Pleasure in Mencius 1

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Abstract. Book 1 of the Mencius features a series of dialogues addressing the ruler's attitude towards enjoyment or pleasure (lì 樂). These include 1A2, 1B1, 1B3, and 1B4. Exactly what claims are made about lì here, and what place does lì have in the larger Mencian vision? Additionally, what insight do the passages on lì provide regarding the suggestion that the Mencius reflects two Mencian schools?

I here suggest that pleasure plays a dual role in Mencian thought: it is an element in self-cultivation and also in good governance. As with other arguments in the text, the passages on lì reveal a feature of human nature which is crucial to proper kingly authority. Claims about the capacity to experience pleasure are thus analogous to Mencian claims about benevolence and being unable to endure the suffering of others.[1]

Data Set. Terms related to pleasure or delight appear throughout the text. Ywè 悅 appears 53 times in 30 passages; syǐ 喜 13 times in 8 passages; hàu 好 57 times in 25 passages. Similar terms include hwān 歡 (in 1A2) and syīn 欣 used adjectivally in B1 and 7A35 to indicate a happy or joyous outpouring or something done with pleasure). The character 樂 appears 91 times in the text; eliminating "music" (17 times), the proper name Ywèjìng 樂正 (9 times), and the idiom 樂歲 (3 times), the count for "be happy" or "take pleasure in" is 62 times, the same level of frequency as the major terms syén 賢 (74), lǐ 禮 (68), and mìng 命 (54). This suggests that pleasure and delight are important features of Mencian thought. I here focus on the discussions of pleasure in Book 1, where several substantial claims about pleasure are found.

1A2 and a Puzzle. The first passage to discuss delight is 1A2. Here, King Hwèi of Lyáng meets Mencius in the royal park or enclosure, replete with ponds and animals, and asks whether the virtuous also take delight in such things. The answer is that only the virtuous can take delight in them. This is confusing since, on the received view, King Hwèi is not virtuous and yet is apparently taking pleasure in these things. This seems to suggest either that the King is in fact virtuous, or there are at least two kinds of pleasure, that of the virtuous and some lesser kind enjoyed by King Hwèi.

Two points about the role of pleasure in Book 1 help to resolve this confusion. The first is that a susceptibility to pleasure is consistent with virtuous rulership.

[1]The approach to pleasure outlined here differs from that taken by Michael Nylan (**Politics** and **Mencius on Pleasure**), who frames pleasure as naturalistic desire and its fulfillment. But desire is treated ambiguously in the text, where desires for food and sex conflict with ethical promptings, such as the instinct to bury a dead parent. The metaphysical claim that delight is enhanced when mutually experienced, and the implications of this for political authority, merit their own discussion.

Consider the preceding passage, 1A1, which begins the task of detailing which motivations and sensibilities distinguish the Mencian ruler. Here, Mencius explains to King Hwèı two appropriate sources of motivation: compassion or benevolence (rv́n 仁) and a sense of duty or appropriateness regarding social order (yì 義). In contrast, the profit motive (lì 利) is rejected. 1A2 builds on this first lesson. Unlike profit, pleasure is not a corrupting source of motivation, but one integral to the Ruist way, like rv́n and yì. The capacity to enjoy it appropriately is the mark of a worthy ruler.

In Book 1, Mencius repeatedly reassures rulers of this. In various interviews, rulers confess to finding pleasure in certain pursuits, and assume that this prevents them from being the kind of virtuous ruler that Mencius promotes. In 1A2, the King asks about enjoyment of parks. In other interviews, rulers confess to being fond of war (好戰, 1A3), music (好樂, 1B1), hunting (好 田獵, 1B1), or military valor (好勇, 1B3). Mencius does not condemn such pleasures. On the contrary, he points out that the ancient sage kings were also fond of them. In 1B3, for example, we learn that King Wv́n's fondness for valor enabled him to bring peace to the people (此文王之勇也。文王一怒而安天下之民). Pleasure does not corrupt a virtuous ruler; rather, it is integral to being one. Pleasure and the experience of it is a part of the Mencian vision of the jywn̄dž 君子 or cultivated person, a value to be placed alongside rv́n and yì.

The second point about the discussion of pleasure, and the apparent tension in 1A2, is that Mencius' view of pleasure forms part of the discourse on syìng 性. Certain incipient and undeveloped sensitivities and dispositions are present in all, and can develop so as to exert a positive influence on action. A response to pleasure is one such sensibility. Being alive to pleasure is thus not only part of being a good ruler, it is part of human nature, something within that is already present in some sense.

This view of pleasure is part of a familiar theme in Book 1 – the ruler who is not yet sensitive to important elements of the world around, but can easily become so. In 1A7, King Sywān of Chí is implicitly compassionate and unable to bear the suffering of others, but has not yet fully developed this sensibility. What unites these passages is that humans are inevitably constituted so as to be drawn toward, or repelled by, certain things. As with being uncomfortable in the presence of suffering, humans are also invariably drawn to pleasure. Good governance must recognize this fact.

Pleasure is a wellspring of human action, alongside other Mencian motivations such as sympathy 仁, shame 恥, or reverence 敬. However, in its crudest forms, it does not guarantee virtuous rulership. Such motivational dispositions must be cultivated so that they can exert the appropriate influence on conduct. The first step to resolving the tension in 1A2 is to note that the King is virtuous in the sense that he has the seeds of virtue within him. Pleasure is not, however, treated as an unequivocal good. The Mencius contains several examples of when not to follow the dictates of pleasure, or what kinds of pleasure are inimical to good governance. 1B4 warns against the insatiable pursuit of animals (從獸無厭) and unrestrained drinking (樂酒無厭) – presumably two activities to which kings were usually drawn. Beyond Book 1, several other passages warn of pleasure's pitfalls. The ruler is not to abandon himself to pleasure (般樂, 2A4) and rulers must not delight in what is inhumane (不仁, 4A3). There is a suggestion that rulers must learn to delight in the right things (4A8).

Some pleasures are, however, integral to rulership. Shùn, for example, took pleasure in learning from others to be good (樂取於人以爲善, 2A8); in general, the king should delight in the Way (樂道, 2B2). But the discourse in Book 1 is more nuanced than a simple listing of worthy and unworthy pleasures. It forms the basis for political strategy and also for claims relevant to sagely government.

Key Claims About 樂 in Book 1

As the kings express delight for different objects in Book 1 – parks (1A2, 1B2), fine buildings (1B4), and music (1B1) – so Mencius offers a corresponding lesson on pleasure. Returning to 1A2, the simplest claim made on behalf of pleasure is the admonition to share resources with the common people, allowing them to delight in the goods as does the king, such as the royal park. Sage king Wə́n is offered as an example of such sharing: 謂其臺曰靈臺，謂其沼曰靈沼，樂其有麋鹿魚 (see also 1B2). It is possible that the meaning of 靈 here as "spiritual" or "nominal" is grounded in the experience of delight. Regardless, the political message of 1A2 is clear: rulers who do not share wealth will not be secure. This is an exercise in political governance grounded in enlightened self-interest.

But the discussion of pleasure goes further, and included explanation of awareness of pleasure as important, and a method for realizing it. Aside from merely giving the people something pleasant to enjoy (parks, ponds, and buildings), 1A2 suggests another way in which pleasure is instrumental to political order: allowing people access to state monuments increases their identification with the state, especially since they were employed to build them (文王以民爲臺爲沼，而民歡樂之). People take pride and pleasure in monuments that contribute to the state's prestige, further strengthening the ruler's position. A further directive about the practical importance of pleasure is found in 1B4. The King is to take pleasure in the pleasures of the common people, because doing so will cause the common people to respond to him; they, in turn, will delight in his pleasures (樂民之樂者，民亦樂其樂). Understanding this effect of being alive to the pleasures of commoners will ensure a successful reign (然而不王者，未之有也).

There is one final claim about pleasure in Book 1, a metaphysical one that links the personal with the political. It is stated most clearly in 1B1: pleasure is the sort of thing that is enhanced when shared, and enhanced further when shared widely. This is confirmed when King Hwán of Chí agrees that music is more pleasurable enjoyed in company than alone, most of all when shared with many (曰，獨樂樂，與人樂樂，孰樂？曰，不若與人。曰，與少樂樂，與多樂樂，孰樂？ 曰，不若與衆). Recognising this intersubjective or shared dimension of 樂 further clarifies the tension noted above in 1A2, regarding how the King could enjoy pleasure while not being virtuous (不賢者。。。不樂也). King Hwèı could enjoy a degree of pleasure privately, but not in the same way as if he were virtuous: a person or king fully enjoys something only when that delight is shared with others. This suggests that part of the meaning of rə́n 仁 includes this enhanced understanding of and sensitivity to pleasure. Pleasure thus figures in the conduct of the virtuous Mencian figure in the same way as the more widely discussed qualifies of empathy and an inability to bear the sufferings of others (不忍人之心, 2A6).

Pleasure and the Question of Two Mencian Schools

It has been suggested[2] that the later books of the Mencius can be divided into two schools: a southern school, emphasizing economically-tinged statecraft (Books 2-3), and a northern school, which emphasizes a more personal and meditative philosophy (Books 4-7). What light do the discussions of pleasure shed on this suggestion?

The short answer is that they are consistent with the hypothesis without providing conclusive evidence. They contain important elements both of successful statecraft and of a more personal and private concern with well-being. It is possible that later schools would have developed these embryonic ideas about pleasure according to their own philosophical commitments. A school that developed an inward account of cultivation would treat pleasure as a problem of character, where the correct attitude towards pleasure is to be cultivated for the sake of personal flourishing; a school focusing in statecraft would approach the question of pleasure – how to direct its motivating power and its hold over human action – as a political or social policy question.

Much of the Book 1 discussion of pleasure is consistent with a focus on statecraft, albeit with only indirect relevance to economic questions. As shown above, thinking about society in terms of pleasure is instrumental in creating social order and securing the ruler. Later books continue this theme; Book 2, for example, contains advice to rulers about the correct stance to take towards pleasure (2A4, 2A8, 2B2).

The accounts of pleasure in Book 1 can be seen as having internal ramifications. The claim that pleasure is enhanced when shared has implications for a philosophy of personal well-being. Pleasure could be the fruit of a life of self-sufficient virtue, unaffected by political questions. Perhaps the most striking evidence for this is the self-sufficient joy found in poverty by Yén Hwéı (4B29, referring to Analects 6:11). Here, pleasure is valued as an existential state, not for its role in sustaining social order. This interest in joyful self-sufficiency complements Mencius' declaration that "the ten thousand things are complete in me" (萬物皆備於我矣), which is immediately followed by the assertion of the delight that arises from finding onself to be chźng 誠 or perfectly integrated into the world (反身而誠，樂莫大焉, 7A4).

In Book 4, delight is often identified with the family, to the possible exclusion of the state. 樂 is the fruit that marks good relations between children and parents, and between brothers (4A27). 4A28 and 4B7 also identify delight with good familial relationships. Perhaps the most striking evidence for an emphasis on inward quality in the Northern School is in 7A20. Here the focus on 樂 is retained, but its sources are apolitical: the cultivated person has three sources of delight, but being a ruler is not one of them (君子有三樂，而王天下不與存焉). Instead, the three delights are personal: one's father and mother are alive, one has no cause for shame before others, and talented people are available to serve as one's pupils. It should be recognized, however, that various anomalies make any simple bifurcation problematic and require further study. For example, Book 4 contains various warnings addressed to political authorities on the uses and misuses of pleasure (4A2, 4A3, 4A8).

[2]See Brooks **Nature** 252-263.

Conclusion. My aim has been to explore the passages in Book 1 that deal with pleasure as a philosophic topic. I have tried to show that pleasure is implicated both in the Mencian account of self-cultivation and the fully developed virtuous person, and also in an account of good governance. This should not surprise us, given the frequent linkages in the Mencius between the development of character and effective rulership, and pleasure is one further way in which this linkage is made. The role of pleasure in this account seems to have been largely neglected in English-language scholarship. Hopefully what is sketched here can provide a blueprint for a more in-depth treatment.

Discussion

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Taeko Brooks. Is pleasure recommended as a good by any passage in Mencius, whether northern or southern? My suspicion is that the socially unproductive pleasures of the ruling elite (fighting, hunting, music) are tolerated in MC 1 only as a cultural given on which to hang an argument for otherness: concern for the larger social fabric; for what rén 仁 meant to the 05c Confucians. Even the praise of Yén Hwéı in LY 6:11 (c0460) has a social context: it is Yén Hwéı, above all others, whom Confucius would recommend for an official position (LY 6:3, in the same chapter, also c0460).

It seems to me that Chinese philosophy in general is less individual than Greek, where eudaimonia, personal well-being, is among the qualities of a life rightly lived. I feel that Mencius deals more with what social good the individual (and the state, in the person of the ruler) can accomplish. That good is expressed as good for the people; not as pleasure, but as the ability to stay alive and fulfil duties to parents and brothers. In 4A27, fulfilling these duties is the fruit (實), or the social outcome, of a society which is characterized by the cardinal Mencian qualities rén 仁 and yì 義.

By Mencius 7 (or as we see it, by the second disciple generation), the northern and southern Mencians both show discouragement, and the northern Mencians do turn inward to a more personal kind of fulfilment; it is now the gentleman, not the ruler, who transforms the world (7A13, 7A25). But even in these passages, it seems to me that a gentleman's delight is not in self, but as in 7A20, in *a situation outside the self:* nourishing the most talented to serve in government, and thus in the end helping to establish a morally responsible world, if only in the future. The action is individual, but the goal is still ultimately social; in 7B24, recognizing talent is the Way of Heaven. A moral society, not individual pleasure, is what the Mencian virtues have in view.

Andrew Lambert. I would agree that "Chinese philosophy in general is less individual than Greek," and argue that claims made about delight in the Mencius fit within a more social conception of the person and good action. In fact, I would argue that a concern for "otherness" is expressed in the discussion of delight, as a concern to find delight in the right king of things (those pertaining to the subjects of the state).

While lacking explicit concern with human flourishing à la Aristotle, the Mencius does arguably convey a concern with certain aspects of character, or the development of certain sensibilities. After all, this is the message of 1A7 – the King can come to experience a sympathetic identification with his subjects, more easily than he supposes and despite not initially feeling anything.

Similarly, I think a subtly transformed sensitivity to delight is a goal of these dialogues, and this has important social and political implications, rather than functioning as a component of individual flourishing. Perhaps here we should distinguish between pleasure as a private sensation, with no obvious ground in social experience (the physiologically-based 'high' of drug taking being a prime example), and delight which is the product of the right kind of encounter with social situations. The Mencius, I suggest, is saying something only about the latter, and it is one of the foundations for good rulership.

And I would argue that 4A27 in fact reinforces the idea that the experience of delight is a marker of success in Mencian practical philosophy. Here, appropriate relations between father and son, and older and younger brothers, are the practical embodiments of the ideals of rvn and yì; but what marks the successful realization of these Confucian values is a joyful experience – the kind that spreads throughout the four limbs and results in a spontaneous dance. Again, we see delight and joy having a place in the Mencian ethical and social vision.

Finally, I would also venture to offer a different interpretation of LY 6:11. Yén Hwéı is an examplar, and what distinguishes his exemplary state is that hardship cannot undermine his joyful disposition (不改其樂). Whether this makes him fit to serve in office is hard to say, but again we see delight and good character connected.

Taeko Brooks. To me, what characterizes Yén Hwéı in LY 6:11 is not that he is in a state of joy, but that, despite hardship, he is constant *in taking joy in something*. If we accept LY 6:7 as relevant, we know what that was: 蓌心三月不違仁, he was continually focused on otherness. I do not find that pleasure as such is recommended in these texts; they focus on what a person *takes pleasure in*. Is it right to foreground the pleasure term in these statements, and ignore the object of the pleasure-taking?

There is undeniably a pleasure-positive strand in classical thinking. Shī 115B:

> Mountain medlars high,
> Marshland yew-trees nigh;
> Courts you have, and chambers wide,
> But them you sprinkle not, nor dry;
> Bells beside, and drums so grand,
> But them you neither strike nor ply.
> Soon enough you will be dead,
> And other men will keep them by.

Enjoy life while you can: that is the message. But is it also the message of MC 1B1, and the disciple piece *1A7? Or are those pieces attempting to sensitize the King to the existence of other people, who have claims on his attention? The military texts assert that a ruler is strong only when the people are willing to die for him in battle, when they "know that the sovereign feels sympathy for their fate, and sorrows at their death . . . then officers will regard dying in battle as glorious, and retreating to save their lives as disgraceful" (Wúdž 1:2). So also MC 1A5: "If the King gives the people a benevolent government (仁政), being sparing of punishments and fines and frugal in imposing taxes and levies . . . With nothing but sharpened sticks, one can use them to oppose the strong armor and sharp weapons of Chín and Chŭ." Is not this kind of reciprocal awareness the end which Mencian social policy is working to achieve?

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