

Inhuman Nature in Mencius

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WSWG Query 83 (19 Mar 1997)

Introduction. I here discuss the use of animal imagery in Mencius, reordered as in Bruce and Taeko's theory (in which MC 1-3 and 4-7 represent parallel southern and northern schools). I show that a negative attitude towards animals develops in both schools, but that they differ in their use of animal imagery. Neither pattern is suggested by the traditional arrangement of the text. This tends to support Bruce and Taeko's theory, despite a problem noted below.

The Development of a Negative Attitude

Mencius's Interviews. Mencius's own attitude toward animals, as revealed in the authentic interviews (WSWG Note 51), appears to have been practical: they are food (1A3a), things to ride (1B1), and valuable objects (1B15).

Original Disciple Conversations. 2A2b compares the sage among people to the unicorn among animals and the phoenix among birds; the animal evidence speaks against attributing this rather positive image to the later southern school. 2A6b denies that people lacking one or another of the four seeds are human.

The Separate Southern School. There are four phases. (1) The statecraft sayings do not mention animals. (2) 2B4 gives one of the Mencius's few positive images of animals: a shepherd's flock as an analogue of the people. (3) Animals become somewhat ambivalent. As objects of enjoyment (1A2, 1B2, 1B4) they are now an ethical problem. 1A4 has the "leading animals to eat people" motif. In 1A7, the King's concern for an ox shows he has the heart of a king; however, he mistakenly applies the heart to animals rather than to his people (the text switches from talk of an ox and a lamb to talk of birds and beasts at precisely the point when the King's concern for the animals becomes problematic). See also 1A3b, 1B5. (4) The first mentions of wild animals, as invading the empire (3B9) and eating your parents (3A5). 3B9 also equates the immoral with animals. 3A4, though less intense, prefigures 3B9. 3B10 describes a man (he might as well be an earthworm) with serious eating problems. See also 3A2 and 3B1, 3, 5, 7, 8.

The Northern School. (1) 4A9 gives animals fleeing to the wilds as an image of people's movement from bad to good rulers. (2) In 5A7 and 5A9 animals figure in disreputable exchanges, though in neither case are the animals the problem. (3) The 6A core has three arguments motivated by the human/animal difference: 6A3, 4, 7 (only the first has any real emotional charge). (4) Bad people are called animals in 4A17 (jackals and wolves) and 6A8. Animals are distractions from good in 6A8-9, though the images are relatively benign (grazing animals and a swan). 5B6 has a ruler treating Dž-sž like "hounds and horses." See also 5B4-6 and 6A10-11.

(5) 4B3, 19, 28 have comments that turn on the human/animal difference; the tone is more hostile than in the previous two sections. Shùn's flock of oxen and sheep figure in 5A1-2; 5A2 also has a fish that is neither where it ought to be nor where it's claimed to be. (6) There is no hostility in this stratum or the next. 6B6-7 have protocol violations; 6B2 gives chickens as an example of something easy to lift (1A7 had feathers). (7) 6B15 remarks that Jyāu Gv̄ rose from amidst the fish and salt. (8) 7A37 condemns treating people like pigs (rebutted in JZ 7:5); 7B23 says fighting tigers is beneath the gentleman (compare LY *7:11). 7B26 warns against chasing followers of Yáng and Mwò as if they were strayed pigs. See also 7A16, 22, 36 and 7B14, 22.

The Two Schools

Many of the more stressed uses of animal imagery present animals as a sort of ethical problem. The way the problem is posed differs between the two schools. I will demonstrate this by discussing three major animal themes.

The Human/Animal Difference. The arguments of 6A3, 7 explicitly turn on such a distinction; other northern passages condemn violations of the distinction. Northern writers complained about treating people as animals (5B6, 4B3, 7A37), and compared bad people to animals (4A17, 6A8, 4B19, 4B28). Animals figure in these passages as immoral and unworthy of moral concern.

There is only one southern comparison of bad people to animals (3B9), though *2A6b calls them "not human." 3A4 compares the uneducated to animals, in possible tension with northern moral psychology. (In northern texts one becomes an animal through losing what is distinctively human; here, apparently the people start out as animals and become human through state-sponsored education. The difference may be due to date, with the later 3A4 showing a Syw̄ndzian influence). 1A7 is the closest southern writers come to the "treating as animals" complaint. 1A3b complains about dogs and pigs eating human food.

Attack. In the southern texts, animals are most clearly on the attack in the invasion story (3A4 and 3B9), though there are other violent images involving eating: bad government "leads animals to eat people" (*1A4, 3B9; see also JZ 23:1a, 24:12), and the nasty sight of foxes and flies feeding on the dead lies at the origin of funerals (3A5). In each of these cases (also in 1A3b) animals arrive and eat when morality is absent (see also 3B10 on the problems of eating animals).

The only violent animal in the northern texts is the tiger of 7B23, which is not negatively evaluated. The only eating animals, in 6A8, are part of an involved elaboration of the status of those moral inclinations that differentiate people from animals. The animals serve as an analogue for those circumstances that lead one to lose one's good heart/mind and to become, as the passage says, not far from the birds and beasts (amusingly, the grazed hill is called "Ox Mountain").

Enjoyment. The southern writers were concerned with enjoyment and the excesses to which it could lead. They frequently included animals among the objects of this problematic enjoyment (1A2, 1B1, 1B2, 1B4, 3A2, 3B1; note also the parks of 3B9; 1B5 has enjoyment but not animals). Here animals, especially in parks and on the hunt, function as lures away from morality.

I have found only two relevant northern passages. 7B34 is parallel, denouncing excesses of enjoyment, including hunting (northern mentions of enjoyment more typically celebrate the enjoyment of morality or *dâu*). 6A9 has a student distracted by a swan; this random encounter is significantly different from the indulgence in planned activities of the southern texts, however.

Problem. The northern school appears to develop a negative attitude towards animals in parallel with the southern school; however, there is little sign of this attitude in MC 6B and 7, presumably their latest texts. I am unable to offer an explanation of this change of heart in terms of Taeko and Bruce's theory.

Discussion

(WSW, 21-27 Sept 1998)

Taeko Brooks: It seems to me that it is possible to see northern treatment of animals as non-negative from the beginning, and thus as consistent. Several passages (the clearest is 4B19) assert that humans have something that animals lack, and that this difference is important, but that assertion does not make animals bad, it just makes them inferior: less high on the chain of being. The same applies to 4B3, where the animal image shows the ruler's disrespect for his ministers, but does not make the animals themselves a threat. This is not to say that there is no progression in the northern chapters, but I would see that progression in a different place than Dan does. I note that the nurture images of MC 6 are part of a general interest in similar themes in MC 6-7, and of a closer identification in those chapters with "nature" in general. One way this shows up is in the fondness of these chapters for plant imagery, most of which is also benign . . .

Dan Robins: Taeko points out several negative uses of animal imagery in northern texts, and does not clearly dispute my readings of the passages on which I rested my argument. So I continue to think that northern Mencians developed a negative attitude, and gave it up suddenly. That said, I find that Taeko not only adds nuance to the discussion, but provides a way of explaining the disappearance of negative animal imagery. First, she states more clearly than I did one of the key differences between the two schools in their use of these images: "I would say that the image of animals as symbolizing the breakdown of society (compared to the loss of individual human qualities) is exclusively a southern school idea." The key word may be "loss." When northern texts say someone is in some sense an animal, they mean that the person has lost that which is distinctively human. The implication is that being bad is a matter of losing something. We are originally good, but we lose our heart (or whatever).

Now, the claim that badness results from loss is inconsistent with any view that attributes a positive role to nurture. If the northern Mencians arrived at such a view, it would no longer have made sense to draw the inferences implied by their earlier use of animal imagery. That is, they would no longer have gone from "X is bad" to "X has lost what is distinctively human," and then to "X is (no better than) an animal." A shift in Mencian moral psychology could explain the shift in animal imagery. And Taeko suggests such a shift: "We might say that, in the plant images, the latest chapters focus more on the perils of lack of nurture than on the naturalness of nurture itself."

The word “focus” is deceptive, I think. The reason why many of the texts in 6A do not focus on the lack of nurture is that they presuppose that nurture is not necessary: people are always already good. Coming to discuss the perils of the lack of nurture requires a substantive shift in moral psychology – just the sort of shift that might explain the disappearance of negative animal mentions. Thus, as one might expect, the northern school’s views of human nature are intimately connected with their views of inhuman nature.

Taeko: Dan and I generally agree that there is a systematic difference between the northern and southern schools in their use of animal imagery. I might further test this conclusion by looking at a wider range of animate images, to see if the differences remain (an asterisk in these citations means an interpolated passage).

Mencius himself calls the ruler a shepherd of men (1A6, an image also found in Gwǎndź 1), and mentions hunting as a royal pastime (1B1) and gifts of [hunting] dogs and [chariot] horses. These domesticated animals are positive. In later layers, sheep and oxen are often associated with ancient figures (5A9, 5B1, 5B5 northern; 3B5 southern); again positive. Hunting represents aristocratic pleasure (*1A2, *1B2, 3B11 southern); the *hunting* often has negative social overtones (*1B2, *1B4b, 3A2, 3B9 southern; 7B34 northern), but this does not derive from the *animals* that are hunted. I find it notable that the convergence of the two schools in this category occurs only at the end, in MC 3 and 7 (noninterpolated 3A2, 3B9, 7B34).

For the people, the context is agriculture, not hunting. The ruler is asked not to interfere with the planting seasons (1A5), and to protect the people’s food sources, including animal food sources (1A3a). Edible animals are positive. The motif of danger to livelihood is developed in both schools, but only the southern school uses violent imagery (“leading beasts to devour men,” *1A4). The “economic” passages are mostly southern (eg 3A3-4), with wild animals invoked to characterize periods of disorder (3B7). Violent animal imagery is lacking in the north. The southern chapters also take a negative view of *human* opposition, and sometimes use animal metaphors to denigrate it (the “shrike-tongued barbarian of the south,” 3A4).

In general, the southern chapters seem to consider human society somewhat in the Sywǎndźian manner, as an artificial construct achieved only by walling out hostile nature (or else wild animals will devour the unburied dead, as in 3A5), whereas the northern chapters see a greater continuity of man with both plant and animal nature, and with nature as such (as in the beautiful restorative-night image of 6A8). I would relate this to the northern school’s greater emphasis on human nature, and on the identity with other beings, and with other realms, that is attainable by meditation.

I would say that on the whole, especially at the end, the southern Mencians lived more precariously than their northern colleagues, in a world which they saw as constantly threatened, rather than ultimately supported, by the rest of the natural order. As is also the tendency with Sywǎndź, the social world for them is something that is achieved and maintained by an effort of continual differentiation, not something given.

Is it relevant that the “human nature” dispute between Sywǎndź and the Mencian school involves only the *northern* Mencians?