

## 4.10 Critique of Mencius

At this point let's evaluate Mencius's theory using **two principles from Western moral philosophy**.

### 1. You can't get an "ought" from an "is". (This principle was discussed in lecture 3.9.)

Recall that Mencius, like Mozi, sees 天 **tiān** (heaven) as the normative authority. Mencius thinks 天 **tiān** (heaven) has put guidance into the physical constitution of our heart-minds. But then, isn't Mencius missing a *normative* claim: that we *ought* to follow 天 **tiān** (heaven)'s guidance?

Another way to see the problem facing Mencius is to focus on his claim that there exist **natural guiding patterns** inside our heart-minds (心 **xīn**) telling us to do certain things. His immediate conclusion is that we *ought* to do those things. But in order to get to this normative *ought* conclusion, it seems we need a further premise (the one in red below).

Premise 1: There exist natural guiding patterns inside our heart-minds telling us to do XYZ.

Premise 2: We ought to follow the guiding patterns of our heart-minds.

Conclusion: We ought to do XYZ.

Mencius does seem to recognize this problem, understood as the query: "Why should we cultivate the heart?" He provides the following three answers:

- a. "We should cultivate the heart because that's what makes us human beings different from the other animals."
- b. "We should cultivate the heart for the same reason we'd want to straighten out a crooked finger: to ensure that it is healthy and working well."
- c. "We should cultivate the heart because if you look in your heart, you'll find that you already do value the heart's guidance, and naturally you should cultivate what you value."

None of these answers seem quite satisfactory. And the problem ties up with Mencius's **problem of evil** that we talked about in lecture 4.9: given that a person has **many** inclinations in his heart, he might ask: "Why should I focus on the **moral cultivation** of my heart rather than on my inclinations for good food and soft couches, and so on?" And as we discussed in 4.9, Mencius can only respond by **rectifying names** (though he doesn't want to call it that).

### 2. "Ought" implies "can". (Our moral obligations must be routinely **possible** for the great bulk of humanity given their ordinary capacities to learn and follow moral guidance.)

Both Mencius and Mozi can accept this principle. Mencius's achievement is to show we have a moral, altruistic capacity. Mozi needs simply to point out that adopting his social utilitarian dào supports and encourages this moral impulse. Mencius's reflections, however, do little to justify conventional Confucianism.

Mencius, however, could object that Mozi's account of morality, although possible, is still subject to a criticism that emerges regularly in later arguments against Mohism.

"Yes, Mozi's utilitarian morality is *possible* for us, but it is very *demanding*. Morality should not be so hard it requires an abnormal, saint-like consistency. It should fit the **natural flow of our lives**."

Mencius's morality, with its **initial** preference for close friends and gradual growth in moral capacity has this natural flow with life. Mencius does still incorporate Mozi's general concern for others' well-being. But in Mencius's view, achieving this should progress by easier, gradual steps from simple love and respect of parents. When we reach being a **sage**, we have gradually widened our moral concern. But we should not force things, let morality come via **an instinctive process of growth**, compatible with our ordinary ways of life, and without violence to our natural inclinations.