

HUMAN NATURE AND MORAL EDUCATION IN MENCIUS, XUNZI, HOBBES, AND ROUSSEAU

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Mencius, Xunzi, Hobbes, and Rousseau are all well known for their discussions of “human nature.” It will be argued in this essay that, to some degree of approximation, their views on human nature can be understood as views about the proper course of moral education and that, consequently, a picture of moral development stands near the center of each man’s philosophy. We can then explore empirically which philosopher was nearest the truth.

1. THE “STATE OF NATURE”

The dispute between Hobbes and Rousseau regarding human nature is generally cast—and was indeed by Rousseau himself sometimes cast—as a dispute about what people (or “man”) would be like in the “state of nature,” a state without social structures or government. Hobbes famously writes in the *Leviathan* that the “naturall condition of mankind”—his condition prior to establishment of the state—is one of misery and “Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man” and life is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”¹ We are propelled into violent competition by the desire for limited goods and for glory, and due to our relative indifference to the suffering of others. When a man in the state of nature sees something he wants—such as the goods or wife of another man—he will try to obtain it, if he can do so consistently with his own safety, regardless of the pain or death it may bring to others. The result is continual insecurity and strife, and the failure of any stable agriculture or industry, until men are eventually persuaded to submit themselves to a government for their own protection.

Rousseau, equally famously, paints a very different picture of the “state of nature” in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Man in the

state of nature “breathes only peace and freedom; he wishes only to live and remain idle.”²² “[H]is heart yearns for nothing; his modest needs are easily within reach.”²³ He is moved only by the urge for self-preservation and by basic biological needs, and by a natural pity for others. Sufficient food is easily enough obtained. Sexual couplings are brief and without social complication. He thinks only of the here and now, not planning for the future, not attempting to elevate himself in the eyes of others, not fearing death, and lacking the bloated desires for prestige and luxury that are nearly universal among civilized men.

There’s a peculiarity here, however, that is too little remarked. Why should we suppose that our behavior absent social structures is our *natural* behavior? Biologists do not, for example, separate the ant from the colony or the wolf from the pack to see how they behave “naturally.”²⁴ The ant and the wolf are *naturally social*. Their behavior within their social structures *is* their natural behavior—an isolated ant or wolf is an aberration. Human beings are, of course, the same in this respect.

It seems to follow that the “state of nature” thought experiment is, at best, misnamed. If Hobbes and Rousseau aim to inquire into the value (or disvalue) of society and government, their thought experiments may have some purpose; but it would be less misleading to call the conditions they imagine “governmentless” or “societyless” than “natural.” With this in mind, it is tempting, perhaps, to dismiss Hobbes’s and Rousseau’s comments on “human nature” (despite their importance as political philosophy) as only marginally related to the biological or psychological or anthropological study of the patterns of thought and behavior truly natural to human beings.

2. A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO THE “NATURAL”

Let’s think more carefully, then, about what it means to call a human trait “natural.” Consider some intuitive examples: Eric’s brown hair is its “natural” color, while Jeanette’s dyed black hair is not. Maurice’s sexual attraction to women is natural; a crack addict’s indifference is not. Pauline’s small feet are natural; a traditional Chinese woman’s bound feet are unnaturally small. A trait may be natural to an individual but not, generally speaking, natural for the species: The limited early social attachments of an autistic child may be natural for her but not for human beings in general. It will also be useful in this essay to consider what is *generally* natural to human beings, such as hair color within a certain typical range, adult foot size within a certain typical range, attachments of a certain sort in early childhood, etc.

Here, then, is a working definition: A trait is natural to an individual just in case it arises in that individual through a *normal process of de-*

velopment in a normal, nutritive environment, rather than as a result of injury, acquired disease, malnutrition, or (especially) external imposition. A trait is then natural to a *species* if it is natural to normal members of that species in a broad range of normal environments. A trait needn’t be present at birth to be natural: Adult size, sexual attractions, secondary sexual characteristics, etc., are not present at birth. Nor need a trait be genetically determined to arise in *all* environments—what phenotypic trait could possibly arise in all environments, anyway?—just in normal, nutritive ones. Normal individuals may not have their natural hair color in environments with enough high-energy background radiation. In environments with insufficient food, people may not reach their natural heights or develop their natural sexual characteristics. Even in normal, nutritive environments, aberrant individuals may not acquire a particular “natural” human trait (though the alternative traits they do acquire may be natural for them), as with the autistic child’s social development. A trait may be common among normal individuals yet not natural because, in some sense, it is “externally imposed”—for example, the cropped ears of Dobermans.

This characterization of the natural is both normative and flexible. It assumes we can distinguish “normal” individuals from abnormal ones; “normal” and “nutritive” environments from abnormal and deficient ones; injury, disease, and malnutrition from healthy processes; and “external imposition” from its absence. Admittedly, such terms often have no determinate applications or their applications may be politically influenced. However, the intuitive application of the word “natural” also generates such worries. So, for example, whether one considers homosexuality “natural” depends on whether one thinks it arises without external imposition in normal members of the population in normal, nutritive environments. Those who deny the naturalness of human homosexuality are apt to assert that it is “imposed” on people, or that homosexual individuals are aberrant, or that homosexuality arises only if the individual’s developmental environment was abnormal or deficient in some way. Or consider: Can an ordinary 250-pound American legitimately claim to be at his “natural” weight? The answer depends, in part, on whether the contemporary American nutritional environment should be considered normal.

Much can be hidden in talk of “normality,” etc.; however, the proper response to concerns about this is not to attempt to characterize the natural more objectively, but rather to bring its normativity explicitly to light, as the present definition does. Problematic uses of the word “natural” derive principally from the tendency to hide the normative, to use the term as though what’s “natural” can be determined by objective and apolitical biological measurements alone.

With this understanding of the “natural” in hand, the key idea of the previous section can be reframed. A relatively stable social system is part of a normal, nutritive environment for human beings (and for all social animals). The traits that arise among people raised outside such environments are not our *natural* traits, but often quite the opposite. The “wild child,” starved of human interaction through much of childhood, may lack language, fear people, and so forth; but that is hardly the natural condition of humankind. The “state of nature” thought experiment thus misses its target completely *if* its target is the isolation of our natural traits.

To determine, then, whether human beings are “naturally” violently competitive or placidly compassionate, we must look at how those character traits or behavior patterns arise in human development. To put it starkly, and a bit too simply: Must standards of good behavior be *imposed* on people from outside, by artificial means, as we might, say, impose the shaving of chins and legs, the stretching of necks, the dyeing of hair? Or does morality emerge without external imposition from normal processes of human maturation, drawing on the environment principally for nutrition and support?

Understood as a claim about development, the question whether “human nature” is good or bad begins to gain some scientifically assessable content.⁵

3. MENCIUS AND XUNZI ON HUMAN NATURE

The suggestion that we approach questions of human nature by looking at how development occurs in a normal social environment certainly *seems* to be in tension with Hobbes and Rousseau, or at least certain common portrayals of them (though more on this later). It comports more easily with the views of the classical Chinese philosopher Mencius (fourth century BCE), who said that human nature is good (xing shan 性善), and Xunzi (third century BCE), who said it is bad, ugly, unappealing (xing e 性惡).

Mencius says:

Human nature’s being good is like water’s tending downward. There is no human who does not tend toward goodness. There is no water that does not tend downward. Now, by striking water and making it leap up, you can cause it to go past your forehead. If you guide it by damming it, you can cause it to remain on a mountaintop. But is this the nature of water?! It is that way because of the circumstances. That humans can be caused to not be good is due to their natures also being like this.⁶

Also:

The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because it bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the rest it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, it was not that there were no sprouts or shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep then came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. People, seeing it barren, believed that there had never been any timber there. Could this be the nature of the mountain?! When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness?!⁷

These passages (and others like them) establish that Mencius regards human nature as good, in some sense. They don’t fully express the content of that view, but one thing is already plain: To say that human nature is good is not to say that *all people* behave well. Water can be dammed up on a hillside. A mountain can be kept artificially bald. Indeed, Mencius thought the decadent times he lived in were rife with wickedness. So did Rousseau, for that matter. It’s an undergraduate mistake to think that the view that human nature is good is in any straightforward way undermined by the prevalence of evil in the world. The question is not whether evil abounds; it’s whether evil is “natural” or, instead, a perversion.

But what, exactly, is it for us to “tend toward goodness” if many (even most) of us do not achieve it? According to Mencius, just as all (normal) feet are roughly the same and all (normal) palates prefer roughly the same tastes, all normal hearts delight in righteousness (yi 義).⁸ Mencius builds a case for this claim on the basis of what he takes to be our normal, spontaneous reactions when what is right or wrong is in plain and obvious view. The first impulse of the beggar who is given food in an insulting manner is to reject the food, even though doing so may cost him his life.⁹ The first reaction of anyone who suddenly sees a child about to fall into a well is a feeling of compassion.¹⁰ The first reaction of people on seeing the dead bodies of their parents eaten by foxes and bugs is to want to bury the bodies.¹¹ Such universal impulses are the seeds or sprouts (duan 端) of righteousness, benevolence, and propriety.¹² Moral development results from attending to, cultivating, and “extending” these natural moral impulses, noticing and acting upon the heart’s pleasure in right action; evil results from suppressing the heart’s natural desires, subverting them to the desires of lesser parts of oneself such as one’s stomach, eyes, or limbs, or failing to think through the similarities between nearby cases and those farther away.¹³

Xunzi begins his essay “Human Nature is Bad” like this:

People's nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort [wei 偽—deliberate effort, conscious activity, the artificial]. Now people's nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit. If they follow along with this, then struggle and contention will arise, and yielding and deference will perish therein. They are born with feelings of hate and dislike. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise, and loyalty and trustworthiness will perish therein. They are born with desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then lasciviousness and chaos will arise, and ritual and the standards of righteousness, proper form and good order, will perish therein. Thus, if people follow along with their inborn nature and dispositions [qing 情—dispositions, emotions, essence], they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and disorder, and end up in violence.¹⁴

So for example, Xunzi says that when we are hungry, our natural emotions or dispositions (qing 情) lead us to eat without regard for others; it is only by artificial social convention that we come to accept waiting our turn.¹⁵ Similarly, unless you find this essay unusually gripping, your natural emotions or dispositions probably incline you to leave off reading and take a rest. It is only by artificial social means that you are driven to work as hard as you should.¹⁶ Moral rules are an *invention* of the Sage Kings, a set of *artificial constraints* imposed on people for the proper functioning of society.¹⁷ With time, one can transform one's desires so as to align with the proper strictures, but this is a slow, difficult, and unnatural process, one that does not comport with our original impulses.¹⁸

Despite the starkly different mottoes, it can come to seem unclear where the difference between Mencius and Xunzi lies. They agree on one key point: That people often behave badly when driven by basic bodily impulses, and moral behavior requires the regulation of those impulses by the heart or mind (xin 心).¹⁹ Consequently, it is sometimes suggested that Mencius and Xunzi are much closer than it at first seems: They disagree primarily in how to define the "natural." Xunzi holds that anything arising from the "conscious activity" or "deliberate effort" (wei 偽) of the heart is artificial, and thus that morality is artificial. Mencius thinks the best products of the heart are natural and thus that morality is natural. But the difference is merely semantic.²⁰

We should reject this interpretation. Mencius and Xunzi are not so far apart in their understanding of the natural. Both implicitly accept the approach developed in the previous section (despite Xunzi's occasionally simplistic remarks about the "natural" being what is present at birth).²¹ The core question on which they disagree is this: Is morality something

imposed on people from outside (Xunzi) or something that arises in the normal process of human development if people are encouraged to reflect (Mencius)? In other words, is moral development a process more of indoctrination or self-discovery?

4. METAPHORS FOR MORAL DEVELOPMENT

We can get a better hold of the conflict between Mencius and Xunzi on this point by looking at the different metaphors they use for moral development. Mencius repeatedly compares moral development to the cultivation or growth of a sprout.²² Xunzi compares moral development to straightening a board or sharpening metal.²³ These metaphors can be made to do a lot of work for both authors.²⁴

Both vegetative growth and the straightening of wood are slow processes, suggesting that moral development is also a slow process (unlike, say, some ways of understanding Buddhist enlightenment or Christian conversion and rebirth). Likewise, both metaphors imply permanent change and incremental progress, barring toxic or distortive factors in the environment, rather than a pattern of relapse and relearning. Environment plays a strikingly different role in the two metaphors, however. A sprout grows into an oak tree (for example) more or less of its own accord, if the environmental conditions are sufficiently nutritive and non-hostile. Crooked, raw timber does not similarly straighten of its own accord: Both the impetus for change and the final shape are imposed from outside. Cultivation and growth work in harmony with the pre-existing inclinations of the sprout, while steaming and pressing work against the hard resistance of the board.

These metaphors thus suggest very different pictures of moral education. The cultivation metaphor suggests what we might call a *self-discovery* model of education, or an inward-out model of the sort often associated with "liberal" approaches to education in the contemporary West: Learners are encouraged to reflect for themselves, to discover and nurture the values they already have. They needn't generally be *told* explicitly what is right and wrong. They are perfectly capable of seeing that for themselves, if they reflect carefully on their pre-existing inclinations and judgments. The inclination toward morality already exists within each of us (as the inclination to grow into an oak tree exists within the sprout), as long as the environment is sufficiently supportive. The environment needn't be particularly *directive*: Just as the pattern for the oak tree is in some sense implicit in the sprout, so also a mature sense of right and wrong is in some sense implicit in the small child and will emerge in the normal course of growth, with proper nutrition and protection. A self-discovery model of education can be seen at work in

passages such as *Mencius* 1A7, where Mencius invites the vicious King Xuan to reflect on why he felt an urge to save an ox from slaughter yet allows his innocent subjects to perish.

This isn't to say, of course, that Mencius would be happy with whatever King Xuan decided about such cases, or that Mencius doesn't see value in exposing learners to ritual texts and historical exemplars of good behavior. He was a Confucian and adhered to traditional Confucian values and educational practices. Despite his emphasis on self-discovery, he was not a "liberal" in the contemporary sense (one of the contemporary senses) of tolerating a diverse range of moral perspectives. Mencius takes himself to be encouraging not multiplicity but rather discovery of the one true (Confucian) moral structure already implicit in us and revealed by our impulses—by what pleases and revolts the heart—in obvious and nearby cases.

The straightening and sharpening metaphors of Xunzi suggest, in contrast, a more *authoritarian* approach to education, more outward-in, more in the style of contemporary Western "conservatives." Children, and the morally underdeveloped in general, are not to be encouraged to reach independent moral judgments. They cannot be expected to know what is right any more than an introductory chemistry student should be expected to know, prior to being taught, the electronegativity of the elements. Free reflection, for the morally immature, is at best a waste of time, and at worst an opportunity for the rationalization of their immoral impulses. While Mencius repeatedly urges us to think (*si* 思—think, reflect, ponder, concentrate), Xunzi declares "I once spent the whole day pondering, but it wasn't as good as a moment's worth of learning."²⁵ This isn't to say that thinking isn't of some value in the process of moral education, as thinking is of value in learning the facts of chemistry. Rather, it's to say that the morally immature cannot *discover for themselves* right from wrong. Only someone of sagely genius could do that. For the morally immature, reflection can only be effective in the context of outward instruction, in following and understanding rules or a model given by one's teacher. Morality must be *imposed on us from outside*—against our original impulses and inclinations and quite possibly contrary to our initial understanding. The process of moral education is not the pleasant matter, as it seems to be for Mencius, of discovering what truly pleases one's heart.²⁶ It is instead a matter of being forced against one's will—and then later forcing oneself, by acts of will—to suppress and redirect one's natural desires and inclinations.

In chapters 1 and 2, Xunzi attempts to inspire the reader toward further moral development. He thus seems implicitly to hope that the reader has the desire to improve himself, or can be inspired to that desire;

and this may seem to conflict with the picture of moral development just described, on which morality has to be forced from outside. This difficulty may be resolved in two ways. First, we may read Xunzi here as speaking principally to people who already have come some considerable distance in their development—to the point, perhaps, where their inclinations have some moral merit and they can see the value in further moral development. Adapting the metaphor, one might imagine that Xunzi's wood, after having been straightened to a considerable extent, can itself contribute to the final part of the straightening process. Second, we might read Xunzi's repeated emphasis on the material advantages (such as political power and personal security) that come with the life of virtue as attempts to entice the morally undeveloped into the Xunzian program of artificial self-regulation by appealing to some of their otherwise chaos-inducing natural desires.²⁷

Thus, it's possible to read the disagreement between Mencius and Xunzi regarding human nature as principally a disagreement about the proper means of moral education. Moral education is no small thing to them: It was their profession (whether in teaching the young or in attempting to coax virtuous behavior from the vicious rulers of the "Warring States" period they lived in) and their principal concern.²⁸

5. HOBBS AND ROUSSEAU ON MORAL EDUCATION

As it happens, Rousseau wrote extensively about moral education in *Emile*, a story of the idealized education of a boy from birth to adulthood. Hobbes also makes a number of remarks about moral education in the *Leviathan*. One might thus wonder whether we can recast their claims about "human nature" in developmental terms, applying to them something like the present interpretation of Mencius and Xunzi. Does Rousseau, who thinks that "human nature is good," support a vision of moral education as the cultivation of pre-existing, nascent inclinations toward morality? Does Hobbes support a vision of moral education as the external imposition of rules and moral knowledge upon minds without general inclinations in that direction?

It is clear in *Emile* that Rousseau means his claims about "human nature" to pertain not just to the fictional state of nature but also to the developing child. He writes, for example, "a young man raised in happy simplicity is drawn by the first movements of his nature toward the tender and affectionate passions."²⁹ Pride and vanity (which Rousseau thinks responsible for a large part of our conflict and unhappiness) does not "have its germ in children's hearts, cannot be born in them of itself; it is we alone who put it there, and it can never take root except by our fault."³⁰ Also:

[T]he first voices of conscience arise out of the first movements of the heart. . . . [J]ustice and goodness are not merely abstract words—pure moral beings formed by the understanding—but are true affections of the soul enlightened by reason, and hence only an *ordered development* of our primitive affections.³¹

Rousseau states that his goal in educating Emile is to “cultivate nature” (and not “deprave” it) and “to form the man of nature” but not “a savage [relegated] to the depths of the woods.”³² In the mouth of the Savoyard Vicar, he puts the view that our soul’s conscience follows the “order of nature” regardless of the laws of man and that in following it, we follow the “impulse of nature,” though it speaks with a quiet voice and “[t]he world and noise scare it.”³³

That the first impulses of the heart are good, but that they can easily be overridden by louder desires, that they require cultivation—in such matters Rousseau and Mencius agree. These are not remarks simply about how things stand only for the “savage” in the “state of nature” absent society; they concern moral development as it actually proceeds or fails in ordinary acculturated folk. To a considerable extent, the model of moral education offered in *Emile* resembles the model in Mencius: Specific moral rules are not *imposed* on Emile. He discovers for himself (in a nurturing, supportive environment—by no means the state of nature) the moral impulses we all share. He *wants* to act on them, and by acting on them they are nourished, so that a mature moral sense grows from within. Rousseau shares with Mencius, then, the “self-discovery” model of moral education.

Rousseau and Mencius diverge, however, in important ways. Where Mencius assumes a child always fully embedded in society, Rousseau takes great pains to shield Emile from most of society—so much so that in early adolescence Rousseau can say that

He knows no attachments other than those of habit. He loves his sister as he loves his watch, and his friend as his dog. He does not feel himself to be any sex, of any species. Man and woman are equally alien to him. He does not consider anything they do or say to be related to himself.³⁴

Even allowing for some overstatement, this passage is disturbing and seems hardly to reflect a process properly called “natural.” Indeed, throughout *Emile* Rousseau’s tutor puts enormous effort into manipulating Emile’s environment. Rousseau appears to think the sprouts of human goodness are so fragile that the slightest chill could cripple them, in contrast to Mencius who sees them as always reasserting themselves (as in the parable of Ox Mountain, quoted above). Rousseau aims, for example, to assure that the infant and the child judge the failures to

get what they want to be due only to the resistance of things, never of wills;³⁵ and it requires great artifice to ensure this. Without this artifice, Rousseau seems to fear the child will become permanently spoiled. *Amour-propre*, or the kind of self-love that involves comparing oneself to others, Rousseau calls both “the most natural of all passions” and a “useful but dangerous instrument.”³⁶ When *amour-propre* starts its inevitable bloom into vanity, Rousseau’s tutor contrives elaborate humiliations to cut it down.³⁷ The tutor works to present Emile instead only with situations in which, when he compares himself with others, he finds compassion for others’ suffering and the impulse to improve himself. Similarly, when Emile awakens sexually, the tutor is much exercised, by what seems to be largely artificial imposition, to prevent disasters of vanity, licentiousness, and impulsiveness.

So is Rousseau, after all, *not* committed to a picture of human nature as good in the sense articulated in this essay? On the one hand, the impulses and forms of morality and found within Emile rather than imposed from without; but on the other, they seem to flourish only in a highly artificial environment. The criteria for the “natural” thus appear to diverge. Or, more properly speaking, although Rousseau clearly avoids the most salient defeater of the view that morality is natural—that it is externally imposed—it may seem that the criterion that morality emerge in a broad range of normal environments is not met.

But perhaps the artifices of the tutor are only necessary to counteract the highly unnatural toxicity of French civilization, to restore something closer to a normal, as opposed to a distortive and perverted, human environment? This seems a plausible move, given Rousseau’s well-documented disdain for French civilization. Metaphorically speaking, Rousseau’s tutor may be providing a post to a growing vine in an environment stripped of trees. If, perhaps, Rousseau’s cultivation is more like the work of a French (or even bonsai) gardener, who constantly prunes and shapes, than like the work of a Chinese rice or barley farmer, there is still much they share in common.

Hobbes, in contrast, seems to envision moral education principally as the imparting of official doctrine:

And (to descend to particulars) the People are to be taught, First, that they ought not to be in love with any forme for Government they see in their neighbor Nations, more than with their own, nor (whatsoever present prosperity they behold in Nations that are otherwise governed than they,) to desire change. . . .

Secondly, they are to be taught that they ought not to be led with admiration of the vertue of any of their fellow Subjects . . . so as to

deferre to them any obedience, or honour, appropriate to the Sovereign only. . . .

Thirdly, . . . they ought to be informed, how great a fault it is, to speak evill of the Sovereign Representative . . . or to argue and dispute his Power.³⁸

This education proceeds, not by providing an environment supportive of reflection and self-discovery but rather (for most adults) from the pulpit:

Fourthly, seeing people cannot be taught this, nor when 'tis taught, remember it . . . without setting a part from their ordinary labour, some certain times, in which they may attend to those appointed to instruct them; It is necessary that some such times be determined, wherein they may assemble together, and . . . hear those their Duties told them, and the Positive Lawes, such as generally concern them all, read and expounded. . . . To this end had the Jewes every seventh day, a Sabbath.³⁹

Indeed, private reflection is condemned:

As for the Means, and Conduits, by which the people may receive this Instruction, wee are to search, by what means so many Opinions, contrary to the peace of Man-kind, upon weak and false Principles, have nevertheless been so deeply rooted in them. I mean those, which I have in the precedent chapter specified: as That men shall Judge of what is lawfull and unlawfull, not by the Law it selfe, but by their own Consciences; that is to say, by their own private Judgements.⁴⁰

Hobbes's metaphor for education in the *Leviathan* is not, of course, cultivation. He compares education, rather, to writing on paper:

[T]he Common-peoples minds, unlesse they be tainted with dependance on the Potent, or scribbled over with the opinions of their Doctors, are like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by Publique Authority shall be imprinted in them.⁴¹

Paper does not *resist* writing in the same way a board resists straightening, but neither do the words written on paper gain any particular support from the paper's antecedent inclinations. Hobbes does perhaps suggest that that which conforms to the principles of Reason is more easily inscribed,⁴² but the passage about the pulpit, quoted above—and indeed his authoritarianism generally—suggests that he is not especially sanguine about the common people durably retaining, or even entirely comprehending, what is taught. Perhaps a better metaphor for Hobbes than writing on paper would be writing in sand?

Hobbes's remarks about the education of children are less extensive, but similar in spirit (especially given Hobbes's comparison of paternal

and maternal dominion to the sovereign's dominion over the state), emphasizing obedience and the imposition of doctrine.⁴³

Hobbes, like Rousseau, writes repeatedly about the "nature" of humankind outside the context of the "state of nature" thought experiment that has received so much emphasis in interpretations of their work. Hobbes in fact, wrote an entire essay titled *Human Nature*. This work discusses our "natural faculties," including faculties of the mind. It's clear that Hobbes takes himself to be treating the normal, mature, adult human being as he (or she) actually develops in a normal societal environment—and not (or not just) as he would develop in a state of anarchy. Of particular interest is Hobbes's treatment of the passions and what delights the mind in chapters VII–IX. One sees here more of Xunzi than of Mencius or Rousseau: Hobbes emphasizes self-interest and the sort of desires that would lead to strife without some sort of external or internal suppression or regulation. Where he discusses passions others might see as unselfish, he generally gives them an egoistic interpretation: "Honour" consists not in moral virtue but in signs of power;⁴⁴ repentance is not characterized as following from a sense of moral failure but only as "the passion that proceedeth from opinion or knowledge that the action they have done is out of the way to the end they would attain";⁴⁵ charity arises not so much from innate compassion as from the fact that "There can be no greater argument to a man of his own power, than to find himself able, not only to accomplish his own desires, but also to assist some other men in theirs."⁴⁶ Pity appears to involve a genuine desire for (some) others to do well,⁴⁷ but it is counterbalanced by "Laughter" at other men's "infirmities and absurdity"⁴⁸ and is not uncommonly outweighed by the pleasure that arises, in watching others suffer, from the feeling of one's own security and superior position, as when we watch a battle or a shipwreck.⁴⁹ Even Xunzi's picture of our natural desires might not be quite so relentlessly egoistic.⁵⁰

So when Hobbes and Rousseau speak of human nature as good or as leading to violent strife, we have license to interpret them as speaking not just of how we would behave in the "state of nature." They are much closer to Mencius and Xunzi than a superficial criticism of a few of their most famous passages suggests. To say that human nature is good, for Mencius or Rousseau, is to say that our first and most basic impulses, if we avoid the corruption of distortive environments, point us in the direction of morality, and that consequently moral education consists in careful attention to and cultivation of those impulses.⁵¹ To take the opposing position, for Xunzi or Hobbes, is to say that the most basic and dominant body of impulses in normal, mature individuals would impel us to conflict and disorder if they were not forcibly restrained, and thus that moral development requires the persistent imposition of

rules and doctrines that have little basis in the untutored impulses of ordinary people.

What, then, to make of Hobbes's and Rousseau's thought experiments about the state of nature? They reveal, of course, the (purported) consequences of living without civil society. For Rousseau, they have value also in undermining the idea that contemporary society, especially urban Paris, is the normal human condition; consequently, the greed and corruption found therein needn't reflect our genuine nature. For Hobbes, the thought experiments, by portraying the likely result of an absence of externally imposed standards, help convey the idea that our everyday docility requires such external standards and cannot emerge simply from an unhindered process of natural moral development. Seen in this way, the thought experiments can still have a role in a proper psychological or biological understanding of "human nature" for Hobbes and Rousseau, though not the entirely central role they are usually given.⁵²

6. MORAL EDUCATION AND AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNMENT

Given the association between self-discovery models of moral education and "liberalism" in the contemporary West, one might suppose that those who think human nature is good (in the sense just explained) will be drawn toward forms of government in which expressions of popular opinion play a large role; and that, conversely, those who are drawn toward authoritarian models of moral education would incline more toward authoritarianism in government. Plainly, Rousseau advocates a less authoritarian style of government than Hobbes. Likewise, perhaps, the political philosophy in the *Mencius* has a slightly less authoritarian feel than that in the *Xunzi*. Both democracy and education by self-discovery turn on the idea that ordinary people are often best encouraged to form their own judgments (perhaps aided and supported in various ways), without the external imposition of doctrines by an authority.

But this is oversimple. Mencius, of course, like the other early Confucians, endorses an enlightened monarchy. Perhaps the better predictor of authoritarian politics is the *expense* of moral education? If proper moral education requires resources unavailable to the general public, one might find an aristocratic ruling structure attractive, at least as a utopian possibility. In the early Confucian tradition, moral education is not cheap. It requires long devotion to ancient ritual and classic texts and is incompatible with the life of labor that must be most people's lot. If the education is successful, those who have run through it will have better moral character and judgment than the masses of people. It is, then, their judgment, and not popular opinion, that should guide the state (though the early Confucians did see the approval of the masses

as important to the legitimacy and power of kings). Plato's *Republic* fits a similar model: True knowledge of the good is no common thing. Those occupied daily with manual labor cannot have the moral education of the philosopher-king, and ideally the guidance of the state should not derive from their judgment.⁵³

Rousseau, in contrast, though he imagined the education of Emile to require a private full-time tutor, appeared to believe that, in general, moral development is better attained in a life of rural labor than among the privilege of the elite. Likewise most contemporary dwellers in Western-style democracies see proper moral education as broadly attainable, not requiring the cessation of daily labor—maybe even enhanced by labor. Perhaps also pessimists about moral education, who think a ruling elite will necessarily be corrupt, will be drawn toward more democratic forms of government as best suited to keep our vice in check.

That Hobbes did not go in this last direction, given what some see as a pessimistic strain in his work, has often been held against him. However, he does emphasize that leaders and educators are to receive their education in proper (moral and political) doctrine from the universities;⁵⁴ and perhaps this gives us room to interpret him as thinking that the best moral education requires resources available only to the elite. Maybe he was less than completely pessimistic about the positive moral effect of these more expensive institutions, if properly reformed and subject to the sovereign.⁵⁵

Suppose this relationship holds—not perfectly, of course, but approximately. A view of moral education, then, can drive a political philosophy. Indeed, attitudes toward moral education can motivate views not only of political and familial authority and subordination, but also of the nature of self-constraint and willpower; of the proper role of ritual, custom, and law; of the origin and character of the emotions; of the ideal structure of society; of the role and value of reason and reflection; of the nature of moral character.⁵⁶ Equally, the stances one takes on these issues can motivate thoughts on the proper structure of moral education. Rousseau, more than our other authors, makes explicit the extent to which these issues are entangled: *Emile* beautifully displays the interrelations, with a program of moral education standing at the center. Indeed, near the end of his life, surveying his work, Rousseau wrote that *Emile* was the key to understanding all the rest.⁵⁷

7. WHO IS RIGHT?

Despite Rousseau's notorious claim, near the beginning of his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* to be "setting aside all the facts, for they have no bearing on this question,"⁵⁸ claims about human nature are clearly

at least *partly* empirical: They involve assertions about the way human beings are, in fact. This needn't entail that there is any single, straightforward, empirical test that will definitively reveal whether morality is natural to us or imposed from outside. But the question is empirically *explorable*. Empirical facts are relevant to it, and various of them may comport more harmoniously with one view or another, fit one picture nicely and require explaining away on another. These empirical facts must be tempered with a normative understanding, not only of what is "good," but also (as per §2) of what is normal and abnormal, supportive or distortive—but so also must the empirical explorations of all the human and biological sciences.

We can thus attempt some judgment about who is nearest the truth about human nature. We can ask the empirical question: What sort of moral education best engenders moral maturity—one that imposes morality on children from the outside or one that encourages children to reflect for themselves?

In practice, this will be a very difficult assessment. Even setting aside the complications of moral disagreement, the assessment of moral maturity is no easy thing. We can perhaps look at some extreme cases (people convicted of hideous offenses, or moral exemplars of the sort profiled by Colby and Damon⁵⁹), but it seems a mistake to focus only on exceptional people. Long-term, controlled studies are impossible. Short term laboratory tests may be misleading. Nonetheless, there does appear to be a general consensus among the most eminent scholars of moral development that reflection is salutary and its suppression is harmful—that children should be encouraged to think for themselves about right and wrong, in their own terms.⁶⁰ If true, this fits nicely with the view that human nature is good. However, the advocate of a darker view of human nature may legitimately wonder whether structured reflection, with adults nearby who the child knows will approve of one answer and disapprove of another, isn't really just a form of imposition, more effective for its being subtle and parading as the child's own independent judgment.

We can look also for other signs of natural goodness or its lack. Do we see nascent moral impulses—and a comparative lack of nascent immorality—in very young children and in non-human primates, who presumably are less influenced by the imposition of an external code? Do the perpetrators of terrible evil (such as the Holocaust), when they reflect on their deeds, find themselves morally revolted, regardless of their prior doctrines, or are malignant values relatively stable to the reflection of ordinary non-philosophers? When people are encouraged

to reflect on their emotional reactions to their own and others' actions, are they thereafter more or less likely to commit misdeeds?

It's appealing to read the evidence as favoring a roughly Mencian view, in which ordinary reflection in a supportive but non-directive environment is the best spur to moral development. (This hope is perhaps also implicit in the structure of many contemporary ethics classes.) The researchers on moral development cited above seem to favor views roughly of this sort. Zahn-Waxler and others see sympathy arising in very early childhood.⁶¹ De Waal sees the origins of morality in non-human primates.⁶² Arendt's famous study of Eichmann suggests that evil tends to flow from a failure to think.⁶³ Work on juvenile delinquency suggests reduced recidivism when offenders are encouraged to reflect.⁶⁴

On the other hand, young boys seem naturally to delight in the suffering of insects; and a certain kind of pleasure in the *small* misfortunes of others seems nearly universal, and probably "normal" given inclusive standards of normality. (Consider our reactions to the mishaps portrayed in shows like *America's Funniest Home Videos*.) In-groups' aggression against out-groups (from small cliques and sports teams to races and nations) seems too universal and too heartily approved to be anything but natural. (Think of all the "great men" of history, after whom our children are often named, whose principal achievement was in aggressive warfare.) But perhaps counterbalancing this is a natural intolerance of aggression within in-groups. Nazis are often surprisingly unrepentant, even in the face of the vast social disapproval of their actions; but maybe this can be explained by psychological self-defense mechanisms. Ethics professors, despite what seems like ample opportunity for moral reflection, seem to behave no better than other members of their social class—Rousseau himself famously abandoned his children—but perhaps their reflection is too intellectual, too clever, and too far removed from local particulars to foster their own moral development.

This last concern, actually, is perhaps the most worrisome. Unless one is an absolute pessimist about moral reflection or the value of morality, it seems that one should hope and expect that those who are praised for their talent in thinking through moral issues, who do so in their daily work and who, presumably, extend this at least somewhat into their daily lives, should achieve some moral improvement thereby. Else what is moral reflection for?⁶⁵

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NOTES

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. R. Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [originally published 1651]), pp. 60–62/86–89.
2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, ed. F. Philip, trans. P. Coleman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994 [originally published 1755]), p. 83.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
4. This includes, of course, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biologists, such as the eminent naturalist René de Réaumur, in his *Natural History of Ants*, trans. W. M. Wheeler (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926 [composed 1742–1743]), pp. 47, 135.
5. The content of this section may seem to conflict with a strong version of Developmental Systems Theory that rejects the “nature”/“nurture” distinction (e.g., S. Oyama, *The Ontogeny of Information* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985]). The standard complaints about that distinction have merit. The present understanding of the natural is intended to avoid them and to be compatible with a moderate version of DST.
6. Mengzi 6A2, trans. B. W. Van Norden, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. P. J. Ivanhoe and B. W. Van Norden (New York: Seven Bridges, 2001), p. 141.
7. *Ibid.*, Mengzi 6A8, p. 145.
8. *Ibid.*, Mengzi 6A7, pp. 144–145.
9. *Ibid.*, Mengzi 6A10, p. 146.
10. *Ibid.*, Mengzi 2A6, p. 125.
11. *Ibid.*, Mengzi 3A5, p. 130.
12. These are the canonical Mencian virtues of yi (義), ren (仁), and li (禮), to which 6A10, 2A6, and 3A5 seem respectively to pertain. There may be no passage in the *Mencius* that plays the same role vis-à-vis the fourth canonical Mencian virtue, zhi (智).
13. On “extension” see esp. 1A7, 2A6, 7A15. On causes of moral failure, see esp. 1A7, 6A7, 6A14, 6A15.
14. Xunzi, chap. 23, trans. E. Hutton, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, p. 284.
15. See *Hsün Tzu: Basic Writings*, trans. B. Watson (New York: Columbia, 1963), p. 159.
16. E.g., *ibid.*, p. 159–160.
17. See esp. chap. 23.
18. See esp. chaps. 1–2.

19. Literally the heart, supposed to be the organ of cognition and at least some emotions. See D. B. Wong, “Is There a Distinction Between Reason and Emotion in Mencius?” *Philosophy East & West*, vol. 41 (1991), pp. 31–44.
20. D. C. Lau partially endorses this view his introduction to the *Mencius* (London: Penguin, 1970).
21. We can thus read Mencius and Xunzi as closer in their understanding of xing (性—the natural) than many commentators now suggest, e.g., A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989); P. R. Goldin, *Rituals of the Way* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).
22. E.g., 2A6, 6A6, 6A8, 6A9, 6A14.
23. Chaps. 1, 23. Xunzi also repeatedly uses the metaphor of matching to “models” (fa 法) or keeping to straight lines, which seem generally in the same spirit. Another repeated emphasis is xiu (修), which is frequently translated as “cultivating” or “cultivation,” as in the title of chap. 2, “Cultivating Oneself” (Hutton trans.); “On Self-Cultivation” (*Xunzi*, trans. J. Knoblock [Hunan People’s Publishing House, 1999]). It’s probably misleading to read any agricultural connotation into Xunzi’s use of this term: See A. Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil* (forthcoming), chap. 6. Watson translates the title of chap. 2 as “Improving Yourself.”
24. In emphasizing the importance of these metaphors, I follow P. J. Ivanhoe, esp. *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000); and *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).
25. Chap. 1, Hutton trans., p. 249.
26. Contra the present interpretation, Goldin cites a particular passage in chap. 4 (§12 in Knoblock trans., p. 87) as suggesting that we only born ignorant of morality and are naturally attracted to it even on first exposure (“Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the *Xunzi*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 69 [2001], pp. 497–498). The passage can be accommodated within the present view by noting that what the morally undeveloped might find attractive on first exposure is not morality itself but rather a *society* that operates according to the proper moral principles (and is thus harmonious). (Thanks to Eric Hutton for discussion of this point.)
27. Mencius also repeatedly advertises the material advantages that flow from morality (e.g., 1A2, 1A5, 1A7, 1B3, etc.). Such appeals must play a somewhat different role in his moral psychology than in Xunzi’s.
28. A number of the essays in *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, ed. T. C. Kline III and P. J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000) shine further light on the themes in this section, esp. Kupperman, Van Norden, Wong, Hutton, and Ivanhoe.
29. *Emile*, trans. A. Bloom (Basic Books: 1979 [originally published 1762]), p. 220.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 235, emphasis added.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 254–255.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 267, 286, and 291, respectively.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 208 and 244.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 173–175, 244.
38. *Leviathan*, pp. 177–178/233–234.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 178/234–235.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 179/236.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 176/233. See also *Human Nature*, in *The Elements of Natural Law and Politic*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994 [originally published 1650]), I.X.8, pp. 62–63.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 177/233.
43. *Leviathan*, pp. 101–107/138–145 and 178/235. S. A. Lloyd describes Hobbes's picture of education, and draws a helpful parallel between state-sponsored education and parental instruction in "Coercion, Ideology, and Education in Hobbes's *Leviathan*," in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics*, ed. A. Reath, B. Herman, and C. M. Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
44. *Human Nature*, I.VIII.5–6.
45. *Ibid.*, I.IX.7.
46. *Ibid.*, I.IX.17.
47. *Ibid.*, I.IX.10.
48. *Ibid.*, I.IX.13.
49. *Ibid.*, I.IX.19.
50. E.g., Knoblock trans., chaps. 4.3, 5.9.
51. This interpretation conflicts sharply not only with simple "state of nature" interpretations of what Rousseau means by "natural" but also with some of the more textually nuanced or biologically sensitive interpretations in the literature, such as J. C. Hall, *Rousseau* (London: Macmillan, 1973); J. B. Noone, Jr., *Rousseau's Social Contract* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980); and R. Kukla, "Making and Masking Human Nature: Rousseau's Aesthetics of Education," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 29 (1998), pp. 228–251. A. M. Melzer's interpretation, in *The Natural Goodness of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), nicely incorporates the idea that our first and most basic impulses are good but underplays the developmental aspect.
52. It is perhaps worth noting that Locke, who also famously employs the "state of nature" thought experiment (in his *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. I Shapiro [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003 (originally published

1690)), wrote a handbook on the education of children that was enormously influential in its day (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. R. W. Grant and N. Tarcov [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996 (originally published 1693)]). Locke takes a moderate position, between Hobbes and Rousseau, on our condition in the "state of nature," and likewise takes a moderate and intermediate position on the role of authority and self-discovery in moral education (see, e.g., §116, 139).

53. See also Aristotle's *Politics*, Book III, chap. 4.

54. *Leviathan*, pp. 180/237 and 395/491.

55. Though Hobbes writes that it is easy for common people to learn the basic "Principles of Reason" (*Leviathan*, pp. 176–177/233), likely he intends to distinguish between the kind of education necessary to be a good subject in an authoritarian state and that necessary to make governmental decisions.

56. Two recent works that argue persuasively for the centrality of views of moral education to one's overall moral and political outlook are G. Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and T. Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

57. *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques*, ed. R. D. Masters and C. Kelly, (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1990 [originally published 1776]), pp. 932–933/211. T. O'Hagan (*Rousseau* [London: Routledge, 1999]) puts *Emile* near the center of his understanding of Rousseau, and his reading of what Rousseau means by "nature" has an explicitly developmental aspect: e.g., p. 63.

58. P. 24.

59. A. Colby and W. Damon, *Some Do Care* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

60. E.g., J. Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, trans. M. Gabain (New York: Free Press, 1965 [originally published 1932]); L. Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); W. Damon, *The Moral Child* (New York: Free Press, 1988); E. Staub, *The Roots of Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

61. E.g., C. Zahn-Waxler and M. Radke-Yarrow, "The Origins of Empathic Concern," *Motivation and Emotion*, vol. 14 (1990); M. L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); P. D. Hastings, C. Zahn-Waxler, and K. McShane, "We Are, by Nature, Moral Creatures: Biological Bases of Concern for Others," in *Handbook of Moral Development*, ed. M. Killen and J. G. Smetana (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2006).

62. Esp. F. de Waal, *Good Natured* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); on social animals in general, see C. Darwin, *Descent of Man*, ed. J. T. Bonner and R. M. May (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981 [originally published 1871]).

63. H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1963); "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. J. Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003 [originally published 1971]).

64. E.g., R. Schwitzgebel, *Streetcorner Research* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 24–44; S. E. Samenow, *Inside the Criminal Mind* (New York: Times Books, 1984).

65. For helpful conversation and comments, thanks to audiences at the University of California, Riverside (in developmental psychology); California State University, San Marcos (in political theory); California State University, Fullerton; California Polytechnic University, Pomona; and the Eastern Division APA; and to Nick Bunnin, Robert Harada, Eric Hutton, P. J. Ivanhoe, Chris Laursen, Adam Morton, Timothy O'Hagan, Kwong-loi Shun, and Bryan Van Norden. My debt to Kwong-loi Shun's and especially P. J. Ivanhoe's views of Mencius is large, as will be evident to those who know their writings.