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Scholar's Corner: Confucianism in and for the Modern World

Does the Heart Revolt at Evil? The Case of Racial Atrocities

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One of the most ancient disputes in Confucian philosophy concerns the relationship between morality and human nature (*xing* 性). Mengzi held that human nature is good (*shan* 善). Xunzi held that human nature is bad (*e* 惡). What exactly Mengzi and Xunzi meant by the mottos *xing shan* and *xing e*, respectively, is a matter of scholarly dispute. However, I think this is near the core: If human nature is good, then some part of us is bound to be revolted by acts of great evil, if we reflect on those acts carefully. This natural revulsion is a universal part of the human condition. It requires no special cultural learning, nor can it ordinarily be eliminated through cultural learning. If human nature is good, as Mengzi holds, people have an innate moral compass. Everyone has the "sprouts" of morality—not full-grown moral goodness, but the beginnings of moral goodness, which moral education can nourish into mature moral excellence.

In contrast, if human nature is bad, as Xunzi holds, we have no such innate compass, no natural aversion to evil. Morality is an artificial construction, a cultural invention. Morality was created by our ancestors to solve a certain set of social problems. We no more have an innate guide to solving those problems than we have an innate guide to the correct manner by which to fire pottery. What's morally good does not correlate with what we naturally desire, and there are no culturally universal moral inclinations to be discovered, independent of what we learn from cultural experience and the teaching of our elders.

One crucial point of disagreement between these approaches—not particularly highlighted by Mengzi or Xunzi, but following from

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their disagreement as I have just characterized it—concerns the ability of people to rise above their cultural circumstances. Consider people raised in the racist U.S. South in the early twentieth century. Consider people raised in anti-Semitic Germany in the mid-twentieth century. If Mengzi is right, then those ordinary people, despite the bigotry of their upbringing, ought nonetheless to have an innate inclination to be revolted by at least the most heartless and terrible acts committed against Blacks and Jews. As Mengzi famously suggests, anyone who suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well would feel alarm and compassion (*Mencius* 2A.6). Even the callous King Xuan, upon seeing the suffering of an ox, was moved to pity that ox (*Mencius* 1A.7). Mengzi urges King Xuan to "measure" (*du* 度) his heart and extend his compassion for the ox to the people suffering under his reign. If a Mengzian perspective is correct, then we might expect that post-Reconstruction racists in the U.S. South and ardent German Nazis under Hitler should likewise be able to measure their hearts and find a compassionate part of themselves revolted by the wrongness of gross racial injustice. On the other hand, if Xunzi is right, we might expect that people surrounded by moral authorities who support extreme forms of cruel bigotry would have no separate, internal, culture-independent urging of their heart that might guide them to a better moral vision.

I am, perhaps, oversimplifying a bit. As is generally the case with great philosophers like Mengzi and Xunzi, there are nuances in their views and resources to accommodate diverse possibilities. Nonetheless, I would suggest that it sits more easily with the Mengzian view to suppose that everyone, regardless of cultural background, would find the cruelest bigoted behavior at least a little morally revolting; and it sits more easily with the Xunzian view to suppose that people raised in a sufficiently bigoted culture might find their consciences entirely untroubled by acts that the rest of the world would see as plainly evil. In this way, we can think of the dispute between Mengzi and Xunzi partly as an empirical dispute. How much variation is there in our moral psychology? Is it always the case that ordinary people are revolted by gross evil—at least a little bit, at least in some corner of their hearts, discoverable with the right kind of reflection or introspection? Or alternatively, when that evil is grounded in, for example, a deep, toxic

bigotry in their culture, will ordinary people participate gladly, with no discoverable qualms and no innate sense of moral right and wrong that might lead them to a better vision?

Consider two specific historical acts that I hope everyone can agree are profoundly evil. On July 16, 1935, a Black man appeared at the doorstep of Marion Jones, a 30-year-old mother of three in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, asking for water. Accounts differ about what happened next. On some accounts, Jones screamed upon seeing the man's face. On other accounts, the man cut Jones with a penknife and she fought him off (in one picture, Jones has a bandaged hand). Either way, the man soon fled. Rumors spread that the man had attempted to rape Jones. Fort Lauderdale citizens were in a "lynching mood" and a manhunt began.

Three days later and 25 miles away, a motorist informed the police that he had seen a Black man—Rubin Stacey, an agricultural laborer—ducking into some bushes. When deputies approached, Stacey attempted to flee. After apprehending him, instead of putting Stacey in a lineup according to standard eyewitness identification procedure, the deputies drove him to Jones' house. Jones claimed Stacey had assaulted her and both she and the deputies were given a $25 identification reward ($475 in today's U.S. dollars). Stacey denied involvement, and nothing was ever reported that connected him with the alleged crime apart from the dubious identification procedure. As Stacey was being driven to jail, a mob seized him and, using Jones' clothesline, hung him from a tree near Jones' home. A gun was passed around and spectators were invited to take shots at Stacey, who might or might not have already been dead from hanging. Many of the shots missed, but 17 shots hit. White newspaper coverage accepted the deputies' claim that they had involuntarily released Stacey to the mob after being run off the road. However, doubts about the story were raised in 1988 when one participant in the lynching revealed that the mob had been led by the sheriff's brother, who was himself a deputy and who later became notorious for killing Black detainees for minor acts of disrespect.

Stacey's corpse hung for hours while thousands of White Floridians came to view it and celebrate. They brought their families, posed for photos with Stacey's corpse, and cut off pieces of his clothing to keep

as souvenirs. One famous photo shows four young White girls in casual summer dresses gazing at the corpse from only a few feet away, with men—presumably their fathers—standing behind them. One of the girls appears to be positively beaming with delight.[1]

Stacey's lynching was typical of the era, which saw dozens or hundreds of lynchings every year. Only about one-third of victims were even accused of capital crimes, and some were accused of no crime at all, but instead were associates of the accused or were "troublemakers" who complained about racial oppression. Rarely was any serious attempt made to accurately identify the accused. In perhaps the majority of cases, the accused was already held by police, thus posing no immediate threat and likely to face a criminal justice system already biased against them. Spectators often arrived from miles around, sometimes renting excursion trains and bringing picnics. As mementos, they collected pieces of the victim's clothes, or even pieces of the victim's body. White men took turns shooting, torturing, or abusing the living victim or the corpse, often bringing women and children with them. Lynch mobs posed politely for photos, which were often printed on postcards that quickly sold for a dollar or so. In 2003, James Allen and colleagues published a collection of these postcards along with historical details, including the photo of Stacey's corpse with the smiling girl.[2] In picture after picture, you can see the proud White faces of the murderers, standing near shot, charred, tortured, whipped, skinned, and/or castrated corpses, apparently happy to have their deeds memorialized, printed, and shared via postcard around the country, with handwritten comments on the back like "this is the barbeque we had last night."

In July 1942, the German men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were ordered to kill about 1,500 Jews in the small village of Józefów, Poland. Men capable of work were to be trucked off to slave camps, but all of the women, children, elderly, and disabled were to be killed—on the spot, if they could not walk, or after a brief march side by side with

1 For accounts of Stacey's lynching, see Fort Lauderdale Daily News and Evening Sentinel (1935), New York Times (1935), Reading Eagle (1935), Brooks (1988), Allen et al. (2003; plate 57 and page 185), Florida Lynchings Files (2014), and Bryan (2020).

2 For general overviews of the history of lynching, see Dray (2002), Allen et al. (2003), and Wood (2009), and for the personal recollections of a survivor, see Cameron ([1982] 1994).

their killer into the forest, if they were capable of walking. This reserve police battalion might have seemed an inauspicious group for such a murderous task: They were draftees into a reserve force, not volunteers. They had no special training or dedication to the cause. Only a minority belonged to the Nazi party. They had families and careers at home, from which the draft had plucked them. Nor were they impressionable youngsters: Their average age was over 36 years old. These men were essentially a sample of ordinary men from around Hamburg, *excluding* the most dedicated Nazis and military men, who would have volunteered rather than have been drafted.

These men were given little ideological training and little preparation for their task. They were simply driven to the village and told what to do. The commander of the battalion called the men together to announce their mission, saying that it was not especially to his liking *and that men who wished not to be involved could choose other duties instead.* Of the approximately 500 men, a dozen or so did in fact choose to refrain from the genocide, and they were in no way punished. The remaining men proceeded, apparently voluntarily, to shoot the elderly in their beds and to grab babies from the arms of their presumably screaming mothers, shooting those babies on the spot. Most of the victims walked side by side with their killers, one at a time, into the forest. The men then demanded that the victims lay down, or they forced them down, and shot them in the back of the head. When the victim was dead, they returned to the village to repeat the act. Ordinary men—electricians, merchants, desk-workers, and drivers from Hamburg—were politely asked to kill a village full of Jews, and 98% did so, with no serious protest.

Over the next several months, these men killed repeatedly, occasionally exterminating whole villages, more frequently hunting small groups of Jews in hiding, as well as doing regular policing of the occupied region. They made Jewish men dig their own graves, then lie down in those graves to be shot, then they had the next set of men lie atop the corpses of the previous set. They demanded that Jews squat for hours in the sun, not permitted to sit or to stand, shooting those who broke these arbitrary rules. They mocked the Jews' beards and religious clothing as they marched them through the streets to their deaths.

Sometimes, as with the lynchers, they took proud and happy photos of their exploits, which they then shared afterward and displayed in common rooms.

Of the 500 men, only one man consistently refused to kill. This man, a lieutenant named Buchmann, far from being punished for his refusal, was transferred back to Hamburg and promoted. The men had opportunities to transfer, if they found their genocidal task too unpleasant. For example, at one point there was a call for volunteers to transfer to a communications unit elsewhere in Poland—not difficult work, and not near the front lines. Only 2 of the 500 men apparently applied. Some of the men found the genocidal activities gruesome, while others seemed to relish the killing, but overall the men seemed to enjoy their mostly easy duty in the beautiful countryside of Poland, where they bonded with their comrades.[3]

I love Mengzi. I want Mengzi to be right, and I believe that he is right. But cases like these trouble me.

Mengzi of course knew evil. He lived in a violent time, the Period of the Warring States, and he advised violent kings. In *Mencius* 1B.11, we learn that King Xuan—the king who pitied the ox—invaded the neighboring state of Yan. The people of Yan welcomed King Xuan's troops with baskets of food, thinking that Xuan would be a better ruler than their previous king. King Xuan returned this kindness by killing the old, binding the young, and destroying the ancestral temples. After this episode, Mengzi left King Xuan's court.

If Mengzi is right, or if my interpretation of him is right, then had King Xuan reflected on the natural inclinations of his heart as they manifested in his pity for the ox, he would have seen the wrong of killing the old people of Yan who welcomed his troops, and he would have felt a moral impulse not to have them killed—an impulse he could have listened to, and which it would have pleased his heart to follow. If King Xuan saw an old man of Yan about to be killed after having offered food to his troops, or if he learned news of such a case, and if he really stopped to reflect on the matter, "measuring his heart," he would have

[3] For in-depth portrayals of the activities of Police Battalion 101, see Browning (1992) and Goldhagen (1996).

been revolted. He would have known it was wrong to kill the man.

We cannot of course know much about King Xuan's heart at this historical distance. But unfortunately, the lynchers of Rubin Stacey and the men of Police Battalion 101 did not seem to be troubled by their atrocious deeds.

Is it simply that they did not reflect? That seems hard to imagine. The lynchers potentially had hours to reflect on their way to the lynching celebrations, and they knew that the Northern U.S. press condemned lynching on moral grounds. The men in Police Battalion 101 had months to reflect, including during furloughs back home. For many of these men, this was probably the first time in their lives that they killed a human being. For all but the shallowest and callous among them, it is hard to imagine that would not be an occasion for moral reflection. A man rips a baby from a woman's arms and kills it in front of her. That night, won't he think about the deed? Won't he worry that maybe it was a wrong and terrible thing to do? Did the perpetrators reflect, then, but always only badly, rationalizing their evil actions rather than properly weighing their hearts? Was the prompting of the heart there, but always drowned out by noise?

Xunzi has an easier time with these cases than Mengzi. On a Xunzian view, the lynchers and the men of Police Battalion 101 might be entirely untroubled. Maybe they would feel some visceral bodily disgust at the gore, like the disgust of a medical student first witnessing a surgery, but we ought not expect them to feel moral disgust. With no innate moral compass and only cultural learning of morality, people from such toxically bigoted cultures as the U.S. South in the 1930s and Germany in the 1940s should on a Xunzian view be expected to conform to the morality of their local culture, a morality that says that Blacks should be lynched if suspected of crimes and Jews are the poison virus destroying Germany. Ordinary non-sages have no reliable resource by which to learn otherwise, at least not unless they have the opportunity to seriously engage with liberal, humanitarian values or philosophical ethics from a radically different point of view.

I want to travel back in time. I want to sit down, not with the worst lyncher—not with the murderous, mob-leading deputy—but with just an ordinary member of the mob. I want to find a quiet space with one of

the middling men of Police Battalion 101, and I want to think through the case with them. Does Rubin Stacey really deserve to die, right now, in this way, with no trial and no assurance of guilt, based on a rumor, for an act which is not even a capital offense? Do you really want to hang him from a tree with a clothesline and pass around a gun taking shots at him? This ten-year-old Jewish girl that you're walking beside in the forest, who cannot have done anything wrong—do you really feel okay shooting her in the back of the head? Is there really no part of you that knows this is wrong and screams against it?

When I imagine sitting with the perpetrators like this, I find myself pulled toward the Mengzian view. I cannot help but feel that most ordinary people, if they paused in this way to think through the situation and measure their hearts, would see past the horrible bigotry of their culture, feel the pull of sympathy and humanity, and be morally revolted by such deeds. I imagine, and I hope, and I believe, that they could find their moral compass. But I confess that this opinion is more a matter of faith than a conclusion rationally compelled by the historical evidence.

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