

Mencius, Readings 3

Rules and Character

As we have seen, Gaozi held that while certain moral feelings (*ren*) were natural to us, decisions concerning right conduct should be made on the basis of ethical principles we learn from others. Gaozi's position opened the door to rule-based ethical reasoning associated with "ethics of action." This was the structure of Mohist ethics, and Mencius regarded it as a threat to Confucianism, which was structured as an "ethics of virtue," where correct choice making depended on the cultivation of moral character in the actor. Selections in this reading are directed towards the distinction between these two ways of approaching ethics.

I. Aligning history and character: the case of Shun

Confucianism adopted the past as a moral text that would confirm the school's ethical and political claims. By portraying legendary rulers and real dynastic founders as sage exemplars of Confucian ideals, Confucians were able to invoke their cultural authority for their program (which was, in fact, a substantial departure from tradition) and demonstrate the possibility of perfection, both in persons – the sages themselves – and in societies like the early Zhou. Much of the power of early Confucian ethics was, in fact, carried by the essentially literary imagination of the past. However, because the figures whom the Confucians valorized were drawn from existing legend, which had not been designed for their purposes, there were aspects of the past that conformed poorly to the requirements of Confucian doctrine.

Book 5 of the *Mencius* is largely designed to explain away apparent inconsistencies between the legendary and historical past and Confucian doctrine. No aspect is more important for the text than ensuring that the legend of the sage emperor Shun, the exemplar for filial feeling and conduct, be protected from the incoherence that non-philosophical literary impulse had introduced into its basically mythological form.

The heroism of Shun lay in the fact that he was perfectly filial towards his parents, despite the fact that they were terribly bad people who hated him. This steadfastness in his disposition towards his parents was the trait of character that led Yao to appoint Shun, an obscure peasant, to be his successor as king. (We'd probably all be more tolerant of our parents with such an inducement.)

In 5A.1, Mencius approaches a contradiction in the Shun legend that suggests that the sage was actually imperfect, and "complained" to Tian about his lot in life. (The term for "complain" also carries a sense of harboring resentment.)

5A.1 The disciple Wan Zhang asked, "'Shun went into the fields and cried out in tears to merciful Tian.' Why did he 'cry out in tears'?"

Mencius said, "He was crying his complaint and his yearning."

Wan Zhang said, "The say, 'If your parents love you, be joyful yet never be lax. If your parents hate you, work hard and never complain.' Did Shun nevertheless complain?"

Mencius replied, "Gongming Gao's disciple Chang Xi once asked, 'I have understood your teaching about the text 'Shun went into the fields,' but I still don't understand, 'He cried out in tears to merciful Tian, to his parents.' Gongming Gao said, 'This is beyond your understanding.' Gongming Gao did not believe that in his heart a filial son could be so complacent as think, 'I'll simply till the fields with all my might and fulfill my duties as a son, and if my parents show no love, what is that to me?'"

“Yao, the emperor, sent his children, nine sons and two daughters, to serve Shun in the fields, together with a hundred officers and stores of sheep, cattle, and grain. Most of the world’s gentlemen submitted themselves to his service, and Yao was preparing to transfer control of the world to him. Yet because Shun had not found accord with his parents he felt like a homeless man with nowhere to turn. Anyone would wish to please the world’s gentlemen, but that was not enough to dispel his anxieties. Everyone desires wealth, but though he was wealthy with the riches of the world it was not enough to dispel his anxieties. Everyone desires sexual gratification, but though the emperor gave him his two daughters in marriage it was not enough to dispel his anxieties. Everyone desires high rank, but though he was honored as the Son of Tian it was not enough to dispel his anxieties. None of these things could dispel his anxieties, only accord with his parents could do so.

“When we are young, we yearn for our parents. When we are old enough to have sexual desires, we yearn for youthful beauty. When we are old enough to have a family, we yearn for wife and children. When we are ready to take office, we yearn for a lord, and without a lord’s approval dissatisfaction burns within us. But the greatest filiality yearns for parents to the end of life. In Shun, I see a man who yearned for his parents even at fifty.”

Mencius succeeds in shifting the discussion from the issue of “complaint” to the fact that not even possession of the world could blunt the pain of Shun’s unrequited love for his parents. This change of focus means that rather than allowing that perfect filiality may entail resentment, or that Shun wasn’t perfectly filial, Mencius has demonstrated through a perfect model that the human need for filial relations has a natural priority over all other needs.

5A.2 Wan Zhang said, “The *Poetry* says:

To take a bride what’s to be done?
Parents surely must be told.

If this were truly so, one could never behave like Shun. How can we explain that Shun took a wife without telling his parents?

Mencius said, “If he had told them, he would not have been able to take any wife. That male and female should love together is a fundamental human relationship. If he had told them, he would have had to discard this fundamental relationship, and he would have harbored bitterness against his parents. This is why he did not tell them.”

“I understand now why Shun did not tell his parents,” said Wan Zhang. “But why did Yao not tell them?”

“Yao also knew that if Shun’s parents were told Shun would not have been able to take a wife.”

Wan Zhang said, “Shun’s parents told him to repair the roof of their storehouse, and then his father set fire to the storehouse. They made him climb down to dredge the well and then covered up the well. His brother Xiang said, ‘The plans to kill my elder brother were all my doing. You, my parents, may have his cattle and sheep, and his stores of grain as well. But his halberd and spears shall be mine, his zither shall be mine, his bow shall be mine, and his two women shall tend to my bed.’ Then Xiang entered Shun’s household. Shun was on his bed, playing the zither. ‘I was just thinking of you,’ he said with chagrin. ‘I was thinking of my subjects,’ said Shun. ‘Will you assist me in

governing them?’ Now, am I wrong to think that Shun did not understand that Xiang was trying to murder him?

Mencius said, “How could he not have known? But his brother’s cares were like his own, as his brother’s joys were like his own.”

“Well then, was Shun pretending to be pleased with Xiang?”

“No. Once there was a man who presented a live fish to Zichan, prime minister of Zheng. Zichan told the steward of his estate to raise it in his lake, but the steward cooked it instead, and then reported back, ‘When I first released it, it only stirred weakly, but after awhile it grew active and swam off.’ Zichan said, ‘It found its place! It found its place!’ When the steward emerged, he said, ‘Who says Zichan is wise? If already cooked and eaten the fish and he cries, “It’s found its place!”’

“So you see, the *junzi* may be deceived by devices that follow the normal course of things, but he cannot be fooled by things that defy reason. Xiang appeared to Shun in the mode of a loving brother and Shun responded with pleasure in true accord with that spirit. What pretense was there in that?”

The type of reasoning we see in this passage is called “casuistry,” which reconciles apparent ethical rule-breaking with appeals to contextual circumstances that call for the creation of a new rule. Casuistry is important to the *Mencius*, as a defensive text, but the ad hoc twists that it engages in for the purpose of defending non-essential aspects of doctrine or Mencius’s own behavior tend to muddle the main structure of its ethical project.

In the case of Shun’s rule-breaking, the story makes good sense as legend, and we can all understand how a figure like Shun could have hidden his marriage to the king’s daughters from his ethically hideous parents but still be a good son. However, the reasons are hard to articulate, and the *Mencius* does not do a very good job of it in 5A.2, where it seems to invent a rather dangerous rule: the perfectly filial son will break filial rules if obedience would cause him to resent his parents. The text finds a more cogent “exception rule” in a passage from Book 4.

4A.26 Mencius said, “There are three forms of unfiliality, and bearing no heirs is the worst. Shun married without telling his parents because he was afraid of leaving no heir. The *junzi* understands this as equivalent to telling his parents.”

This is clearly more successful than the claim in 5A.2, since it simply creates a rule hierarchy; following the cardinal rule may entail violating a subsidiary rule.

But there is a more basic problem here. In casuistic argument, the *Mencius* is treating morality as an ethics of action, and judging the moral person – Shun in this case – good because he follows rules, not because his character is virtuous. It is very common to see the *Mencius* move in this direction when it is on the defensive; for example, Mencius’s arguments for why he treats the King of Qi with disdain in 2B.2 present a welter of unconvincing rules to rationalize and conceal the basic fact that Mencius lied and got caught.

Here is a passage that approaches the figure of Shun entirely from an ethics of virtue perspective:

4B.19 Mencius said, “The difference between man and the beasts is extremely slight. The common person discards it; the *junzi* preserves it. Shun’s understanding of affairs and perceptiveness about human relationships was due to his proceeding from humanity and right, not a matter of applying humanity and right to his actions.”

What's at stake in 4B.19? It is difficult to clarify without awareness of the anti-Mohist program of the *Mencius*. "Applying" humanity and right would be a Mohist approach, treating these values as external standards. For Mencius, what distinguished Shun is his "preservation" of the dispositional responses that are inherent in people as a species – the moral senses, which operate intuitively, if we are able to attend to them.

Elsewhere in the text, *Mencius* is portrayed dealing with another problem that the legend of Shun presented to Confucians. If Shun became king while his father was still alive (which would, of course, only happen in non-hereditary succession), how could he fulfill both the imperatives of filiality and kingship if his father fell afoul of the law?

7A.35 Tao Ying asked, "When Shun was Son of Heaven and Gaoyao was Minister of Crime, had Shun's father Gusou killed a man, what would have been done?"

Mencius answered, "Gusou would have been apprehended, that's all."

"Then, Shun would not have prevented it?"

"How could he have prevented it? It would have been Gao Yao's mandate."

"Well then, what would Shun have done?"

Mencius replied, "Shun would have viewed casting off the empire like casting off a worn out shoe. He would secretly have borne his father on his back and fled until he came to dwell by the shores of the sea. There he would have lived in joyful contentment, having forgotten the empire."

Here, Mencius resolves the contradiction not merely through a formula that adjudicates between conflicting rule obligations (or role obligations), but by imagining Shun's character. Shun was perfectly suited to be king because he had no attachment to its office or rewards, only to the most basic rewards of human relations – this character would have allowed him to resolve ethical conflicts arising from his multiple roles by giving up those less central to universal human character, the ground of his moral perfection. Whether the solution Mencius offers is satisfactory can be argued (Shun discards his political obligations without notice, breaks into the jail, obstructs justice, and abets a fugitive murderer – and lives out his days in joyful contentment), but the method is true to the basic Confucian approach.

II. Detecting virtue in real people

There is an example in the *Mencius* that illustrates with great clarity the double track of casuistry and virtue ethics in the text. It does not concern Shun, but a real person close to Mencius himself. It illustrates again how people should not be judged according to rules – there is an art to "knowing people," and the *junzi* is accomplished in that art.

4B.30 Gongdu-zi said, "Kuang Zhang is termed unfilial throughout the state, yet you, Master, travel in company with him and treat him with the forms of courtesy. May I ask why?"

Mencius said, "There are five types of behavior that the world commonly refers to as unfilial. To be physically lazy and ignore the welfare of one's parents is the first. To gamble and drink, and so ignore the welfare of one's parents is the second. To be greedy for wealth that one reserves for wife and children, and so ignore the welfare of one's parents, is the third. To revel in sensual pleasures and bring shame upon one's parents is the fourth. To be enamored of bravado and brawls and so endanger one's parents is the fifth.

"Does any one of these apply to Kuang Zhang? In his case, the son reproached the father over an issue of moral conduct and now the two have broken off relations.

Reproaches are appropriate between friends, but between father and son, they are great despoilers of love. Do you think Kuang Zhang does not wish to have a family, and be a husband with children? Yet because he offended his father and is banished from his presence, he has sent away his wife and children, to live out his days without their care and support. He reasoned that were he not to do so, his offense would be great indeed, and *that* is precisely what Kuang Zhang is all about.”

In 4B.30, Mencius has been attacked for befriending a man who has fallen out with his own father – for a teacher so vocally committed to filiality as a cardinal virtue, friendship with such a man would be a problem indeed. Mencius takes two approaches in defending his friend. The first is to claim that he has not broken any of a set of five rules (we never encounter this set elsewhere; it seems designed for this case). It is hard to find a weaker argument in the *Mencius*. But then Mencius takes a different tack, acknowledging that Kuang Zhang failed live up to filial perfection, but taking as the *defining mark of his character* how thoroughly he sought to make amends for his failing. The question becomes not what his friend did, but who his friend truly is. Just as when Mencius sees deep into the heart of the ox-pitying King in 1A.7, the ethical method the text celebrates is ultimately focused on discerning and building moral character, not identifying and obeying moral rules.

4A.15 Mencius said, “Nothing is better in examining a man than to observe the pupils of his eyes. They cannot conceal his faults. If he is upright within his breast then his eyes will be clear; if he is not, they will be murky. Listen to his speech, stare into his eyes – where can he hide?”

This passage seems to suggest a connoisseurship of virtue. It echoes, to some degree, Mencius’s claim in 2A.2 that he is exceptionally skilled in “understanding speech” (see the section of the passage titled “Sagehood and Speech” in Reading 2).

III. Self-cultivation and the “greater body”

The most detailed description of how one develops (or, for Mencius, “recovers”) the character of the sage is unquestionably the discussion of the “flood-like *qi*” in 2A.2. In that passage, we can glimpse the way Mencius conceived of how we can discipline ourselves so that our moral dispositions can harness the energy and skills of our bodies in responding to the challenges and opportunities presented by everyday living. But there are many other passages where Mencius makes observations on how we can become sages like Yao and Shun, and these help illuminate the portrait of the person – real and ideal – that underlies Mencius’s ethical thought.

7B.35 Mencius said, “In nurturing the heart, nothing is better than to reduce one’s desires. When a man has few desires, though there may be qualities he has not preserved intact, they will be few. As for a man of many desires, though there may be qualities that he has preserved intact, they will be few.”

What sort of desires does Mencius mean? Clearly, the weight of the text as a whole makes it impossible to read 7B.35 as advocating extreme asceticism. The following passage seems to frame the issue in terms of relative strength of desires as well as number.

6A.10 Mencius said, “I love to eat fish; I also love to eat bear paws. If I can’t have both, I’ll forego the fish and eat the bear paws. I love life; I also love right. If I can’t have both, I will forego life and choose to do right. Life is truly something I love, it’s just that

there is something else I love more, and so I can't hold on to life by devious means. And death is truly something I hate, it's just that there is something I hate more than death, and so there are dangers I will not avoid.

"If a man loves nothing more than life, then won't he use whatever means are required to hold onto it? If a man hates nothing more than death, then won't he use whatever means are required to avoid danger? Yet there are things men won't do in order to avoid danger and live, and from this we know that there are things men love more than life and hate more than death. It's not just worthy men who have such feelings, all men have them; worthies are simply those who do not lose them.

"Let's say that a dishful of rice and a bowlful of porridge are the difference between life and death. If you offer them with a curse, no traveler would accept them, and if you trampled on them first, even a beggar would refuse. But when it comes to accepting a court stipend of ten thousand measures of grain, people accept it with no question of propriety (*li*) and right (*yi*). What will such a stipend provide for me? A beautiful home, the attentions of a wife and concubines, the gratitude of needy acquaintances whose pleas I heed? A moment ago, I refused rice and porridge that meant life or death because it was not proper to accept, but now I'll do anything for a beautiful home, the attentions of a wife and concubines, or the gratitude of needy acquaintances whose pleas I heed. Is there no end to what I would do? This is called losing one's original heart."

A more general formulation of these issues is developed through a theory of the "greater" and "lesser bodies" that people possess. These passages underscore that for Mencius, the moral senses are given to us in just the way that the physical senses of sight, hearing, and so forth are given – there is no categorical distinction between the physical and moral capacities of the person.

6A.14 Mencius said, "People love all parts of their bodies, and they nurture them all together. There's not an inch of a person's skin he does not love, nor an inch he does not nurture. When considering the different value of the parts of the body, there is no standard other than to consider their relation to the person himself. The body has parts that are of different value, and greater and lesser parts. One should not harm a greater part for the sake of a smaller, or a more valuable part for the sake of one of lesser worth. Those who nurture the smaller parts become small men; those who nurture the greater parts become great men. Let's say a gardener cut down fine phoenix and catalpa trees and nurtured common jujubes; we'd say he was a worthless gardener. A man who nurtured his finger while allowing his shoulder and back to degenerate without being aware of it would be called deranged. Those who care only about food and drink are despised because they nurture the small and lose the large. If a man could care only for food and drink and not lose something important, then the mouth and belly would indeed be far more than simply a patch of our flesh."

6A.15 Gongduzi asked, "We are all equally men, yet some are great men and others small men. Why is this?"

Mencius said, "Those who follow their greater body become great men, those who follow their lesser body become small men."

"We are all equally men, why do some follow their greater bodies while others follow their smaller?"

Mencius said, “The ears and eyes are organs that do not think; their perception is veiled by things. In this way, one thing encountering another, there is simply a force of attraction. The mind is an organ that thinks. If you think you’ll grasp, if you don’t you won’t. This is a potential endowed in us by Tian. Once a man chooses to stand by his greater parts, his lesser parts cannot seize him. Being a great man is no more than this.

The desires that Mencius seeks to control clearly are appetites that he associates with the “lesser body,” appetites that are merely governed by the material “magnetism” of the world of things. These deflect us away from responding to the dispositions of our greater, ethical person, and as those dispositions weaken, the motivational impulses of self-regarding behavior grow. The Confucian *dao* is designed to reverse this process.

6A.11 Mencius said, “Humanity (*ren*) is the heart of man, and right (*yi*) is man’s path. How woeful it is when a man turns from his road and does not follow it, and lets his heart go without realizing he needs to find it. When people let their chickens and dogs roam away they know to go find them, but when their heart has wandered off it is different. The *dao* of learning is none other than this: it is a search for one’s lost heart.”

The *Mencius* provides some relatively specific ways to approach the “rehabilitative” function of self-cultivation.

4A.12 Mencius said, “If a man in a subordinate position cannot gain the support of those above him he will not be able to govern people. There is a *dao* for gaining the support of superiors: if you are not trusted by your friends you will not gain the support of your superiors. There is a *dao* for becoming trusted by your friends: if you are unable to please your parents you will not be trusted by your friends. There is a *dao* for pleasing your parents: if you examine yourself and find you do not have integrity within you will not be able to please your parents. There is a *dao* for gaining integrity within: if you do not see the good clearly you will not have integrity within.

“This integrity is the *dao* of Tian and aspiring to integrity is the *dao* of man. There has never been a man who has thorough integrity yet has been unable to move others; there has never been a man without integrity who has been able to move others.”

This passage, which appears almost verbatim as a quote from Confucius in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, a Mencian text we’ll read late in the term, traces, in reverse order, the steps one must take and tests one must pass to become morally successful in public life. Rehabilitation of the self ultimately begins by returning to the relationship that precedes all others, as child to one’s parents. Until one has learned how to perform that role, one cannot effectively play any other role in society. The lesson of filiality, submitting oneself to the service of others rather than pursuit of the appetites of the lesser body, are prerequisite to any further growth of the greater body.

4A.4 Mencius said, “When those one loves do not respond with affection, reflect on your humanity (*ren*). When those one governs do not respond with order, reflect on your wisdom. When those one treats with ritual courtesy do not return it, reflect on your respectfulness. If in any action there is a failing, seek it out within yourself. When one’s person is correct, the world will turn to you. The *Poetry* says:

Long may he match the mandate,
Himself seeking many blessings.”

The *Mencius* is relentless in focusing moral responsibility on the actor. If the task is self-perfection, the moral qualities of others are not relevant to the project. Confucians insist on the belief that virtue is charismatic and will elicit a positive response from others, ultimately working to transform the world towards virtue. If that is not occurring, it can only be interpreted as a symptom of imperfect self-cultivation, and the only implication is that one must increase one's effort to reform oneself.

The charismatic nature of the man of moral integrity is reflected in 7A.21, which illustrates on another level how integrated the moral and the physical are in Mencius's thought.

7A.21 Mencius said, "To possess broad lands and a populous state – these are things the *junzi* desires, but his joys do not lie therein. To stand at the center of the world and bring peace to all within the four seas – this is what the *junzi* takes joy in, but his nature does not lie therein.

"What the *junzi* takes as his nature is not increased by great accomplishments nor decreased by impoverishment in failure. This is because it is his fixed allotment. What the *junzi* takes as his nature are humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Rooted in his heart, they bloom richly in his visage, course down his back and through his four limbs – he moves unspeaking and is understood."

The redirection of one's motivational structure from rewards associated with material appetites and conventional markers of social esteem to the satisfaction of moral integrity is the basic theme of self-cultivation passages.

6A.16 Mencius said, "There are offices that are bestowed by Tian and offices that are bestowed by men. Humanity, righteousness, loyalty, faithfulness, the untiring love of goodness – these are offices bestowed by Tian. Duke, minister, grandee – these are offices bestowed by men. Men of old cultivated their Tian-bestowed offices, and human offices followed. Men today cultivate their Tian-bestowed offices in order to exact from other men an office, and once they have it, they cast away their Tian-bestowed offices. There are no men more deluded than these. In the end, they will surely perish."

The fulfillment of self-cultivation is represented in terms of a type of cosmic satisfaction.

IV. Becoming Yao and Shun: self-transformation

6B.2 Cao Jiao asked, "Do you teach that every person can be a Yao or a Sun?"

"Yes," replied Mencius.

"I have heard that King Wen was ten feet tall and Tang was nine. Now I am nine feet four inches tall and I eat well – what could I do to be like either?"

Mencius said, "What does this have to do with my point – which is, indeed, about simply taking action? Let's say there's a man here who isn't strong enough to lift a baby chick – he's simply a weakling. Now let's say there's a man who can lift a hundredweight – he's a strong man. If he lifts the same weight that the great strong man Wu Huo lifted, then he's a Wu Huo. Such a man doesn't have to worry about whether he can do it – the question is simply whether he *will* do it.

"When a man walks slowly so as to stay behind those elder to him, we say he is a good youth. If he walks so quickly that he precedes his elders, we say he is not acting as

a good youth. Is walking slowly something he isn't able to do? No, he simply doesn't do it.

“The *dao* of Yao and Shun is nothing other than filiality and proper treatment of elders. If you wear the clothes of Yao, if you intone the words of Yao, if you do the deeds of Yao, you are simply Yao. If you wear the clothes of the tyrant Jie, intone the words of Jie, and do the deeds of Jie, you are simply Jie.”

Cao Jiao said, “If I am able to gain an audience with the ruler of Zou and he grants me an abode here, I would wish to stay and take instruction at your gate!”

Mencius replied, “The *dao* is like a broad road – how could it be hard to find? The problem is simply that people just don't look for it. You go home and look for it. You'll find there are more than enough teachers.”

We have seen Mencius take much the same take in speaking to King Xuan of Qi. Having illustrated for that king his possession of a sense of compassion, even for oxen, Mencius tells him, “that Your Majesty does not rule as a True King is only because you will not, not because you cannot.”

7B.33 Mencius said, “For Yao and Shun is was simply their nature. For Tang and King Wu, they returned to it. Every motion, every stance precise in *li* as one goes round: this is the acme of full virtue.”

7A.38 Mencius said, “A man's looks and figure are Tian-endowed nature, but only after becoming a Sage does a man know how to move his figure.”

4B.25 Mencius said, “If the great beauty Xi Shi were covered with filth people would hold their noses and pass her by. But though a man may be ugly, if he fasts and bathes he is fit to sacrifice to the Lord Above.”

7A.17 Mencius said, “Don't do what others will not do; don't wish for what others do not wish for. That's all there is to it.”

The roots of the *dao* are in ordinary life, and it is in ordinary action that sagehood is accomplished. The question for Mencius is not whether we can do it, but whether we will.

4B.14 Mencius said, “A *junzi* immerses his student deeply in the *dao* because he wishes him to grasp it for himself. Once he has grasped it, he will dwell in it at ease; once he dwells in it at ease, he will draw deeply from it. Once he draws deeply from it, then as he takes it to himself he will encounter its source at his every left and right. Hence the *junzi* wishes him to grasp it for himself.”

Translators do not generally interpret the main topic of this passage to be teaching. In the initial sentence, the object of the verbs “immerses” and “wishes” are words meaning “him,” and most interpreters read the passage to say that the *junzi* immerses himself deeply in the *dao*. However, the syntax of the initial sentence becomes quite unusual in that reading, and by reading the passage as a comment on teaching, the grammar becomes simple, and the meaning clear.

7A.4 Mencius said, “The world of things is complete in me; to reflect upon oneself and find perfect integrity: there is no joy greater than this!”

Yet the text insists on the accessibility of this goal of perfection, based on our initial complete possession of the moral seeds in our nature.

4B.32 Chuzi, a man of Qi, told Mencius, “The King sent someone to spy on you, Sir, in order to learn whether you are after all different from other men.”

Mencius said, “How would I be different? Yao and Shun were the same as other men!”

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