquiry. As discussed above, early MacIntyre argues that the aim of ethics is to transform human nature-as-it-is into human nature-as-it-ought-to-be. And for Xunzi, the most significant fact about human nature is that it is powerfully directed toward self-centeredness, and the only way to motivate creatures like ourselves to undertake the arduous path toward virtue is by appealing to the instrumental benefits of behaving in accordance with virtue; once the developmental process has been initiated, the goal is to *transform* rather than *build up* our nature.

Although such a view is less explicit in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre also seems to have held an account of human nature as plagued by disordered tendencies.¹¹ What is important is that neither of them believes human nature bears any normative content; there is no end or set of ends directed by our nature offering us normative cues. While this is a normative claim, it also supports the epistemological position that knowledge of human flourishing cannot be obtained by examining human nature. And as we have seen, these points are in strong opposition to Mencius's nature-based ethical position, which posits innate moral tendencies as offering a normative foundation.

4. PROBLEMS FOR XUNZI

Despite the depth and complexity of his account of moral self-cultivation, there is a potential problem that afflicts Xunzi's view, which I will refer

to as *the problem of moral transformation*. The following question cuts to the heart of the difficulty: If human nature is bad and dominated by selfish tendencies, how is it that human beings could come to see virtue as not only instrumentally beneficial, but as intrinsically valuable? Unless there are *some* latent moral desires in human beings, is it plausible, as Xunzi seems to claim, that human beings can become truly virtuous? David Wong describes the problem this way: “If we continually submit ourselves to rites and to righteousness, we may form a habit of practicing them, but how do we come to delight in them and be willing to die for them?” (2000, 143).

Now, as a number of scholars have pointed out, Xunzi never explicitly denies the existence of all other-directed desires. Eric Hutton draws attention to the following remarks by Xunzi:

All living creatures between heaven and earth which have blood and breath must possess consciousness, and nothing that possesses consciousness fails to love its own kind. If any of the animals or great birds happens to become separated from the herd or flock . . . it will invariably return to its old haunts, and when it passes its former home it will look about and cry, hesitate and drag its feet before it can bear to pass on. Even among tiny creatures the swallows and sparrows will cry with sorrow for a little while before they fly on. Among creatures of blood and breath, none has greater understanding than man; therefore man ought to love his parents until the day he dies. (*Xunzi*, 110, quoted in Hutton 2000, 229)

Drawing on this passage for support, Hutton claims that “Xunzi seems to allow that people’s inborn tendencies need not all be narrowly self-centered, but that people may also naturally have certain feelings of love and concern for others” (2000, 232). Hutton suggests that, despite Xunzi’s emphasis on the selfish aspects of our nature, the above passage shows that we can have other-regarding concern.¹² But it is noteworthy that the passage above only identifies outwardly directed concern for one’s own parents; nowhere does Xunzi discuss such natural affections for those outside kinship. The relevant question is whether this provides a sufficient psychological basis for moving from our powerful selfish tendencies to intrinsically valuing virtue for its own sake.

One possible response, suggested by Eirik Harris, turns to MacIntyre’s notion of “goods internal to practices.” As MacIntyre describes them, the internal goods of a practice are goods that can be achieved only through participation in a specific practice and can be fully grasped only by those who have the relevant experiences in that particular practice (2007, 187–89). To take an example from MacIntyre, a child may begin to participate in an activity such as chess only for its instrumental benefits,

for example, an extra allowance, but eventually come to value playing chess as intrinsically valuable by appreciating those specific goods that are internal to chess (MacIntyre 2007, 188). As Harris notes, “If there are values internal to the practice of chess which can make one’s life better and richer, we should be willing to entertain the idea that there are values associated with the practice of virtue that are inherent to a life lived virtuously, and which cannot be explained fully to those who are not virtuous” (2013, 108). Harris is certainly right that both chess playing and virtuous activities have inherent values that can be appreciated only “from the inside.” But there seems to be a relevant dissimilarity between chess and virtue that does not allow for the analogy to sufficiently explain the process of moral transformation. The relevant difference is that virtue also requires particular moral affections such as empathy and compassion, and the basic capacity for these moral affections, given the nature of human psychology, cannot be something that is learned or acquired; we must already be equipped with it from the very start. In other words, the very possibility for human beings to become virtuous, given our psychological constitution, presupposes the existence of something like the Mencian sprouts.

Recent work in empirical psychology supports the view that our basic capacities for empathy and compassion are innate features of human psychology that are revealed in a variety of ways even during our infancy. The psychologist Paul Bloom has drawn attention to the moral life of babies through numerous experimental studies on babies as young as five months old. From this data, Bloom argues that human beings have a number of innate capacities encoded into our nature through evolutionary processes, including (a) a basic moral sense (allowing us to distinguish kindness from cruelty), (b) empathy and compassion, (c) a rudimentary sense of fairness, and (d) a rudimentary sense of justice.¹³ Such studies seem to show that something like the moral sprouts posited by Mencius really are deep features of our nature. Do these studies, then, provide a justification for favoring Mencius’s account of human nature over Xunzi’s account?

We must be cautious here. As Bloom is careful to emphasize, these basic moral tendencies found in babies and children are quite limited. For example, although babies begin to manifest sharing behavior by the end of their second year, the sharing is limited almost exclusively to family and friends; they hardly share with strangers (Bloom 2013, 53). In fact, babies and children are naturally inclined to be hostile toward strangers, a fact that appears to be rooted in our tribal nature that gives rise to our strong propensities to make in-group and out-group distinctions. These facts perhaps point toward a more Xunzian view of human nature, in which our innate sprouts of compassion and empathy

(assuming their existence) are too weak and fragile to play any role in moral development.

Nevertheless, that they exist at all, as Bloom notes, is a significant fact. Without them, our lives would be crippled, as revealed by examining the actual lives of those who completely lack the basic capacity for empathy and compassion, such as psychopaths and extreme narcissists.¹⁴ Simon Baron-Cohen (2001) has argued that the central feature shared by most psychopaths and narcissists is what he calls “zero degrees of empathy.” Now all too frequently, the media portrays such people as socially intelligent and creative, with the capacity to navigate successfully through the social world, unhindered by the kind of guilt, shame, and compassion that generally plays a substantial role in our psychological economy. But as Cohen notes, most people who lack empathy lead very lonely and frustrating lives. Such people are simply unable to get along with others in a normal way, let alone develop the kind of deep, personal relationships that are crucial for moral development and flourishing lives.¹⁵

These studies suggest that our capacity to feel compassion and empathy provides us with the basic moral foundation from which we can become full-fledged moral agents. As Bloom states concisely, “There would be no morality if we didn’t care for others” (2013, 47).¹⁶ Without the basic capacity to be concerned about the well-being of others or to feel guilt at having done something perceived to be wrong, no amount of training or habituation could produce in us the virtues. As noted above, virtue requires proper emotions and feelings, and it is exactly these kinds of affections that psychopaths lack. For the process of moral transformation even to initiate, it appears that at least some of those moral sprouts that Mencius alerts us to are, in fact, absolutely necessary.

What might Xunzi say to all this? Extrapolating from his acknowledgment of the universally shared affection for kin, we may interpret Xunzi as recognizing the existence of the kind of rudimentary feelings of compassion or empathy that these studies suggest are necessary for moral development. This would certainly be, I think, a very charitable interpretation since Xunzi never posits anything like the Mencian moral sprouts and exerts much effort in arguing that human behavior is mostly driven by the desire for self-aggrandizement.¹⁷ But even if we do interpret Xunzi as acknowledging the kinds of incipient moral tendencies that Mencius argues for, there is still another problem that I do not think Xunzi’s view can accommodate. The problem is that the recent empirical work on babies and psychopaths demonstrate that our basic capacities for empathy and compassion that are manifested in our infancy play not only a necessary but a *significant* role in our moral de-

velopment. For those who lack these basic moral sensibilities, no amount of practice in Xunzian rituals, even under the guidance of sages, could ever transform them into virtuous agents. The key point is that, even if Xunzi were to acknowledge the existence of these moral or protomoral tendencies (which I do not think we have sufficient textual support for attributing to him), given his general moral outlook, he would see them as having no substantive role in the process of moral self-cultivation.¹⁸ But recent empirical research suggests otherwise, since it demonstrates the critical role these basic moral tendencies play in early childhood development and the way that these innate traits provide us with the necessary moral platform for developing into mature moral agents.

If the discussion up to this point has shown the need for revising Xunzi's account of human nature, how does this change affect other aspects of Xunzi's views, in particular, his account of virtues and moral development? I think many of the key features of Xunzi's account of moral development such as his stress on the importance of rituals, teachers, and tradition still stand. (One empirical thesis strengthened by recent developments in moral psychology is the powerful influence that our social environment has on our character, values, and behaviors.) One possible revision Xunzi may have to make is in his use of craft metaphors and the degree to which he takes external imposition as the driving force behind moral development. For based on the psychological research discussed above, I think we can now see Xunzi's craft metaphor for moral development as less apt than Mencius's agricultural metaphor. The road to moral improvement appears to build upon those basic moral tendencies—the Mencian moral sprouts—that we find in human nature, whereas Xunzi's craft metaphor takes human nature as providing only hard, resistant material with no natural tendencies toward virtue. In having to adjust this aspect of his thought, Xunzi will have to at least revise his judgment that external imposition is the only impetus behind moral transformation. Nevertheless, the weight attached by Xunzi to external conditions does not seem to require significant modification since, as both Paul Bloom and Mencius recognize, the development of those basic moral tendencies we find in human nature requires extensive work and wise guidance if they are to become morally reliable.

None of the claims above undermines the fact that, when it comes to many of the particular details of moral self-cultivation, especially regarding the practices of ritual, Xunzi provides richer, more subtle descriptions of the moral developmental process than Mencius. For a complete account of moral transformation, especially the psychology of agency that underlies the process of moral development, Xunzi offers us profound reflections that demand careful study. In this way, Xunzi can help fill in some of the gaps in Mencius's account of moral self-cultivation.

Nevertheless, I have argued that, in order for Xunzi to get his account of moral development off the ground, he needs to presuppose something closer to the Mencian conception of human nature.

5. LESSONS FROM MENCIUS AND XUNZI

The debate between Mencius and Xunzi shows how important the concept of human nature is for one's theory of moral development. Even though Xunzi does not see moral self-cultivation as consisting in the building up of our nature, his substantive conception of human nature as mostly consisting of disordered passions clearly affects his account of moral development by moving him to rely solely on the products of human artifice. But as we saw, recent empirical work on moral psychology helps show not only that certain incipient moral tendencies are features of our native equipment but that our basic capacities to feel empathy or guilt play a critical role in our moral development, as exemplified by the examination of the lives of babies and psychopaths. What we see in this exchange confirms MacIntyre's earlier observation that

no account of the goods, rules and virtues that are definitive of our moral life can be adequate that does not explain—or at least point us towards an explanation—how that form of life is possible for beings who are biologically constituted as we are, by providing us with an account of our development towards and into that form of life. That development has as its starting point our initial animal condition. (MacIntyre 1999, x)

One reason MacIntyre identifies for needing an account of how we can transition from our initial animal condition to virtuous agency is that, as human beings, we are embodied creatures with basic physiological and psychological tendencies. Without an adequate appeal to our biological nature, any theory of moral development risks floating free from the empirical realities that constrain human life. What we need, therefore, in any adequate theory of moral development, is an empirically realizable picture of how creatures like us, given our psychological and physical constitution, can move toward moral excellence.¹⁹

This point about the need to build normative theory on a plausible understanding of human psychology has been defended by a number of contemporary philosophers. What distinguishes MacIntyre's position from other contending views is his Aristotelian stance that our biological animal nature not only constrains but also partially determines what substantively constitutes human flourishing. Human nature is important not only for instrumental reasons in helping us understand which set of ends we can realistically achieve and how we might proceed in obtain-

ing them but also in setting the ends that are proper to human beings. Now, one immediate worry will be that this normatively loaded conception of human nature as partially determining the good life requires an implausibly rigid view of human well-being. There are a variety of ways, it could plausibly be argued, in which human lives can go well, and any view that denies this point is a nonstarter.

It is not entirely clear from his statements about human nature the extent to which MacIntyre believes human nature fixes what can count as a flourishing life. But throughout his works, MacIntyre has always maintained the deep connections between one's society and culture on the one hand and the virtues and human flourishing on the other. In a recent essay, he asserts, "It is always in and through the particularities of the social, economic, and cultural relationships of their own time and place that individuals and groups pursue their individual and common goods. And it is in terms of those particularities that they understand themselves and their situation" (2013, 478). As I understand him, what MacIntyre is claiming is not that what constitutes a person's good is invariable but that there is a range of goods that are rooted in our nature as human animals, such as our bodily, emotional, social, and intellectual needs, that are shared across all cultures and societies, a view that I find deeply plausible. Of course, just how these goods should be obtained and organized within a person's life will depend much on the particularities of that person's social and cultural circumstances, as well as her own talents, desires, and aspirations.

Both MacIntyre and Mencius draw attention to certain significant features of the natural patterns of human development that direct us to the kinds of lives that allow us to live well *qua* human beings. And, although their accounts of human nature are interestingly different, they point to different aspects of our nature in a way that can enrich each other's views. Mencius, as shown earlier, concentrates on certain moral or protomoral tendencies and emotions that supported by some recent empirical work, point toward distinct virtues. In this way, Mencius offers us a more thorough and careful discussion of the moral content of our nature, which is less attended to by MacIntyre and the Aristotelian tradition in general.

On the other hand, MacIntyre captures other fundamental aspects of our nature that Mencius does not explicitly address: the vulnerability and dependency that marks every human life. As MacIntyre explains well, our dependency and vulnerability, arising out of our shared animal identity, are especially visible during our infancy and old age and surface throughout our lives to varying degrees. This profound insight regarding human vulnerability is one that I believe Mencius would

have readily acknowledged and bears a close connection to one of the foundational virtues of the Confucian tradition generally neglected within Western contemporary philosophy: filial piety. On one plausible account, Confucian filial piety is a virtue grounded in a special form of gratitude toward parents (or caretakers) for nurturing and sustaining a person during the most vulnerable and dependent stages of one's life (Ivanhoe 2007 and Sarkissian 2010). In taking care of our parents as they face increasing levels of vulnerability and dependency in old age, we gratefully acknowledge the benefits received in our infancy and childhood.²⁰ In this way, I believe we can see MacIntyre's account of the "virtue of acknowledged dependence" that arises from our dependent animal nature and the "networks of giving and receiving" necessary for achieving both our individual and common good, as capturing important features of Confucian filial piety. In MacIntyre's view, the virtue of acknowledged dependence allows us to see ourselves and others correctly, as marked by fragility, and to help us express our gratitude for the care that we have received by assisting others in their times of need. At heart, Confucian filial piety allows us to appreciate properly the fact of our mutual indebtedness and helps sustain the chain of reciprocity that is so vital for human life. Although the virtue of acknowledged dependence is broader than the virtue of filial piety in that it extends outward to those outside our own community, it aptly captures certain key features of Confucian filial piety in a way that I think Mencius would have roundly endorsed.

6. CONCLUSION

In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre advances his own account of moral development that demonstrates how human beings, starting from the initial stages of infancy characterized by dependency and vulnerability, are disposed to acquire the moral and intellectual virtues necessary for flourishing within the context of shared communal life, thereby becoming what he calls "independent practical reasoners." In filling out this account, he draws attention to those characteristics that apply to us *qua* animal, as one among a spectrum of living organisms that share certain capacities with other members of the animal kingdom. On this picture, our basic animal nature equips us with certain inclinations and capacities that reveal our directedness toward mature rational agency. Of course, appeals to our biological nature, as MacIntyre himself clearly acknowledges, are insufficient, since the correct development of those basic tendencies requires wise and intelligent guidance. Nevertheless, what MacIntyre shows is that any satisfying story of moral development needs also to elaborate how it is that beings like us, with those fundamental capacities and desires that are anchored

in our biological nature, can undergo the kind of moral transformation necessary to become virtuous practical reasoners. On this point, Mencius would wholeheartedly agree.²¹

City University of Hong Kong

Keywords: Alasdair MacIntyre, Confucianism, human nature, Mencius, Xunzi

NOTES

1. This movement toward psychological realism was partially motivated by Elizabeth Anscombe's call to provide a more adequate philosophical psychology. See Anscombe 1958. For attempts to make room for virtue within consequentialism, see Driver 2001 and Hurka 2001. For attempts to develop an account of virtue within a Kantian moral framework, see Baxley 2010 and Herman 2007, especially chaps. 1, 4, and 5.

2. I leave aside the situationist critique of virtue ethics prominently set forth by Gilbert Harman (1999) and John Doris (2002).

3. Especially Ames 1991. Like Ames, Dan Robins (2011) also argues that *xing* (性) should not be understood as "human nature" but, unlike Ames, leaves open the possibility that Mencius and Xunzi may have shared a common notion of "human nature." For defense of nonconstructivist interpretations of human nature in the early Confucian tradition that go against Ames's position, see Yu 2007 and Sim 2007.

4. See Graham 2002, Schwartz 1985, Bloom 2002, Shun 2007, Ivanhoe 2000a, and Van Norden 2007.

5. I am indebted to both Bryan Van Norden and Philip J. Ivanhoe for helping me clarify my thoughts on this issue.

6. *Mengzi* 2A6. All translations of the *Mengzi* (Mencius) are from Van Norden 2008.

7. *Xunzi*, 15. All translations of Xunzi's writings are from Watson 2003. For a comprehensive overview of the role of metaphors in Xunzi as well as other thinkers from early China, see Slingerland 2007.

8. For helpful, empirically grounded discussions of the power of rituals in the formation of emotions and habits, see Sarkissian 2014 and Wong 2014, 180–86.

9. The characterization of Xunzi's account of moral self-cultivation as a *re-formation* model is introduced in Ivanhoe 2000a, 29–37. Of course, whether engaging in these practices will actually lead one to moral virtue depends on

whether the practices are *correct*, or in Confucian terms, in accordance with the *Dao*.

10. For Xunzi's discussion of the essential role of rituals, see especially chaps. 1, 2, and 19 of the *Xunzi*. MacIntyre's central discussion of practices and their relation to virtues and human flourishing can be found in chap. 14 of MacIntyre 2007. Clearly, a more comprehensive analysis of "rituals" and "practices" is needed than what I can offer here.

11. While he never explicitly endorses this view of human nature, MacIntyre does claim that the Enlightenment thinkers inherited a view of human nature that "has strong tendencies to disobey" the moral precepts (2007, 55). And since he does not attempt to revise this view of human nature, I think we can also see early MacIntyre as accepting something close to a Xunzian account of human nature.

12. It is not entirely clear whether affection and concern for one's own parents constitute properly "other-regarding" concern since, in special relationships such as these, the boundary between one's well-being and that of another can become quite blurred.

13. See Bloom 2013. See also Haidt 2013. The idea that altruistic tendencies could develop through the process of evolution was discussed by Darwin in *The Descent of Man*, Part I, chaps. 4–5. See also Trivers 1971, 35–37, for an appeal to "reciprocal altruism" as an evolutionary mechanism for explaining apparent cases of altruism among nonkin organisms. I thank Bryan Van Norden for these references.

14. When it comes to psychopathy, the origin of the condition is not always traceable to bad parenting or some explanation based on nurture. Rather, recent research has shown that it is a genetically inheritable condition, as supported by the brain-scanning studies on psychopaths that reveal greatly diminished activity in the amygdala and the vmPFC. See Blair 2007 and Kiehl 2006.

15. Paul Bloom makes the same point: "The overall lack of moral sentiments—and specifically, the lack of regard for others—might turn out to be the psychopath's downfall. We non-psychopaths are constantly assessing one another, looking for kindness and shame and the like, using this information to decide whom to trust, whom to affiliate with. The psychopath has to pretend to be one of us. But this is difficult. . . . Without a normal allotment of shame and guilt, psychopaths succumb to bad impulses, doing terrible things out of malice, greed, and simple boredom. And sooner or later, they get caught" (2013, 39).

16. Here Bloom's discussion seems to account mainly for only one of Mencius's four moral sprouts, the sprout of compassion. A full treatment of the other three moral sprouts (disdain, deference, approval and disapproval) as innate dispositions anchored in human nature would take much more work than I can offer here. For naturalized accounts of these sprouts see Van Norden 2007, 257–77.

17. Philip J. Ivanhoe claims that, for Xunzi, "we begin life in a state of utter moral blindness. According to Xunzi, initially, we have no conception of what

morality is; we can't recognize the moral dimensions of even paradigmatic actions or situations." See Ivanhoe 2000b, 243–44.

18. This point is supported by the way in which Xunzi argues against Mencius's conception of human nature, by arguing that Mencius's view undermines the role of rituals, sages, and tradition in the process of moral self-cultivation. See *Xunzi*, 166–68. Such passages help demonstrate that Xunzi's focus was almost exclusively on the role of ritual and tradition, gained through the wisdom of human artifice and culture. For Xunzi, human nature has little role to play in moral development.

19. The basic idea expressed here bears a close connection to what Owen Flanagan has called "Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism," which admonishes us to "[m]ake sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing, and behavior prescribed are possible, or are perceived to be possible, for creatures like us" (1991, 32). While in agreement with this point, MacIntyre would want to add the metaphysical claim that our given biological nature also directs us toward certain ends that carry normative force.

20. Here I mean to discuss only those parents who have met a certain threshold of giving adequate care.

21. This work was supported by a grant from the Academy of Korean Studies funded by the Korean government (MEST) (AKS-2011-AAA-2102). An earlier version of this essay was presented at a conference honoring David Solomon at the University of Notre Dame, and I thank all those who participated in the discussion for their helpful comments. For valuable written comments on earlier drafts, I would like to thank Youngsun Back, Eirik L. Harris, Philip J. Ivanhoe, Bryan W. Van Norden, Xueying Wang, and an anonymous reviewer.

REFERENCES

- Ames, Roger. 1991. "The Mencian Conception of *Ren Xing*: Does It Mean 'Human Nature'?" In *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, edited by Henry Rosemont, Jr., 143–75. La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- Anscombe, Elizabeth. 1958. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33, no. 124: 1–19.
- Baron-Cohen, Simon. 2011. *Zero Degrees of Empathy: A New Theory of Human Cruelty and Kindness*. London: Allen Lane.
- Baxley, Anne Margaret. 2010. *Kant's Theory of Virtue: The Value of Autocracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blair, R. J. R. 2007. "The Amygdala and Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex in Morality and Psychopathy." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11, no. 9: 387–92.

- Bloom, Irene. 2002. "Mengzian Arguments on Human Nature (*Ren Xing*)." In *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, edited by Xiusheng Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 64–100. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Bloom, Paul. 2013. *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Doris, John. 2002. *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Driver, Julia. 2001. *Uneasy Virtue*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fingarette, Herbert. 1972. *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Flanagan, Owen. 1991. *Varieties of Moral Personality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Graham, Angus. 2002. "The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature." In *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, edited by Xiusheng Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 1–63. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2013. *The Righteous Mind*. New York: Pantheon.
- Harman, Gilbert. 1999. "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99, no. 3: 315–31.
- Harris, Eirik. 2013. "The Role of Virtue in Xunzi's Political Philosophy." *Dao* 12, no. 1: 93–110.
- Herman, Barbara. 2007. *Moral Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hurka, Thomas. 2001. *Virtue, Vice, and Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hutton, Eric. 2000. "Does Xunzi Have a Consistent Theory of Human Nature." In *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, edited by T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 220–36. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2000a. *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*. 2d ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.
- . "Human Nature and Moral Understanding in the *Xunzi*." In *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, edited by T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 237–49. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- . 2007. "Filial Piety as a Virtue." In *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, edited by Rebecca Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 297–312. New York: Oxford.
- Kiehl, Kent A. 2006. "A Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective on Psychopathy: Evidence for Paralimbic System Dysfunction." *Psychiatry Research* 142, nos. 2–3: 107–28.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1999. *Dependent Rational Animals*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.

- . 2007. *After Virtue*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. 1st ed., 1981.
- . 2013. "Epilogue." In *What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century?* edited by Fran O'Rourke, 474–86. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Robins, Dan. 2011. "The Warring States Concept of *Xing*." *Dao* 10, no. 1: 31–51.
- Sarkissian, Hagop. 2010. "Recent Approaches to Confucian Filial Morality." *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 9: 725–34.
- . 2014. "Ritual and Rightness in the *Analects*." In *Dao Companion to the Analects*, edited by Amy Olberding, 95–116. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Schwartz, Benjamin. 1985. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schwitzgebel, Eric. 2007. "Human Nature and Moral Education in Mencius, Xunzi, Hobbes, and Rousseau." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 24, no. 2: 147–68.
- Shun, Kwong-loi. 2007. "Mencius on *Jen-hsing*." *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 1: 1–20.
- Sim, May. 2007. *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slingerland, Edward. 2007. *Effortless Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Trivers, Robert. 1971. "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism." *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46: 35–57.
- Van Norden, Bryan W. 2007. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2008. Trans. *Mengzi: with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Watson, Burton, trans. 2003. *Xunzi: Basic Writings*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wong, David. 2000. "Xunzi on Moral Motivation." In *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, edited by T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 135–54. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- . 2014. "Cultivating the Self in Concert with Others." In *Dao Companion to the Analects*, edited by Amy Olberding, 171–97. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Yu, Jiyuan. 2007. *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue*. New York: Routledge.