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MENGZI AND LÉVINAS:
THE HEART AND SENSIBILITY

With Lévinas, we will have to talk about the other. We will have to talk with him or to him about the thought of the other as it has been thought by him. But by whom? By Lévinas or by the other? Or, by Lévinas as the other? Already ambiguities begin to accumulate here, and they are not simply grammatical or linguistic ones (I will have to beg your pardon for *having* to speak rather clumsily here in a language which is *other* than “mine,” that is, for *having* to speak of a thinker who speaks in still another language. The implication of this situation is enormous concerning such a thinker, who is in a certain sense the very thinker of the irreducible difference between the saying and the said. What am I *saying* here, and what have I *said*? Have I already betrayed my saying in what I said? Has Lévinas’s thought, which should be our *inspiration*, or which should “inspire” us as the other in ourselves, already been inevitably turned into an object of a study of that which is said?¹ And, if there is or there should be the saying without the said, then does language or the multiplicity of language matter? Will we be able to say in Chinese precisely what Lévinas says in French without betraying him? For example, but this is perhaps not just one example among others, how should we translate the word *responsabilité* [responsibility] into Chinese without losing its essential semantic link with its verbal and adjectival cognates in French, a link on which Lévinas has put so much emphasis? In other words, with what word are we to “respond” in Chinese to Lévinas’s call for the responsibility for the other, which is thematized in another language, if our response *still* has to be born by a word said? I will leave these preliminary questions open and suspended here and close this parenthesis).

To talk to a great thinker about his thought is to learn to begin to ask questions, however modestly, questions addressed to this thinker about his thought. Thus, with Lévinas, the thinker of the other, we will have to ask him questions about the other, or perhaps, to ask him *the* question of the other. But is the other a question or even *the* question?

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Does Lévinas think that the other is *a* question, or that *the* philosophical question should be the question of the other, rather than that of Being, as Heidegger would think?² Can we ask any question to and about the other without having already been questioned by the other, or without having already been called into question by the other—being called into question, that is, with regard to my right for my very being in the world? If so, we should not ask questions to and about the other. Furthermore, no question can be asked to and about the other if the other is to be respected as what it is, as such, if this is ever possible. In speaking to the other without having really said anything, or more precisely, in responding to the call of the other, my first word would have to be a “Here I am (*me voici*),” or a “Yes,” already the word of responsibility, which responds or answers to the other in my passivity, a passivity which according to Lévinas is more passive than all passivity. “The response, which is responsibility, responsibility for the neighbor that is incumbent, resounds in this passivity,” says Lévinas.³ However, contrary to almost the whole Western philosophical tradition, Lévinas asserts that it is in this passivity more passive than all passivity, that subjectivity “comes to pass” (*se passe*), and that it comes to pass precisely as this very passivity. And this passivity, or “vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation,” all this is the self, and all this, if “pushed to the limit,” is “sensitivity,” sensitivity as the “subjectivity of the subject.”⁴ Thus, the subjectivity of the subject is sensitivity, and sensitivity is essentially passivity and responsibility, which, in a passivity more passive than all passivity, responds to the other to which it is exposed, to which it is itself the very exposure, “without this exposure being assumed, an exposure without holding back, exposure of exposedness.”⁵ And this exposure is “sensitivity on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves (*sensibilité à fleur de peau, à fleur de nerfs*).”⁶ It is because the subjectivity of the subject is essentially sensitivity, that the subject is subjection to and substitution for the other, hence is originally or pre-originally responsibility that responds to and for the other.

Would the subject that is thus originally and essentially exposed in its sensitivity to the other without any holding back, and is thus subjected to the other in its responsibility to the other, would such a subject still be the subject conceived in Western philosophical tradition? Here I can only raise this question without being able to enter into a discussion, nor being able to cite the numerous studies on this question.⁷ What interests us here is Lévinas’s characterization of sensitivity as the “subjectivity of the subject,” which, in displacing the classical concept of subjectivity, seems to have provided an inspiration for a new and different reading of a Confucian thinker in ancient

China, Mengzi. Without going into the depth of their thought, and at the risk of not doing justice to either of them (but can we ever be truly just to the other?), what I will attempt to do in the following is only to indicate a certain convergence of Lévinas and Mengzi, in their thinking of subjectivity *or* humanity in terms of sensibility. Lévinas's description of the subjectivity of the human subject as sensibility does seem in a certain way to remind us of Mengzi's thought of human nature or the humanity of the human. As the first Chinese thinker explicitly to insist on the original goodness of human nature, Mengzi's description of human nature, which is thought mainly or exclusively in ethical terms, is also centered on a certain sensibility, if I can put it this way a la Lévinas, although Mengzi has not literally said so. The word Mengzi uses to characterize human nature as essentially sensibility is *xin* (心), which literally signifies heart, but which has been normally translated, rather clumsily, as "heart/mind" in present-day Western writing on Chinese thought. This clumsiness is not something that can be avoided by new ingenuity in translation, as there was no differentiation in the Chinese tradition between an intelligent, theoretical, or rational mind and a sensible, emotional, or irrational heart, as has been the case in Western philosophy. And this "lack" of such differentiation, which would have been read by some as a vagueness or shortcoming of thought, may signify positively, when read side by side with Lévinas's analysis of sensibility, in a different direction, a direction which seems to tend to converge with that of Lévinas's in a certain way.

Yes, Mengzi talks about the human heart, or more precisely, the human hearts when he describes and defines human nature. He talks about four inborn hearts that everyone must have. For him, these very hearts are the defining characteristics of the being human of every human being, or of their humanity. Without them, Mengzi asserts, we would not be human. The Penguin English translation of Mengzi renders these four hearts, respectively, as the "heart of compassion," the "heart of shame," the "heart of respect," and the "heart of right and wrong."⁸ Others have translated the Chinese word "*xin*" as "feeling" or "sentiment" in this context.⁹ These translations are also legitimate readings of this concept, but they highlight only one aspect of it, whereas this heart is also a knowing heart (and this is why many have insisted on the translation of "*xin*" as "heart/mind," with or without a slash or hyphen). So let's stick to the very literal translation of *xin* as heart for our discussion.

For Mengzi, of these four hearts which are inborn in us, the heart of compassion is the most important, as this heart signifies *ren* 仁, which is a homophone of the word *ren* 人, meaning man, and which can be literally translated as humanity, or the being human of the human being.¹⁰ For Mengzi, then, the inborn heart of compassion signifies the

humanity of the human. But why, and how? Translated as the heart of compassion, a great deal of the force of thinking in Mengzi has got lost. In the *Mengzi*, the original expression for this heart of compassion is “*ce yin zhi xin* 惻隱之心,” which could have been translated literally as the “heart of profound pain,” that is, a heart that can feel great pain. But this profound pain has always already been a result of one’s being passively exposed to the other, as it can be seen in the example that Mengzi gives us, an example that does not seem to have drawn enough attention in studies of Mengzi’s thought. It is here, in illustrating this heart of profound pain as inborn or as original to every human being, that Mengzi calls or recalls another person to his help. But we may immediately wonder if this calling is not first of all or simultaneously a being called by the other, and if in this calling the other into his example Mengzi has not felt, albeit perhaps implicitly, the exigency of the other as the other person. This other that Mengzi invokes in his example is an infant, who is seen to be on the verge of falling into a well. Here the exigency of the other itself seems to hide itself in the exigency of the situation. Mengzi says that on seeing this small, weak, and helpless infant whose life is in danger, everyone would have their heart greatly startled, and would then feel their heart in great pain. This, then, would be the very moment that one of our hearts, the heart that can feel pain and that can be pained, becomes manifest to ourselves for the first time. And it shows that we all have such a heart of profound pain. For Mengzi, this is the very humanity of the human, or, as he would also say, the very starting point of humanity (“*ce yin zhi xin, ren zhi duan ye* 惻隱之心,仁之端也”).¹¹ This heart pain or this paining of my heart by the other is immediate, and is my first immediate response to this other who is exposed to me, to my sight; but this exposure to my sense is also my exposure to this other. My immediate response here in the form of the paining of my heart by the other is a response without reflection, without meditation, pure response passively expressed in the pain that I feel in my heart. A pain that is inevitable, as the other is there and I have been exposed to it. But it is still a pain that is unbearable to my heart, even though my heart or my whole self must nevertheless bear it, and must have already borne it in a certain way, as my heart or my whole self is just such an unreserved exposure to the other. It is this profound unbearable pain, resulting from my immediate exposure to the other, not any ulterior motives or self-interest, that would prompt me into action of rescue. Certainly Mengzi does not say that I will have necessarily rescued the infant, as there is still an *undecidable* moment between my being immediately and greatly pained in my heart by the suffering of the other, and my resolute decision of coming to its rescue. However, for Mengzi, this

heart of profound pain, this heart that can feel and must bear the suffering of others, is the very humanity of the human.

This heart, which Mengzi also calls the heart that cannot bear the suffering of others (“*bu ren ren zhi xin* 不忍人之心”), is for him also the very possibility of a humane government.¹² (Here is another interesting and important point at which we can compare Mengzi’s thought and Lévinas’s thought. For one, a humane and just government is seen as the natural consequence of the extension to everyone of one’s humanity which shows itself in the form of a paining heart while being exposed to the suffering of others; for the other, the need for justice results in “the fact of the multiplicity of men and the presence of someone else next to the Other,” but justice “must always be held in check by the initial interpersonal relation.”¹³) In trying to convince a king of his own ability to govern humanely, Mengzi interprets, in terms of the heart that cannot bear the suffering of the other, the fact that this king once saved an ox from being killed for its blood to be used to consecrate a newly cast bell. The king saved the ox because he saw it shuddering, and he could not bear to see its suffering. For Mengzi, the extension of this heart onto everyone under Heaven would be the realization of *ren* or humanity. And it is based on this observation of our inborn heart of profound pain, the heart that can feel and have to bear the pain of others, that Mengzi insists that human nature is originally good.

Mengzi has been regarded by some as essentially an idealist thinker, as they believe that in his insistence on the original goodness of human nature, Mengzi has basically ignored that human nature is largely the production of our environment, or that it is basically determined by our material existence. Others have tried to return to Mengzi’s thought of human nature for a revival or reconstruction of Confucian tradition in our times. The latter’s argument would largely run like this: Man is *originally* moral by his very nature, which means that I am good and moral first, and my kindness and generosity toward others come second from me as someone who has already been constituted as being moral.¹⁴ There are indeed places in Mengzi where such an interpretation of his thought seems justifiable. But in reading Mengzi in such a way, it seems that no adequate attention has been paid to that infant who in Mengzi’s remarkable example comes to pain our necessarily sensitive heart and hence calls us to our responsibility for the other. Thus, the argument made in favor of Mengzi’s thought of human nature as originally good becomes somehow dogmatic. With Lévinas, it seems that we have been able to reread one’s relation with the other in this “particular” example in an inverted order: that I am good is not because I am originally moral independently of the other, and can then extend my moral generosity

to others, but I am *ordered* (or even *ordained*, as Lévinas would put it) to be responsible to and for the other and, hence, I am good. But that I am able to be responsible to the other is because that I am “naturally” or pre-originally in this responsibility in my passivity, a passivity which in Mengzi takes the form of an inborn human heart that is *always already* exposed to the other, that is, to wounding by the suffering of the other, vulnerability, or extreme sensibility. Could we venture to say that Mengzi’s thought of the original goodness of human nature does not depend on some naive belief in man, but is instead grounded in the human nature which is regarded essentially as sensibility, a sensibility which can be interpreted in Lévinas’s terms? In fact, such an interpretation has indeed already been made by Cheng Hao 程颢 a thousand years after Mengzi first ventured his thought of human nature. Cheng has gone as far as saying that man is all and only this heart of profound pain, and that *ren* or what we have translated as humanity first and foremost signifies an extreme sensibility, an ability which is likened to that of feeling the existence of my limbs and body parts—a physical and medical metaphor.¹⁵

In our rereading, Mengzi seems to come close to Lévinas in a certain way, or Lévinas seems nearer to a part of Chinese tradition. But this can only be a proximity with immense distance, and our comparison is very much limited and rather partial. The distance may be quickly and roughly stated in the following words or questions: One thinks of the other in a language and a tradition in which God is the wholly or the absolutely other, whereas the other thinks of the other in a language and a tradition in which the name God or its equivalent is not even there. How would this difference influence our thinking of the thinking of the other which is thought in another language (I mean both the thinking of Lévinas in Chinese and the thinking of Mengzi in Western European languages)? Could Mengzi accept the concept of an absolute other? And conversely, could Lévinas think of the other without thinking of it as wholly other? And if, as Derrida would say, every other is totally other (*tout autre est tout autre*), that is to say, if there has to be the multiplicity of others, then what would happen to *the* absolutely other? In other words, how are we to begin to respond, across linguistic, cultural and religious borders, to the other, to the other thought, and to the thought of the other (if not to the other of thought), with a respect that would respect the other as the other and would not turn it into the same? I think this would perhaps be one of the significances of holding an international conference in China to commemorate Lévinas, the thinker of the other.

ENDNOTES

1. “*Inspirer*” is a word which Lévinas has taught me to read differently. Together with other French words which he uses such as *essouffement*, *soufle*, *expirer*, *respirer*, and especially *l’esprit*, it would warrant an interesting topic for a research in which these words as they are used by Lévinas can be compared with some Chinese words of similar or close senses, such as *qi* 气, *shen* 神, *jing* 精, *ling* 灵, *gui* 鬼, *huxi* 呼吸, etc. See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, *Phaenomenologica* 54 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); fifth printing (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 5–6, 17, 19, 146.
2. Here, with this question about the question, we simply wish to indicate a *certain* proximity of Lévinas to the Chinese tradition. In his critique of Western philosophy as “hav(ing) most been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being,” Lévinas proposes ethics as the first philosophy (*Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969], 43). This juxtaposition or opposition of ontology with ethics finds a certain similarity in some characterization of the Chinese tradition as having only ethical concerns but no ontological pursuit. We do not mean to subscribe to this characterization without any precaution or reservation, or to ignore the complication of Lévinas’s thought. What interests us here is still how to respond to the call of the other from the language and the tradition in which we find ourselves, or how the thought of the other can inspire a new and different reading of ourselves.
3. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 14–15.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. But see, for example, Derrida’s interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject,” in Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 255–87.
8. D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 163, 83.
9. Chan translates it as “feeling” in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 54, Schwartz as “sentiment” in Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 267.
10. The word “*ren* 仁” is traditionally translated as “benevolence” or “kindheartedness.”
11. Meng Ke 孟軻 (ca. 370–ca. 290 BC) et al., *Mengzi Zhengyi* 《孟子正義》 (*Mencius with Correct Annotations*), commentary by Zhao Qi 趙岐 (d. 201), ed. Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820), *Xinbian Zhuzi Jicheng* 《新編諸子集成》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987), 234.
12. *Ibid.*, 232.
13. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 90. For Lévinas justice means that I have to compare between the unique ones, between the incomparable, which would result in a limitation of my absolute responsibility to the other. “If I am alone with the Other, I owe him everything; but there is someone else” (*ibid.*, 89–90). See Jacques Derrida’s *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) for this situation, the so-called question of the third, or the birth of the question, especially 29–35.
14. The most powerful and most representative of such arguments are made by Mou Zongsan. See his *Xinti yu Xingti* 《心体与性体》 (The Heart-mind and the *Xing* as the Substance) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1999); *Xiangxian yu Wuzhishen* 《现象与物自身》 (Phenomena and Things-in-Themselves) (Taiwan: Taiwan Student Press, 1975).
15. See Cheng Hao 程颢 and Cheng Yi 程颐, *Er Cheng Ji* 《二程集》 (Complete Works of the Cheng Brothers), ed. Wang Xiaoyu 王孝鱼 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2004), 15, 33.