Rethinking the Mengzi’s Concept of Tian 天

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Abstract: There is an undeniable relationship between humanity and tian 天 in the philosophy of the Mengzi 孟子 where the latter is generally conceived as the metaphysical or ontological source of the morality and ethics of the former. However, this line of interpretation is misleading because it not only imports foreign notions of transcendence into the thought of the Mengzi but also because it ignores the contribution humans make to tian. At the same time, there have been attempts to read the Mengzi in biological terms, thereby naturalizing human morality. This likewise does not satisfy as an adequate account of human morality because it also reduces it to a natural or biological realm where human culture is an external accessory. However, the relationship between humanity and tian in the Mengzi is one of mutual influence and emergence; therefore, this article analyzes their relationship and argues that tian is to be understood as “tradition” whereby humans in their process of becoming humans contribute to and invigorate it as successive generations carry it on into the future.

Keywords: Mengzi 孟子; tian 天; culture; tradition; morality

The relationship between humanity and tian 天 (tianren guanxi 天人關係) is one of the most important in all of Chinese philosophy. Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 has famously enumerated five different meanings of tian, among which is the “philosophical” meaning. (Feng 2015, p. 43). The Chinese term translated as “philosophical” (yili 義理) here does not imply speculative philosophy as we might familiarly think of it in the Western tradition. Instead, it refers to the moral and normative dimensions of tian, that is, of the cosmos. As a moral and normative dimension, tian in the “philosophical” sense is the source of moral and ethical values. Tang Junyi 唐君毅 has drawn attention to the goodness of tian being interwoven into human nature (xing 性) in early Confucian thought:

“The pre-Qin Confucians took the way of tian as good and the incipient power (ji 機) of all of the ceaseless generations itself is seen in the fluctuating transformations of the cosmos. Thus, in saying that human living is good, they directly connected the ceaseless generation of the cosmos to human beings, and that human nature is good is because it is in possession of this incipient power of ceaseless cosmic generation itself.” (Tang 2022, p. 317)

The Confucian philosophy of the Mengzi 孟子 is no exception to this general mode of thought, and the relationship between tian and humanity plays an important role in its understanding of the source of human values and morality. Therefore, an appropriate understanding of this dimension of tian is paramount to an accurate understanding of the moral philosophy of the Mengzi. Fortunately, there has been much scholarly work exploring this relationship; unfortunately, much of this research fails to provide a satisfying account of the concept of tian in the Mengzi. This article is an attempt at resolving some of the interpretive tensions present in the relevant literature to provide a fuller account of the role that tian plays in the moral philosophy of the Mengzi.

1. Interpretive Problems in Understanding Tian

The term tian is multivalent and means different things in different contexts. One of its central meanings, the one of concern here, is as the source of moral values. Robert Eno
(1990) states that, in the Mengzi, tian “engenders in people their moral predispositions; it is the source of ethical values” (p. 121) and Shun (2000) claims the Mengzi maintains that “the ethical predispositions of the heart/mind have their source in t’ien [tian] and provide human beings with an access to t’ien” (p. 209). Yet there is a tension between different interpretations of tian in its role as a normative source of morality in the Mengzi. This tension primarily takes on two dimensions. On the one hand, tian is explained either as a transcendent entity or an anthropomorphic deity, and, on the other hand, tian is understood in terms of the natural and social forces that condition human living. This tension not only reveals the complexity of the concept of tian in the Mengzi, but it also indicates there is still much work to be done before a proper account thereof is achieved.

Scholars writing in both English and Chinese have offered transcendent and anthropomorphic readings of tian. For example, Yu Ying-shih 余英時 relates tian to Plato’s eidos and the atman of Indian philosophy, defining it as something transcendent in contrast to humanity as something “real” (Yu 2014, p. 73). Therefore, when he says of the Mengzi 孟子 that the “‘good beginning’ (or ‘good nature’) of the ‘mind’ … originate[s] in tian” (p. 130), he situates the source of morality in a transcendent realm. Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 maintains that tian is a kind of metaphysical substance whose status as a standard of absolute values is set through the founding of the subject: “Tian is a transcendent substance in a purely philosophical (yi) sense… that is entirely dependent on autonomous morality to be established.”5 (Mou 1985, pp. 136–37). Karyn Lai (2008) claims that the Mengzi “attempted to provide a transcendent basis for a moral human nature. [It] identified that as the source of human goodness and asserted a unity of heaven and humanity” (p. 37). Similarly, P.J. Ivanhoe (2009) states of the Mengzi that it “explicitly claimed that Heaven endowed human beings with a nature that both equips and inclines them toward the goals that it has in mind for them” (p. xvi). For these scholars, tian belongs to a transcendent realm either as a moral substance or as an anthropomorphic deity.6

Yet understanding tian as the source of morality in this way is problematic because it imports into Chinese philosophy notions that are not native there. As James Behuniak has shown, Ivanhoe’s reading of tian as “Heaven” can be traced back to James Legge’s first translations of the Chinese classical corpus in a vocabulary borrowed from the philosophy of Joseph Butler, thereby creating a Christianized version of Confucian philosophy (Behuniak 2019, pp. 207–12).7 Likewise, Mou is more explicit in drawing on Immanuel Kant’s “metaphysic of morals” when he talks about the requisite autonomy necessary for the establishment of absolute values in his “moral metaphysics” and in doing so he commits what Tang Wenming 唐文明 refers to as a “hidden subversion” (Tang 2012, p. 4). Whether it is interpreting this tian as “Heaven” that has a “plan” for humanity or as a “transcendent substance” whose a priori metaphysical existence is proven through ethical practice, tian is transformed into something that determines human nature from a realm beyond humanity.

However, this deterministic view of tian misses out on its various other aspects, in particular the human contribution to what tian actually is. In other words, in the relationship between tian and humanity, there is a bidirectionality where, rather than the former metaphysically determining human nature, tian and humanity are mutually engaged in the social and cultural project of creating themselves and each other. This leads us to the other side of the interpretive dimension. Irene Bloom, for example, states of the Mengzian position that tian is more aptly translated as “Nature” (Bloom 2002, p. 100) and, in trying to blur familiar Western conceptual lines between “nature” and “nurture”, emphasizes that “Culture involves, among other things, the way people go about developing their natural potentialities, their moral capacity, their ability to care for and cooperate with one another” (ibid.) where “one might say that the culture itself will be built on and sustained by recognizing and sacralizing what is biologically natural” (p. 95). Behuniak, alleviating the religious tendencies in understanding tian’s “agency”, relates it to something more like “the spirit of the age” or “collective will of society” that weighs in “to pronounce its mandate and change the course of events” (Behuniak 2019, p. 216) and he goes on to say there
is a “conceptual link” tying “the ‘age’ in which one lives and the ‘forces’ that hinder or facilitate successful action” (p. 217) so that tian becomes “large-scale forces that mandate the conditions under which things in the world can or cannot come to pass” (p. 218). Yet, as much as I might agree with Bloom’s and Behuniak’s overall interpretation and concern for mediating the relationship between nature and culture, they have nevertheless, in my estimation, not gone far enough to draw out the social and cultural connotations of tian.  

As a source of morality and ethical values, tian is not just culture aimed at realizing biological tendencies or the “public opinion” of a given time and place, but rather the tradition that embodies social and cultural values and in which humans are embedded. Understood this way, tian, as the source of morality, is no longer a transcendent substance or anthropomorphic deity, neither is it cultural accessory to biological necessities or the public opinion that forces one’s political hand, but instead it is a historically sedimented tradition elevated to the most sacred of levels that is internalized and progresses as humans make their way in the world. It is this understanding of the relationship between tian and humanity that obtains in the philosophy of the Mengzi that I attempt to clarify below.

2. Tian between Nature and Culture

In order to explicate the notion of tian as the tradition that backgrounds and provides a source of morality in the Mengzi, it is necessary to understand it in terms of a web of concepts that it is integral to, particularly the web set up by the Mengzi between xin 心 (heart/mind), xing 性 (human dispositions), and tian 天. The locus classicus of this is found in the opening line of the seventh book (7A1):

“Fully realizing one’s mind, one knows one’s human dispositions; knowing one’s human dispositions, one knows tian. 經其心者，知其性也；知其性，則知天矣。”

It is clear from the conceptual link between xin, xing, and tian that the Mengzi conceptualizes the relationship between humanity and tian as being primarily an internal one. Yet, to say that this relationship is internal, that is, that tian is “inside” the human, we have to be careful not to impute any kind of dualism where a person has to introspect to take note of tian in a mental or spiritual realm. Rather than using the language of internality, it would be better to say that these three are integrated into each other. Neither should we confuse this relationship as one of tian determining what it means to be human. Thus, even though Cheng (2003) is right to employ the language of “emergence” when he says xin is “an emergent creation of human nature, just as human nature can be considered an emergent creation of [tian].” (p. 442) because the idea of emergence implies a bottom-up relationship that avoids the top-down determinism of strict transcendence, he nevertheless only captures one aspect of the relationship between tian and humanity. In other words, the relationship proceeds not only from tian to humanity but also from humanity to tian. Luo Anxian 羅安憲 provides a fuller picture of the relationship between these two:

“The Mengzi makes one piece out of the cosmos and human life, realizing the emergence and concentration between things and people and between tian and humanity. To move from xin to natural dispositions and then to tian is to ascend, to transcend; to move from tian to natural dispositions and then to xin is to cross over, to fall into place.” (Luo 2007, p. 126)

Whether or not we agree with his terminology, we see that there exists a bidirectional process of influence between tian and humanity. Yet neither Cheng nor Luo have keyed into the fact that tian, regarding its moral dimension in relation to humanity, is not to be understood as a metaphysical entity but rather as a social and cultural tradition that sustains human living. Therefore, in order to better understand the relationship between tian and humanity, it behooves us to understand the former in the greater context of early Confucian philosophy.

As mentioned above, tian is a multivalent concept. Two of its main meanings are tian as an anthropomorphic deity and tian as a kind of natural force (Shun 2000, pp. 207–10). In
early Confucian philosophy, there is a tension between these two meanings as the former is gradually transformed into the latter. This tension is clearly seen in the 

The Guodian manuscript (Dispositions Emerge from Conditions) states: “Human dispositions emerge from their conditions and their conditions come down from their conditions.” The Analects (5.13) presents a similar notion. The Mengzi expands on the idea of conditionality in 7A2: “There is nothing that is not conditioned and in accepting these conditions things properly align. Therefore, one who understands their conditions does not stand under a precarious wall.” Thus, the conceptual link between tian and ming shows that the former implies a certain set of circumstances that constitute the human condition. The same tension exists in the Mengzi, but its shift towards a non-anthropomorphic understanding is perhaps more pronounced. On the one hand, in 2B13, for example, Mengzi is quoted as saying, “Now, as for tian, it has yet to desire (yu 欲) bringing peace to the world; but if it should desire bringing peace to the world, then other than I, who else is there?” This seems to present tian as having desires and, by extension, consciousness or will. On the other hand, tian also connotes such conditions as are beyond human control but which nevertheless are not absolutely determining. For example, in 5A6, it says: “That Shun and Yu differed from Yi in their time as ruler and that the worthiness of their sons differed is a matter of tian and is not something that people are capable of doing. That which is done but no one does it is a matter of tian and that which is arrived at, but no one sets out for is a matter of conditionality.” Tian “conditionality” (ming 禎) have a close conceptual connection in early Confucian philosophy. The Mengzi expands on the idea of conditionality in 7A2: “There is nothing that is not conditioned and in accepting these conditions things properly align. Therefore, one who understands their conditions does not stand under a precarious wall.” Thus, the conceptual link between tian and ming shows that the former implies a certain set of circumstances that constitute the human condition.

This conceptual relationship plays an important role in the Mengzi and the school of thought it belongs to, which is usually referred to as the Si-Meng school (思孟学派), as it is extended to “humans” (ren 人) and “human dispositions”. The Zhongyong’s 中庸 opening line, which states, “That which conditions naturally is what is known as human dispositions” (tianming zhi wei xing 天命之謂性), does not mean that tian somehow endows people with a “human essence” but rather that it provides the conditions for humans to become fully ethical. The human contribution comes in the following lines: “Taking charge of human dispositions is what is known as the proper course (dao 道); cultivating the proper course is what is known as edification.” Similar thoughts are found in excavated Confucian texts. The Guodian manuscript Xing zhi ming chu 性自命出 (Dispositions Emerge from Conditions) states: “Human dispositions emerge from their conditions and their conditions come down from tian” (xing zhi ming chu ming zhi tian xing 性自命出命自天降). “Human dispositions” grow up out of the “conditions” laid down by tian. The Wuxing 五行 (Five Kinds of Conduct) also presents a similar notion. The “Jing 经” states: “What tian extends to people is what is ‘natural’ (tian) and what people extend to each other is what is ‘custom’, “. The “Shuo 説” elaborates that “What is natural in people that is from tian is exemplified by King Wen” and “What is ‘customary’ in people that is from others is exemplified by King Wen’s employment of Hong Yao and San Yisheng.” The distinction in the Wuxing between tian and “humanity” lies in natural moral intelligence and the usage thereof. Hence, the “Shuo” continues by saying that if King Wen lacked such exemplary ministers as Hong Yao and San Yisheng, he would have lacked models for his laws. These models become what is standard for tian in their being employed by King Wen. These texts allow us to triangulate the Mengzi’s position. By establishing a link between “that which conditions naturally” and “human dispositions”, the Zhongyong, Xing zhi ming chu, and the Wuxing clearly instantiate an intimate relationship that obtains between them.
The Mengzi follows these texts in understanding xing and ming. 7B24 says:

“As for the mouth in relation to taste, the eyes in relation to sights, the ears in relation to sound, the nose in relation to scents, and the four limbs in relation to ease and leisure, while these are dispositions they are also conditions and the exemplary person does not refer to them as “dispositions”. As for consummate conduct in relation to fathers and sons, rightness in relation to rulers and ministers, ritual propriety in relation to hosts and guests, wisdom in relation to worthies, and sages in relation to the way of tian (天道), while these are conditions they are also dispositions and the exemplary person does not refer to them as “conditions”.”

What the distinction being made here actually means is open for debate, but it is clear that the Mengzi has chosen ming to refer to those aspects of physiological necessity that are beyond human choice, while xing refers to those things that are uniquely of the human world and of ethical and moral practice. Importantly, however, we should not import into this distinction any kind of strict dualism that divides what is “biologically” human from what is “morally” human because the Mengzi confirms that both xing and ming operate in both dimensions. (Bloom 1997, p. 29) It is therefore a matter of emphasis and perspective as to which term we use to describe which features. In 7A38, the Mengzi brings tian back into this conceptual web: “As for form and countenance, that is a matter of natural dispositions (tianxing 天性) and is only the sage who is capable of furthering this in practice (jianxing 跡形).” So, we see clearly from all of this that tian in the Mengzi moves away from the idea of an anthropomorphic deity meddling in human affairs towards one of conditionality inclusive of what is both biological and cultural. Yet this is precisely where the interpretive problem lies: if we follow Mou’s interpretation, then tian is conceived of as a kind of transcendent entity that somehow determines the moral character of human nature, and if we follow Ivanhoe’s, then it becomes a deity capable of imbuing morality into human nature. Following Bloom in rendering tian as nature she naturalizes morality as a biological fact of the human species, and despite her insistence on mediating biological nature through culture, this latter is nevertheless only an external medium for the realization of the former. Such interpretations do harm to the bidirectional nature of the relationship between tian and humanity, as evidenced by the above discussion. If tian is a transcendent metaphysical entity, then what power do humans have to influence, let alone shape, it? If tian is nature, then how can human beings make any contributions thereto that are not already contained in their biological existence? It is only Behuniak’s interpretation of tian as “the spirit of the age” or the “collective will” that offers a way forward because it is clear in such a case how humans can contribute to the shape of tian. However, if tian is to be understood as “public opinion”, then how do we make sense of it as the source of morality, as implied in the passage from 7A1 quoted above? This is why I argue that tian is more than “public opinion”, but rather the cultural tradition that humans are embedded in and which they embody during their process of “becoming human”.

3. Tian as Cultural Tradition

In light of the above, we are now ready to set out to explore how tian functions as “tradition” in the philosophy of the Mengzi as the source of morality. While the natural and biological dimensions are important, we should not mistake this as indicating that the Mengzi has naturalized morality as a part of human nature because the Mengzi’s idea is not that we are moral because of our natural constitution, but rather we are moral because of our being embedded in tradition, but at the same time, this “embeddedness” is a “natural condition” of becoming human. The idea of tian as tradition appears in Mengzi 5A5, which records a dialogue between Mengzi and his student Wan Zhang 萬章 on the transfer of political power between the sage kings Shun and Yu. Wan Zhang asks whether it was Shun that gave the throne to Yu, and Mengzi answers that “the son of the heavenly (tianzi 天子) cannot give the world
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to other people” but that it is 天 that does so. Mengzi states that “天 does not speak, it reveals its choice through deeds and tasks.” He further elaborates that if whoever is nominated to take over political power dutifully serves the spirits and handles the affairs of the people, then they will be accepted by 天 and by the people, proving their appropriateness to be ruler. To end his argument, Mengzi appeals to a saying from the “Taishi太誓” chapter in the Shangshu 尚書 (Documents): “天 sees from where my people see and hears from where my people hear” (tian shi zi womin shi tian ting zi womin ting 天視自我民視天聽自我民聽). The importance of this line cannot be overstated. Mengzi’s quotation of this passage is evidence that he carried the transformation of 天 as an anthropomorphized deity beyond natural forces to turn it into human discourse, into society, and into culture, in other words, into tradition.

This is why the “will of the people” reading that this passage so readily elicits underperforms as an explanation. It is not simply the case that new rulers have obtained the consensus of the people through dealing with their immediate affairs; instead, it should be said that obtaining the consensus of the people is predicated on the ruler’s accepting and promoting the cultural tradition to which the people belong. Hence, in the Daxue大学 (Expansive Learning), it says:

“That it is said that one who wishes to bring order to the state must first do so in their family is because there is no one who can teach the people without having first taught their family… Yao and Shun led the world with consummate conduct and the people followed them; Jie and Zhou led the world with violence and the people followed them. If what is commanded goes against what they themselves are fond of then the people will not follow.”

At first glance, we are reminded by this passage of Kongzi’s saying that “If the ruler desires what is good then the people will be good. The virtue of the ruler is like wind, and that of the people is like grass. When the wind blows the grass sways.” We are inclined to understand that the virtue of the people is a product of the influence of the ruler. While this is certainly an important dimension of Confucian political philosophy, it seems that this way of reasoning cannot make sense of the final line of the Daxue quoted above. The crux of the relationship between the state and the people is that the people provide the final judgment on what the “virtue of the ruler is to be”. Put differently, we can ask: what is it that the ruler cultivates in his family in the first place? It is the values of the tradition embodied in the daily practices of the people. Hence, the Zhongyong states, “The beginning of the way of the ruler is fashioned between husband and wife” (junzi zhi dao zaoduan hu fuzu 君子之道造端乎夫婦). It is true that the ruler must model exemplary behavior for the people to follow, but the standards for what is exemplary are embodied in the cultural tradition carried on by the people.

A fuller explication of the logic of this progressive cyclicality of Confucian ethics and political philosophy is beyond the scope of the current discussion, but we can summarize the point of this passage as not being that rulers have to first order their families in order to provide models for the emulation of the people, but rather that the rulers have to first model themselves on the people so as to provide an example of the values embodied in the tradition of the common people. The people understand what “filiality” (孝), “fraternity” (弟) , and “paternality” (慈) are because they live these values in their daily lives. This intimacy with traditional values is what gives them the authority to judge whether or not Yao and Shun or Jie and Zhou are “practicing what they preach.” Just like the quote from the “Taishi” indicates, it is the people who have the final say on what is and is not to be considered a part of the cultural tradition.

Finally, Pang Pu 龐樸 has captured this important dimension of the relationship between 天 and humanity when he teaches us that they are related through their sociality:

“This kind of 天 goes beyond humanity; but it also cannot leave behind humanity because its root is society. And humanity cannot leave behind 天 because human beings are mainly understood to be social beings. Therefore, the rela-
tionship between tian and humanity talked about by the Confucians is actually a relationship between society and social individuals or that between greater society and humans themselves... Mengzi clearly affirmed this relationship and sacralized it, elevating society to tian.” (Pang 2005, p. 364)

We can conclude from this that rather than understanding tian as a transcendent metaphysical substance that determines human nature and serves as the source of human morality, we should instead understand it as the whole of human society, culture, and tradition that acts as the communal reservoir that those who grow up with access to can draw on and internalize as they learn to become human in the fullest sense.

We can see this important dimension emerge by connecting three more passages from the Mengzi: 6A15, 1A7, and 6A7. In 6A15, Mengzi is quoted as follows:

“The offices of the eyes and ears do not think and are obscured by things; when things interact with things they are led thereby. The office of the xin reflects and in reflecting it is obtained while by not reflecting it is lost. This is what tian has given us; first establish yourself in what is greater so that what is lesser cannot steal from it. There is nothing more to being a greater person than this.”

The key here is the line, “This is what tian has given us.” It is clear that what is “given” (suoyu 所與) are the senses that interact with things and the xin that reflects (si 思) on them. It is also easy to see that the Mengzi places more emphasis on the xin, what it refers to as the “greater part” (dati 大體). But what does it reflect on? The object of reflection is moral dilemmas that implicate the individual and environment in an integrated situation.

This is illustrated in Mengzi 1A7, which recounts a dialogue between Mengzi and King Xuan of Qi where, upon seeing a trembling ox being led to sacrifice, the king felt compassion for it and replaced it with a sheep. Mengzi subsequently guides the king to extend the compassion he felt for the ox to the subjects of his kingdom:

“Today your majesty's grace is sufficient to reach beasts, but your deeds fail to reach the common people. Why is that? By balancing things their weight is known; by measuring things their length is known. All things are like this, how much more so the xin! I implore your majesty to take measure of it!”

The Mengzi uses the word “to measure” (du 度) here rather than “to reflect”, but that its greater meaning is the same is not hard to see. The king had failed, either due to ignorance or incompetence, to reflect on his encounter with the trembling ox, which constituted an instance of the spontaneous operation of his moral capacities. If only the king could see his own ability to have moral experiences, then he would be able to “spin the world in the palm of his hand” (tianxia ke yun yu zhang 天下可運於掌).

These spontaneous moral capacities are what the Mengzi refers to as the “four sprouts” (siduan 四端). In the story about someone spontaneously moved to feel compassion for a child about to fall into a well, 2A6, it says:

“From this we see that whosoever lacks the xin of compassion is not truly human; whosoever lacks the xin of shame is not truly human; whosoever lacks the xin of yielding is not truly human; and whosoever lacks the xin of discrimination is not truly human. The xin of compassion is the sprout of humaneness (ren 仁); the xin of shame is the sprout of rightness (yi 義); the xin of yielding is the sprout of propriety (li 禮); the xin of discrimination is the sprout of wisdom. All people have these four sprouts in just the same way they have four limbs.”

In 6A6 the Mengzi connects these spontaneous moral responses to “reflection”: “Humaneness, rightness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded onto us from outside, but they are what we are certainly in possession of—it is just that we fail to reflect (si 思) on them.” From these two passages, it is clear that what the Mengzi implores King Xuan of Qi to reflect on are these “four sprouts” that emerge as moral responses in ethical situations. (Shun 2000, p. 150) By doing so, he can recollect his “lost heart/mind” and his connection to the proper dao 道 (6A11). It is also these two passages that easily lead readers to adopt
a biological or naturalistic interpretation: these four moral sprouts are just as much a part of the human biological constitution as having four limbs. This is where the third of the three relevant passages gets to work.

*Mengzi* 6A7 employs a barley analogy and at the same time appeals to the common tastes shared by all to argue that the *xin* likewise has a common taste for morality:

> “Now, if we plant barley seeds in the ground all covered in soil, then given that the earth they are planted in and the time they are planted are the same, they will burst forth all flourishing and by the time of the summer solstice they will all ripen. And if they should be different this is because the soil is loose and deficient, the nourishment of the rain and the efforts of the people are inconsistent. Thus, those things that belong to the same class belong so because they are alike. How can it be doubted that humans are any different? … That shoes throughout the world are all alike is because people have feet in common. People share a common taste when it comes to what mouths prefer. The gourmet Yi Ya was the first to obtain what appealed to our common preferences. If in obtaining what tastes the mouth prefers people were all different in the way the natures of horses and dogs belong to different classes than us, then how could it be that those in the whole world follow the taste of Yi Ya? When it comes to tastes, that the world follows Yi Ya is due to nothing more than their mouths having the same preferences. When it comes to sounds, that the world follows Shi Kuang is because their ears have the same preferences. The eyes are also like this. When it comes to Zi Du there is none who do not know of his beauty; and those who do not know of it lack eyes. Thus I say: People all want to eat the same things when it comes to the preferences of the mouth; people all want to hear the same things when it comes to the preferences of the ears; people all want to see the same things when it comes to the preferences of the eyes. How could it be that *xin* is alone in there being no common preferences between people? What is it that the *xin* has a common preference in? It is in the patterns of ethical conduct. The sages first obtained what our *xins* all had in common. Thus I say, patterns of ethical conduct delight my *xin* in the way that meat delights my mouth.”

I have quoted this passage at length because it presents a crossroads regarding how we interpret the *Mengzi*. As Behuniak remarks, there is a “majority route” of interpretation that “understands the barley example by making a series of essentialist inferences—because human beings are like barley, they possess an inborn, end-driven teleological nature that never changes and has no history” (p. 220). Qian Mu 錢穆, for example, describes this passage as indicating that the reason why people all have the same tastes is because there is a “standard” (*biaozhun* 标准) that is “hidden within their minds” (*qiancang zai ni xinlin* 潛藏在你心里) and it is just that the sages were those who “discovered the standard hidden inside the human mind and provided it for everybody” (Qian 1977, p. 244). Qian’s interpretation of this passage universalizes the preferences of the senses for certain tastes and the *xin* for morality, thereby making such preferences an innate feature of the human mind. Understood this way, the preferences of the eyes, ears, and mind for certain things are a facet of an essential and metaphysical human nature.

Yet that is not the *Mengzi*’s point. First, it makes no sense to talk of an internal standard of beauty when the *Mengzi* argues that only those who lack eyes to see the beauty of Zi Du 子都 are those who do not recognize it. If such beauty was a matter of an a priori principle in the mind, then one would imagine the *Mengzi* making the argument that even the blind could, in introspection, come to know this standard of beauty. But the *Mengzi*’s point is that such a standard for beauty is derived from the community and from tradition rather than being imbedded into the human being from birth. Furthermore, the *Mengzi* is explicit that the reason different fields of barley are more or less productive than others is due to the fact that “the efforts of the people are inconsistent” (*ren shizhi bu qi ye* 人事之不齊也). This shows us that human effort is of the utmost importance in raising people who are capable of internalizing the historical and cultural values embodied in the tradition. Hence, the
Qing dynasty Confucian Wang Chuanshan 王船山 (1619–1692) comments that “All things human and otherwise are produced by tian; that there is nothing that is not so produced is a matter of tian. Those things thus produced require further nourishing, and thus tian has entrusted them with a task whereby the affairs of tian are fully brought out” (C. Wang 2011, p. 705). The soil of the field is the tradition itself that provides the starting point for becoming human, but it is the efforts of the individual and community to take up the tradition and its values in their daily lives that truly account for their resulting in an abundant harvest. Hence Wang continues: “Taking in all the people of the whole world, is there any child who is not filial when his father is paternal?” (p. 708). The younger generations en-culturation into the tradition is dependent on the older generation modeling and spreading the values of the tradition.

What the Mengzi intends to convey in this passage, then, is that even though people might begin from a similar starting point, through the influences of their various social, cultural, and natural environments, they become different. This is what Kongzi means in Lunyu 17.2 when he says, “by their natural dispositions they are similar; by habits they move far apart” (xing xiangjin xi xiangyuan 性相近習相遠). It is not the case that the reason people are “similar” is due to an innate human nature that is either actualized or not due to the conditions of the external environment; instead, people are “alike” because they live and grow in a common cultural environment informed by a shared tradition. That this is a preferred reading over the “essentialist” one is bolstered by the fact that the Mengzi appeals to the historical figures of Yi Ya 易牙, Shi Kuang 師曠, and Zi Du as exemplars of the goods that all people have a common taste in. These goods are not metaphysical goods—the Good—but rather cultural goods that have sedimented into the tradition over the long course of history.

If we work backwards through the above three passages in light of what has already been said, then we can draw the conclusions that (1) humans are born into and grow up in a culture whose values are embedded in tradition; (2) the “four sprouts” that represent the capacity for morality are not an a priori feature of human nature or the human mind but rather are enculturated into humans as they develop as full members of society; and (3) what tian has “given” people is precisely this capacity for morality and reflection that is sourced in the tradition that encompasses their life processes.

In other words, “being human” is predicated on being embedded in a culture that provides the appropriate resources that allow the human mind and human nature to achieve consummation. John Dewey (1958) provides an encapsulating summary of this line of thought: “[A person] would be poorer than a beast of the fields were it not for traditions that become a part of his mind” (p. 270). This is not a matter of either “nature” or “nurture,” but rather a matter of understanding that human nature is cultural and that to be human is to be situated in a cultural tradition that provides the values and meanings from which human living draws resources and upon which it builds itself. Culture is so thoroughly integrated into the “biological” existence of humans that the two are, for all intents and purposes, two sides of the same coin. This is why, as we saw, the Mengzi makes a distinction between “human dispositions” and “conditions” while maintaining that both dimensions are implicated in each other. It is just as natural to be born with “four limbs” as it is to be born into a culture that instills “four sprouts”.

We can take this analysis one step further and say that the cultural tradition is what is laid down as the conditions from which human beings grow—it is the earth from which sprout so many stalks of barley. At the same time, human achievements contribute to the cultural tradition in a way that nourishes the soil, so to speak. This is what the Mengzi means with its term shitian, 事天, which we can translate here as “serving the cultural tradition.” Shun (2000) explains that “living up to the ideal to serve t’ien does not involve a renunciation of the social world; instead, it requires the fulfillment of human relations and full social engagement” (p. 210). It is not that humans have to submit to metaphysical laws of morality or an anthropomorphic deity, but rather that through their ethical practice, their taking up the cultural tradition and putting it to action in their daily dealings with
others and the world, they contribute new meanings that reshape it for new generations. This is what is implied when Kongzi says in Analects 7.1 that he “describes but does not create” (shu er buzuo 述而不作). The act of description—remember, Kongzi is traditionally said to have edited many of the Confucian classics—is an act of creativity in which something new is founded on the groundwork of something old. In other words, the relationship between tian and humanity is such that the former lays down the cultural conditions from which humans emerge and carry on in the world, thereby reshaping the very cultural conditions from which they emerged so that new generations in turn carry on a reinvigorated cultural tradition, and the process continues as long as there are those who can take up the tradition.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, in this article I have argued that the Mengzi’s concept of tian, in its relation to humanity as the source of morality, should not be understood as a transcendent substance or as an anthropomorphic deity, nor should it be understood as simply nature or the “will of the people.” Instead, I have argued that in the context of the Mengzi’s moral philosophy, tian is best understood as the cultural tradition that sustains human community as a source of intergenerational moral values. Humans grow up embedded in this cultural tradition and internalize it so that it becomes the means by which they ethically engage others and the world. In so doing, they further the tradition by making their own contributions that reshape and reinvigorate the tradition, from which new generations emerge and repeat the process of internalization and contribution. This is how, as tradition, tian functions as the source of morality.

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Notes

1 Cao Feng 曹峰 (Cao 2019) states: “Because tianren guanxi is just about the most important topic in Chinese philosophy, therefore I do not think it is excessive to say that the phrase ‘the unity of tian and humanity (天人合一)’ more or less captures the substance and characteristics of Chinese philosophy and that it is a synthetic expression of the ancient Chinese mode of thought” (p. 106). All translations of first- and second-hand Chinese materials are my own.

2 The others being: “physical” (wu zhi 物質), “sovereign” (zhuzai 主宰), “natural” (ziran 自然), and “fateful” (mingyun 命運).

3 It is thus surprising to find Donald Munro say that the notion of tian can be “filtered out” of Mencian ethics (Munro 2002, p. 307).

4 The other meanings of tian include “nature”, “sky”, and even “conditionality” or “circumstance”. For example, Mengzi 2A2’s “As qi, it is vast and rigid; if it is constantly nourished and not done any harm, then it will fill up the space between the heavenly and the earthly (tian di zhi jian 天地之間)” and 2B1’s “Seasonal timing (tianshi 天時) is not as good as advantages in the land” both refer to tian as connoting the t“sky” or associated phenomena (i.e., the seasons) or the natural world in general. There are also the binomials tianxia 天下 and tianzi 天子 where the former simply refers to the whole world as “all under the sky” and the latter refers to kings as the “son of tian”. This latter ties into the conceptual history of tian as an anthropomorphic deity that probably originated as an ancestral spirit in earlier times. One key advance of Confucian philosophy is that this anthropomorphic dimension of tian was replaced with the notion of “nature” and, as will be argued herein, in the Mengzi it also takes on the meaning of “sacred cultural tradition”. This transformation of tian is not yet complete in the Analects or the Mengzi, but is by the time of the Xunzi at the end of the Warring States. That being said, it never goes away, and Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 of the Han dynasty famously reinstates it in his so-called theory of resonance (ganying 感應).

5 Tang (2012) explains Mou’s stance on the Mengzi: “He thought that Mengzi’s concept of xing (human nature) is actually an ontological essence, that is, xingti 性體. And the theory of a good human nature that Mengzi promoted implies that this ontological essence is the most good moral essence... On the other hand, the proposal of an ontological moral subject (xinti 心體) also expresses a purely theoretical speculation that is directly connected to the mind, and moreover, this also becomes a direct and ultimate foundation for morality” (p. 44).
While Shun (2000) is aware of this tension, he nevertheless states that he will “not try to decide whether we should describe t’ien as a personal deity” (p. 209) and that he “will not try to decide whether we should characterize them [xing 性 and tian 天] in terms of transcendence or immanance” (p. 210).

Behuniak, quoting Legge: “By the study of ourselves we come to the knowledge of Heaven, and Heaven is served by obeying our Nature,” he submits. ‘It is much to be wished,’ however, ‘that instead of the term Heaven, vague and indefinite, Mencius had simply said “God,” but the message remains the same’ (Behuniak 2019, p. 210).

It must be noted that this aspect of tian is at least hinted at by Behuniak in his earlier Mencius on Becoming Human, where he says: “Tian in this context is understood as the history, experience, culture, and institutions, and general process that have shaped human emergence” (Behuniak 2005, p. 94). But his subsequent discussion of tian sticks with the “spirit of the age” interpretation.

The word translated as “realize” here is jin 禮. It should not be understood in any kind of Aristotelian sense of the “actualization” of innate potentials. Qian Mu 錢穆 (Qian 1977) offers this way of understanding jin: “Electricity can be used for such human purposes as pulling [train] cars, powering lights, making telephone calls, and transmitting messages. This is nothing more than realizing (jin) the nature of electricity” (p. 253). All translations of the Mengzi follow Yang (2010) and reference the traditional commentary of Jiao Xun 焦循 (Jiao Xun 2021) and the English translation of Bloom (2009).

This is, for example, what Augustine does (Taylor 1989, pp. 127–41). See also Turner (2019, pp. 351–62) for a discussion on subjectivity and objectivity in the Mengzi.


There are those who read the withholding of speech here as evidence of tian’s anthropomorphic dimension (Shun 2000, p. 207), but I think the naturalistic context undermines this reading.

These two tendencies are captured in the notions of “something does it” (huoshi 或使) and “nothing does it” (mowei 苫為) found in the “Zeyang 則陽” chapter of the Zhuangzi 莊子. My understanding of ming as “conditionality” here follows Steve Coutinho, who defines it as “circumstances” (Coutinho 2014, p. 84) and Roger Ames, who defines it as “the propensity of things” and “force of circumstances” (Ames 2021, p. 125).

Franklin Perkins translates this line as “what is conditioned from heaven” (Perkins 2010, p. 20).

Andrew Plaks’ translation as “By the term ‘nature’ we speak of that which is imparted by the ordinance of Heaven” (Plaks 2004, p. 25) is an egregious example of such an interpretation.

See Cook (2012) for a detailed study of these texts.

This is one of the dangers of the biological reading: modern biology has an inescapable hidden teleology (Gilson 1984).

This “reflecting” should be understood as “moral reflection” rather than speculation. For example, in 1.4 of the Lunyu, Zengzi 曾子 says he “reflects daily on three things” (ri sanxing wushen 日三省吾身): was he committed to his dealings with others, was he devoted in his interactions with friends, and did he practice what he was taught? Even though he uses xing 性 for “to reflect” rather than si 思, that they fall within the same conceptual range is clear.

Bloom (2002) expands on this passage from the perspective of qi 氣: “Just as one naturally delights in pleasing colors and good food... the heart has a natural ‘taste’ for righteousness” and also that this “taste” is a “function of qi” (p. 51).

The anthropologist Geertz (1973) teaches that “The apparent fact that the final stages of the biological evolution of man occurred after the initial stages of the growth of culture implies that ‘basic’, ‘pure’, or ‘unconditioned’ human nature, in the sense of the constitution of man, is so functionally incomplete as to be unworkable... this revised view of human evolution leads us to the hypothesis that cultural resources are ingredient, not accessory, to human thought” (pp. 82–83).

Wang Bo 王博 explains (B. Wang 2011): “Kongzi and the Confucians have a significant characteristic, that is, they emphasize the classical texts transmitted from antiquity and express their own positions through studying and interpreting them” (p. 82).

References


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