

Human Nature and Moral Development in Mencius, Xunzi, Hobbes, and Rousseau

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Mencius, Xunzi, Hobbes, and Rousseau were all political philosophers well known for their views on “human nature”. I will argue in this essay that, to some degree of approximation, their views about human nature can be interpreted as, or even reduced to, views about the proper course of moral education, and that, consequently, a view of moral education stands near the center of each man’s philosophy. I will then suggest that we can explore empirically which philosopher was nearest the truth.

1. The “State of Nature”.

The dispute between the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the 18th century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarding human nature is generally cast – and was indeed by Rousseau himself 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 (1651/1996) that the “natural condition of mankind” (p. 60/86) – his condition prior to establishment of the state – is one of misery and “Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man” and the life of man is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (p. 62/89). 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. A man in the state of nature will see something he

wants – such as the goods or wife of another man – and will seek to obtain it, if he can do so consistently with his own safety, regardless of whatever pain or death it may bring upon others. Inevitably, 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 and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (1755/1994). Man in the state of nature “breathes only peace and freedom; he wishes only to live and remain idle” (p. 83). “[H]is heart yearns for nothing; his modest needs are easily within reach” (p. 35). 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.

It is sometimes suggested that Rousseau is less sanguine about the state of nature in his later work, The Social Contract (1762/1987). He certainly does, there (in Chapter 6), envision that the time may come where the survival of man requires exiting the state of nature and entering some sort of civil society. Perhaps, though, Rousseau is only recognizing here that the state of nature portrayed in his Discourse on Inequality requires a ready abundance of food and may be unsustainable if food becomes scarce. And there may be reasons for thinking that Rousseau felt man’s behavior in conditions of plenty better reflects his “nature” than his behavior in conditions of scarcity – if, for example (to

anticipate somewhat the next section of this essay), Rousseau regards the environment of plenty as the “normal” environment of humankind. In any case, in Emile (1762/1979), published the same year, Rousseau appears still to hold human nature in high esteem – we will return to Emile later – and in his essay to Christophe de Beaumont that same year, he writes that “the fundamental principle of all morals, on which I have reasoned in all my writings, and which I have developed in them with all the clarity I was able, is that man is a naturally good being, liking justice and order; that there is no original perversity in the human heart; and that the first movements of nature are always correct” (1762/1969, p. 935-936).

The famous claims about “human nature” in the Leviathan and the Discourse on Inequality appear to pertain, as I have said, to how human beings would behave without government or stable social structures. But it is, in a way, very strange to 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”. The ant and the wolf are naturally social. Their behavior within their social structures is their natural behavior – the isolated ant or wolf is an aberration. Human beings are, of course, the same in this respect.

If the reader agrees with me in this matter, she may also consequently agree that the “state of nature” thought experiment is, at best, misnamed. If Hobbes’s and Rousseau’s aim in conducting this thought experiment is to begin an inquiry into the value (or disvalue) of society and government, it may have some purpose; but it would be less misleading to call the conditions they imagine “governmentless” or “societyless” than “natural”. With this thought in mind, for years I dismissed Hobbes’s and Rousseau’s

comments on “human nature” as being perhaps important as political philosophy but as only marginally related to the biological or psychological or ethological study of what patterns of thought and behavior are truly natural to human beings. Mencius and Xunzi seemed to me quite different in this respect, much closer to a proper sense of the “natural”. My opinion on this matter has changed somewhat, however, as the reader will see.

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: My brown hair is its “natural” color, while my friend Jeanette’s black hair is not. My sexual attraction to women, which began in adolescence (if not earlier), is natural; a crack addict’s indifference is not. My wife’s small feet are natural; a traditional Chinese woman’s feet, if their growth was constricted by tight binding, may be unnaturally small. A trait may be natural to an individual but not, generally speaking, natural for the species: The limited early social attachments in a child with autism may be natural for her but not what we would consider natural for human beings in general. There is some merit in thinking about the “natural” as essentially relative to individuals, as indeed I have in all my examples thus far. However, our four authors aim to make broad generalizations about human nature. Thus (though not only for this reason), it will be useful in this essay primarily to think about 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.

I propose that we consider a trait natural to an individual just in case it arises in that individual through a normal process of development in a normal, nutritive environment, rather than as a result of injury, 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 need not 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. In abnormal or deficient environments a “natural” trait may generally be absent: For example, normal individuals may have white hair or no hair in environments with enough background radiation. In environments with severe nutritive deficiencies, people may not grow to their natural heights or develop their natural sexual characteristics. Even in normal, nutritive environments, some aberrant individuals may not acquire a particular “natural” human trait (though the alternative traits they do acquire may be natural for them), as in the case of 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 that 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. All sorts of objections may be raised against the use of such terms. There may often be no determinate answers, or only political answers. But that is no objection to this definition of “natural”, since (I

think!) the reader will find that the intuitive application of the word “natural” also generates such worries. So, for example, whether we consider homosexuality “natural” depends on whether we think it arises without external imposition in normal members of the population in normal, nutritive environments. Those who deny the naturalness of human homosexuality, for instance, will be 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. Is the massive overweight of many Americans “natural”? That depends on whether you think we should consider a sedentary environment with superabundant refined sugars and fats a “normal, nutritive” environment for human beings, or whether you think that environment distortive and defective in some way.

If you are concerned about what might be hidden in decisions about what counts as “normal”, etc., you have my sympathy: But the proper answer to this concern, if you find it overriding, is not to redefine “natural” in some more objective way, but simply to avoid the word. The definition I propose has at least the merit of making explicit the normative presuppositions often implicit in calling a trait “natural”. Too many people employ the word as though the matter of naturalness could be decided by objective and apolitical biological measurements alone.

With this understanding of the “natural” in hand, let me reframe the key idea of the previous section. A relatively stable social system is part of a normal, nutritive environment for human beings (and for all social animals). Even in times of political revolution, much of one’s social environment remains the same. The traits that arise among people raised outside such environments are not our natural traits, but often quite

the opposite. The most extreme case of this is, of course, the occasional “wild child”, starved of human interaction through much of her childhood. Such children 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.

Here, then, is how I would like to interpret the question about whether human beings are “naturally” violently competitive or placidly compassionate: Look at how those character traits arise in human development. 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, or the stretching of necks or the dyeing of hair? Or does morality emerge without external imposition from a normal process of human maturation, drawing on the environment principally for nutrition and support?

These two alternatives are of course too stark, and they are not exhaustive. Among other possibilities, human nature could be mixed, with some elements driving us toward compassion and others driving us toward violence, or different people might have different natures, some naturally more inclined toward violence some naturally more inclined toward compassion, so that we cannot say there is a single “human nature” on this head. And of course compassion and violence are not entirely exclusive: One can perpetrate violence in a compassionate way. Finally, by using violence and compassion as examples (because of the role they play in my simple portrayal Hobbes and Rousseau), I don’t wish to focus unduly on compassion and violence as the fonts of morality and immorality. Certainly the relationship between compassion, violence, and broad issues of human morality (for instance) is a mixed and complicated one.

3. Mencius and Xunzi on Human Nature.

What I have said about how to approach questions of human nature – that is, in terms of development within a normal social environment – certainly seems to be in tension with Hobbes and Rousseau. (How much it actually is so, we will see.) It comports rather better with the classical Chinese philosophers Mencius and Xunzi in the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C.E., respectively, and indeed arose in part from my reflections on their famous dispute about whether human nature (xing 性) is good (shan 善) or bad (e 惡 – bad, ugly, unappealing). In this section, I will try to convey the general flavor of the views associated with their takes on human nature. At the end will I suggest what I take to be the unifying thread.

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 (6A2, 4th BCE/2001).

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 or 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?! (6A8, 4rd BCE/2001).

These passages establish that Mencius adopted the slogan that “human nature is good”. They do not yet give us a full picture of what that slogan means, but Mencius clearly wants to make one thing plain: To say that human nature is good is not to say that all people behave well. Water can be dammed up and kept on a hillside. A mountain that naturally tends to be verdant can actually be bald. Indeed, Mencius thought the decadent times he lived in were rife with wickedness. Rousseau did also, for that matter. It is 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 (6A7) (yi 義 – moral rightness). Mencius builds a case for this claim on the basis of what he takes to be normal, spontaneous reactions to circumstances in which what is right or wrong is plain and in one’s face, as it were. 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 (6A10); the first impulse of anyone who suddenly sees a child

about to fall into a well is to want to save the child (2A6); the first impulse of people on seeing the dead bodies of their parents eaten by foxes and bugs is to want to bury the bodies (3A5). Such universal impulses are the seeds or sprouts (duan 端) of righteousness, benevolence, and propriety. Moral development results from attending to, cultivating, and “extending” (1A7, 2A6, 7A15) 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 the desires of the heart to the desires of lesser parts of oneself such as one’s stomach or eyes or limbs, or failing to think through the similarities between nearby cases and those farther away (1A7, 6A14, 6A15, 7A15).

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 (3rd BCE/2001, p. 284, ch. 23).

So for example, Xunzi says that when we are hungry, our natural emotions or dispositions lead us to want to eat before others. It is only by artificial social convention that we come to accept waiting our turn (3rd c. BCE/1963, p. 159-160). 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. Moral rules are an invention of the Sage Kings, a set of artificial constraints imposed on people for the proper functioning of society. 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 (ch. 1 and 2).

However, despite the starkly different mottoes, it can come to seem unclear where the difference between Mencius and Xunzi lies. Mencius and Xunzi agree on one key point: That people often behave badly when they act from basic bodily impulses, and moral behavior requires the regulation of those impulses by heart or mind (xin 心 – literally the organ of the heart, supposed to be the organ of cognition and at least some emotions [see Wong 1991]). In light of this agreement it is sometimes suggested that Mencius and Xunzi are much closer together than it may at first seem: They disagree only (or primarily) in how to define the “natural”. Xunzi thinks anything arising from the activity 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. (See Lau's introduction to Mencius 4th c. BCE/1970 for a partial endorsement of this view.)

I strongly disagree with this interpretation. But where, then, should we locate their disagreement? The reader will recall my preference for interpreting questions about human nature developmentally. I believe that Mencius and Xunzi implicitly accept this approach (despite Xunzi's occasionally simplistic remarks about the "natural" being what is present at birth in chapters 22 and 23). The core question on which they disagree, I would suggest, 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 for themselves (Mencius)? In other words, is moral development a process more of indoctrination or self-discovery?

4. Metaphors for Moral Development.

One 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 (e.g., 2A6, 6A6, 6A8, 6A9, 6A14). Xunzi compares moral development to straightening a board or sharpening metal (chapters 1, 23). These metaphors can be made to do a lot of work for both authors (as in Ivanhoe 1993, 2002b).

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). Both involve permanent change and incremental progress, barring toxic or distortive factors in the environment, rather than a pattern of continual relapse and relearning. So also moral development, in the view of both philosophers.

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 structure come 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, in contemporary parlance, call a liberal model of education: Students are encouraged to reflect for themselves, to discover their own values. They need not be told explicitly what is right and wrong. They are perfectly capable of discovering it for themselves, if they reflect carefully on their pre-existing impulses and judgments. The inclination toward morality already exists within them (as the inclination to grow into an oak tree exists within the sprout), as long as the environment is sufficiently supportive. The environment need not 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.

This liberal model of education captures, I think, much of the spirit of Mencius' view, and is seen at work in such passages as 1A7, where Mencius invites the vicious King Xuan to reflect on why he felt an urge to save an ox from slaughter yet allowed his innocent subjects to perish. However, I don't want to overplay the point. Mencius was a Confucian, after all, who valued the study of the classic texts and adherence to traditional

rituals. He held people to very high standards of moral conduct; he would not let the morally undeveloped run wild. He would not be liberal in the sense of failing to enforce strict rules – only in the sense of encouraging self-discovery.

The straightening and sharpening metaphors of Xunzi suggest, in contrast, what we might today call a more conservative style of education. Children (and the morally underdeveloped in general) are not to be encouraged to think for themselves. They cannot be expected to know what is right. Free reflection, for them, is at best a waste of time, and at worst an opportunity for the rationalization of one's 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” (p. 249, Hutton trans., 2001, ch. 1). The morally immature cannot discover for themselves right from wrong. Only someone of sagely genius could do that. Instead, they must be explicitly instructed. The shape of morality cannot be found implicitly within them; it must be given them from outside. Indeed, it must be imposed – against their impulses, against their inclinations. 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. 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 prior 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. The

resolution of this difficulty, I believe, is to read Xunzi here as speaking principally to people who have already 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. For the young and the vicious, however, it may still be permissible to interpret Xunzi as preferring rote conformity (“reciting the classics”: p. 250, Hutton trans., 2001, ch. 1) and the rod; real understanding comes only near the end.

Thus, I 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.

5. Hobbes 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. I am thus prompted to wonder whether we can recast their claims about “human nature” in developmental terms as I have suggested we do for 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? I would like to suggest that the answer to both questions is yes.

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 [as is Emile] is drawn by the first movements of his nature toward the tender and affectionate passions” (1762/1979, p. 220). 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” (p. 215). 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 (p. 235, emphasis added).

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” (p. 254-255). 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 (p. 267) and that in following it, we follow the “impulse of nature” (p. 286), though it speaks with a quiet voice and “[t]he world and noise scare it” (p. 291).

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 are about how moral development proceeds or fails in the normal human being. 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, what I have called a “liberal” model of 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 (p. 219).

Even allowing for some overstatement, this passage is disturbing and seems to me hardly to reflect a process I would call “natural”. Indeed, throughout Emile, Rousseau has his tutor take enormous pains to manipulate 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, 6A8). 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 (p. 66); and it seems to me to require great artifice to ensure this. Without this artifice, he 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” (p. 208) and a “useful but dangerous instrument” (p. 244). When amour-propre starts its inevitable bloom into vanity, Rousseau requires his tutor to contrive humiliations to cut it down (p. 173-175, p. 244). 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 me largely artificial imposition, to prevent disasters of vanity, licentiousness, impulsiveness.

I am thus somewhat torn in my assessment of Rousseau’s claim about the goodness of human nature, where that claim is construed as a claim about the whether proper moral development is a natural phenomenon. On the one hand, the impulses and forms of morality are found within Emile rather than imposed from without; but on the other, they seem to flourish only in a highly artificial environment. My 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 (on my definition of “natural”) – that it is externally imposed, the question might arise whether the condition that morality emerge in a broad range of normal environments is satisfied. This difficulty might be avoided if we allow Rousseau to suggest that the artifices of his tutor are principally necessary to counteract the highly unnatural toxicity of French civilization, to restore something closer to what Rousseau might regard as a normal, as opposed to a distortive

and perverted, human environment. Metaphorically speaking, Rousseau's tutor may be doing something like providing a post to a growing vine in an environment stripped of trees. In any case, if we construe the key question as whether moral education proceeds by the cultivation of pre-existing, nascent impulses toward morality, Rousseau clearly thinks it does. If, perhaps, Rousseau's cultivation is more like the work of the French gardener, who constantly prunes and shapes, than like the work of the 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 onely....

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...

(1651/1996, p. 177-178/233-234).

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, nor after one generation past, so much as know in whom the Sovereign Power is

placed, 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 (after prayers and praises given to God, the Sovereign of Sovereigns) 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 ... (p. 178/234-235).

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 neverthelesse 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... (p. 179/236).

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

the 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 (p. 176/233; see also 1650/1994, I.X.8, p. 62-63).

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 with the principles of Reason is more easily inscribed (p. 177/233), but the passage about the pulpit, quoted above – and indeed his authoritarianism generally – suggest 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 I interpret them as 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 (p. 101-107/138-145 and 178/235) – and on the whole being very different from the sort of education envisioned by Rousseau.

Hobbes, like Rousseau, writes repeatedly about the “nature” of humankind outside of the context of the “state of nature” thought experiment that has received so much emphasis in interpretations their work. Hobbes, in fact, has an entire essay titled “Human Nature” (1650/1994). This work discusses our “natural faculties”, including both faculties of the body and faculties of the mind. It is clear that Hobbes takes himself to be treating the normal, mature, adult human being as he (or she) actually develops in a normal environment containing society – 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 (ch. 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 (I.VIII.5-6); 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” (I.IX.7); charity appears to arise 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 other men in theirs” (I.IX.17). Pity appears to involve a genuine desire for (some) others to do well, independently of one’s own condition (I.IX.10), but it is counterbalanced by “Laughter” at other men’s “infirmities and absurdity” (I.IX.13) and is not uncommonly outweighed by the pleasure that arises, in watching others suffer, from feeling one’s own security and superior position, as when we watch a battle or a shipwreck (I.IX.19).

We have thus ample evidence, I suggest, to interpret Hobbes and Rousseau, when they speak of human nature as good or as leading to violent strife, 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 examination 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. To deny that it is good, 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 the ordinary men. That, at least, is my suggestion.

What, then, to make of Hobbes's and Rousseau's thought experiments about the state of nature? I do think they have an interest besides that of revealing the value (or disvalue) of living in a civil society. For Rousseau, the value is also partly in undermining the idea that contemporary society, especially urban Paris, should be seen as the normal human condition. That realization in turn permits us to see that the greed and corruption to be found therein need not reflect our genuine nature, in something like the proper, developmental sense of "natural" I advocate. For Hobbes, the value is partly in showing that our everyday docility proceeds not from the unhindered process of normal moral development but from the external imposition of standards. Seen in this way, the thought experiments can still have a role in a proper psychological or biological understanding of "human nature", though not the entirely central role they are usually given.

6. Moral Education and Authoritarian Government.

One might suppose that advocates of liberal models of moral education, those who think that human nature is good, would be drawn toward comparatively democratic forms of government in which voting or other expressions of popular opinion play a large role, and that those who are drawn toward conservative models of moral education would incline more toward authoritarianism. Plainly, Rousseau in The Social Contract advocates a less authoritarian style of government than Hobbes in the Leviathan; arguably, also, Mencius advocates a less authoritarian style of government than Xunzi.

There may be some truth in this idea. The liberal educator and the democrat agree that ordinary people are best left to form their own judgments (perhaps aided and supported in various ways), without the external imposition of doctrines by an authority.

But of course Mencius is no democrat. Like the other major early Confucians, he endorses an enlightened monarchy. Perhaps the better predictor of authoritarian politics is the expense of moral education. If proper moral education requires extensive resources unavailable to the general public, then one might find an aristocratic ruling structure attractive, at least as a utopian possibility. In the early Confucian tradition, moral education is not cheap. Although anyone (or at least any man) can enter it, it requires long devotion to learning ancient ritual and studying classic texts, and is incompatible with the life of labor that must be most people's lot. If the education has been successful, those who have run through it will have better moral character and better judgment than the masses of people. It is, then, their judgment, and not popular opinion, that should guide the state (though early Confucians generally thought the masses possessed enough good sense to be attracted to virtuous rulers and to despise the wicked). I am reminded here, also, of Plato's Republic. Plato can, I think, be classified with Mencius and Rousseau as endorsing the goodness of human nature and seeing education as the drawing out, through guided reflection, of innate and universal impulses. Nonetheless, for Plato, true knowledge of the good is no common thing (recall the analogy of the cave in Book VII of the Republic). Those occupied daily with manual labor cannot have the moral education of the philosopher-king, and the guidance of the state should ideally not derive from their judgment.

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, it seems to me, most contemporary dwellers in Western-style democracies see proper moral education as broadly attainable, not requiring the cessation of daily labor – perhaps even enhanced by manual 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 viciousness 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. On the other hand, he emphasizes that both the gentry and the educators of the masses are to receive their education in proper doctrine from the universities (1651/1996, p. 180/237 and p. 395/491), which perhaps suggests that he thinks the best moral education requires resources available only to the elite. There may be room to interpret him as less than completely pessimistic about the positive moral effect of these more expensive institutions, if properly reformed and subject to the sovereign.

I am certain there are counterexamples to the generalizations I have made in this section. Supposing I am right, however: This is one way in which a view of moral education can drive a political philosophy. Is it too much to see a vision of moral education – that is, a stance on the extent to which morality is natural to us and the conditions of its flourishing – as the engine driving each of our four authors' overall social, political, and ethical work? Well, yes, it probably is too much, especially for Hobbes. But still: A well-developed view of moral education can motivate not only a

view of political and familial authority and subordination, but also a view 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. Equally, the stances one takes on these issues can motivate thoughts on the proper structure for moral education. I can make no causal claims here, but simply point out the entanglement. Rousseau, more than our other authors, makes that entanglement explicit: Emile beautifully displays the interrelations between all these issues (and others), 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 (1776/1990, p. 932-933/211; also O'Hagan 1999).

7. Who Is Right?

Despite Rousseau's famous claim, near the beginning of his Discourse on Inequality to be "setting aside all the facts, for they have no bearing on this question" (1755/1994, p. 24), claims about human nature are clearly at least partly empirical: They involve assertions about the way human beings are, in fact. People could be one way or another; it is not a matter of conceptual necessity that we are as we are. 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. (Little, indeed, of broad general interest in human psychology can be revealed by a single test.) But the question is empirically explorable. There are empirical facts that are relevant to it, that comport more harmoniously with one view or another, that fit one picture nicely and require

explaining away on another. These facts must all be tempered with a normative understanding, not only of what is “good”, but also as I suggested earlier of what is normal or abnormal, supportive or distortive – but so also must the empirical explorations of all the human (and perhaps biological) sciences.

We can thus attempt some judgment about who is closest to the truth about human nature. Since I have characterized the issue as at its core an issue about the proper course of moral education, that is the natural place to begin. I suppose that reasonable people can in general more or less agree about standards of moral goodness. (I am thus taking a stand against strong versions of [descriptive] moral relativism.) We can then ask an 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 on their own?

Now in practice, this will be a very difficult assessment, since even without the complications of moral relativism, 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 type profiled in Colby and Damon [1992]), but it seems a mistake to focus only on exceptional people. Long-term, controlled studies are impossible; while short term laboratory tests may reveal little. Although there appears to be a general consensus among scholars of moral development that reflection is salutary and its suppression is harmful (e.g., Piaget 1932/1965; Kohlberg 1981; Damon 1988; Staub 1989), the advocate of a darker view of human nature may legitimately wonder whether structured reflection, with adults nearby whom 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 individual's own independent judgment.

Fortunately, we can look also for other signs of natural goodness, or its lack, that may bode well, or ill, for a roughly Mencian view. So, for example, 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 revulsed, 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 (at least immediately thereafter) more or less likely to commit misdeeds?

Let me take my stand. I think, overall, the evidence favors a roughly Mencian view, in which ordinary reflection in a supportive but non-directive environment constitutes the best spur to moral development. Besides the scholars of moral development cited above who seem to favor views of roughly this sort, let me mention the work on early childhood emotional contagion and sympathy by Zahn-Waxler and others (Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow 1990; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, and Chapman 1992); de Waal's (1996) work on the origins of morality in non-human primates (and Darwin's [1871/1981] reflections on social animals in general); Arendt's (1963) suggestion that evil tends to flow from a failure to think in her study of Eichmann; and work on juvenile delinquents that suggests reduced recidivism when encouraged to reflect (Schwitzgebel 1964 [my father!]; Samenow 1984).

The evidence is by no means unequivocal, and an absolutely pure and uniform goodness in human nature is too much to hope for. Some delight in the suffering of insects seems quite natural to young boys, and a certain kind of pleasure in the small misfortunes of others seems nearly universal. (I think here especially of our reactions to the kinds of mishaps portrayed in shows like America's Funniest Home Videos.) The aggression of ingroups against outgroups (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 counterbalancing this, it seems to me, is a natural intolerance of inappropriate aggression within the ingroup. Nazis are often surprisingly unrepentant, even in the face of the vast social disapproval of their actions; but perhaps this can be explained by psychological self-defense mechanisms. Ethics professors, despite what seems like ample opportunity for moral reflection, in my experience behave no better than other members of their social class – Rousseau himself famously abandoned his children – but perhaps their reflection is too intellectual and too far removed from local particulars to foster their own moral development.

This last concern, actually, is the one that worries me most. Unless one is an absolute pessimist about moral reflection or about 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, habitually extend this into their daily lives, should achieve some moral improvement thereby. Else what is moral reflection for?

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