

4.11 Mencius's movement towards Daoism

In this final section, we'll talk about the ways in which Mencius tilts towards Daoism.

Emphasis on flow

There's a passage in which Mencius criticizes one of Mozi's disciples for advocating universal love while at the same time paying special care and attention to his own father. But there is a rather obvious response one could make on behalf of Mozi – in fact, a rather Mencian response, which is simply that it's both more efficient and also **less of a psychological burden** for each person to take care of his or her own father. There's more of a natural “flow” to *my* taking care of *my* father, and *your* taking care of *your* father. This emphasis on the natural flow is a **Daoist** emphasis.

Language

Mencius also rejects the focus on **language**, as the Daoists are going to do.

告子曰：『不得於言，勿求於心；不得於心，勿求於氣。』
不得於心，勿求於氣，可；不得於言，勿求於心，不可。

Here Gaozi states his slogan about the crucial role of **language** in moral guidance. We should not expect to find guidance in the **heart** that is not from words, nor find in **physical reality** without the heart. Mencius agrees only with the second part. He insists the heart delivers that is not put there via language.

Gao says, "What you can't get from words, do not seek in the heart; what you can't get from the heart, do not seek in **氣qi** (physical structure)" "What you can't get from the heart, do not seek in **氣qi**" is sound. "What you can't get from language do not seek in the heart" is not sound (not 可 acceptable).
(Mencius: Book2A2)

Mencius also complains that Mozi sees normative guidance as having two “roots”: 天 **tiān** and also **language**. (Recall Mozi's emphasis on the importance of making distinctions and using words in the right way.) Mencius thinks there should be only **one** “root”: all should come from the heart, only from the heart.

The foolish man of Song



心勿忘，勿助長也。無若宋人然：宋人有閔其苗之不長而揠之者，芒芒然歸。謂其人曰：『今日病矣，予助苗長矣。』其子趨而往視之，苗則槁矣。

The heart should not be wasted and should not be pushed to mature. Don't be like the man of Song. A man of Song was concerned that the family's sprouts were not more mature, and so he gave them all a pull. Foolishly he returned home, and said to others, "I'm exhausted from work to-day. I have been helping the sprouts grow faster." His son ran urgently back to see what was going on. The sprouts had withered and died.
(Mencius: Book 2A2)

For Mencius, **forcing** or directing the growth of your moral plant will harm it, just as pulling up corn to make it “longer” will cause it to wither. And **using language** (moral theory) is the main way of forcing moral growth.

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Still, Mencius is a loyal **Confucian**: the sages are all correct and the classics are all right. So using **Confucian language** will be no problem, because it is totally in tune with the natural flow of our hearts growth. But other moral theories (**language**) are likely to damage more than help natural moral growth. Best to avoid it. No theorizing, no 辯 **bian** (distinctions), and **no new terms for guiding behavior**.