



Xiusheng Liu. Mencius, Hume and the Foundations of Ethics

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XIUSHENG LIU. *Mencius, Hume and the Foundations of Ethics*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2003. Pp. vii+204. ISBN 0-7546-0406-3, cloth, \$84.95/£47.50.

This book compares Hume with Mencius, a fourth-century B.C.E. Chinese Confucian thinker, and according to his introduction, Liu aims to use Mencius and Hume to articulate and defend a particular meta-ethical position. This meta-ethical position, which he calls “Mencius-Hume moral theory” (MHT), is intended as an improved version of the so-called “sensibility theory” advocated by David Wiggins and John McDowell. The book is thus a work of constructive meta-ethics. However, Liu also resolutely defends particular interpretations of Mencius and Hume. Hence, he may appear to be offering equally a historical study, but for reasons discussed below, the book is less convincing as a historical study and is instead best approached as a constructive enterprise.

Since some readers may be unfamiliar with Mencius, a brief introduction is warranted. Mencius is generally considered the second greatest Confucian thinker after Confucius himself. Beginning around the tenth century C.E., Mencius’s philosophy became the dominant interpretation of Confucianism, and the record of his sayings, the *Mencius*, was essential reading for all educated Chinese men up until the twentieth century. Mencius famously claims that “human nature is good,” in that people innately have “beginnings” or “sprouts” of four virtues: *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* (often translated respectively as “benevolence” or “humanity,” “righteousness,” “ritual propriety,” and “wisdom”). These four “sprouts,” in turn, consist of certain innate, spontaneous inclinations or feelings: compassion, shame, deference, and approval and disapproval, respectively. Mencius’s idea that humans innately incline to compassion, which develops through cultivation into the virtue of “benevolence” or “humanity,” *prima facie* resembles Hume’s discussions of “sympathy” and “humanity.” Hence, Liu’s comparison of Mencius and Hume is not without grounds.

The book contains five chapters. The first focuses on Hume, arguing that “humanity,” which Hume treats in the second *Enquiry* as the most general principle in human nature and the ground of all moral behavior, is really just “sympathy” from his *Treatise*, but corrected and made consistent by reason, through appeal to the “general point of view.” The second chapter focuses on Mencius and analyzes his conception of *ren* (“humanity”). Liu argues that, like Hume, Mencius regards “humanity” as the most general principle of human nature and the ground of all virtue. According to Liu, Mencius’s philosophy helpfully complements Hume’s picture, because Mencius gives more explicit discussion of how humanity underlies

and unifies the other virtues, how humanity is cultivated, and how sympathy is the essential human feeling which gives rise to all other characteristically human feelings. Chapter 3 then lays out the basic features of “sensibility theory.” Liu considers the complaint that “sensibility theory” is explanatorily circular as the most serious objection against it, and he argues that one can use Mencius’s and Hume’s conceptions of humanity and human nature to eliminate the circle and rescue the theory from this defect. Next, Liu supplements MHT with an account of Hume’s moral epistemology in chapter 4, and with an especially original and insightful argument for reading Mencius as an internalist about moral motivation in chapter 5.

Although chapters 1 and 4 focus on Hume, and chapters 2 and 5 on Mencius, readers who take these as historical studies will likely be unsatisfied. For, Liu engages with many rival interpretations of Hume and Mencius, but he often dispenses with these so quickly that one cannot but feel that the competing arguments have not received adequate consideration. Also, Liu’s own interpretive stances are sometimes under-supported. For example, Liu frequently follows the famous Confucian commentator Zhu Xi (1130–1200 C.E.) in interpreting Mencius, but with little argument. Zhu’s relation to Mencius resembles Aquinas’s relation to Aristotle. Both Aquinas and Zhu have strong philosophical commitments that greatly influence their interpretations. Aquinas *may* have understood Aristotle correctly, and likewise Zhu for Mencius. Yet, often their readings are also quite suspect, and so, in a historical study one would normally expect much more defense for adopting Zhu’s interpretations than Liu provides. Additionally, Liu’s claim that Mencius advocates “sensibility theory” faces the following difficulty. Many early Chinese regarded “Heaven” (*tian*, lit. “sky”) like a *deity*, and according to a common reading, Mencius also holds this theological view, believing that “Heaven” implanted the “sprouts” of virtue in us. This religious reading of Mencius challenges—or at least complicates—the idea that he holds a naturalistic meta-ethical view like “sensibility theory,” but Liu does not discuss this problem. Ultimately, even if Liu’s readings of Hume and Mencius are unpersuasive, this does not wholly undermine his defense of a revised “sensibility theory.” For that project, Liu only needs to claim that a composite *neo-Humean* and *neo-Mencian* view provides the philosophical machinery to make “sensibility theory” viable, and one could read these four chapters as outlining the requisite neo-Humean and neo-Mencian ideas.

What, then, of the attempt in chapter 3 to save “sensibility theory” by combining Mencian and Humean views? As Liu explains, “sensibility theory” states that for any object X, “X is good/right if and only if X is such as to make a certain sentiment of approbation appropriate” (86). However, since the theory identifies the property “good” (or “right”) by reference to a certain response, and identifies the response as a response to a certain property, the theory is circular, because it

does not identify *which* responses and properties are the specifically *moral* ones, as opposed to any other <property, response> pair. A meta-ethical theory is supposed to help explain the special authority of moral judgments, but if “sensibility theory” fails to distinguish the moral <property, response> pair from any other such pair, then apparently it has not adequately fulfilled its explanatory responsibilities. Circularity is thus a serious problem for the theory. Liu proposes a way to identify the responses independently of the properties and so break the circle, namely by identifying the responses as those that stem from human nature and are most characteristic of human beings, an idea he borrows from Mencius and Hume, with some elaboration.

Liu’s proposal is well worth considering and deserves more serious examination than is possible here. One may worry, though, whether the appeal to human nature fully escapes problematic circularity. For, Liu’s argument works essentially by granting normative priority to human nature, but one can question whether human nature merits such ethically normative status, as Mencius’s own Confucian rival Xunzi suggests. Since “sensibility theory” accounts for ethical normativity by appeal to human sensibilities, the theory is apparently committed to defending the normativity of human nature in terms of these sensibilities, too. In other words, certain responses are normative because they stem from human nature, but human nature accounts for their normativity because it elicits those same responses. Such circular justification, however, may seem not to explain the normativity of ethical judgments so much as presuppose it. This problem does not completely overturn Liu’s position, for one might either argue that the circle is ultimately benign or find a further way to break it (and here perhaps is where Mencius’s own appeal to “Heaven” might play a role), but it does show that challenges remain for “sensibility theory,” even with Liu’s proposed solution.

In sum, for those interested in meta-ethics, this book provides a stimulating example of how one might use both Western and Chinese materials to engage with contemporary problems. Hopefully, it will encourage productive interactions between students of the two philosophical traditions in the future.

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