Mengzi's Losing It

Abstract. Mengzi states that our human nature consists of our ability to feel compassion, disdain, respect, and (dis-)approval: all human beings have them. But he also states that we lose these four emotional capacities if we don't reflect on or attend to them. There is an apparent contradiction in saying that all humans have them, but some have lost them. This essay offers a close reading of Mengzi's phrase "to lose it" that helps explain away this appearance of contradiction. In doing so, Mengzi is interpreted to be offering an ethics of attention about how we should attend to ourselves and others selectively to have a functional social life. (13527 words)

1. Introduction

In stark contrast with the prominent role both traditional and contemporary commentators typically think Mengzi's doctrine of human nature plays in his overall philosophy, the term human nature doesn't explicitly appear often in *Mengzi*. (I'll use italic for the book *Mengzi* to set it apart from Mengzi the philosopher.) The discussion of human nature is largely implicit. The word "nature" (*xing* 性) appears in just 16 passages in the book and only 2 of them contain the word explicitly in the form of the term "human nature"(*ren xing* 人性); and in those 2 passages 6A1 and 6A2, "human nature" is used only 3 times, only 1 of which is from Mengzi's mouth (the other two are uttered by his philosophical rival Gaozi). Part of the difficulty in interpreting Mengzi's doctrine of human nature lies in the fact that no explicit statement was offered regarding what is meant by terms like "nature" and "human nature" even in the rare occasions where he used them.[1]

To make things worse, Mengzi's comments on human nature appear to be plagued with inconsistencies. Long gone were the days when contemporary commentators casually dismissed Mengzi as a bad philosopher.[2] But still we shouldn't turn a blind eye on the appearances of plain contradictions. This essay focuses on addressing a contradiction in *Mengzi* regarding the question of whether human beings can lose a part of their human nature and remain humans. Mengzi's answer seems to be affirmative on some occasions, but negative in others. I will argue that this contradiction is mere apparent by scrutinizing the specific set of words Mengzi used to describe the loss and preservation of our human nature. Whereas explaining away this contradiction is an important step towards establishing the consistency of Mengzi's doctrine, my way of handling the contradiction has deeper significance for *Mengzi* scholarship. It allows for an interpretation that construes Mengzi's overall philosophical project as a substantive ethics of attention.

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[1] It is, therefore, a fair question whether the majority of the commentators have been wrong to put so much emphasis on Mengzi's doctrine of human nature. Instead, some scholars leave the idea of human nature in the periphery. For example, Jiang's (2020) and Nylan's (2018) respective chapters on Mengzi give no significant role to his doctrine of human nature.

[2] "Mozi sets the terms, but Mencius' Confucian training in reciting poetry in court did not prepare him to adopt Mozi's argumentative essay style." (Hansen 1992: 155) Not saying that there is no merit in Hansen's judgment. But remarks like this is rare in more recent ancient Chinese philosophy scholarship.

Here is the roadmap of this essay. In **Section 2**, I will first offer *prima faci*e textual evidence for the contradiction in *Mengzi* that I mentioned. Next, in **Section 3**, I will examine three tempting ways to address the contradiction and argue that they all fail. I will then turn to develop my solution by scrutinizing a group of interlocking terms that are used in *Mengzi* to express the contrast of losing and preserving one's heart/nature:

> **Section 4:** "*si*" ("思"), which refers to the mental activity responsible for us preserving or losing our human nature.
> **Section 5:** "to lose" ("失"/"亡"/"消"/"去"/"放"/"喪") ourselves, our nature, or our hearts.
> **Section 6:** "to preserve" ("存"/"守") ourselves, our nature, or our hearts so that they become "unmoved" ("不動").

The result of the analysis of these terms will show that it's possible to interpret Mengzi's claim about the potential loss of our human nature to mean the failure to properly prioritize our human nature. After addressing a few potential objections to this interpretation in **Section 7**, I will demonstrate in **Section 8** that assuming Watzl's (2017) Priority Structure View of attention, my way of resolving the contradiction in *Mengzi* offers a satisfying explanation of why the preservation or the loss of our nature depends on the mental activity *si*. This gestures at a new path forward — for future research — of interpreting Mengzi's philosophy of attention as the foundation of his ethical project about human nature.

2. Inconsistency in *Mengzi*

A full interpretation of *Mengzi* requires a clear and explicit definition of his notion of "human nature". This essay does not aim to offer that. But whatever "human nature" means, suppose x is a part of human nature, is it possible for a person to ever not have x in Mengzi's view? In some passages, Mengzi's answer appears to be negative; but in other passages, his answer appears to be affirmative. His doctrine of human nature contains an apparent contradiction.

2.1 Negative: human beings *cannot* miss a piece of human nature

Whatever "human nature" means, it's evident that Mengzi believed that it's intimately associated with these four *xin*/feelings/emotions (Mengzi also called them our *four sprouts* or *four duan*):[3]

[3] I'm aware that words like "emotions" and "feeling" are loaded terms. There are massive disagreements about the best way to translate and understand these four *xin* 心. The psychological terms in ancient Chinese and contemporary English are never going to match period (see Virag 2017). Some argue, for example, that Mengzi's notion of *xin* here is about our inclinations, not feelings: "The heart simply has these reactions [i.e., the four sprouts] to situations in the world. The substance of compassion is the inclination to act, not some inner feeling" (Hansen 1992: 165). Hansen's remark, however, appears to contradict Mengzi's occasional description of our heart of compassion *not just* in terms of our inclination but *also* our affect, e.g., "怵惕", which means the feeling of alarm and surprise (see Kim 2010: 413 and Hu 2023: 565). In any case, as much as it is proper to be cautious about conceptual misalignments, it would be hyperbolic to deny that some contemporary concepts are better than others to *approximate* an ancient Chinese concept. For example, even if we suspect that "feeling" doesn't align perfectly with "*xin*", there

(a) the feeling of sympathy/compassion (惻隱之心)
(b) the feeling of shame and disdain (羞惡之心)
(c) the feeling of deference/respect (辭讓之心), and
(d) the feeling of approval and disapproval (是非之心).

Certainly, we don't have these emotions at all times. For example, when I'm drunk, I typically don't have respectful feelings for anything, including myself. Strictly speaking, Mengzi is referring to our psychological *capacities* to have these feelings when he makes statements like the following:

> Humans all have the feeling of compassion. Humans all have the feeling of disdain. Humans all have the feeling of respect. Humans all have the feeling of approval and disapproval. (6A6)

According to this passage, we all have these four emotional capacities, regardless of whether those capacities are activated in proper scenarios. Having the capacities to feel these ways constitutes our potential to fully develop the four Confucian character-traits (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom):[4]

> Mengzi said, "As for what they are inherently, they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their natures good. [...] The feeling of compassion is benevolence. The feeling of disdain is righteousness. The feeling of respect is propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is wisdom. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them." (6A6)

Regarding the last two sentences of this quote, just like the four feelings, Mengzi presumably doesn't mean to say that we all already have the four fully developed character-traits inherently but that we all have the *capacities* to develop them fully.[5] In

shouldn't be any doubt that it aligns with "*xin*" much better than "mood" and "tomato". I use the terms "feeling" and "emotion" just for their *proximity* to what "*xin*" expresses to get us in the ballpark, to start somewhere. By doing so, I make no assumption about which conceptual framework (either the ancient Chinese one or the contemporary English one) picks out the natural kinds in human psychology better; it might even be the case that each conceptual framework carves up different aspects of our psychology better. In fact, this essay doesn't even take a stance on whether there are natural kinds in psychology to begin with.

[4] I choose the term "character-traits" instead of "virtues" because, at least in English, the term "virtues" is ethically loaded, i.e., it's analytically true that a virtue is ethically good. By contrast, the term "character-trait" is ethically neutral. An important part of Confucianism consists in its unique explanation of what makes character-traits like benevolence, righteousness, etc. ethically good. (In fact, whether benevolence, righteousness, etc. are ethically good was questioned in *Daodejing*.) Referring to these character-traits with ethically loaded English terms like "virtue" risks rendering the ethical explanation of their goodness moot, thereby undermining a key element of Confucianism. By describing them neutrally as character-traits, the question about what makes them ethically good remains open.

[5] Though, under Buddhist influence, neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming interpreted Mengzi's view to be that we already have all the Confucian character-traits, which are simply clouded by our material endowment (*qi* 氣) and selfishness. As Liu (2018) puts it: "When Zhu Xi professes to take up Mencius's [i.e., Mengzi's] view of human nature, however, he has modified the view to be about our normative aims." (128) There is more to discuss regarding the proper understanding of the relation

other words, we have the capacities to feel a certain way and these emotional capacities constitute a proper part of our broader ethical capacity to have certain characters. Whatever it means to label the combination of these psychological and ethical capacities *human nature* (depending on how "human nature" is defined), it's clear that Mengzi thought that everyone has them even if many don't exercise these capacities based on passages like the following:

> Mengzi said, "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 respite it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, there were sprouts and shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. Seeing it barren, people believed that there had never been any timber there. But 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? The way that they discard their genuine hearts is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. […] Others see his bestiality, and think that there was never any capacity there. But is this what a human is like inherently?" (6A8.1-8.2; with minor modifications to the translation)

In this passage, Mengzi discusses how a person's behaviors and environment are related to her (hidden) ethical potentials. The rhetorical questions "But 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?", and "But is this what a human is like inherently?" provide evidence that Mengzi means to respond to skeptics in this passage. Those rhetorical questions also make it clear what thesis Mengzi means to defend from the skeptics: *no one truly lacks the four sprouts, i.e., the four emotional capacities, that constitute a part of our human nature.*

Mengzi acknowledges in the passage that our environment and our behaviors may suppress the manifestation of the four emotional capacities. It's important to keep in mind that this is a *premise* of Mengzi's reasoning in this passage, not his conclusion.[6] The inference he makes based on this premise was that, logically, it isn't ruled out that our capacities to feel those four emotions remain, even when these capacities are prevented from manifesting due to "the hatchets and axes". When Mengzi asked the rhetorical question "When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness?", he expected us to answer "no": people don't truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness. The fact that some people don't exercise these emotional capacities isn't evidence against the thesis that they have those capacities. Mengzi's answer to our main question appears to be negative: people would never miss a piece of human nature.

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between the character-traits and our potential to fully develop them in *Mengzi*, let alone in the works of the neo-Confucians. But this is a topic for a different essay.

[6] There are commentators who consider the major *take-away* from the Ox Mountain passage to be that people can discard their four sprouts if they are not properly nourished. This is to mistake Mengzi's premise as his intended conclusion. Given the rhetorical questions, it is quite evident that Mengzi was trying to use the premise that people can discard what they all inherently have *to show that* we cannot infer that a person does not have the four sprouts inherently just because the four sprouts are not manifest in that person's life.

2.2 Affirmative: human being *can* miss a piece of human nature

That people's moral capacities can vanish or be lost is a prominent idea in Mengzi's discussion of moral self-cultivation, as he continued in the same passage we just read:

> When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? The way that they discard their genuine hearts is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. [...] Others see his bestiality, and think that there was never any capacity there. But is this what a human is like inherently? Hence, if it merely gets nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow. If it merely loses its nourishment, there is nothing that will not **vanish** (消). Kongzi said, "Grasped then preserved; abandoned then **lost** (亡). Its goings and comings have no fixed time. No one knows its home." Was it not the heart of which he spoke? (6A8.2-8.4; my emphasis and minor modifications to the translation)

On the face of it, it seems that the idea is that people originally have the emotional capacities (i.e., the hearts) that can be developed into the four Confucian character-traits. But without proper "nourishment" (whatever that means), *they* will vanish and be lost, i.e., the capacities would go out of existence. Also:

> Mengzi said, "That by which humans differ from animals is slight. The masses abandon it. The gentleman preserves it." (4B19)

Presumably, the implication is that (the distinctively human part of) human nature can fail to be preserved and go out of existence; in fact, most people failed to preserve it. Whether one gets or loses one's four sprouts was said to depend solely on a mental activity called *si* 思, often translated as reflection:

> Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not **reflect** upon them. Hence, it is said, "Seek it and you will get it. Abandon it and you will lose it." (6A6; my emphasis)

Echoing what we have seen in the earlier part of 6A6.8 about what people are inherently, Mengzi means that we inherently have the *capacities* to cultivate the four Confucian character-traits and not that we inherently have these character-traits. This indicates that what's meant to be lost without reflection — i.e., the reference of the pronoun "them" (it's worth mentioning there is no difference between singular and plural pronouns in classical Chinese) — aren't the Confucian character-traits that we don't have in the first place, but our capacities to cultivate them. These capacities that are said to constitute a part of our human nature can go out of existence if we don't *si*. So, in Mengzi's view, a person can miss a piece of human nature after all.

3. False Ways Out

As far as I can tell, the contradiction I described has not been taken up in Mengzi scholarship as an issue for a thematic discussion — hence the relatively thin list of references of this essay. One reason could be that there seems to be obvious ways to explain the alleged contradiction away: far too obvious for us to say that there is even an appearance of contradiction. In this section, I'll discuss three such apparent ways out of the contradiction and explain why they don't work.

3.1 Generic Claim

Some scholars like to weaken Mengzi's statement that all humans have the four sprouts so that it only expresses a *generic* truth about human beings (like the generic truth that dogs have four legs) instead of a universal truth (e.g., Zhao 2014: 348, Ivanhoe 2002: 66). Unlike a universal claim, a generic claim doesn't rule out exceptions. If the claim that humans have the four sprouts is a generic claim, then it doesn't contradict the claim that some humans have lost them and don't have them anymore. Actually, if Elizabeth Anscombe (1991: 38), Michael Thompson (2008: 68), and Philippa Foot (2001: 28) are right that generic claims are not reducible to claims about the statistically normal (e.g., it is generically true that human adults have 32 teeth, but the majority of human adults have fewer than that), the generic claim that humans have the four sprouts is even compatible with most humans not having them, as Mengzi states in 4B19: "The masses abandon it".

Mengzi's statement shouldn't be read as a generic claim. It's tempting to weaken an author's claim in the name of charity because a weaker claim is less likely to be false. But it's noteworthy that Mengzi also unequivocally made the following negative claim: "From this we can see that if one is *without* the feeling of compassion, one is *not* human." (2A6.4; my italic) The logic of generic claims is pretty messy. But as far as I can tell, generic claims don't warrant their negative counterparts. The assertability of "dogs have four legs" as a generic truth doesn't warrant the assertion of its negative counterpart "a creature that *doesn't* have four legs *isn't* a dog", or so it seems to me. You only get to infer the latter from the former if the former is read as a universal truth.

Perhaps Mengzi made the two claims "all humans have the four sprouts" and "a person who does not have the four sprouts is not human" independently of each other (i.e., without meaning to assert the latter as an implication of the former). But we saw that he explicitly said "[f]rom this we can see" in 2A6.4, indicating that he means for the latter to follow from the former. Furthermore, this renders Mengzi's discussion of human nature inexplicably disunified, something that a plausible interpretation of Mengzi should avoid. If, however, Mengzi asserted the latter *because* he accepted the former, "all humans have the four sprouts" should be read as a universal claim. We don't have an easy way out of the contradiction.

3.2 What We Once Were

In the passage 6A8 we examined earlier, Mengzi says, "Others see his [i.e., a person who doesn't take care of their four sprouts] bestiality, and think that there was never any capacity there." One may read Mengzi's claim that everyone has the four sprouts to simply mean that everyone *initially* has the four sprouts. The claim that everyone starts

out with something by default is logically consistent with many people not having it anymore. Hence, read this way, there is no contradiction in Mengzi's claims.

There are two main reasons that we should not read Mengzi's doctrine of human nature to simply be about how people start out to be. First, it's worth noticing that Mengzi doesn't simply say that without *si* (i.e., reflection), the four sprouts would vanish, but also that "Seek it and you will get it". If Mengzi means that all humans start out with the four emotional capacities but that these capacities can disappear later in life, then it isn't true that we will get it as long as we seek it. If a person's potential to x is gone, she won't be able to x at all; this is simply what it means to have no potential to x. If a person can still x as long as she seeks to do so, her potential to x remains. So, if Mengzi accepts "Seek it and you will get it", his claim that people all have the four sprouts shouldn't be construed to mean simply that everyone initially has the four sprouts. He had to mean that people literally always have the four sprouts. Secondly, recall that Mengzi states that "the masses abandon it". If Mengzi means to say that all humans initially have the four emotional capacities and can cease to have them later if they are abandoned, his view would then be that the majority of us no longer have those emotional capacities, not only that they no longer or rarely activate those capacities. This significantly undercuts the point of even caring about the four sprouts, making it at best a fun fact about the developmental history of mankind. Mengzi certainly doesn't view his doctrine of human nature in this way.

3.3 Losing Character-Traits, not Sprouts

In 6A6, Mengzi quoted approvingly, "Seek it and you will get it. Abandon it and you will lose it." The reference of the pronoun "it" isn't obvious. Scholarly discussion about the preservation/getting vs. the vanishing/losing of *it* in *Mengzi* often focuses on examining how *si* 思 or reflection contributes to our ethical cultivation. Reflection is said to make us take pleasure in having the four ethical feelings, the capacities for which Mengzi calls the four sprouts, and thereby boost our readiness to react to a broader range of situations with those four feelings. As a result, seeking with reflection allows us "get it", where "it" is interpreted to refer to the Confucian character-traits, not the four emotional capacities, which, if cultivated, can lead us to acquire these character-traits:

> To *si* the sprouts involves delighting in their operation. Mengzi 4A27 informs us that this delight causes the sprouts to grow. Consequently, the heart will "get" virtue through self-aware virtuous activity. (van Norden 2007: 232)[7]

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[7] Here van Norden takes what we get/lose to be the Confucian character-traits. But there are occasional inconsistencies in his presentation. For example, elsewhere, van Norden (2003) writes, "the story of Ox Mountain raises the issue of what sorts of things **'fetter and destroy' a person's potential for virtue**" (124; my emphasis). Presented this way, what we preserve and lose via *si* is our moral potential itself, not the end product of the cultivation of such potential. But he immediately goes on to say two sentences later:

> He thought that these conditions were not absolutely necessary to realize one's nature […], but most people will be **impeded from realizing their nature** without them. (*Ibid*: 124; my emphasis)

Read this way, the first "it" and the second "it" in "Seek it and you will get it" refer to different things. The first "it" refers to the sprouts: we seek by reflecting (i.e., *si*) on the sprouts. The second "it" refers to the character-traits; as van Norden puts it in the quote: "the heart will 'get' virtue". Our primary concern in this essay is the second "it", i.e., the object of the getting/losing. Summarizing the relative consensus in the literature on this issue, Shun (1997) wrote:

> What one is supposed to get is not clear from the passage. Giles and Lyall leave unspecified the object of the getting, Chai and Chai have "obtains what is good", Dobson has "receives what is transmitted to it", Lau has "will find the answer", and Legge has "gets the right view of things". Comparison with 6A6, which observes that "one gets it if one seeks but not if one lets go" (cf. 7A3) and whose context is the ethical attributes *jen* [i.e., benevolence], *yi* [righteousness], *li* [propriety], and *chih* [wisdom], shows that what one is supposed to get through *ssu* [i.e., *si*] has something to do with the ethical ideal. Commentators generally agree on this point […]. (149-150)

Shun describes the scholarly consensus tactfully by saying that the "it" "has something to do with" the virtues, i.e., Confucian character-traits. And some of these scholars think that the virtues *just are* what we are supposed to "get" by *si*.

Since the phrase "preserve [存] it" was used as an alternative expression of "get [得] it" in the relevant contexts, the "it" in both phrases co-refer. *If* we follow van Norden's interpretation that the "it" in the phrase "get it" refers to the Confucian character-traits, to remain consistent, we must interpret Mengzi's claim about "preserve it" to mean preserving the Confucian character-traits instead of preserving the four sprouts, i.e., our capacities for cultivating those virtues. Given the further fact that Mengzi speaks of preserving *it* in contexts like 4B19 as preserving *what's distinctive in human nature*, again to remain consistent in our interpretation, we must then take the Confucian character-traits, instead of our capacities to develop them, to be human nature. Finally, given that "preserve"/"get" and "lose" [失] are used as contrasting terms, the way we interpret "preserve"/"get" *dictates* how we should interpret "lose". As a result, the "it" in the phrase "lose it" should also be read to denote the Confucian character-traits and we are required to equate Mengzi's talk of "lose it" with the failure to develop the Confucian character-traits.

Here is a good news about this interpretive maneuver. Mengzi made two claims. First, humans all have the four sprouts. Second, depending on whether they reflect, people may preserve/lose "it". These two claims don't contradict each other according to this interpretation. This is because the "it" doesn't refer to the four sprouts. Mengzi's claim that people may preserve/lose "it" only meant that we may or may not develop the Confucian character-traits. It's consistent to say that we all have the four sprouts which

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What is lost now is not one's moral potential but the realization, i.e., the reaching of the destination of one's moral potential. Losing one's potential and being prevented from realizing one's potential are different things. In general, Mengzi's idea that our human nature/heart can be preserved or lost has not been brought into a sufficiently sharp focus as it should be.

are potential to develop the Confucian character-traits, while simultaneously say that we may fail to actually develop them if we aren't reflective.

The bad news is that we shouldn't accept this interpretive maneuver. It's undeniable that Mengzi thinks that *si* has a cultivating effect on our four sprouts that leads to the Confucian character-traits. But he is talking about something else when he talks about "getting" and not "losing" what we "inherently have". There are three reasons for this.

First of all, "seek it and you will get it" translates "求則得之" in 6A6.7. The original text has only one pronoun "之". Literally, it says "seek then get it". This mirrors "思則得之" in 6A15.2, which also contains only one pronoun "之" and literally says "*si* then get it". The significance of this observation is this. The interpretation under consideration separates the object of "seek" and the object of "get": one reflects on or seeks one's four sprouts and thereby gets or preserves the four Confucian character-traits. This maneuver becomes questionable if Mengzi doesn't use two pronouns to distinguish the objects of "seek" and "get"; what we get or preserve just is what we are supposed to seek or reflect on.

Secondly, I argued that a consequence of this interpretation is that the four Confucian character-traits become human nature. But it isn't Mengzi's view that the full-blown character-traits, instead of just our capacities for developing them, constitute our nature. Hence, the distinctly human elements that we are supposed to get and preserve should be the four sprouts, not the Confucian character-traits.

Thirdly, it's an oft ignored fact that, as I have pointed out, there are several interlocking terms at play in this context so that any proposal to interpret one term in a certain way would create a domino effect that dictates how we interpret other terms. In the relevant discussions, Mengzi uses the words "get 得" and "preserve 存" interchangeably and he uses the word "lose 失" as the contrasting term. A proper interpretation of what Mengzi meant by "get it" must also be a proper interpretation of "preserve it" and the opposite idea a proper interpretation of "lose it". But it's unclear that developing something one doesn't possesses in the first place can be described as *preserving* it and not developing something that one doesn't have yet can be described as *losing* it. I haven't lost my Scottish accent for not developing it. The words "存" (preserve) and "失" (lose) simply cannot be stretched to mean what this interpretation needs them to mean. Hence, we should read the "it" in expressions like "get it", "preserve it", "lose it", "nourish it", "abandon it", etc. to refer to our emotional capacity to cultivate the Confucian character-traits (something we possess), not the character-traits themselves (something we don't possess yet).[8]

[8] This reading of "get" (得) echoes, to a certain extent, Nivison's (1996) treatment of the word. Investigating the term "virtue" (德) in ancient Chinese philosophy, he says:

> *De* [virtue 德] now becomes a concept standing in a certain contrast to *dao*: it is said to be the "localization" of the *dao* in a particular thing; but it retains its *dao*-character — it enables that thing to be what it is, alive, intelligent, causally interconnected with other things […]. (33; italics are in original)

The contradiction is back on the table. How can everyone have the four sprouts and yet most people lose them because they don't *si*?

4. To *Si* Or Not To *Si*

Often translated in English as "to think" or "to reflect", *si* (思) is supposed to be the psychological process that is singularly responsible for whether our nature is preserved or lost:

> Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not **reflect** […]. (6A6.7; my emphasis)
>
> Mengzi said, "If people want to raise a mahogany tree from a sapling that could fit in your hands, they know how to care for it. But when it comes to their own selves, they do not know how to care for them. Could it be that they do not love their own selves as much as they love a mahogany tree? It is simply because they do not **reflect** […]." (6A13.1; my emphasis)

Setting aside the instances where "*si*" was simply part of a person's name (Zisi 子思), there are 18 passages in *Mengzi* where the word is used.[9] Let's also set aside 4 of these passages where the passages by themselves don't help determine what "*si*" means (4A12.1, 6A6.7, 6A13.1, 6A15.2). That is, the interpretations of "*si*" in these 4 passages require us to first figure out what the word means in the other 14 passages. These 14 passages can be grouped into three categories, based on how "si" can be sensibly translated to English in them.

> **(si1)** "*si*" = "to intend/will": 2A3, 3A5, 4B20, 5A4.3

For example, in 2A3, Mengzi quoted the *Odes*, "None do not **long to** (思) submit"; and in 3A5, he spoke of the Mohist Yi Zhi, "Yi Zhi surely does not **long to** (思) change the world to something that he thinks is wrong and base!". In these cases, where van

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Then, he connects the idea to "get" (得):

> The words *de* 德, "virtue", and *de* 得, "get", are (and were) exact homophones; so "virtue" must be a metaphysical "getting". […] The two words probably *are* cognates. One finds occasional puns on the two in the Confucian moral texts. (33; italics are in original)

Nivison's switch from "must" in the first sentence to "probably" in the second sentence is inconsistent. And I believe "must" is an overstatement because homophones are extremely common in the Chinese language — hence the need for a writing system that is partly independent of the spoken language — so that the mere fact that two words are homophones is only *weak* evidence for semantic connection. That being said, Nivison's identification of "virtue" with "get" implies that when Mengzi says attention can help us "get it", the "it" shouldn't be interpret as referring to virtue. Virtue, according to Nivison's treatment, is the *getting* of whatever "it" refers to, not this "it" itself. This aligns with my reading that "it" refers to the four emotional capacities, i.e., the four sprouts, that can be cultivated into the character traits Confucians consider virtuous.

[9] I don't mean the word was used 18 times; the word can be used multiple times in a single passage.

Norden translates "*si*" as "to long to", to *si* certain events or actions means to **intend** for those events or actions to happen.

> **(si2)** "*si*" = "to value/care/rate": 2A9.1, 3A5, 4A1.5, 4B20, 4B29.4, 5A2.3, 5A7.6, 6A17.1-2, 7B37.1

For example, describing Bo Yi in 2A9.1, Mengzi said, "He **looked upon** (思) […] having a discussion with a bad person like wearing one's court cap and gown and sitting down in filth." It's noteworthy that when Bo Yi was said to looked upon x like y, he wasn't simply treating y as some kind of purely descriptive scientific model for x. The idea was that Bo Yi **rated** chatting with a bad person as poorly as wearing one's court cap and gown in the filth. "*Si*" is an evaluative process.

> **(si3)** "*si*" = "to attend/concentrate": 5B1.1-2, 4B24, 6A9.3, 7B37.1

Take 6A9.3 for example. Speaking about how to master archery, Mengzi said, "**reflecting** (思) only upon drawing his bow". "Reflecting", which often carries the connotation of taking a step back in contemplation, might be a slightly odd choice. But it's pretty clear that what Mengzi means here is to **focus** or **attend** only to the drawing and to block out everything else from one's mind.

Some of the passages appear more than once in my categorization. This is because the word "*si*" can be translated in multiple ways in some passages. Consider 4B20:

> The Duke of Zhou **intended** [*si*] to unite the excellences of these Kings in order to bestow upon the people these four actions. If he encountered anything that was inconsistent, he would raise his head and **rate/weigh the pros and cons of it** [*si*], from the day into the night. When he was fortunate enough to understand it, he would sit and await the dawn. (van Norden's translation with modification; my emphasis)

The word "*si*" appears twice here: one properly translated as an expression of intent and one better translated as an expression of an act of evaluation to sort out inconsistency in a political plan.[10]

Sometimes, a single occurrence of "*si*" can sensibly be translated in more than one way. Take 7B37.1 for example, Wang Zhang asks Mengzi to explain Kongzi's behavior, "When in Chen, why did Kongzi **think of** (思) the wild scholars of his home state of Lu?" (my emphasis). By "*si*" (i.e., "think of" in van Norden's translation), the question

[10] Van Norden translates the second "*si*" as "to reflect" and considers it to express a cognitive act of reasoning away inconsistencies in one's thought and uses this as evidence that *si* is partly cognitive: "Given the non-technical uses of the term '*si*' [i.e., the second occurrence of "*si*" in this passage], it seems likely that engaging in *si* has both an affective and a cognitive component" (2003: 127). I'm inclined to think that the kind of inconsistencies the Duke of Zhou was supposed to be dealing with weren't logical inconsistencies but conflicts of interests and priorities from different parts of the kingdom. So, the kind of sorting out required would be evaluative: weighing and appropriately prioritizing the importance of different interests. This is why I modified van Norden's translation from "to reflect" to "rate/weigh the pros and cons". My reading echoes Mengzi's advice to the King of Xuan of Qi in 1A7.13 that in politics, it's important to *weigh* one's heart, i.e., sorting out the relative importance of different feelings.

could be read to be about why Kongzi **cared about** those scholars or why he **gave those scholars his attention** when he was in Chen; so, translating "*si*" as (si2) and as (si3) are equally sensible.

Does this mean Wang Zhang's question in 7B37.1 was ambiguous? Not necessarily. There is a sense in which to value something and to attend to something don't involve two distinct psychological states. Arguably, we attend to or focus on something by virtue of caring about certain things. When I pay attention to what you are saying instead of the color of your shoes, I care about or value our conversation more than your attire. My attention towards your words *just is* my caring about or valuing our conversation. If so, Wang Zhang didn't use the word "思" ambiguously between two things that English expresses with two words "care" and "attend"; instead, there is just one psychological phenomenon here that Wang Zhang used a single word to pick out, while English has developed two words to refer to this one psychological phenomenon in different contexts.

Let me make a more ambitious claim beyond 7B37. Although the word "*si*" is translatable in English in three different ways (i.e., si1, si2, and si3), Mengzi didn't use "*si*" ambiguously, referring to three distinct psychological phenomena in different passages. Instead, I *hypothesize* that Mengzi's usage of the word reveals a substantive moral psychology commitment in his theory: what we use three different word-clusters to characterize in English ("to intend/will", "to value/care/rate", and "to attend/focus"), Mengzi conceptualized as a single psychological phenomenon with a single word "*si*".[11] To intend a certain course of event just is to value or care about certain things; and to care about something just is to attend to or focus on certain things.

The Mengzian thesis is a fairly substantive psychological claim that needs to be examined empirically — eventually. One may find it plausible to claim that there is some degree of correlation among intent, attention, and value. But go from noting a correlation to equate them as a single psychological phenomenon is a substantive step further. From the perspective of this Mengzian thesis, the English language is somewhat misleading in having these groups of not-quite-interchangeable words that ultimately pick out the same psychological process: creating the linguistic illusion that we are dealing with distinct phenomena. This essay doesn't assume that Mengzi was right about human psychology. The rationale for my hypothesis is that, all else being equal, we should take people to mean the same thing when they use the same word (especially in this case, where we have independent reason to think that intention, value, and attention are at least intimately related).

My hypothesis about Mengzi's notion of *si* is not entirely news. For example, while translating "*si*" as "to long to" in many passages, van Norden (2007: 129), following Arthur Waley (1938), also argues that Mengzi's "*si*" refers to an act of concentration instead of some kind of theorization or discursive reasoning as the word "reflection"

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[11] I'm neutral about whether there is a way and if so which way of carving up our psychological reality matches up with the natural kinds better.

may otherwise suggest.[12] As such, Mengzi is interpreted to treat the evaluative act of longing and the act of concentrating/attending as a single psychological phenomenon like I do. Given that *si* is said to be a psychological function performed by the faculty *xin* (心 heart), my hypothesis about Mengzi's notion of *si* echoes a popular view among Mengzi scholars who argue that *xin* is a psychological capacity that is simultaneously affective, motivational, and cognitive (e.g., Hu 2019; Wong 2015a, 2015b, 2002, 1991; Hutton 2002). This hypothesis about "*xin*" will play an important role in the last section.

5. Losing It

To Mengzi, the most important part of our human nature, if not the only part, was our four sprouts. I have demonstrated that Mengzi was of the opinion that being attentive is necessary and sufficient for the preservation of the four sprouts. What can the word "存 (preservation)" mean for this opinion to be plausible? Answering this question will help us find a way out of the apparent contradiction. If the word is supposed to mean "preventing something from going out of existence", which is the most straightforward way to interpret the word "存 preservation", then Mengzi's view is not obviously true. My capacity of feeling jealous doesn't go away just because I don't pay attention to it. What reason do we have for thinking that our capacity of feeling compassion is different? Moreover, the apparent contradiction we discussed earlier arises exactly when we read Mengzi's talk of "存 preserving" and "失 losing" human nature to mean "preventing (part of) our nature from going out of existence" and "letting (part of) our nature go out of existence" respectively.

Of course, none of this means anything if we do not have a plausible alternative reading of what else Mengzi could mean when he says that whether we pay attention is crucial to whether we preserve or lose our human nature. Interpretations should aim to be charitable. But interpretations should also be driven by empirical data. We cannot force words to express meanings they don't express by wishful thinking. If "letting (part of) our nature go out of existence" is the only legitimate meaning of the phrase "失 (lose) it", then perhaps we have to accept that Mengzi held a dubious view about human psychology (i.e., that an emotional capacity would disappear if we don't pay attention to it) and an inconsistent view about human nature (i.e., that everyone has it, yet most people no longer have it). I want to argue that there is a philologically well-founded, alternative reading.

Mengzi uses a variety of words to express the contrast between losing (Table 1) and preserving (Table 2) our heart, our human nature, or ourselves *in the relevant contexts*. And each of these words are translated in a variety of ways by different scholars.

Table 1. "Lose"			
	Van Norden's Translation	D. C. Lau's Translation	Bloom's Translation

[12] The same idea is found when Ivanhoe interprets Mengzi's claim that our nature would be lost without *si* in the following way: "Without our constant attention, they [i.e., the four sprouts, which are human nature] may wither and fade" (2002: 19).

(a) 失	to lose (2A9.2, 2B1.4, 4A19.1, 4B12.1, 6A6.7, 6A10.8, 6A14.6, 7A3.1)	to take himself away (2A9.2); to not have (2B1.4); to be morally lost (4A19.1); to not retain (4B12.1); to lose (6A6.7, 6A10.8, 7A3.1); to neglect (6A14.6)	to lose (2A9.2, 2B1.4, 4B12.1, 6A6.7, 6A10.8, 7A3.1); to lose control of (4A19.1); to neglect (6A14.6)
(b) 亡	to lose (6A8.4)	to disappear (6A8.4)	to lose (6A8.4)
(c) 消	to vanish (6A8.3-8.4)	to wither away (6A8.3-8.4)	to be destroyed (6A8.3-8.4)
(d) 去	to abandon (4B19.2)	to lose (4B19.2)	to relinquish (4B19.2)
(e) 喪	to lose (6A10.5)	to lose (6A10.5)	to lose (6A10.5)
(f) 放	to dissipate (1A7.20, 3A3.3); to discard (6A8.2); to lose (6A11)	to go astray (1A7.20, 3A3.3), to discard, to let go of (6A8.2); to stray (6A11)	to be dissolute (1A7.20, 3A3.3); to let go of (6A8.2); to lose (6A11); to abandon (6A11)

Table 2. "Preserve"			
	Van Norden's Translation	D. C. Lau's Translation	Bloom's Translation
(g) 存	to preserve (4B19.2, 4B28.1, 6A8.4, 7A1.2)	to retain (4B19.2, 4B28.1, 7A1.2); to remain (6A8.4)	to retain (4B19.2); to preserve (4B28.1, 6A8.4, 7A1.2)
(h) 得	to understand (1A7.9); to get (6A6.7, 6A15.2, 7A3.1); to discover (6A7.5-7.8)	to understand (1A7.9), to get (6A6.7, 7A3.1); to discover (6A7.5-7.8); to find (6A15.2)	to grasp (1A7.9); to apprehend (6A7.5-7.8, 6A15.2); to get (6A6.7, 7A3.1)
(i) 守	to preserve (2A2.6, 4A19.1); to maintain (7B32.2)	To grasp firmly (2A2.6), to watch over (4A19.1), to hold on to (7B32.2)	to keep hold of (2A2.6); to be vigilance over (4A19.1); to grasp (7B32.2)
(j) 長	to grow (6A8.3)	to grow (6A8.3)	to grow (6A8.3)

I propose to start with Table 1, since the idea of losing our nature is what creates all the troubles. To remain methodical with the empirical evidence the text presents, let's first establish a clear desideratum for how to interpret (a)-(f) properly. If I'm right that Mengzi uses (a)-(f) on the one hand and (g)-(h) on the other hand to express a contrast, we should interpret the words (a)-(f) at least in a relatively uniform manner so that they have more or less the same meaning in the relevant contexts. If an interpretation only

works for some but not all of (a)-(f), it isn't a good interpretation of what it means to lose our human nature. (The same applies to Table 2.)

This desideratum already allows us to reject the initial, tempting way to interpret Mengzi's claim that we lose our four sprouts if we don't *si*. According to this interpretation, to lose one's four sprouts is for them to go out of existence. *Si* helps us prevent our four sprouts from disappearing. This is a tempting interpretation because "to let something go out of existence" is indeed a major usage of the words (a)-(e).

In 6A11, Mengzi says the following about losing one's heart (i.e., one's four sprouts or human nature):

> Benevolence is the human heart and righteousness is the human path. To leave one's path and not follow it, or to **lose** one's heart and not know to seek for it — these are tragedies! If people **lose** their chickens or dogs, they know to seek for them. But if they **lose** their hearts, they do not know to seek for them. The Way of learning and inquiry is no other than to seek for one's **lost** heart. (6A11; my emphasis)

The word chosen for "lose/lost" in this passage is telling: "放", i.e., (f) in Table 1. Unlike the other words (a)-(e), the word "放" cannot even remotely mean "to let something go out of existence". The word "放" can be used as a verb. According to the dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字) from the 1st century C.E., it's a synonym of the word "逐", which means to exile. For example, "放" is used in 1B8.1 to mean to exile. By extension, it can mean letting something go either mentally (e.g., giving up) or physically (e.g., putting something down). When it's used as an adjective, "放" means wandering or stray; the word is still used this way in modern Chinese.

In 6A11, "放" is used as an adjective. Instead of translating "人有雞犬**放**" as "people **lose** their chickens or dogs", perhaps this is a less ambiguous translation: "people have chickens or dogs that **wander off**". When a dog or a chicken wanders off, it doesn't mean they go out of existence. It just means it's not where it belongs. For example, Mengzi uses "放" in 3B9.10 to talk about how "specious words" and "evil doctrines" are let lose in the world where they don't belong. With this in mind, a heart that is lost isn't an emotional potential that has gone out of existence. Similarly, to seek one's lost heart isn't to try to regain an emotional potential that has disappeared. Instead, a person's lost heart is a stray, wandering heart that isn't in its proper place. To seek one's lost heart is, by contrast, to bring one's emotional capacity to where it should be in the same way one brings a cattle that has wandered off back to it belongs.[13]

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[13] This reading of "lost heart" ("放心") is the same as Zhu Xi's, I think. Shun (1997) takes Mengzi's analogy of lost animals as evidence *against* Zhu Xi's reading; Shun wrote:

> Chu Hsi [i.e. Zhu Xi] takes "*fang hsin*" [i.e., "lost heart" 放心] to mean being lax and not paying attention, but the occurrence of "*fang chi liang hsin*" [i.e., "give up one's genuine heart" 放棄良心] in 6A:8 and the description of chickens and dogs as fang in 6A11 show that "*fang*" means "to lose". (136, fn. 1)

The question is whether (a)-(e) can be read in this way. They can:

> (a) "失" can mean something being left behind, or a person not being able to find one's way. This is in sync with my reading of "放" as "being stray". We can see glimpses of this interpretation of the word "失" in Bloom's translation.
>
> (b) Although "亡" can often mean "to go out of existence" or "to die", it's original meaning, according to *Shuowen Jiezi*, is "to escape". Occasionally, it's used interchangeably with "忘", which means to overlook or forget about something. To apply the word "亡" to our four sprouts can therefore be interpreted as the four sprouts escaping from their proper place in our lives, wandering off from our sight. For example, Mengzi uses "亡" in this exact way in 1B4.6 to describe someone drifting away from their proper place, and also in 1B7.1 to express the idea that someone is gone to who-knows-where — not dead.
>
> (c) Although "消" originally means the melting away and hence the destruction of ice, the word have several derivative meanings, one of them is the dispersal of something. For instance, Mengzi speaks about how the sage Yu "dredged the earth from the rivers and guided the water to the sea. He drove the snakes and dragons away and banished them to the marshes. […] When the flooding had receded, and the birds and beasts harmful to men had dispersed [消], only then did the people live on the plains." (3B9; modified based on van Norden's translation). What Yu did wasn't to kill the birds and beasts but to chase them off. It's noteworthy that "消" is explicitly used in parallel with "放" in 3B9.4 as synonyms.
>
> (d) The original meaning of "去" is to leave. Used as an intransitive verb, it can be used to describe something's wandering off. As a result, I'd argue that, being used as a transitive verb, as it's the case in 4B19, "to 去 something" *can* mean to let something wander off.
>
> (e) Finally, according to *Shuowen Jiezi*, the original form of "喪" is composed of "哭" ("to cry") and "亡". As such, it stands for people's grieving reactions to the loss of something, i.e., something being 亡. For example, "喪" was used in this way to express people's mourning of the dead in 1A3.3. (See also 3A2.2 and 5A4-6 on the social etiquette of honoring a three-year mourning period for the

I confess I'm puzzled by Shun's remark. I take the description of lost animals as evidence *supporting* Zhu Xi's and my reading of "放" as "to lose" and "to lose" in the sense of being lax and inattentive. In fact, Shun's translation of "放心" as "*stray* heart" (instead of "lost heart") in Liu & Shun (1996) seems to be an excellent choice and echoes Zhu Xi's and my readings. I use the plural "readings" here because there is a difference between Zhu Xi's and my understanding of the notion of a stray/lost heart. Perhaps under the influence of Zhang Zai's emphasis on moral devotion or conviction (志), Zhu Xi understands a stray/lost heart in terms of the lack of devotion or conviction. By contrast, as I shall explain more in the rest of this article, I understand it as a lack of proper priority, which I don't think is the same thing as devotion or conviction (even though the two are connected somehow).

> passing of one's parents). So, "喪" derives its meaning in part from "亡". We have already seen that "亡" can but doesn't need to mean "to die"; it can mean "to escape" as well. Given the connection between "亡" and "喪", "喪" can also be extended to mean one's negative reaction to something escaping, wandering off from its proper place.

Thus, we have an interpretation that unifies (a)-(f). As far as I can tell, this is the only one that does.

6. Preserving One's Unperturbed Heart

If my interpretation is correct about what Mengzi meant for our nature to be lost, the contrasting idea, namely, the preservation 存 of our nature (i.e., (g) in Table 2), would be to keep our nature in its proper place.[14] This corroborates with how the word "存" was occasionally used in other pre-Han texts. We can find evidence of "存" being used to express the idea of "to remain or to be kept in its proper place". For example, in the *Analects*:

> As for the details of handling sacrificial vessels, there are minor officials **to deal with** that. (8.4)[15]

And in *Liji* 禮記 (i.e., the *Book of Rites*):

> Dwelling in **the proper place given to them** [i.e., the sages], such is the way the ceremonies are run in harmony. (*Liyun* 14; my translation)[16]

I interpret Mengzi's application of "存" to our four sprouts in the following way: it means being watchful that our four sprouts are in their proper place. (We will discuss what this proper place is supposed to be shortly.) Certainly, how the word "存" is used in other texts is circumstantial evidence at best. Fortunately, we have some corroborating evidence from *Mengzi* itself.

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[14] Interpreted this way, and placing the idea of a disciplined, un-wandering heart in the center of Mengzi's view puts him in an interesting and stark contrast with Zhuangzi, who advocated for a completely different vision of a flourishing life, a life of a wandering heart.

[15] In original Chinese: 籩豆之事，則有司**存**. There are multiple ways to parse this sentence and only some of them render this sentence evidence for my claim about the word "存". The second part of this sentence (則有司存) can be interpreted simply as "there are officials" by reading "有司" together as a phrase that means officials and reading "存" simply to mean "exist". So, the idea that these officials would manage such trivial matters and put them in their proper place is merely implied by the sentence, not explicitly expressed by any of the words. Read this way, this sentence is *not* evidence of the word "存" being used as "to be kept in its proper place". Another way to parse this sentence treats "司" alone to mean "officials" and "有" is read as "there are". In that case, "存" has to be read as "to be kept in its proper place". Alternatively, we may read "有司" together as "officials" and *opt to* read "存" as "to keep things in their proper place". Read in the second and third way, this sentence is evidence for my suggestion about the word "存".

[16] In original Chinese: 處其所**存**，禮之序也.

First of all, interpreting "存" in my way is supported by the best interpretation of Mengzi's contrasting idea of losing one's heart, as we have already seen. Secondly, this matches the best interpretation of the other word (i) "守" that Mengzi used to express the idea of preserving one's heart. Taking a closer look at Mengzi's notion of "守" not only confirms my interpretation of "存", but can also deepen our understanding of what exactly Mengzi means by keeping our four sprouts in their proper place.

What exactly does it mean for an emotional potential to wander off? That is, what exactly are we supposed to prevent when we are asked to keep our hearts in their proper place? To understand what kind of wandering we are meant to prevent, we can look at what a heart that *doesn't* wander is like. On this, Mengzi offered an elaborate characterization of an unperturbed/unmoved heart (不動心) in 2A2, something we are meant to achieve by 守.

When asked to explain the *dao* of an unperturbed heart (2A2.3), i.e., the idea of a *properly* unperturbed heart, Mengzi responded by presenting four people who exemplified different traits that may count as courageous in slightly different senses. This indicates that "unperturbed heart" simply means "courageous heart"; and the conversation about a properly unperturbed heart is about what's proper courage. Focusing on 2A2.3-8, Mengzi presents these four people as exemplars of four versions of so-called courage:

(1) Bogong You: a person who battled everyone on anything
(2) Meng Shishe: a person who chose who and when to battle so that he never felt fear
(3) Zixia: a person who cultivated himself by meeting every challenge thrown at him
(4) Zengzi: a person who cultivated himself by meeting only the challenges to avoid feeling shame under self-scrutiny

Perceptively drawing a parallel with Kongzi's autobiographical passage in the *Analects* 2.4, Zhu Xi commented that Mengzi's idea of a courageous, unperturbed heart is what Kongzi meant by "being free of doubts" (or: "being free of confusion"). If so, Mengzi's idea of a wandering heart is a heart that wavers with doubts. Of course, this is simply replacing one term ("wandering") with another term ("in doubt/confusion"); we need more clarity.

Parsing the discussion about (1)-(4) by following the lead of Alan Chan's (2011) meticulous analysis of this passage, the major difference between (1) and (2) on the one hand and (3) and (4) on the other hand lies in the *subject matter*. Bogong You and Meng Shishe are, in their own ways, unwavering in physical battles (in both personal and political life). Zixia and Zengzi are, in their own ways, unwavering in their approach to self-cultivation. Mengzi doesn't care about what counts as proper courage in physical confrontations; hence, he says, "Now, I do not really know whose courage [i.e., Bogong You's or Meng Shishe's] was preferable" (2A2.6). Instead, the focal point of the discussion is that (2) and (4) deal with doubts regarding their respective domains in a similar way. Mengzi characterizes this way of dealing with doubts as *shou-yue* (守約). Though it was left indeterminate whether *shou-yue* is crucial for proper courage in

physical battles, *shou-yue* is considered the essence of being properly courageous in the context of self-cultivation, i.e., having a properly unperturbed heart.

Chan understood the term *shou-yue* as "securing what's important":

> [I]n being able to cultivate a heart that knows no fear, Meng Shishe guards, defends, or secures (*shou* 守) what Mencius considers more "important" (*yue* 約). (Chan 2011: 45)

He isn't alone. "*Yue*" is rendered as "what's important" in both Legge's and van Norden's translation, and as "the essential" in D. C. Lau's and Bloom's translations. Whereas *yue* in this context indeed *implies* something important or essential, "*yue*" itself (as far as I can tell) doesn't mean that. Imagine translating a German recipe. One of the steps says, "Zucker hinzufügen". Translating that as "add something sweet" isn't wrong in the sense that adding something sweet is often an *intended implication* of adding sugar (i.e., Zucker). But the word "Zucker" doesn't just mean "something sweet". In pre-Han usages, the word "*yue*" can express "to restrain", "to reduce", or "to simplify". (It could also be used as a noun to mean "string", related to "to restrain".) When we simplify or reduce things, we handle them selectively, typically based on their relative importance. We can certainly see that if one aims at *yue*, one typically keeps one's eyes on what's important. But at the same time, some aspects of "*yue*" are lost by simply reducing it to "something important". For one thing, the idea of selectivity in "*yue*" gets pushed aside; the idea of importance/essential is conceptually compatible with everything being equally important/essential. In the subsequent discussion, I'll render "*yue*" to mean "priority" so that to *shou-yue* is to *secure a sense of priority*.

Meng Shishe was selective in what battle to fight.[17] Selective how? By what standard? Van Norden (1997: 243) is right to bring our attention to one aspect of the contrast between Bogong You and Meng Shishe in 2A2: the former's courage was behavioral, about what he did; the latter's courage was emotional, about how he managed to be without fear. In the case of Bogong You, courage is being free from threats. Threats are the source of doubts out there. To be free from them is to charge at them and eliminate them. In the case of Meng Shishe, courage is being free from doubts understood as the feeling of fear.[18] The emotion of fear sets *the standard of operation*: the decisions to engage, to disengage, to throw resources in to win a battle, to maintain a stalemate, to hold a defensive position and observe, etc. are all made based on whether doing so help him be without fear. This is why Meng Shishe reportedly says, "I look upon defeat the same as victory." (2A2.5) No behavior is intrinsically preferred — either going for the win or not; it all depends on what would put him in a position without fear. Bogong

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[17] My reading of Mengzi's evaluation of Meng Shishe in this passage is drastically different from van Norden's (1997), who interprets Meng Shishe to be someone who *didn't* discriminate the kind of situation he was in like Bogong You: "there is one important similarity between the two [i.e., Bogong You and Meng Shishe]: both fail to distinguish or discriminate aspects of the situations they are in". (243) I don't think the passage must be parsed in the way I do. But I am not sure what else to say other than that, to me, it seems incredibly explicit in the text that Meng Shishe chose what battles to fight and Bogong You didn't.

[18] See also Jiang (1997) for an interesting discussion of Mengzi's (and Kongzi's) idea of courage as feeling no fear and how that view on courage is consistent with the broader Confucian commitment that virtue requires acting from proper feelings.

You's version of courage is about meeting external demands (specifically, threats); Meng Shishe's version of courage is achieved by meeting internal demands that manifest through certain emotions (specifically, fear).

Let's shift from (1) and (2) to (3) and (4). Fear wasn't the standard of operation in Zengzi's journey of self-cultivation. He put it this way:

> If I examine myself and am not upright [縮], even if opposed by a man in baggy rags, I would not try to intimidate him. If I examine myself and am upright [不縮], even if it is thousands or tens of thousands of people who oppose me, I shall go forward. (2A2.7)

He appealed to his sense of righteousness on self-scrutiny as the standard to help him decide the proper course of action. Zengzi's quote doesn't explicitly mention his emotions or heart. He speaks about examining himself to see whether he is "縮" (van Norden translates it as "not upright" and its opposite "不縮" as "upright") in a situation. This translation follows the traditional commentator Zhao Qi in rendering "縮" as "義 (righteousness)". We should, however, distinguish the literal meaning of a word from what a person intends to implicate when they use the word. Although it's correct that Zengzi intends to check whether he is upright *by means of* checking whether he is 縮, the word "縮" itself doesn't mean "not upright" (or "lack of righteousness"). The word originally means "being disordered" and then by extension, "to tighten something with ropes" due to something being disordered (and hence the various derivative meanings like "to retreat", "to shorten", etc.). As such, a plausible reading of the quote is that Zengzi examines whether he senses conflict in himself (i.e., emotionally disordered) or senses hesitance in himself (i.e., emotionally being held back, perhaps by his feeling of disdain) in order to see whether he is righteous in each situation. Zengzi's conducts are shaped by his feeling of disdain. Given that Mengzi uses Zengzi to illustrate his view, this reading has the advantage of cohering with Mengzi's broader view that the standard of righteousness lies in one's feeling of disdain.

Zengzi's emotion-centered approach to self-cultivation is contrasted with Zixia's approach, whose idea of self-cultivation presumably is to learn to handle every challenging external situation strictly according to proper rites. If tens of thousands of people oppose Zixia's way of doing things, he would consider it a part of his self-cultivation to learn how to handle these tens of thousands of people perfectly according to rites.[19] By contrast, Zengzi focuses on answering to himself alone and could not care less as long as he wasn't ashamed of himself by doing things in his way. Analogous to Meng Shishe's approach to physical battle, Zengzi was selective in what he cared about (*shou-yue*), prioritizing the emotion of disdain as the gold standard.

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[19] The passage in *Mengzi* 2A2 doesn't elaborate on Zixia other than claiming that Zixia's approach to self-cultivation is like Bogong You's approach to physical battles. The characterization I offer here is based on something we learn about Zixa from the *Analects*. In *Analects* 6.13, Kongzi advises Zixia not to be a petty bureaucrat who focuses excessively and rigidly on formalities and rites. And in *Analects* 3.8, Kongzi is delighted that Zixia was able to draw the inference from the *Odes* that the value of having a virtuous character is more fundamental than the value of rites because the point of the latter is to highlight and refine the positive quality of one's virtuous character. This can be read to indicate that Zixia tends to focus too rigidly on the social formalities and rites to answer all sorts of external demands properly.

Now Mengzi rated Zengzi higher than Meng Shishe. After describing Meng Shishe as a person who has a sense of priority (*shou-yue*) — something good that he is said to share with Zengzi, Mengzi goes on to say this:

> Meng Shishe's securing his *qi* (*shou-qi* 守氣) is then not as good as Zengzi's [way of] securing a sense of priority (*shou-yue* 守約) (2A2.8; translation is mine).

Without overcomplicating things and distracting ourselves from our task, we can think of *qi* as the external aura that something or someone embodies in a situation.[20] It would be a mistake to read this quote to be saying that Zengzi secures a sense of priority (*shou-yue*) but not his *qi*, whereas Meng Shishe secures his *qi* (*shou-qi*) but not a sense of priority. First of all, as we have seen, Meng Shishe has a sense of priority, too. So, it's false that Meng Shishe doesn't *shou-yue*. Perhaps more importantly, Mengzi also believes that working on one's *qi* is important. Later in the same conversation in 2A2.9-2.11, Mengzi discusses how to not injure one's *qi* and how to cultivate "a flood-like *qi*" ("浩然之氣") by "having your will fixed somewhere" (2A2.9b), which I take to be the same as *shou-yue*. Given the Confucians' interest in healthy socialization, it's unsurprising that securing a pro-social external aura/*qi* is significant from their point of view. Since Zengzi is meant to be someone who does self-cultivation right in the context of *Mengzi*, it would be wrong to interpret Mengzi to say that Zengzi doesn't *shou-qi*.

A better reading of 2A2.8, I reckon, is this. Meng Shishe and Zengzi secure *both* their sense of priority (*yue*) *and* their physical aura (*qi*). But they go about this with different mindsets. Meng Shishe sees his prioritized emotional state, i.e., being fearless, as something he is to *manufacture* from the outside. He makes military decisions that situates himself to embody the proper aura or *qi* externally in order to manufacture the fearless emotional state internally. On the contrary, Zengzi views his prioritized emotional state, i.e., being without disdain, not as a product of his actions but as the driving force behind his external behaviors. Meng Shishe secures his *qi* with external behaviors in order to achieve his emotional priority. Zengzi listens to the emotional state he prioritizes to shape his external behaviors. They both prioritize certain emotional states but "to prioritize" means something slightly different to them; that is, they *shou-yue* differently. This contrast between Meng Shishe and Zengzi alludes to and complements another contrast that Mengzi brings up earlier in the same conversation, namely, a contrast between Gaozi and himself. Mengzi says:

> Gaozi said, "What you do not get from doctrines, do not seek for in your heart. What you do not get from your heart, do not seek for in the *qi*." "What you do not get from your heart, do not seek for in the *qi*," is acceptable. "What you do not get from doctrines, do not seek for in your heart," is unacceptable. (2A2.9a)

[20] This *something* can be an environment. Regarding the *qi* of an environment (instead of people), see 6A8.2, where Mengzi mentions the "restorative effects of the morning *qi*". Even a night-owl like myself must acknowledge that the morning embodies a refreshing aura that the night doesn't have. Such is the *qi* of the morning. The notion *qi* here doesn't carry the metaphysical/mystical connotation that it later acquires in the works of later generations.

Whereas Meng Shishe tries to shape his heart with his *qi*, Gaozi tries to shape his heart with doctrines instead of *qi*. Despite the difference, they both see self-cultivation as a process of manufacturing certain prized emotional states in oneself. By contrast, Zengzi and Mengzi see self-cultivation as a process of answering to certain prized emotional calls from within. There is a whole lot to be analyzed and discussed about Mengzi's reason for thinking that listening to our emotions instead of manufacturing the proper emotions is the superior way to cultivate an unmoved heart. This goes beyond the scope of the present article and is a discussion for a different occasion. For our purpose, we only need to focus on what this tells us about what an unwavering heart is.

Let's retrace the dialectic: Mengzi talked about all this in order to answer Gongsun Chow's question about the essence of a properly unperturbed heart (2A2.3). To answer this question, Mengzi brought up the four characters to highlight the *similarity* of Meng Shishe and Zengzi. Keeping track of the big picture of this dialectic is important. I want to argue that, in spite of the fact that Zengzi was deemed better than Meng Shishe, it's their *similarity*, not their difference, that is supposed to answer the question about the essence of a properly unperturbed heart.

There is a lot going on in Meng Shishe's and Zengzi's case. Let's make sure we focus on the essence of Mengzi's answer:

> Meng Shishe:
>
> (i) prioritized what to tackle and what to disengage;
> (ii) prioritized emotions specifically;
> (iii) prioritized a subset of emotions to be more specific;
> (iv) prioritized fear, to be even more specific, as the standard in battles
> (v) to prioritize something is to aim at producing it
>
> Zengzi:
>
> (i) prioritized what to tackle and what to disengage;
> (ii) prioritized emotions specifically;
> (iii) prioritized a subset of emotions to be more specific;
> (iv) prioritized shame, to be even more specific, as the standard in life
> (v) to prioritize something is to listen to it and let it take the lead

Their (iv)-(v) is irrelevant because that's where the two characters differ, not only in terms of what emotions are being prioritized but how they are prioritized, as we just discussed. The essence of a properly unperturbed heart is (i)-(iii): to live with a sense of priority that centers upon a restricted set of emotions as one's standard of operation. This helps us systematize our further inquiry; the next questions we should press Mengzi would be:

> (a) Why prioritize anything as the standard at all?
> (b) Why prioritize emotions as the standard?
> (c) Why prioritize whatever specific emotions we are supposed to prioritize as the standard (e.g., Zengzi's disdain instead of Meng Shishe's fear)?

Mengzi has some intriguing things to say in the rest of 2A2 and elsewhere that can be read as answers to these questions. But we will be in a better position to fully unpack what I take to be Mengzi's answers to (a)-(c) only after we manage to pin down two things: (1) the definition of "human nature" that underlies Mengzi's reasoning and (2) why human nature so defined is supposed to carry normative force (i.e., how the notion of human nature manages to breach the is-ought distinction, so to speak). This essay has a highly restrictive objective that doesn't include (1) and (2). For now, it suffices to appreciate how Mengzi's characterization of an unperturbed heart paints a clearer picture of the kind of wandering hearts that we are supposed to keep in check so that we don't lose our hearts.

Our heart is lost when it's wandering. This can be understood either as a claim about our emotional capacity in general or as a claim about our capacity for a specific emotion. Our heart — understood as our emotional capacity in general — wanders when it lacks what Meng Shishe and Zengzi had in (i)-(iii): there isn't any particular subset of emotions such that our capacities to feel them are prioritized in our lives. Words like "lost", "wandering", and "stray" are apt descriptions of a person like this. A person with a wandering heart lives an emotionally unstructured life, being dragged around from one external demand to another, from one emotional drive to another. This is a life without a path. Then, a particular kind of heart — understood as our capacity to feel a particular kind of emotion (e.g., shame, compassion, fear) — is lost and stray when it isn't prioritized as part of the standard of one's life. To preserve (存/守) one's heart in the Mengzian sense is to live a life with a proper emotional discipline, with one's emotional capacities exercised with a highly selective priority. (This provides an interesting contrast with the ethical vision of Zhuangzi.)

Let's take stock. Mengzi says that people cannot lack what's part of human nature and yet, he says that without the mental activity *si*, a crucial part of our nature would be lost (most people have lost it according to Mengzi). We have an apparent contradiction. If we accept my interpretation, this apparent contradiction disappears. In section 5, I propose the interpretation that to lose one's heart is for one's four sprouts to wander away from its proper place. Let's call this the **Proper Place Interpretation** of Mengzi's notion of preserving/losing our hearts. In this section, by analyzing Mengzi's discussion of a properly unperturbed heart, I take the further step to argue that this proper place for our four sprouts is the top spot of our priority so that for our four sprouts to be stray is for them to fail to be prioritized in our lives, i.e., being left in the background. Note that it's perfectly consistent to say that everyone has the four sprouts and simultaneously that most people fail to prioritize them in their lives. Being inattentive to yourself, you become accustomed to going about day-to-day business mechanically, forgetting about the simple fact that you are a person who *can* feel compassion, disdain, deference/respect, and approval/disapproval; this simple fact gets left behind in the back of your mind.

7. Master of Flavors

I argued that a proper interpretation of Mengzi requires us to read (a)-(f) in a uniform manner. The same applies to (g)-(j). So far, I have demonstrated how my interpretation

works for (g) “存” and (i) “守”. It’s yet to be seen that the same applies to (h) “得” and (j) “長”.

7.1 “To Grow”

To start with (j), Mengzi says:

> Hence, if it merely gets nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow [長]. If it merely loses its nourishment, there is nothing that will not vanish. (6A8.3)

And this is immediately followed by:

> Kongzi said, “Grasped then preserved [存]; abandoned then lost. […]” (6A8.4)

The parallelism makes it fairly evident that “長” and “存” are meant to be synonymous. If “長” means “to grow” here, then “存” would mean “to grow”, too. This is bad news. Not only is this in conflict with my proposal that “存” means “to remain in one’s proper place” in the sense of “to be prioritized”, it seems to leave no room for a plausible interpretation at all because “存” doesn’t mean “to grow”, not even remotely, which means there is no uniform interpretation of (g)-(j) possible.

The good news is, “長” can mean something other than “to grow”. In fact, it originally meant something else. In its ancient form, the word pictorially represents an elderly person with long hair and a walking cane. According to *Shuowen Jiezi*, “長” characterizes something being around for a long time. By extension, it can mean “to grow old” or simply “to grow”. But it can also be used as a synonym of “常”, which means “being constant”. As such, we can take 6A8.3 to say that, regarding Ox Mountain, as long as there is nourishment, the greeneries will *stick around* in where they belong and, as long as there isn’t nourishment, all greeneries will retreat [消] out of sight. This reading of “長” as “to stick around” coheres with the interpretation of “存” as “to remain where it belongs”.

It’s worth noting that my argument doesn’t exclude that in *some* contexts in *Mengzi*, “長” can be used to mean the growth of our four sprouts. For example, in 2A2.16, the Mengzi says the following:

> One should not **forget** [忘] the heart, but neither should one “help” it **grow** [長]. Do not be like the man from Song. Among the people of the state of Song there was a farmer who, concerned lest his sprouts not **grow** [長], pulled on them. Obliviously, he returned home and said to his family, “Today I am worn out. I helped the sprouts to **grow** [長].” His son rushed out and looked at them. The sprouts were withered.

Here ”to grow” is the only legitimate interpretation of “長”. The farmer pulls on the sprouts not because he is worried that the sprouts won’t stick around constantly; he is

concerned that they won't grow. This story is used to make a point about how we shouldn't try to actively make our four sprouts grow into the four full-blown Confucian character-traits. Is this passage then a counterexample to my thesis that, in the relevant contexts about our four sprouts, (g)-(j) uniformly means "to remain in its proper place"? The answer is no because this passage isn't one of the relevant contexts.

The literature often fails to distinguish two separate conversations about our four sprouts in *Mengzi*. First, there is the discussion about the *preservation* of our sprouts, making sure they remain in their rightful place, i.e., the top spot of our priority. Second, there is the discussion about the *growth/extension* of our sprouts.[21] These are conceptually distinct conversations.[22] One can keep something at right where it belongs without actively making it grow (even if its growth is a byproduct of being where it belongs). In fact, the first sentence in the quote from 2A2.16 above is arguably Mengzi's attempt to distinguish the two conversations. The word "忘" ("to forget"), as I have mentioned before, is often used interchangeably with "亡", i.e., (b), in ancient Chinese. Mengzi says we should actively make sure our hearts don't go stray, i.e., aren't forgotten (亡/忘); in other words, we should actively do things to remind ourselves and each other that we are someone who can feel compassion. But immediately, he cautions that this doesn't mean we should actively make our hearts grow, make ourselves feel *more* compassion. So, the claim indicates exactly that the word "亡" **isn't** the opposite to "長", which means "to grow" in this passage. This essay focuses on understanding the contrast between preserving and losing our four sprouts, not their cultivation or extension. Since 2A2.16 concerns the cultivation of our sprouts, it isn't one of the relevant contexts for our purpose. As a result, my argument still stands. In all the *relevant* contexts, (g)-(j) — hence including the relevant occurrences of "長" — can be interpreted uniformly to mean "to remain where it belongs".

7.2 "To Get"

One might object that my proposed interpretation is based on a usage of the terms (g), (i), and (j) that is inapplicable to (h) "得" ("to get"). The translation of "得" as "to get" reinforces this concern since, in English, "to get something" doesn't mean anything remotely close to "having something remain where it belongs". A good interpretation must render (g)-(j) in a relatively uniform manner. Thus, my interpretation is no good.

"得" and "to get" doesn't align perfectly though, or so I want to argue. Philologically, "得" means "to get" or "to obtain" *by* pictorially depicting an act of picking up a coin on

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[21] This conversation is often framed in terms of how to extend (*tui* 推) our four sprouts to the four corners of the world (1A7). For a few contemporary interpretations of the supposed mechanism of this extension of our four sprouts in *Mengzi*, see Shun 1989 (extension via logical inferences), Wong 1991, 2002 (extension via becoming attentive to morally salient features of new situations), Im 1999 (extension via applying fully-formed innate emotional capacities to new situations), Kim 2023 (extension via projecting oneself to other people's positions), Hu 2023 (extension via scaffolding higher-level moral evaluative processes upon lower-level perceptive-affective-motivational responses). Since I advocate for separating the conversation about the preservation from the conversation about the extension of our four sprouts, my interpretation remains neutral to and compatible with any of these interpretations of how the extension of our four sprouts is supposed to work according to Mengzi.

[22] I made this same point in section 3.3.

the road. (The word has three parts: the "彳" on the left that symbolizes a path, the "日" on the top-right that depicts a coin, and the "寸" on the bottom-right that stands for a hand that grasps the coin.) *Shuowen Jiezi* defines "得" as "picking up something on a walk" ("行有所得也"). Note that this already cannot mean preventing something from going out of existence. But more importantly, based on this philological information, I argue that "得" *can* mean getting something in the exact sense of retrieving something that has wandered off from where it belongs to give it a proper place to be, like picking up a coin that has perhaps fallen off from someone's pocket to put it in my wallet. This is an aspect of the meaning of "得" that the translation "to get" doesn't fully capture. Interpreting "得" in this way, we have a uniform interpretation of (g)-(j).

This interpretation of "得" ("to get") allows us to bring what we have learned about Mengzi's idea of preserving human nature into his colorful comparison between the Confucian ideal of political leadership and the culinary art. Mengzi says:

> Mouths have the same preferences in flavors. Master Chef Yi Ya was the first **to discover** [得, i.e., to get] what our mouths prefer. If it were the case that the natures of mouths varied among people — just as dogs and horses are different species from us — then how could it be that throughout the world all tastes follow Yi Ya when it comes to flavor? When it comes to flavor, the reason the whole world looks to Yi Ya is that mouths throughout the world are similar.
>
> […]
>
> What is it that hearts prefer in common? I say that it is order and righteousness. The sages first **discovered** [i.e., "to get" 得] what our hearts prefer in common. Hence, order and righteousness delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths." (6A7.5-8; my emphasis)

The verb that van Norden translates as "discover" here is "得", which is the same verb that Mengzi used when he said elsewhere that one *gets* (得) one's human nature as long as one seeks with *si*. I highlight this fact because drawing this connection allows us to use what we have learned about preserving human nature to parse the culinary analogy in an interesting way.

In our discussion about Mengzi's notion of a non-wandering and unperturbed heart, I argued that to preserve our human nature just is to have our four sprouts remain in their proper place: having a disciplined emotional life that prioritizes our capacities to feel four specific emotions, letting them take the lead in the flow of our lives. If so, to preserve our human nature isn't to *discover* it but simply to build a structure of priority around it. Mengzi uses the same verb "得" in the culinary analogy. If we read the culinary analogy accordingly, then arguably Yi Ya's alleged contribution wasn't that he *discovered* our culinary preferences. After all, I know that I love something crispy; I don't need others to *discover* what I enjoy for me. Good chefs are distinctive not because they discover the flavors we prefer; they are good at *structuring* our culinary experiences by having a good sense of priority regarding our preferences, e.g., matching the right tastes

with the right textures, pairing the right entrées with the right wines. They know what and how to prioritize aspects of our culinary experiences to do wonderful things with our various common preferences. They instill discipline into the realm of flavors. This allows a master chef like Yi Ya to create (again, not discover) dishes that captivate and move people effectively. (By contrast, those who have tried to create a new dish as an amateur — instead of following recipes — most likely have had the humbling experience of putting all the good flavors together but ending up with a dish that tastes confusing.)

As an analogy, this says something remarkable about the Confucian sages. Their brilliance wasn't due to their having discovered anything new about human beings. Instead, if we interpret "得" as to keep something in its proper place in the sense of preventing it from wandering without a sense of priority, then what the sages were meant to have achieved, according to the passage quoted above, was to have managed to inspire a proper sense of priority over people's shared yet undisciplined senses of righteousness to make socio-political life a dish that works. Politics isn't about fighting over who's right and who's wrong. There is no wrong ingredient in the kitchen, only a poor way of organizing and using ingredient in a dish.[23]

8. Conclusion and Beyond: The Mengzian Ethics of Attention

Dissipating this appearance of contradiction about losing our human nature from *Mengzi* is a meaningful result especially because it doesn't get the attention, let alone a thematic treatment, like many other more well-known apparent inconsistencies in *Mengzi* do.[24] But the significance of honing in on this particular contradiction goes beyond merely filling a gap in the literature. In this final section, I want to make the case that handling this contradiction in the way I propose in section 5-7 brings us full circle to our earlier discussion about the notion *si* (思) in a manner that paves a new path forward for understanding Mengzi's overall philosophical project.

On multiple occasions, Mengzi states that *si* is both necessary and sufficient for the preservation of ourselves, our hearts, or our human nature:

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[23] Like many of Mengzi's ideas, this presents an interesting answer to Mozi's political thought, specifically the latter's state of nature thought experiment. According to Mozi, before the rise of a proper state, everyone has their own sense of righteousness and their own sense of how things should be run (人異義); as a result, "within the family, fathers and sons, elder and younger brothers become resentful and scattered, unable to remain together with each other peacefully. The common people of the world all injured each other with water, fire, or poison." (*Mozi* Book 11 "Identify Upward") According to Mozi, the achievement of political institution was to impose a unified standard of governance and thereby bulldoze the individual senses of righteousness and governance. By contrast, in Mengzi's vision, politics is not about settling whose senses of righteousness are right/wrong. Nobody's sense of righteousness is *wrong;* we all want *more or less* the same sort of things. What we lack is a proper sense of priority and discipline to make something productive out of our fleeting senses of righteousness. Analyzing the subtle differences between these two models of governance is a job for another occasion.

[24] For example, there is an apparent inconsistency in *Mengzi* regarding whether human nature is purely good or a mix of good and bad. Chen Li's 陳澧 *Dongshu Dushuji* (juan 3: 1a-1b) is a historical discussion of this apparent inconsistency in *Mengzi*; see Lau 2000 for an explicit treatment of this inconsistency in the contemporary literature.

> Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them. Hence, it is said, "Seek it and you will get it. Abandon it and you will lose it." (6A6)

As I have argued before, it's best to interpret Mengzi to be commenting on the *tips* or *capacities* for benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom (instead of the four full-blown Confucian character-traits themselves because he clearly doesn't mean that people are born perfectly virtuous). According to this passage, first of all, seeking it (i.e., our human nature) by reflection (*si*) alone is sufficient for getting it — hence he says "it is simply that […]". Secondly, doing so is necessary for getting it — hence "abandon it and you will lose it". Why exactly is this psychological process *si* related to "getting" or "losing" our human nature? As I have pointed out earlier in this essay, this is a suspicious claim about human psychology if "get it" and "lose it" are interpreted as "preventing it from going out of existence" and "letting it go out of existence" respectively. Our other emotional capacities don't seem to work this way. For example, my capacities to feel insecure, jealous, angry, etc. is likely to remain whether or not I am reflective about it or attentive to it. The Proper Place Interpretation removes the suspicious psychology from *Mengzi*. Since to preserve our heart just is to have it remains in its proper place, i.e., the top priority in our lives, the issue becomes how the psychological process *si* relates to whether our four sprouts are prioritized.

Recall my hypothesis that to *si* something is to intent/attend/value something. Let us focus particularly on the attention aspect of *si*. Whereas attention has been one of the key subjects in psychology, philosophy of attention (especially, the metaphysics of attention) has only begun to emerge as a major topic. The rise of the metaphysics of attention has been driven by a growing sense of unease felt by psychologists and philosophers alike regarding the disunified works in experimental psychology on human attention. Important experiments about how our attention functions are designed based on radically different models (or assumptions) of what attention is.[25] Metaphysicians of attention try to answer this foundational need in experimental psychology by developing and defending theories of the general essence of attention. Among the few theories that have gained tractions, Watzl's Priority Structure View is particularly relevant for our purpose. According to Watzl's theory, roughly speaking, attention is the mental process of maintaining a priority structure and a priority structure is a ranking of things according to their relative importance to a person.[26] The Priority Structure View, unlike some other metaphysics of attention on the market, is importantly motivated by its ability to remain faithful to how attention shows up in our everyday-life deliberations as a subject-level phenomenon (Watzl 2017: 33-37). As such, it theorizes attention as a phenomenon that an ancient philosopher like Mengzi could also have some level of access to. A theory like this could therefore be attributed to

[25] For discussion of this scientific motivation for a quest for a proper metaphysics of attention, see Mole 2011: 3-23, Wayne 2014: 11-75, and Watzl 2017: 13-37.

[26] It isn't the most accurate to say that a priority structure is a ranking of *things*. Watzl's theory has something more to say about what exactly is being ranked in a priority structure. Not everything in Watzl's view is attributable to Mengzi. Such detail is beyond the scope of this essay.

Mengzi without the concern of anachronistic overinterpretation.[27] There is much more detail in Watzl's metaphysics of attention, some but not all of it is attributable to Mengzi; sorting out which is which is a task for another article. The point here, however, is that if Mengzi thinks about attention along the same line, the connection between *si* and the preservation of our four sprouts can be explained in a satisfying manner. How does one make sure that feeling compassion, etc. are prioritized in one's life so that they don't drift off in the back of one's mind? There is no secret here: be attentive to them. Attention can keep our four sprouts prioritized because maintaining priority is the nature of attention. The fact that the Proper Place Interpretation of what it means to preserve/lose our hearts allows us to justify Mengzi's claim about the connection between *si* and the preservation/loss of our hearts is yet another reason to prefer the interpretation.

Finally, interpreting Mengzi's claim about the preservation of our hearts as an ethical claim about attention in the way I have just described opens up new possibilities for further exploration in *Mengzi* scholarship. To mention just a few, first, what we prioritize and consider important in life constitutes our self-identification. *If*, as some Mengzi scholars suggest (e.g., Ames 2017: 19, van Norden 2003: 128-29), the ethical significance of Mengzi's conception of human nature resides in its deep connection with our self-identity, then Mengzi's remarks about prioritizing (i.e., being attentive to) our four sprouts are much more integral to his overall philosophy of human nature than it is typically acknowledged to be. Mengzi doesn't simply *also* have something to say about the ethics of attention; his philosophy *just is* first and foremost an ethics of attention. Second, if we attribute the general idea of Watzl's Priority Structure View to Mengzi, and if *shou-yue* or priority comes in degrees, then we now have the conceptual resources to potentially talk about things being human nature to different degrees. This gives us novel tools to maneuver around various notorious puzzles in Mengzi interpretation, e.g., whether Mengzi thinks that human nature is also partly bad. Third, the kind of view that I have sketched and attributed to Mengzi can be a unique contribution to the on-going discussion about the norms of attention. For example, unlike Simone Weil (2021: 67), who advocates for cultivating a non-selective, defused kind of attention to the big picture of the world, Mengzi argues for a more tunnel-vision norm of attention: we should cultivate the habit of attending inward and selectively to a small subset of emotional capacities, leaving everything else out of the spotlight of our attention. His view also stands in stark contrast with Yao's (2020: 15), who argues for the socio-ethical importance of attending to people's flaws and to do so in a loving way, attending to them as an endearing part of human nature. *Arguably*, one finds traces of a similar idea in the *Daodejing* (Chapter 27; my emphasis):

> The bad person is the raw material for the good. (不善人者，善人之資。)
> If you do not value your teacher or if you do not **love your raw material**, (不貴其師，不愛其資，)
> Then even if you are wise yet you will go greatly astray. (雖智大迷，是謂要妙。)

[27] As much as it is interesting to see contemporary scientific research and Mengzi have a conversation, there is a limit to what is relevant when it comes to the *interpretation* of *Mengzi*. This methodological constraint is not always observed.

But given Mengzi's view that attention or prioritization nourishes or encourages the growth/extension of our psychological inclinations (which is a topic that I have not discussed in-depth), it's perhaps unsurprising that he opines that we should attend exclusively to each others' morally good, pro-social emotional capacities instead.

All this, of course, is but gestures. So much work is needed to render these ideas textually/philologically respectable, conceptually precise, and philosophically convincing. However, that my interpretation of Mengzi's notion of losing/preserving ourselves opens up these fresh angles to approach his overall philosophical project and reveals its relevance in the on-going conversation about attention (in the sense that Mengzi's view is, if not right, at least wrong in some illuminating way) is exactly part of this interpretation's value.

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