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Mencius and Early Chinese Thought, by Kwong-Loi Shun (Book Review)

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Mencius and Early Chinese Thought. By KWON-LOI SHUN.
Stanford: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997. Pp. 295. \$45.

Although “ethics” does not appear in the title, Kwong-Loi Shun’s *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* is an analysis of ethics in the *Mencius*. Shun’s goal is to “further our understanding of the Confucian perspective on the ethical life” (p. 8). His painstakingly careful presentation of passages of Mencian ethics certainly achieves this aim.

The book is the first of a projected three-volume set. It is to be followed by another, similarly philological, volume and a final volume devoted to philosophical issues. Shun’s topics include *yi* (tentatively glossed as “propriety”) and its relation to *hsin* (heart/mind), *hsing* (tentatively glossed as “nature, characteristic tendencies”), self-cultivation, and the ethical ideal. The bulk of Shun’s work involves an impressive amount of research and systematic line-by-line analysis. In the case of disputed passages, he supplies a thorough exploration of optional readings, accompanied by copious notes on other scholars’ opinions.

Shun’s method is one of the few things in this book that seems questionable. He privileges interpretations that either make Mencius (the person) as coherent as possible or that make the text itself an argument for a single (not necessarily as coherent) position. But since language is social, an interpretive method must maximize coherence over a whole period of use, not just over a single text. Shun’s approach risks making the *Mencius* coherent at the expense of other texts in the period. Yet, in some cases, it does produce interesting readings. For instance, in his interpretation of 6A:1–3 and 6A:4–5, Shun’s reading accounts for “all stages of the debates,” which presumes the debates are related. Thus, although he admits that the debates

about *hsing* in 6A:1–3 do not appear to be about the relationship of *yi* to the heart/mind, Shun reads them in light of the debates about the internality of *yi* in 6A:4–5. The result is a surprisingly consistent reading of these passages, although it does have one drawback. According to this interpretation, Kao Tzu's claim that *yi* is external means that *yi* is imposed on *hsing*, hence *hsing* itself is not good. However, as Shun notes, contrary to expectations, the reverse does not quite apply to Kao Tzu's view of the internality of *jen*. That is, according to Shun, the fact that Kao Tzu thinks that *jen* is internal does not necessarily mean it belongs to *hsing* (since this could conflict with Kao Tzu's position that *hsing* is neutral). Moreover, Shun adds, even if *jen* is part of *hsing*, the result need not make *hsing* good, because the kind of *jen* Kao Tzu invokes is not what Mohists or Confucians would consider goodness. This complex twist about the ethical content of *jen* may not be entirely convincing, but Shun's interpretation is clever and thought-provoking.

However, when applied to 2A:2, the price of maximizing internal coherence in the *Mencius* involves a tenuous translation of a common term that produces a less convincing interpretation. Shun reads most of this passage in light of his version of Kao Tzu's position on human nature and *yi*. Citing some precedents, he chooses to depart from the ordinary reading of *yen* for the period and argues that *yen* in Kao Tzu's maxim should be taken as "doctrines about *yi*." Accordingly, Shun suggests that the first half of Kao Tzu's maxim says something like, "one should not seek *yi* in the heart/mind or make demands on the heart/mind if one does not get *yi* from doctrines or does not understand or do well in relation to doctrines about *yi*." And the second half, in his view, says, "one should not seek *yi* from or make demands on *ch'i* if one does not obtain *yi* from the heart/mind" (p. 117). From Mencius' claim of superiority in knowing *yen*, Shun infers that Kao Tzu does not know *yi*; and from Mencius' claim to be better at nourishing "floodlike *ch'i*," Shun infers that Kao Tzu is not good at nourishing his *ch'i*. Finally, Shun views Kao Tzu as the target of Mencius' story of the man of Sung. According to Shun, "Kao Tzu did not know *yi* because he regarded it as external and was therefore mistaken about its source . . ." Moreover, Shun writes, ". . . he was not good at nourishing his *ch'i* because he was helping *ch'i* grow by imposing a mistaken conception of *yi* from the outside" (p. 119). Thus, Shun again manages to present an account that makes sense of the stages of the discussion, but in this case the interpretation seems forced.

An interpretive method that looks for a broader base of coherence would take into account the fact that, generally, in the philosophical texts of the period, *yen* is used for "speech" (and often contrasted with *xing* "action"). Just as "speech" sometimes can be interpreted more abstractly to mean the teachings contained within it, so too *yen* may be extended to mean doctrines or teachings. However, understanding *yen* as "speech" has the advantage of being the reading that most often makes

sense in other texts of the period. It also seems particularly applicable to the acts of speech emphasized in this passage—the discussion of *yen*'s relation to the physical functions of *ch'i* and the heart/mind, as well as Mencius' knack for intuiting people's heart/mind (or what is "born in the heart/mind") via their *yen* (which may constitute Mencius' reply to the first half of Kao Tzu's maxim).

Mencius' description of how others achieved an unmoved heart/mind emphasizes the physicality of the process in a way that Shun's preferred interpretation does not. Although Shun notes that the unmoved heart/mind ensures "freedom from fear, uncertainty and other influences" (p. 76), his conclusion about Kao Tzu's achievement has little to do with physical self-control: "By firmly holding to certain doctrines and shaping his motivations accordingly, Kao Tzu attained an unmoved heart/mind in the sense that he was firmly committed to the doctrines he endorsed" (p. 119, emphasis added). Firm commitment to doctrines certainly contributes to courage in the face of danger, but the unmoved heart/mind in these descriptions seems to be physically manifested courage, not commitment to doctrines. For instance, when explaining how to acquire an unmoved heart/mind, Mencius says Po-kung Yu cultivates his courage by never showing submission on his face, never letting anyone outstare him, and always returning whatever harsh tones come his way. Likewise, Tseng Tzu's reference to Confucius suggests that while commitment to doctrines does undergird an unmoved heart/mind, the movement at issue is not wavering about doctrinal commitment but the physical expression of fear: "If, on looking within, one finds oneself to be in the wrong, then even though one's adversary be only a common fellow coarsely clad one is bound to tremble with fear . . ." (2A:2).

Shun does discuss the physical cultivation through which *ch'i* manifests the heart/mind elsewhere (p. 159), but he does not seem to connect this to the way speech manifests the heart/mind. Although he cites 4A:15, which says the conditions of the heart/mind are manifest in one's eyes and speech, Shun seems to agree with Chu Hsi's and Chang Shih's assessment that Mencius believes one can "put on pretense in speech" (p. 159). Perhaps Shun's particular emphasis on *ch'i* manifesting the heart/mind has to do with his view that *ch'i* plays the role of mediating between the heart/mind and the body.

Since 2A:2 describes *ch'i* as what fills the body and as something guided by and supporting *ch'ih*, the directions of the heart/mind, *ch'i* probably serves as the aspect of the person that mediates between the heart/mind and the body. (p. 160)

But from a perspective that takes the heart/mind to be a bodily function, one might say that, rather than needing mediation, the heart/mind expresses its unmediated directions in movements, speech (7B:37), and *ch'i*. In that view, both *yen* and *ch'i* are

emanations from a physically construed heart/mind, which could account for Mencius' confidence that he "knows speech."

Adhering to the common reading of *yen* as "speech" reduces the likelihood that Kao Tzu is to be identified with the proverbial man from Sung. Shun's interpretation is that Kao Tzu is not good at nourishing his *ch'i*, which he helps grow via mistaken doctrines about *yi* from the outside. But Mencius never says Kao Tzu is not good at nourishing *ordinary ch'i*. Perhaps Kao Tzu did have some skill in nourishing his *ordinary ch'i*, but not his special floodlike *ch'i*. (In fact, some amount of skill in nourishing *ordinary ch'i* might be a prerequisite for achieving an unmoved heart/mind—Mencius declares Meng Shih-she's firm hold on his *ch'i* to be inferior to the achievement of Tseng Tzu, which suggests that *ch'i*-control is fairly basic to the process.) Floodlike *ch'i* is probably unusual, because Mencius presumes it will be difficult to introduce to others who are not familiar with it. This part of the passage concerning floodlike *ch'i* does not mention *yen*. Hence, even on Shun's reading that Mencius connects Kao Tzu's lack of *ch'i* skills to his teachings that *yi* is external, one need not translate *yen* as "teachings" or take Kao Tzu to be the subject of the following parable. Mencius' discussion of Kao Tzu seems to end with the beginning of the Sung parable, at which point Mencius raises a contrasting problem—not inability to nourish floodlike *ch'i*, but over-eagerness in helping it grow. Moreover, if Kao Tzu's view of the externality of *yi* were the subject of the Sung parable, then many people must share Kao Tzu's views, since Mencius says: "There are few in the world who can resist the urge to help their rice plants grow."

Despite these questions about some results of Shun's method, his meticulously researched presentation of Mencian ethics is extremely useful. The book is well structured for quick reference to a discussion of any given passage. For beginners and specialists in the *Mencius*, it provides a thorough survey of issues and debates in Mencian scholarship in Chinese and English, as well as many interesting interpretations.

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