

(Penultimate Draft)

Mencius on the Continuity of Moral Development

Finis origine pendet—the end hangs from the beginning.
—Manlius

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the Continuity Problem arising from Aristotle's account of habituation and moral development. After reviewing recent attempts to resolve this issue, the paper proposes a solution informed by the ideas of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius. It argues that Mencius's understanding of human nature, along with his accounts of self-reflection and moral recollection, provides a satisfying response to the Continuity Problem and offers significant insights into the process of moral development.

(I) *Introduction*

This paper offers a solution to the Continuity Problem arising from Aristotle's account of moral development: the challenge of explaining how someone who initially lacks the appropriate motivations, emotions, and thoughts required for virtue can acquire them by repeating virtuous actions. After outlining Aristotle's view of habituation and clarifying the nature of the Continuity Problem, the paper examines two recent and conflicting solutions from Marta Jimenez and Margaret Hampson. It then shows how Mencius's view both integrates key insights from their approaches and underscores additional dimensions for moral growth: (a) the plurality of moral motivations that can build a virtuous character, and (b) the role of moral recollection. Finally, Mencius's moral psychology is shown to provide an attractive resolution to the Continuity Problem by illuminating how the process of becoming virtuous accords with our nature as human beings.

Before proceeding, a justification can be offered for turning to Mencius, an early Confucian thinker. Although the Continuity Problem emerges within the context of Aristotle's account of moral development, it raises broader philosophical questions that confront anyone who affirms the importance of acquiring virtue. Mencius was deeply concerned with the cultivation of virtue and particularly with the dynamics of moral motivation—issues at the heart of the Continuity Problem. As discussed below, contemporary scholars continue to debate how Aristotle's theory resolves this problem. By contrast, Mencius offers a compelling response grounded in a clear account of human nature as constituted by basic moral inclinations, thereby sidestepping some of the interpretive difficulties associated with Aristotle. His view also diverges from Aristotle's in important ways that provide him with greater philosophical resources for addressing the Continuity Problem. Moreover, Mencius introduces the concept of moral recollection, which further enriches his account of moral development and contributes to its resolution. These points do not imply that Mencius provides a complete account of moral development, but rather that his ethical framework offers a fruitful and philosophically illuminating way of engaging the Continuity Problem—one that both intersects with and diverges from Aristotle's in important respects.

(II) *Aristotle on Habituation*

The starting point for discussing Aristotle's view of moral development can be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) 2.1 in which Aristotle claims that the virtues are the result of habitual activity:

[T]he excellences develop in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature, but because we are naturally able to receive them and are brought to completion by means of habituation. (*NE* 2.1 1103a20-25.)¹

On Aristotle's view, while we have the natural capacity to acquire the virtues, they do not develop in us by nature. Rather, it is through repeated practice and habituation that virtues are acquired, much like the acquisition of skills: "...people become builders by building, and cithara-players by playing the cithara; so too, then, we become just by doing just things, moderate by doing moderate things, and courageous by doing courageous things." (NE 2.1 1103a30-b1)

But one might puzzle over how one can *become* virtuous by performing virtuous actions if one can only perform virtuous actions by already being virtuous. Here is what Aristotle says about it:

But one might find it puzzling how we say that people have to become fair by doing fair things, and temperate by doing temperate things; after all, if they are doing fair things and temperate things, then they are fair and temperate, just as they are literate and musical if they are doing literate things and musical things. (NE 2.4 1105a17-21.)

Following scholarly convention, this will be labelled the "Priority Problem."² To resolve this puzzle, Aristotle makes a distinction between acting in accordance with virtue and acting virtuously. While acting virtuously requires one to possess the virtues, one can act in accordance with virtue without being fully virtuous:

Or isn't that how things are in the case of the skills? For it is possible to do something grammatical both by chance and at someone else's direction; so one will be grammatical if he should both do something grammatical and do it grammatically, that is, according to the grammatical skills within himself. (NE 2.4 1105a21-26.)

Merely hitting the correct notes on a piano doesn't mean that one is an expert. The expert possesses the understanding of how to play the piano whereas the novice requires external guidance; she doesn't yet possess the skills "within herself." Similarly, someone who isn't fully virtuous may perform an act of virtue that a virtuous agent would have performed but will do so while lacking certain internal

characteristics such as a proper motive or emotion. The non-virtuous person could have just gotten lucky. Aristotle ends up identifying three necessary conditions for an act to be done virtuously: (1) that the agent acts knowingly, (2) that the agent chooses the virtuous action for its own sake, and (3) that the agent acts from a firm and stable character (*NE* 2.4 1105a26-b4).

But this distinction between the non-virtuous learner and the virtuous agent raises another puzzle: how can it be that someone who isn't virtuous and so merely acts in ways that resemble the actions of virtuous people can, just through repetition, *become* virtuous? Sarah Broadie comments, "the more [Aristotle] stresses the differences, the more one is entitled to wonder how merely performing the actions leads to moral character."³ (Broadie 1991, 104) Here is how Marta Jimenez articulates the problem:

"But Aristotle's solution to the problem of priority seems to generate a new problem—this time a problem of continuity: if we take the view to be that learners become virtuous by doing virtuous actions in a different way to how virtuous people do them—i.e. not virtuously—then it is hard to see how actions performed in that way can contribute to the formation of truly virtuous dispositions. Indeed, the more deflationary the characterization of how learners perform virtuous actions, the more difficult it is to find any significant continuity between those actions and the virtuous dispositions they are expected to yield." (Jimenez 2016, 4)

In resolving the Priority Problem, Aristotle must now offer an account of how it is that an unvirtuous person can cultivate the necessary dispositions for virtue. Following Jimenez, this will be referred to as the "Continuity Problem." A common response to the Continuity Problem has been to affirm that the process of habit formation involved in cultivating virtue is not rote or mechanical but requires purposeful, reflective practice.⁴ Just as hitting notes randomly on a keyboard or haphazardly hacking away at a golf ball will not result in skilfulness in playing either piano or golf,

the cultivation of virtue requires time, reflection, and structured training. Mindlessly mimicking the behaviours of a virtuous person will not result in the development of virtue. This response also chimes well with Aristotle's emphasis on taking the development of virtue as akin to the development of skill, "For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions." (*NE* 2.2 1103a-1103b)

One can, however, develop an expertise in a particular craft, without coming to appreciate the craft for its own sake. A child might begin learning the piano to please one's parents or win the praise of others, and with enough practice the child may become quite proficient. But whether the child comes to truly enjoy playing piano for its own sake and appreciate its value is a highly contingent matter. Alasdair MacIntyre draws attention to this difference between the development of skill and internal appreciation of the skill through an example of a chess-playing child:

Consider the example of a highly intelligent seven-year-old child whom I wish to teach to play chess, although the child has no particular desire to learn the game. The child does however have a very strong desire for candy and little chance of obtaining it. I therefore tell the child that if the child will play chess with me once a week I will give the child 50 cents worth of candy; moreover I tell the child that I will always play in such a way that it will be difficult, but not impossible, for the child to win and that, if the child wins, the child will receive an extra 50 cents worth of candy. Thus motivated the child plays and plays to win. Notice however that, so long as it is the candy alone which provides the child with a good reason for playing chess, the child has no reason not to cheat and every reason to cheat, provided he or she can do so successfully. But, so we may hope, there will come a time when the child will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, reasons now not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands. Now if the child cheats, he or she will be defeating not me, but himself or herself. (MacIntyre 2007, 188)

MacIntyre goes on to identify those goods specific to chess as “goods internal to a practice” (or what we will call *internal goods*) which consists in goods that can only be achieved through the specific activity (or type of activity) such as chess or piano. Moreover, the internal goods can only be grasped or understood by those who participate in the relevant activity. One must experience the practice to genuinely appreciate the activity’s intrinsic value. By contrast, external goods such as wealth, honour, or prestige can be achieved through other means. What also seems clear is that it is often the external goods that attract us initially (just as the child began learning chess to obtain candy) and when one is primarily motivated by the external goods attached to a practice, it is challenging to deeply appreciate the practice for its own sake. The challenge is to explain how the child—and people more generally—come to engage in an activity for its own sake.

The central distinction between the child only motivated by the desire for external goods and the child motivated by the desire for internal goods seems correct and raises a more difficult question about how we come to develop a proper attitude and motive toward practices. And this problem isn’t resolved by calling attention to how skills are acquired through structured practice over time. For while someone with an adequate level of ability and talent will become better at the piano through diligent training, it is not at all clear that one will, even with dedicated study, come to appreciate the goods internal to playing the piano.

This is a problem that seems even more difficult to resolve when applied to the cultivation of virtue. For while the cultivation of a skill can take place without becoming intrinsically motivated to value the skill for its own sake, one will not become more virtuous without becoming intrinsically motivated to do what is virtuous. Someone who does what appears to be a generous act such as delivering

meals to struggling families will not be cultivating generosity whatsoever if the motive is to seek adulation from neighbours. And neither will the repetition of this act, with the same motive, make one any more virtuous. Moreover, as Aristotle notes, proper feelings are also a necessary element of virtue:

...it is possible on occasion to be affected by fear, boldness, appetite, anger, pity, and pleasure and distress in general both too much and too little, and neither is good; but to be affected when one should, for the reasons one should, and in the way one should, is both intermediate and best, which is what belongs to excellence. (NE 2.6 1106b19)

Virtues also require that one is disposed to act in certain ways, while skills do not. One can be a master chess player but not be motivated to play chess, but one cannot be both virtuous and unmotivated to act virtuously in circumstances where virtue is called for.

A key difference between skills and virtues lies in motivation and the cultivation of proper feeling. If you have a certain level of musical capacity, then with guidance from a teacher and diligent practice, you *will* become better at the piano. You don't need to learn piano for the right reasons or even enjoy playing the piano to become an expert.⁵ But when it comes to becoming virtuous, things look quite different. Someone who is merely doing the right thing to appear virtuous is not at all moving toward virtue. And for Aristotle, without proper emotions one might simply be acting from self-control. What makes the Continuity Problem especially difficult has to do with the centrality of both motive and feeling for the cultivation of virtue: it's difficult to see how simply behaving as a virtuous person would, without having the motivations or affections of a virtuous person, would lead to the actual development of virtue.

The discussion now turns to two divergent responses to the Continuity Problem developed recently by Marta Jimenez and Margaret Hampson. In

developing alternative interpretations of Aristotle, they identify two different ways to meet the Continuity Problem. Both accounts provide insight into the process of habituation and mark out substantial elements of the process of moral development that need to be addressed.

(III) *Marta Jimenez on the Continuity Problem*

After laying out the Continuity Problem (as discussed above), Jimenez offers an interpretation of Aristotle that seeks to resolve the problem and shows how Aristotle's account of habituation does not leave a gap that makes the process of virtue-acquisition mysterious. For our purposes we can leave aside whether Jimenez's interpretation of Aristotle is correct and focus on the philosophical idea that she proposes. The core idea is this: on Aristotle's view, the non-virtuous learner, when performing virtuous actions that move the learner toward virtue, must perform the action from a virtuous motive.⁶ By positing the possession of a virtuous motive—a desire to act for the sake of the noble—Jimenez argues that the Continuity Problem is resolved:

It is then of the greatest importance to pay attention to *how* learners perform their actions, since they will acquire virtuous dispositions only if they perform the relevant actions *in the right way*—because the qualities of the dispositions will reflect the qualities of the actions through which they came into being, and the quality of those actions will be determined not only by the external results, but also by the agents' emotional and motivational states. The relevance of the *how* implies, then, that learners have to be able to perform *well* the relevant actions *before* they have the relevant dispositions. (Jimenez 2016, 11)

If the process of habituation is to yield a genuinely virtuous character, the actions of the non-virtuous learner cannot be motivated by non-moral concerns (e.g. wealth or fame). Rather, "learners of virtue will already have 'something of' the virtues that they are trying to acquire, which will enable them to perform the actions in the right way."

On Jimenez's account, the Continuity Problem is resolved by showing that the non-virtuous learner, though not fully possessing virtuous qualities, acts for the sake of the noble, and that these actions gradually build virtuous dispositions. Let us call this the Virtuous Motives view.⁷ For Jimenez, the source of this virtuous motive for Aristotle is found in his account of shame which Jimenez takes as the proto-virtue of the learner. A sense of shame provides the learner with the motivation to act for the sake of the noble or fine (*kalon*). More will be said later about how Mencius agrees that a sense of shame is important for moral development, as well as how his account of shame diverges from Aristotle's in important ways.

An analogous response to the virtuous motives view can be found in the panpsychist response to the problem of consciousness. For a fundamental challenge in the philosophy of mind is the emergence of consciousness and mind in the natural world. For panpsychists, mind and consciousness are a fundamental part of everything in the world; there is no special story we need to supply about the emergence of consciousness. Mentality and consciousness were there all along in matter, albeit to a low degree. Similarly, on Jimenez's view, moral motivation is constitutive of our human form of life, and so no special story needs to be told about how moral motives emerge from a completely non-moral state. Rather, moral motivation was there all along. There is no gap to be filled.

But despite this view's plausibility in resolving the Continuity Problem, Margaret Hampson has recently argued against Jimenez's account. Let us now turn to Hampson's objections to the Virtuous Motives view and Hampson's own solution to the Continuity Problem.

(IV) *Margaret Hampson on the Continuity Problem*

Hampson agrees with Jimenez that it is possible for the non-virtuous learner to act for the sake of the fine but argues that this isn't central to the process of habituation. Hampson contends that "the Virtuous Motives view fails to offer a satisfactory account of how virtuous dispositions come to be established, and misrepresents the role that a learner's motives play in the habituation process." (Hampson 2020, 3) At the heart of Hampson's argument against the Virtuous Motives view is the idea that by identifying the presence of a noble motive and acting for the sake of the fine as what centrally explains how a non-virtuous becomes virtuous, the Virtuous Motives view is unable to adequately represent the internal changes that occur in the agent during the process of moral development. On Hampson's view, virtue-acquisition characteristically involves developing a virtuous motive within the very process of habituation. In other words, while on Jimenez's account virtuous motives must be assumed to have already been present in the non-virtuous learner, on Hampson's view, it is a part of the moral developmental process *itself* that gives rise to the virtuous motive. In fact, it is an important feature of moral development that the learner, through the performance of virtuous actions, come to *discover* the fineness of good actions and thereby develop virtuous motives (Hampson 2020, 16).

Now, as Hampson makes clear, the argument is not that it is impossible for the non-virtuous moral learner to perform virtuous actions with virtuous motives.⁸ But, by arguing that a virtuous motive must be driving the moral learner, the Virtuous Motives view fails to attend to a key element in character development. In fact, by not attending to the way the virtuous motives become established through virtuous actions, we miss out on the critical role that the agential perspective plays in the developmental process. Hampson argues that performing virtuous actions is central

to Aristotle's picture of habituation because through engaging in such actions "the learner gains an increased sensitivity to the fineness of virtuous action, the situations that call for such action, and the variety of forms that this can take." (Hampson 2020, 30. Going back to MacIntyre's chess-playing child example, the thought might be that just as the child ideally comes to see the value of playing chess—perhaps appreciating the game's complexity by engaging in the activity itself, the virtuous learner also comes to notice the various ways in which a fine or noble action is attractive. As Hampson notes, "Aristotle's deep insight, I submit, is that there is something in particular about doing something oneself that is revealing to an agent, and in the case of moral education, that can be transformative." (Hampson 2020: 31)

It is worth summarizing now the dialectic between Jimenez and Hampson. Jimenez argues that for the performance of virtuous action to lead to the building of virtuous dispositions, a virtuous motive must already be present. Hampson argues that the existence of a virtuous motive is not necessary for the learner to move toward the development of virtue, and in fact, it is the very process of engaging in virtuous actions that itself is the source of the development of virtuous motives. Both positions capture important aspects of the process of moral development, and what follows aims to integrate these points by turning to the ideas of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius.

Mencius integrates key ideas found in both Jimenez and Hampson, appealing to nascent moral sensibilities that he believes are constitutive of human nature, but also taking reflection on these sensibilities as a central part of the process of moral development. So, while Mencius sides with Jimenez in taking the existence of certain moral motives as a prerequisite of moral development, he agrees with Hampson that it is in the process of moral growth (through reflection on one's own heart) that we

come to discover the fineness of moral actions, which in turn strengthens our inclinations toward virtue.

(V) Mencius on Moral Sprouts and Moral Recollection

During 4th Century BCE in which Aristotle was working out his ethical framework, half a world away the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius (*Mengzi* 孟子) was also working out a vision of the moral life by refining the ideas of Confucius (Kongzi 孔子) and those found in other classical Chinese documents. The central preoccupation of Mencius and other early Confucian thinkers was *how* one can become good. The answer, it turns out, is complicated since not only are there certain attitudes and mindsets that need to be cultivated, but also a range of social, cultural, and political mechanisms that need to be in place for the realization of virtue. For example, Mencius notes that poverty leads most young men to violence (*Mengzi* 6A7) and that our social environment deeply influences our moral lives. Alongside environmental factors, he also acknowledges that individual human effort, focus, and dedication are also important for the acquisition of virtue (*Mengzi* 6A9).

But besides the exertion of will and the support of a proper social environment, Mencius believed that a proper understanding of human nature was a necessary component of an overall account of moral self-cultivation. When the rival philosopher Gaozi argues that making human beings virtuous is like fashioning a willow tree into cups and bowls, suggesting that virtues are artificial products of culture and socialization, Mencius replies:

Can you make it into cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow tree? You can only make it into cups and bowls by violating and robbing

the willow tree. If you must violate and rob the willow tree in order to make it into cups and bowls, must you also violate and rob people in order to make them benevolent and righteous? Your doctrine will surely lead people to regard benevolence and righteousness as misfortunes for them, won't it? (*Mengzi* 6A1)⁹

If the virtues only arise in humans by distorting human nature, Mencius argues, then the virtues would come to be seen as harmful to human life and would be practically impossible to realize.¹⁰

Mencius, like Aristotle, develops a substantive account of human nature (*xing* 性) that provides a foundation for his ethical views.¹¹ Mencius asserts that human nature is constituted by a number of moral “sprouts” (*duan* 端) that can be cultivated to become robust virtues.

...we can see that 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.

(*Mengzi* 2A6)

The moral sprouts are inclinations that dispose one to feel, think, and act well in a variety of contexts. But unless they are developed into actual virtues, they do not reliably motivate people toward good action. Rather, as the sprout metaphor suggests, they provide a range of moral emotions that need to be strengthened, refined, and developed over time if one is to become a truly virtuous agent.¹²

As Mencius emphasizes throughout the text, the moral sprouts are actively working in us in subtle ways. Mencius believes that there are some who have fully developed the sprouts (e.g. the sages), but even those that are far from virtue are influenced by sprouts. A clear illustration of this is found in a widely discussed

passage in which Mencius attempts to persuade King Xuan of Qi—notorious for his lack of benevolence—to redirect his life toward virtue and become a true king. King Xuan, apparently aware of his own moral defects, asks Mencius whether he really has what it takes to become a virtuous king. In reply, Mencius calls attention to an event that he claims to have heard from an attendant:

While the king was sitting up in his hall, an ox was led past below. The king saw it and said, “Where is the ox going?” Hu He replied, “We are about to ritually anoint a bell with its blood.” The king said, “Spare it. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground.” Hu He replied, “So should we dispense with the anointing of the bell?” The king said, “How can that be dispensed with? Exchange it for a sheep.”

(Mengzi 1A7)

After confirming the veracity of this story with King Xuan, Mencius asserts that, “this heart is sufficient to become king.” To support this point, Mencius rules out an alternative explanation of the king’s behaviour held by the commoners, namely, that he was just being stingy. Mencius is adamant that the king was genuinely moved by compassion and the king agrees: “...although Qi is a small state, how could I be stingy about one ox? It was just that I could not bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground. Hence, I exchanged it for a sheep.” *(Mengzi 1A7)*. Although Mencius agrees with King Xuan that he was moved by compassion for the ox rather than by stinginess, he nudges the king for deeper reflection: “If Your Majesty was pained at its being innocent and going to the execution ground, then what is there to choose between an ox and a sheep?” The king responds with puzzlement:

The king laughed, saying, “What was this feeling, actually? It’s not the case that I grudged its value and exchanged it for a sheep. But it makes sense that the commoners would say I was stingy.” *(Mengzi 1A7)*

The king is not entirely sure what to make of this feeling, and yet he seems pleased by this remembrance. Why? It is worth highlighting a crucial feature of Mencius's account of human nature and moral psychology: human beings naturally desire not only to be esteemed and honored by others but also to be esteemable and honorable in their actions. This aspiration to live in a dignified and morally upright way, by meeting the ethical standard we set for ourselves, is anchored in the sense of shame, which Mencius takes as a moral sprout directed toward the virtue of righteousness (*yi* 義). As commentators have noted, shame in Mencius's thought typically arises from a failure to live up to one's own moral standards and vision of the good.¹³ An illustration of the sprout of shame at work is found in *Mengzi* 6A10:

A basket of food and a bowl of soup—if one gets them then one will live; if one doesn't get them then one will die. But if they're given with contempt, then even a homeless person will not accept them. If they are trampled upon, then even a beggar won't take them. However, when it comes to a salary of ten thousand bushels of grain, then one doesn't notice propriety and righteousness and accepts them. What do ten thousand bushels add to me? Do I accept them for the sake of a beautiful mansion? For the obedience of a wife and concubines? To have poor acquaintances be indebted to me?...This is what is called losing one's fundamental heart."

This passage clarifies that the sprout of righteousness—manifested as the feeling of shame or disdain—guides us to avoid actions that would undermine our self-respect. Such shame gives rise to a basic desire to maintain our integrity and preserve what Mencius calls our "fundamental heart": the noble aspect of our nature that makes us worthy of respect. The king feels pleased by this reflection because it affirms the existence of something within him that is honorable; even despots want to see themselves as good. Mencius is drawing attention to a powerful aspect of our moral psychology that might go unnoticed since much of human life (then and now) is preoccupied by the chase for material ends. But we also know that human beings care deeply about how they appear to others ethically, and how far-reaching even

minor insults and derision can be on the human psyche. Mencius's idea that our sense of shame, self-respect, and moral integrity are deeply rooted in our nature is an idea that resonates with human experience. Mencius cleverly brings to light a moral potential the king had forgotten, revealing that he does care about honour and nobility.

While shame plays a crucial role in Mencius's account of moral development, it is actually the king's feeling of compassion that moves him to spare the ox—what Mencius identifies as the sprout of benevolence. This shift in focus does not mark a departure from Mencius's overall moral psychology but rather illustrates how multiple innate moral tendencies can serve as starting points for cultivating virtue. As the conversation in *Mengzi* 1A7 unfolds, Mencius encourages the king to “extend” (*tui*) this compassion to his people.¹⁴ He draws attention to the king's innate capacity for care—still present despite his otherwise unscrupulous character—as a way of guiding him onto the path of virtue and true kingship.

That the feeling of compassion can serve as a proper moral motivation for the learner seems quite plausible. Imagine a teenager who instinctively helps someone who has fallen out of genuine concern; by repeating such compassionate acts, she may be on the path toward developing a virtuous character. For Mencius, then, it is not only the sense of shame that serves as an inborn moral tendency capable of cultivation, but a broader range of natural sensibilities that preserve continuity between the moral learner and the virtuous person.

Whereas Jimenez takes the recognition of the fine or noble as the central moral motivation for the learner, Mencius treats this as only one kind among several. Like the teenager above, one can also act out of respect (the sprout of propriety) or from moral approval or disapproval (the sprout of wisdom). In this way, Mencius

offers a richer set of resources for addressing the Continuity Problem by positing multiple distinct types of moral motivation that can serve as the seeds of virtue.¹⁵

Turning back to the story of King Xuan, we can draw an additional insight. Consider the king's reflection after recognizing that he was moved by compassion in sparing the ox:

The king was pleased and said, "The *Odes* say, Another person had the heart, I measured it." This describes you, Master. I was the one who did it. I examined myself and sought to find my heart but failed to understand it. But when you discussed it, my heart was moved." (*Mengzi* 1A7)

Mencius assists the king in what can be termed *moral recollection*, a process by which we recall and examine past behaviour for its moral significance.¹⁶ While moral recollection has not been the focus of substantial inquiry in contemporary moral psychology, it plays a crucial role in moral development. Because time is often needed to synthesize and reflect upon our moral experiences, the moral significance of our actions may only become apparent after the fact. Moral learning, in other words, frequently occurs in subtle ways following our initial emotional response. This may help explain why the Confucian tradition places such emphasis on moral self-examination. For example, in *Analects* 1.7 we read:

Master Zeng said, "Every day I examine myself on three counts: in my dealing with others, have I in any way failed to be dutiful? In my interactions with friends and associates, have I in any way failed to be trustworthy? Finally, have I in any way failed to repeatedly put into practice what I teach?"

And in *Xunzi* we find a similar line: "The gentleman learns broadly and examines himself thrice daily, and then his knowledge is clear and his conduct is without fault."
(*Xunzi*, Ch.1)

Examples of moral recollection can also be found in the Western tradition. Consider this autobiographical account from Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazo*

“Suddenly I got up, I did not want to sleep any longer...Why is it, I thought, that I feel something, as it were, mean and shameful in my soul?...And suddenly I understood at once what it was: it was because I had beaten Alfanasy the night before!...this is what a man can be brought to, a man beating his fellow man! What a crime! It was as if a sharp needle went through my soul.”

(Dostoevsky 2002)

The disturbance Zossima feels is not immediately clear to him. His recognition of wrongdoing emerges gradually, through a subconscious process of reflection, and becomes the catalyst for his moral transformation.

As contemporary psychologists note, human actions are often the product of fast-acting, emotion driven processes (System One) and so a considered moral judgment of an action (both those of others and our own) may not emerge for quite some time.¹⁷ It is common for our moral emotions such as anger, shame, guilt, or gratitude to intensify over time as we sort out and synthesize the relevant facts and come to an overall evaluation.

Mencius's solution to the Continuity Problem involves two key features. First, he holds that human beings are endowed with certain innate moral inclinations like compassion and a sense of shame that provide the initial motivations which, through cultivation, can be refined into full virtues. So, while there is a substantial difference between the moral learner and the fully virtuous agent, there is no looming gap that needs to be filled to make sense of the developmental process. In this way Mencius's position aligns well with Marta Jimenez's point that there must be some virtuous motive already in operation for the moral learner to truly develop the virtues.

There are, however, two key ways in which Mencius's account differs from Jimenez's reading of Aristotle. First, as discussed above, Mencius affirms a range of

moral motivations and inclinations, such as compassion and a sense of shame, as natural endowments that serve as the building blocks of virtue. Second, whereas Aristotle does not believe that the sense of shame should be sustained throughout the entire course of moral development (NE 4.9, 1128b10–15), Mencius assigns shame a continuing role even in the life of the virtuous or cultivated person, particularly through its association with the virtue of righteousness. For Mencius, then, the emotion of shame exhibits greater continuity in moral development, remaining active in a more refined form within the mature moral agent.

While more study is needed to properly compare Aristotle and Mencius on shame, Mencius appears to regard shame more tightly as a moral emotion bound up with self-respect, nobility, and integrity than Aristotle does. For while Jimenez does make a plausible case that Aristotle affirmed a connection between shame and the desire for the noble, there remains interpretive disagreements about whether shame itself arises through social and cultural conditioning, and whether shame really does carry the significance in moral development for Aristotle that Jimenez argues for.¹⁸ There are no such interpretive disagreements about the role of shame in Mencius.

But Mencius also affirms that our grasp of the fine or noble is developed through virtuous actions, a point central to Margaret Hampson's position. However, Mencius identifies how this happens in a way interestingly different from Hampson, namely, through the process of moral recollection.¹⁹ It is through reflecting on past moral experiences and behaviors that we can hone our moral sensibilities for as noted above it is not often the case that we comprehend the goodness or badness in our actions while performing them; rather, it is only through examining our previous actions with clarity, and in conversation with good friends or teachers, that we can draw meaningful evaluations that alert us to the ways in which our actions were able

to track the good. By probing our hearts and identifying those moral emotions that direct our conduct, we can improve our emotional sensibilities and moral perception. On the Confucian view our moral education begins with emotional education: we start by learning about the nature and complexities of human feelings that serve as the impetus for moral (or immoral) behaviors.

The picture of moral development that emerges from Mencius offers a satisfying account of how it is that a non-virtuous person can move toward virtue through virtuous activity. If Mencius is right that human beings possess nascent moral inclinations as well as aspiration for living a fine or noble life, we should see moral development (at least when properly pursued) not as externally imposed, but as the organic outgrowth of a potency that is inherent in human beings. But even with natural inclinations toward goodness, the process of moral maturation does proceed through necessity but requires thoughtfully attending to our moral feelings and motives. Given the multifaceted and subtle nature of human motivation, thought, and feeling, it is not easy to navigate even our own interior moral lives and behaviors. While we possess an intuitive sense of the sorts of desires and motives that are admirable and good, deepening our understanding of the proper feelings that ought to motivate our actions in the right situations is the work of a lifetime; it is nothing less than a journey toward the kind of self-understanding advocated by Socrates and Confucius.

Conclusion

A key issue in the study of habituation and moral development centers on whether moral desires are ultimately inculcated from without or whether they are the proper development of incipient tendencies such as empathy and social cooperation

that human beings naturally possess. Looking at the picture currently supported by evolutionary biologists and developmental psychologists, it appears that human beings are naturally fitted for the moral life and that while culture and socialization play a necessary role in moral education, we possess certain seeds of morality that dispose us toward virtue. In the words of a prominent contemporary developmental psychologist:

Far from being egocentric, early-developing conceptual and emotional skills provide the basis for a primitive “pre-moral sensibility” as young children become sensitive to others’ feelings and goals, make morally relevant evaluations of others’ conduct based on human needs, and become capable of cooperative and prosocial action...Moral character and virtue are thus constructed from early cognitive-emotional primitives and are advanced by growing understanding of self and others and experience in close relationships.”²⁰

Of course, numerous external conditions must be met for human beings to turn out well and that there are competing, strong non-moral impulses that can easily impede us from doing what is good.²¹ We are also born neither with cultivated sensibilities nor knowledge of the proper motives that ought to govern our actions. And yet, it was Mencius’s insight that naturally moving within us are also benevolent impulses and aspirations for the noble that can be grown and expanded through self-examination. Introspection can reveal a moral depth to our hearts that we may not have been fully aware of, and alert us to an important domain of our lives that must be developed and expanded to lead a richer, more fulfilling life.²²

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Keywords: virtue, moral development, moral psychology, Mencius, Aristotle

NOTES

¹ All translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from Broadie and Rowe 2002.

² Marta Jimenez describes the priority problem in this way, “how can learners perform virtuous actions unless they are *already* virtuous? In other words, how can learners become virtuous by doing virtuous actions if being virtuous must be *prior* to doing virtuous actions?” (Jimenez, 2016: 4) But for a different reading of the problem Aristotle is raising, see Hampson 2021.

³ This problem is also raised by Howard Curzer 2012: 318-319.

⁴ See Burnyeat 1980, Sherman 1989, Broadie 1991, Annas 2011.

⁵ Certainly, one is less likely to become an expert pianist if one does not enjoy playing the piano. However, it’s worth noting that one can derive pleasure from playing the piano without necessarily appreciating it for its own sake. For instance, one might find satisfaction in improving at the piano, viewing progress as a step toward winning a competition or earning accolades.

⁶ The *locus classicus* for discussions of Aristotle’s account of moral development Burnyeat 1980. There Burnyeat highlights several pre-rational elements—such as knowledge of the *that*, the enjoyment of noble actions, and the feeling of shame—as critical to the process of moral development. As Jimenez herself acknowledges, her account can be seen as an extension of Burnyeat’s analysis (Jimenez 2016, 12).

⁷ I borrow this term from Hampson 2020.

⁸ *Ibid*, 3, fn. 7.

⁹ All translations of the *Mengzi* are from Van Norden 2008. One might question Mencius’s criticism of Gaozi, since the accuracy of Gaozi’s view on human nature and virtue does not depend on how people come to regard virtue. Moreover, Mencius provides independent arguments elsewhere for why human nature is inherently directed toward virtue, suggesting that his critique here is not purely pragmatic.

¹⁰ Mencius argues against appealing to artificial doctrine that is detached from facts about human beings. Cf. *Mengzi* 3A5. For an insightful discussion, see Nivison 1996, 133-148.

¹¹ For an in-depth, illuminating account of Mencius’s view of human nature, see Graham 2002.

¹² For Mencius, each sprout is linked to a specific virtue, implying a modular view of morality in which domain-specific cognitive-affective-conative dispositions—such as the tendency to feel compassion, shame, indignation, or respect—are triggered in trait-eliciting situations. However, I agree with Owen Flanagan that Mencius does not endorse a strong modularity model, which he refers to as “modules-all-the-way-up and all-the-way-down,” since the sprout of approval and disapproval (directed toward the virtue of wisdom) influences the development of other sprouts. In other words, the sprouts are not entirely insulated from one another. See Flanagan 2010 and Seok 2008 for further discussion.

¹³ For an illuminating analysis of both the moral sprout of shame and the virtue of righteousness in Mencius, see Van Norden 2004. See also Seok 2015 and Hu 2022 for an interesting discussion of why shame can aid in moral progress. All these commentators agree that shame for Mencius is primarily about moral integrity and meeting one’s own ethical standard.

¹⁴ Extension is an important concept for Mencius and has garnered scholarly discussion. See: Nivison 1980, Van Norden 1996, Ivanhoe 2002, Wong 2002, McRae 2011.

¹⁵ This point was greatly clarified for me through the pointed comments of Ben Huff, Hagop Sarkissian, Aaron Stalnaker at the 2025 Midwest Conference on Chinese Thought.

¹⁶ Gus Law's remark about King Xuan's reflection chimes with my account of moral recollection: "...in recognizing one's action as an (incipiently) ethical reaction, the subject may, in addition, embrace the action more robustly in the incipiently virtuous way in which they originally chose it. Thus, the subject's (incipiently) ethical disposition would be nourished in relation to the past incident..." (Law 2020, 554) He also notes that retrospective evaluation of a past action may be morally significant.

¹⁷ The most widely discussed treatment of the difference between System One and System Two processes is in Daniel Kahneman 2011.

¹⁸ Marechal (2022, 363) raises the worry that shame is not an inborn tendency as Jimenez argues but is the result of socialization and learning. Singpurwalla (2022, 897-98) argues that for Aristotle shame is primarily about judgment of others and that it is reason that orients us toward noble.

¹⁹ To clarify, Margaret Hampson does not deny the possibility of discovering the fineness of an action after performing it, but her focus seems to be on how the agent comes to recognize the fineness of the action while doing it. (Hampson 2020, 26-27.) I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

²⁰ Thompson, 2015, 280. Both Tomasello 2009 and Bloom 2013 would agree with the main point.

²¹ As Mencius himself recognized. See *Mengzi* 6A14-15.

²² This paper has undergone several revisions over the years and has greatly benefited from the comments and suggestions of many scholars. I apologize for any oversights in acknowledging them properly. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Midwest Conference on Chinese Thought, Carleton College, Northern Illinois University, Seoul National University, and the University of Chicago. I am grateful to all the participants for their valuable feedback. For written comments, I thank PJ Ivanhoe, Justin Tiwald, Joshua Mendelsohn, Freya Mobus, and Andrew Cutrofello. I also appreciate the insights and constructive criticisms provided by two anonymous referees at *History of Philosophy Quarterly*.

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