

Wang Chong's Critique of Mencius's Theory of Human Nature

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Abstract: Building upon Sima Qian's work, Ban Gu directly identified Mencius as a disciple of Zisi and established the Mencius as comprising eleven chapters. Ban Gu explicitly opposed Sima Qian's evaluation of Mencius as "impractical and remote from reality," arguing instead that Mencius possessed a longer-term perspective than his contemporaries. He also elaborated on Mencius's doctrine that sovereign power is "conferred by Heaven" and selectively handled historical materials and passages from the Mencius.

Keywords: Book of Han, Mencius's thought, Reception.

1. Introduction

In the *Lunheng* (论衡, *Balanced Discourses*), the concept of "Human Nature" (性, *Xing*) discussed by Wang Chong primarily encompasses two meanings: the materiality of life and moral attributes. The former is illustrated in statements like "Life and death have no image in Heaven; they depend on human nature" [1] (p.46), while the latter is seen in assertions such as "Discourse on human nature must acknowledge that there is both good and evil" [1] (p.68). The "human nature" analyzed here refers primarily to the latter. In the chapter "Ben Xing" (本性, Original Nature), Wang Chong systematically expounds his views on human nature, traces the history of theories concerning it, and critiques the theories of *Shi Shuo* (世硕), *Mencius* (孟子), *Gaozi* (告子), *Xunzi* (荀子), *Lu Jia* (陆贾), *Dong Zhongshu* (董仲舒), *Liu Xiang* (刘向), and others, before finally presenting his own perspective. The following analysis focuses specifically on his critique of Mencius's theory of human nature.

2. Direct Criticism of Mencius' Theory of Innate Goodness

Wang Chong criticizes Mencius's doctrine that "human nature is inherently good; when it becomes not good, it is because things have disordered it" [1] (p.133) (*Lunheng jiaoshi*• *Ben xing*; all quotations in this section are from this chapter). First, he argues that "human nature is inherently good" does not accord with reality, providing two pieces of evidence: 1) "When King Zhou (紂) was a child, Viscount Wei (微子) witnessed his evil nature. His evil nature did not exceed that of the common people, yet he grew up to become a tyrant without changing." That is, when Zhou was a child, Viscount Wei perceived his innate wickedness. 2) "When Yangshe Shiwo (羊舌食我) was first born, Shuji (叔姬) observed him. Upon reaching the hall and hearing his cry, she turned back, saying, 'That cry is the cry of a jackal or wolf. He has a wild heart and no affection. If not he, who will destroy the Yangshe clan?'" Thus, immediately upon Shiwo's birth, Shuji knew he was evil and that he would bring destruction to the clan, which was later confirmed. Therefore, Wang Chong asks: "Zhou's evil was present when he was a child; Shiwo's disorder was seen in his birth cry. At the beginning of life, the child has not yet interacted with things. Who caused his perversity?" This shows that humans can possess evil from

birth. Secondly, Wang Chong also disagrees with the view that "when [nature] becomes not good, it is because things have disordered it." He cites the examples of Yao's (尧) son Danzhu (丹朱) and Shun's (舜) son Shangjun (商均), arguing that the people's virtue was pure and thick at that time, the common people "were certainly mostly good," and the people surrounding the two emperors "were certainly mostly worthy." "However, Danzhu was arrogant, Shangjun was cruel, and both lost the imperial succession, serving as warnings for generations." If human nature were inherently good, then Danzhu and Shangjun, constantly in an excellent environment, should have become good, but the facts were otherwise. This demonstrates that human nature originally possesses evil. Thirdly, Wang Chong opposes Mencius's statement that "by observing a person's pupils, [one can know his character]: if the heart is clear, the pupils are bright; if the heart is turbid, the pupils are dull" (*Mencius* • *Li Lou I*). He believes that the brightness or turbidity of the pupils results from "being endowed by Heaven with different *qi* (气)," and is not a matter of being bright in childhood and becoming turbid later due to external influences. Based on these three points, Wang Chong concludes: "Nature is originally spontaneous; good and evil have their substance. Mencius's words on [human] nature and feeling are not factual." Wang Chong's critique is grounded in historical events. While it appears reasoned and evidenced, it stems from experience and fails to fully grasp the fundamental purpose of Mencius's assertion of innate goodness.

Wang Chong's theory of human nature is close to Dong Zhongshu's and represents a compromise between the theories of Mencius and Xunzi. However, in his view of "feeling" (情, *qing*), he is closer to Mencius while also absorbing ideas from Xunzi and Dong Zhongshu. Mencius sometimes equates human nature with "feeling" or "native endowment" (才, *cai*), stating: "As for their feelings, they can become good. This is what I mean by good. If they become not good, it is not the fault of their native endowment" (*Mencius* • *Gaozi I*). Later, Xunzi and Dong Zhongshu also discussed "feeling" in relation to nature. Although they treated them as integral to nature, this departed from Mencius's original intent. Xunzi states: "Nature (xing) is what is endowed by Heaven; feeling (qing) is the substance of nature; desire (yu) is the response of feeling" [2] (p.428). Here, "feeling" as the substance of nature is inherently evil. Dong Zhongshu states: "Therefore, when [the ruler] initiates, the people harmonize; when he acts, the people follow. This is

knowing how to guide what their Heavenly nature loves and suppress what their feelings hate” [3] (p.143); and “Simplicity and substance are called nature; nature cannot be perfected without instruction. Human desires are called feelings; feelings cannot be moderated without regulation” [4] (p.2515). Although not explicitly stating that feeling is evil, since feeling is equated with desire and requires restraint, feeling is the evil substance within nature. Building on their views, Wang Chong states:

There are feelings (renqing) in humans that become good without instruction, and there are those that do not become good even with instruction. Heavenly nature (tianxing) is like destiny (ming). [1] (p.26)

Like Mencius, Wang Chong identifies human feeling (renqing) with human nature (renxing), equating “human feeling” with “Heavenly nature.” However, unlike Mencius, who saw feeling as good, Wang Chong holds that “human feeling” includes both good and evil. The good become good without instruction; the not good (bushan) cannot become good even with instruction. Those who cannot become good even with instruction are what Wang Chong terms “those below the average person” (zhongren yixia zhe) in the “Ben Xing” chapter. Because feeling and nature are equivalent, Wang Chong often combines them: “Feeling and nature (qingxing) are the root of governing humans and the source from which ritual and music arise. Therefore, to trace feeling and nature to their extremes, ritual provides the guard against [excess], music provides the moderation” [1] (p.132); “From Mencius down to Liu Zizheng [Liu Xiang], great Confucians and erudite scholars have heard and seen much. Nevertheless, their discourses on feeling and nature ultimately lack definitive correctness” [1] (p.141). In his view, Mencius’s discourse on human nature is discourse on feeling-nature. For this reason, he also criticizes Dong Zhongshu for separating nature (xing) and feeling (qing):

Dong said: “The great principles of man are one feeling, one nature. Nature is born of “yang”; feeling is born of “yin”. “Yin” energy is base; “yang” energy is benevolent. Those who call nature good see its “yang”; those who call it evil see its “yin”. If we follow Zhongshu’s words, it means Mencius saw its “yang” and Xunzi saw its “yin”. That these two masters each saw one aspect is acceptable; but that they did not establish that human feeling-nature has both good and evil is a failure. Human feeling-nature is equally born of “yin” and “yang”. That which is born of “yin” and “yang” has richness and thinness. Jade is born from stone; some is pure, some is flawed. Feeling-nature is born of “yin” and “yang”; how can it be purely good? Zhongshu’s words fail to attain reality. [1] (p.139-140)

Although Wang Chong disagrees with Dong Zhongshu’s view that nature is born of “yang” and feeling born of *yin*, he here acknowledges that nature and feeling are two distinct things, not one. Furthermore, he states, “Therefore, the purpose of learning for scholars is to reverse their feelings and cultivate their nature, exhaust their native endowment and perfect their virtue” [1] (p.546), which tends to view feeling as evil, closer to Mencius and Xunzi’s concept of innate desire (yu). Consequently, Wang Chong often combines feeling and desire (qingyu): “What feelings or desires do plants and trees

possess? Yet they sprout in spring and die in autumn. Plants and trees have no desires; their lifespan does not exceed a year. Humans have many feelings and desires; their lifespan reaches one hundred. This shows that those without feelings and desires die prematurely, while those with feelings and desires live long” [1] (p.334-335). The emphasis in feeling-desire is on desire (yu), leaning towards the evil aspect.

Additionally, Wang Chong also equates “native endowment” (cai) with nature (xing). He states: “Therefore, knowing folly in facing affairs, and the purity or turbidity of conduct, belong to nature and native endowment (xing yu cai). Holding office with high or low rank, managing property with wealth or poverty, belong to destiny and timing (ming yu shi)” [1] (p.20). Intelligence/foolishness and conduct belong to nature; rank and wealth/poverty belong to destiny. Nature is also called “native endowment,” so he also says: “Conduct has constant worthiness; holding office has no constant opportunity. Worthy or unworthy is native endowment (cai); encountering opportunity or not is timing (shi)” [1] (p.1) By contrasting “native endowment” (cai) with “timing” (shi), it is clear that “native endowment” here means nature. From the perspective of the unity of native endowment and nature, Wang Chong draws on Mencius’s view. However, he imbues native endowment/nature with a different connotation. The “native endowment” or nature he refers to primarily signifies talent (caineng) and conduct (caoxing). Therefore, “It can be seen that when Wang Chong discusses ‘nature’ (xing), the meaning he takes is ‘talent-nature’ (caixing), not ‘mind-nature’ (xinxing). In other words, it does not refer to ‘free will’ or the ‘moral self,’ but rather to endowed talent” [5] (p.114). Moreover, Wang Chong’s theory of the unity of native endowment and nature is not consistently maintained in the Lunheng. In the “Ben Xing” chapter, he also states: “In reality, human nature has good and evil, just as human talent has high and low. The high cannot be made low; the low cannot be made high. To say that nature has no good or evil is to say that human talent has no high or low” [1] (p.142). Here, human nature (renxing) is contrasted with good/evil, while human talent (rencai) is contrasted with high/low. This dichotomy between native endowment (cai) and nature (xing) is again far removed from Mencius’s view of their unity.

3. Reconciling the Theories of Human Nature by Mencius, Xunzi, and Others Through the “Three Aspects of Human Nature” Theory.

Wang Chong also elaborated on Mencius’s view of the relationship between nature (xing) and destiny (ming). Mencius said: “Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it. This seeking is beneficial to getting, for the seeking is within myself. Seek it and there is a Way; get it and there is destiny. This seeking is not beneficial to getting, for the seeking lies outside myself” (Mencius • Jinxin I). Mencius believed that humans are born with the sprouts of goodness, which can be realized through expansion and reflection. Wealth and honor, however, are external things; their gain or loss is determined by Heavenly destiny (tianming). Therefore, the subject only needs to exhaust human effort (exhausting the mind or nature) and await destiny, meaning that by exhausting the mind and knowing nature, one knows Heaven. Mencius’s original intent was to encourage people to expand their innate

good sprouts, value moral cultivation, and not let the pursuit of wealth, honor, gain, or loss affect their mind-nature. Wang Chong evaluates this:

Nature and destiny are different. Some have good nature but ominous destiny; some have evil nature but auspicious destiny. The goodness or evilness of conduct belongs to nature (xing); calamity, fortune, auspiciousness, or ominousness belong to destiny (ming). Some practice goodness yet meet calamity: this is good nature with ominous destiny. Some practice evil yet meet fortune: this is evil nature with auspicious destiny. Nature inherently has good and evil; destiny inherently has auspiciousness and ominousness. For those with auspicious destiny, even if they do not practice goodness, misfortune is not inevitable. For those with ominous destiny, even if they strive in conduct, calamity is not necessarily avoided. Mencius said: "Seek it and there is a Way; get it and there is destiny." Only with good nature can one seek [the good]; only with good destiny can one attain it. If nature is good but destiny ominous, one may seek but not attain. [1] (p.50-51)

Wang Chong agrees with Mencius that nature pertains to the good/evil of moral conduct, while destiny pertains to the auspicious/ominous nature of fortune/misfortune. There is no equivalent causal-logical relationship between nature and destiny; this dichotomy aligns with Mencius. However, whereas Mencius emphasizes internal self-reflection and subjective effort as the human affair, Wang Chong places greater weight on the decisive role of the auspiciousness / ominousness of destiny (ming) over the good/evil of nature (xing). He argues that human fortune/misfortune is not determined by the good/evil of human nature, but by the auspicious/ominous nature of destiny. Moreover, the regulatory role of mind-nature (xinxing), which Confucians value—such as not blaming Heaven or others—seems ineffective in the face of destiny's fortune/misfortune. While a person with good nature can indeed seek to realize that goodness, the fortune/misfortune encountered later in life is completely unrelated to this. Here, Wang Chong is both interpreting Mencius's words and supplementing the relationship between nature and destiny. Furthermore, Mencius viewed destiny (ming) as the will of Heaven (tian), calling it Heavenly destiny (tianming). Wang Chong strongly criticizes this, arguing that Heaven (tian) is spontaneous and non-deliberative (ziran wuwei), that there is no such thing as Heavenly destiny. Both nature (xing) and destiny (ming) result from humans receiving endowments of qi.

Building on his critique of earlier theories of human nature, Wang Chong proposes his "Tripartite Theory of Nature" (三性说, sanxing shuo). The Lunheng • "Ming Yi" (命义, The Meaning of Destiny) chapter states:

This refers to the three destinies (san ming). There are also three natures (san xing): the correct (zheng), the following (sui), and the encountered (zao). The correct nature is to be endowed with the nature of the Five Constants (五常, wuchang: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, faithfulness). The following nature follows the nature of the parents. The encountered nature is encountered due to obtaining evil images/things. [1] (p.53)

This tripartite theory is somewhat similar to Jia Yi's (贾谊)

trichotomy of talent-nature (caixing) and closer to Dong Zhongshu's theory of three grades of nature. The "correct nature" refers to those endowed innately with the goodness of the Five Constants; the "following nature" refers to a nature whose goodness/evil is determined by the parents' nature — good if the parents are good, evil if the parents are evil; the "encountered nature" refers to those innately evil. Essentially, the "correct nature" corresponds to the good nature Mencius spoke of; the "encountered nature" corresponds to the evil nature Xunzi spoke of; the "following nature" corresponds to the mixed good-evil nature Yang Xiong (扬雄) spoke of, or Dong Zhongshu's "nature of the average people" (zhongmin zhi xing). Thus, Wang Chong synthesizes the theories of Mencius, Xunzi, and Yang Xiong. He further states:

In reality, human nature has good and evil, just as human talent has high and low. The high cannot be made low; the low cannot be made high... Destiny has nobility and baseness; nature has good and evil. To say that nature has no good or evil is to say that human destiny has no nobility or baseness. The nature of the land within the Nine Provinces has varying degrees of good and evil. Hence there are distinctions of yellow, red, and black, and grades of superior, medium, and inferior... Humans receive the nature of Heaven and Earth, harbor the qi of the Five Constants. Some are humane, some are righteous; their natures and methods diverge... I firmly believe that Mencius's assertion that human nature is good refers to those above the average person (zhongren yishang zhe); Xunzi's assertion that human nature is evil refers to those below the average person (zhongren yixia zhe); Yang Xiong's assertion that human nature is a mixture of good and evil refers to the average person (zhongren). If they return to the classics and accord with the Way (fan jing he dao), then they can serve as the basis for instruction (jiao). But as for exhausting the principle of nature (jin xing zhi li), they have not done so. [1] (p.142-143)

Wang Chong takes Yang Xiong's mixed good-evil nature as the nature of the average person (zhongren). Those above this level are assigned to Mencius's good nature; those below are assigned to Xunzi's evil nature. "Return to the classics and accord with the Way" (fan jing he dao) carries the meaning of Mencius's "return to the standard" (fan jing) and "when the standard is correct" (jing zheng) (Mencius • Jinxin II). Wang Chong argues that from the perspective of "returning to the classics and according with the Way," these three theories of human nature can all serve as foundations for instruction (jiao). However, in terms of clarifying the inherent principle of nature, these three theories are incomplete because each only addresses one aspect of human nature. Only by combining them can the reality of human nature be grasped. Wang Chong's synthesis is based on Confucius's sayings: "Those above average can be told of higher things; those below average cannot be told of higher things", "By nature, people are close to one another; through practice, they grow far apart" and "Only the highest wisdom and the lowest stupidity do not change". This synthesis has a somewhat forced reconciliatory character.

Although this view of three grades of nature superficially resolves the tension between the theories of Mencius and Xunzi, it conflicts with Wang Chong's other assertion regarding the transformation of good and evil: "As for the evil

[nature], it can be instructed, admonished, led, and urged to make it good... Evil [natures] should be supported, guarded, prohibited, and defended, causing them gradually to move away from evil. Good gradually changes evil; evil transforms into good, becoming the nature and conduct" [1] (p.68). In the "Shuai Xing" (率性, Inducing Nature) chapter, he states:

Human nature: the good can be changed to evil, the evil can be changed to good. It is like this: Fleabane growing among hemp needs no straightening to become straight; white silk entering black dye needs no steeping to become black. The nature of fleabane is not straight; the substance of silk is not black. [But] the hemp straightens it, the dye blackens it, making it straight and black. Human nature is like fleabane and silk; it changes to good or evil depending on what it is gradually dyed by. [1] (p.70-71)

The assertion that "the good can be changed to evil, the evil can be changed to good" contradicts his statement in the "Ben Xing" chapter that "the high cannot be made low; the low cannot be made high." Moreover, surveying the entire Lunheng, the former view (transformability) appears to be his primary stance. Regarding the conditions for the transformation of good and evil, Wang Chong particularly emphasizes the role of the postnatal environment and habituation: "Fleabane growing among hemp needs no straightening to become straight; white silk entering black dye needs no steeping to become black. This saying means that the habits of good and evil change the substance of nature" [1] (p.545). Here he also draws on some of Mencius's views. Mencius said: "In years of plenty, most young men are lazy; in years of famine, most young men are violent. It is not that Heaven has endowed them with different native endowments; it is because their minds are drowned in such circumstances. Consider barley: sow the seeds and cover them; the ground is the same, the time of planting is the same. They sprout vigorously and by the summer solstice, all ripen. If there are differences, it is because the fertility of the soil is uneven, the nourishment of rain and dew differs, and human effort varies" (Mencius • Gaozi). Mencius used the effect of the soil's "fertility or barrenness" on the harvest to metaphorically argue for the promoting or hindering effect of environment on the realization of goodness. Wang Chong uses the same metaphor to illustrate the influence of environment and instruction on the realization of good in human nature:

Fertility and richness are the original nature of the soil. Fertile and rich soil has a fine nature; crops planted there are abundant and luxuriant. Barren and poor soil has an evil nature. [But] deep plowing, careful hoeing, abundant manure and soil, diligent human effort to assist the land's strength — then the crops planted there will be similar to those on fertile soil. [1] (p.73)

Just as barren land, through diligent human effort, can yield like fertile land, so too can an originally evil nature be transformed to good through postnatal habituation. Therefore, Wang Chong fully affirms the story of Mencius's mother moving three times: "By drawing near to a gentleman, the Way of benevolence and righteousness is repeatedly added to one's person. The moving of Mencius's mother is proof of this" [1] (p.82). He also states that the difference between the people of a "sagely ruler" and a "wicked ruler" lies "in

transformation, not in nature [1] (p.72). What the original nature is like is not paramount; instruction is the key: "It is not that nature is all evil; what they practice violates the sagely teaching" [1] (p.545); "The sagely teaching and its majestic virtue transform nature. Do not worry about evil nature; worry that they do not submit to the sagely teaching" [1] (p.80); "From this perspective, it also depends on instruction, not solely on nature [1] (p.82). Consequently, Wang Chong quotes Mencius's evaluation of Bo Yi (伯夷) and Liu Xiaohui (柳下惠): "Hearing the style of Bo Yi, the greedy become pure and the weak acquire determination. Hearing the style of Liu Xiaohui, the mean become generous and the narrow-minded become tolerant. Merely hearing their style names can cause people to change their character. How much more so if personally encountering them and being earnestly admonished face to face?". This passage is repeatedly cited in chapters like "Shuai Xing," "Fei Han" (非韩, Criticizing Han Feizi), and "Zhi Shi" (知实, Knowing Reality) [1] (p.70, 434, 1100), demonstrating Wang Chong's full affirmation of Mencius's view. Regarding the miraculous effect of sage instruction, Wang Chong also uses Mencius's words: "The establishment of a worthy ruler happens to coincide with an age that should be well-governed. Virtue becomes manifest above, the people naturally become good below, the age is peaceful, the people secure, auspicious signs arrive together. The age then says it is caused by the worthy ruler" [1] (p.774). This paraphrases Mencius: "The people of a true king are carefree. Kill them, and they do not resent; benefit them, and they do not feel indebted. Daily they move towards goodness without knowing who makes them do so. Where the gentleman passes, he transforms; where he abides, he is spirit-like. Above and below, he flows together with Heaven and Earth".

Therefore, it can be said that Wang Chong's full affirmation of the role of instruction contradicts his adherence to the doctrine that "the highest wisdom and the lowest stupidity do not change" and his theory of three grades of human nature.

4. Proposing the Theory of Qi-nature Based on Mencius' Concept of Qi.

Wang Chong further believed that a person's "nature" is formed when the embryo receives different qi in the mother's body. The good and evil of human nature stem from the thickness or thinness of this qi: "The endowed qi has thickness and thinness, therefore nature has good and evil" [1] (p.80). Thick qi results in good nature; thin "qi" results in evil nature. This qi is also called "primordial qi" (元气, yuanqi) or "essential qi" (精气, jingqi). It has only differences in thickness/thinness; it has no inherent distinction of good/evil or pure/turbid. Hence he says: "The good and evil of humans share the same primordial qi (yuanqi). The qi has more or less, therefore nature has worthiness and foolishness" [1] (p.81). This "primordial qi" does not change with the times: "The Heaven of high antiquity is the Heaven of later ages. Heaven does not alter or change; qi does not alter or renew. The people of high antiquity are the people of later ages; all receive primordial qi. Primordial qi is pure and harmonious; it does not differ from past to present" [1] (p.803). In Wang Chong's view, human destiny (命) concerning longevity/short life, wealth/honor, the good/evil of nature, and

indeed all things in Heaven and Earth, are generated by qi: “Heaven and Earth combine their qi, and the myriad things spontaneously generate” [1] (p.775). The qi Wang Chong speaks of has connections to the “night qi” (夜气, yeqi) and “dawn qi” (平旦之气, pingdan zhi qi) mentioned by Mencius. The two qi Mencius refers to are essentially the sprouts of goodness in the human heart—the small distinction between humans and beasts. This qi, “if nourished, nothing fails to grow; if not nourished, nothing fails to perish” (Mencius • Gaozi II). If nourished, it can become the “flood-like qi” (浩然之气, haoran zhi qi) and achieve the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom; if not nourished, one becomes a beast. Mou Zongsan (牟宗三) criticized Wang Chong’s evaluation of Mencius’s doctrine of innate goodness: “Wang Chong says, ‘Mencius’s assertion that human nature is good refers to those above the average person.’ He does not realize that Mencius’s discourse on nature does not proceed from ‘qi.’ Therefore, the nature he speaks of is not qi-nature (qixing)... The goodness he speaks of is the goodness of this ‘moral mind-nature in itself’ (daode xinxing dangshen zhi shan), not a tendency of qi-nature.” Mou argues that Wang Chong “pulled the ‘moral mind-nature in itself’ that Mencius spoke of down into the ‘natural substance’ of qi-nature to arrange it; this is a profound error” [6] (p.26). Although Mencius’s theory of human nature is not a theory of qi-nature, his doctrine of the night qi and dawn qi did provide an opening for later theories of qi-nature. Examples include the discourses on the qi of benevolence (renqi), righteousness (yiqi), and propriety (liqi) in the Wuxing (五行, Five Conducts) commentaries, Dong Zhongshu’s theory of qi of benevolence and greed” (仁、贪之气) [3] (p.294), Yang Xiong’s statement that “qi is the steed that carries one towards good and evil”[7] (p.85), and then Wang Chong’s theories of “primordial qi” and “essential qi.” These should all be seen as connected to the lineage initiated by Mencius.

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