

Xunzi on what separates humans and other animals: Some Mencian considerations

Concerned that the mechanical philosophy he had come to endorse would show humans to be no more than complex machines—a conclusion he was willing to embrace when it came to other animals—Descartes famously makes an exception of the human mind. Here, in our capacity to think and to be aware of our thoughts, he found a reassuring and reassuringly sharp line between humans and machines, and a fortiori, between humans and other animals. Descartes here is giving a modern gloss on a venerable idea in Western religion and philosophy, the idea that humans beings are unique among the things in the world, and that our uniqueness is rooted in our rational, thinking, conscious faculties.

This view, which I'll follow others in calling human exceptionalism, has had a long and varied history in Western thought, running from the *Imago Dei* of Jewish and Christian theology through more scientific claims of the uniqueness of human language (or culture, or technology, or self-awareness--the candidates are many). In its various guises human exceptionalism occasions debate and controversy over the exact source of our claimed uniqueness. The very idea has its critics as well, who argue that humans are considerably more continuous with the rest of the natural order than HE would have it, an argument that is frequently bolstered with appeals to evolutionary theory.

The question of where human beings fit into the grand scheme of things, or whether we do at all in the same way that squirrels, squid and spiders do, is not uniquely Western. The Six Realms of Existence of Buddhist thought, for example, distinguish the animal and human realms, and while some classical texts such as the *Dao De Jing* can

be read as putting humans and the rest of the ten thousand things (*wan wu*) on a more even plane, classical Chinese thought also typically sees important and profound differences between humans and other animals. Moreover, these differences are often taken to have a normative aspect to them, in the sense that humans are ranked as 'higher' beings. For a human to reduce herself to the level a (mere) animal is a significant moral failing. Of considerable interest, and my focus here, are versions of human exceptionalism found in the *Xunzi and Mencius*. Though traditionally seen as having opposing theories of human nature (*ren xing*), that humans are importantly distinct from animals, and this in a way that has important moral implications, is a point on which Xunzi and Mencius agree.

Western Human Exceptionalism: A Brief History

As a backdrop to a comparison of Mencius and Xunzi, I want to start with the Western version of HE. There is a sense in which the claim "human beings are unique" is trivially true and uninteresting, so it will be helpful to be precise about how it can be understood to be saying something substantive and important. The trivial reading would have it that there are things true of humans that are true of no other animals, or, to put it another way, that humans have traits shared with no other animals. This is trivial in the sense of being both obviously true and unremarkable. If we are expansive enough in what counts as a trait, it is doubtlessly true that for every species there's at least one trait it shares with no other. So if this is all we mean by unique, each species is unique in some way, and so it tells us little to point out this is true of humans well.

Even if we tighten up what we want to count as a trait, limiting it to genuine phenotypical characteristics, we can still find animals that have something no other

animals have—the elephant’s trunk being a noted example. Unlike eyes, lungs, feathers, wings, feet, noses, etc., it seems the remarkably versatile and powerful trunk of the elephant has evolved only in that one kind of animal¹. It is a controversial claim, but even if it is true that language, for example, is a uniquely human trait, its mere uniqueness is not sufficient to make humans entirely or *interestingly* unique.

To make the claim substantive, humans need to be unique in ways elephants aren’t, and that seems to require we find something that takes us out of the biological altogether at least in some respect. We see this in the *Imago Dei*—the dramatic claim in the first chapter of *Genesis* that humans and humans alone are made in the image of God. Attempts to refine and give more explicit content to this idea have typically focused on some distinct human cognitive abilities, rational thought in particular. As St. Thomas Aquinas puts it: “Only in rational creatures is there found a likeness of God with counts as an image.” (*Summa* Ia q.93a). What is important here is that the *Imago* confers on humans a kind of uniqueness that goes beyond the uniqueness enjoyed by elephants. Even if human reason is in some sense rooted in our biology, something we enjoy by way of our having a certain thoroughly biological organ (the brain), it is said to let us share in a feature of the divine that no other kind of biological trait (like a trunk) could. Elephants remain animals through and through; the *Imago* makes us something more.

In *De Anima* Aristotle deploys a motif that is echoed in *Genesis* which leads him to a similar rendering of human uniqueness. Aristotle pictures the things of the world as ordered on a scale of sorts, from the most basic and lacking in psychic powers (inanimate matter), to the most complex and psychically powerful (humans). Each step

¹ Strictly speaking this isn’t true as some now extinct relatives of the elephant had trunks. Also, African and Indian elephants belong to different species. I don’t think either of these facts effect the point at hand.

introduces a difference in kind, marked by a qualitative increase in ability. Plants share matter with inanimate things, but have a vegetative soul—having life they have the capacity to grow, die, metabolize, and (we would add) reproduce. Animals have all that but having a sensitive soul also sensation and appetite. Humans have everything animals have but also a rational mind. Though humans share, according to Aristotle, an animal nature with things like squirrels and squid, they are distinct and unique in their powers of reason.

Elements of Aristotle's account are echoed in *Genesis*' description of God's creation as happening in stages, suggesting that it was one thing for God to create inanimate things, another for him to create plants, another still for him to bring animals into the world, and yet a further, final crowning act of creation to bring forth thinking men and women. This shared picture of a stepped order of kinds—what would come to be called a chain of being—remains a powerful influence on those who would defend human exceptionalism. It's not just that as animals we have some bells and whistles found nowhere else in nature. Rather the idea remains that we are something more than animals. From *Genesis* and Aristotle through Aquinas to Descartes, the idea of human exceptionalism has been tied to this idea that humans transcend the natural realm. This idea has in recent years become problematic among philosophers who hold to a more naturalistic view of the world and our place in it. James Rachels, for example, is a harsh critic of HE, and in his book *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* he makes his case by way of an extensive discussion of the biological continuities evolutionary theory has discovered to exist between humans and other animals. Speaking for many, he argues that “we have a well confirmed theory which tells

us that humans are closely related to other species...With such a theory in hand it becomes more reasonable to see connections between human abilities and those of animals.” (165) Specifically, Rachels argue that human cognitive abilities lie on a continuum with those of numerous other species, and so cannot be made a basis for HE. This move from naturalism to a denial of human exceptionalism by way of evolutionary biology has become a familiar one in contemporary western thought. Part of what I want to argue here is that in Xunzi and Mencius we see a way of making out the claim of HE that avoids the problematic corollary of humans being something more than biological beings.

Xunzi's Chain of Being

I will start with a passage from the *Xunzi* that may suggest a picture surprisingly congruent with that of *Genesis* and particularly Aristotle. In his chapter on The Regulations of Kings (*Wang Zhi*), Xunzi give us what A. C. Graham, Chad Hansen, and Robert Eno all dub a “chain of being”. In the Burton Watson translation the passage goes like this:

Fire and water possess energy [*qi*] but are without life [*sheng*]. Grass and trees have life but no intelligence [*zhi*]. Beasts have intelligence but no sense of duty [*yi*]. Man possesses energy, life, intelligence, and, in addition, a sense of duty. Therefore he is the noblest [*gui*--most valuable, most precious] being on earth.

(48-49)²

² *Xunzi: Basic Writings*, translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press: New York, 2003. Quotations from Xunzi are from this volume unless otherwise noted.

At first glance Xunzi presents a familiar picture. Each step in the order of beings is marked by an additional attribute. *Qi* is common to all things. To get to plants we add *sheng*, to animals *zhi*, rather like Aristotle's ordering of the different kinds of souls. Then we get to a *yi*, translated by Watson as a "sense of duty." The context suggest this is a further attribute or capacity, and it's here that the critic of HE will object, supposing that once again we have a picture that grants humans a doubtful something above and beyond the normal run of things, something connected in some way--Xunzi is rather terse here--to morality. To his credit, such a critic might continue, Xunzi is willing to cede a certain degree of cognitive continuity between humans and (at least some) animals--both have *zhi* (knowledge, understanding). But the familiar claims to discontinuity between humans and animals returns with *yi*. So what exactly does his have in mind?

The bare outlines of what Xunzi has in mind is sketched in the rest of the passage. He continues:

Humans are not as strong as the ox, nor as swift as the horse, and yet they make the ox and the horse work for them. Why? Because they are able to organize themselves in society and animals are not. Why are humans able to organize themselves in society? Because they set up hierarchical divisions. [*fen*] And how are they able to set up hierarchical divisions? Because they have a sense of duty [*yi*]. If humans employ this sense of duty then there will be harmony; where there is harmony there will be unity; where there is unity there will be strength; where there is strength, there will be the power to conquer all things. (48-49)

As we would expect, Xunzi is tying *yi* to human relationships, highlighting its essential role in creating the kinds of social organizations that enable human beings to increase their powers beyond what any individual might enjoy in herself.

But all this raises as many questions as it answers. As Xunzi surely knows, humans are not the only social animal, or the only to live in generally harmonious groups. Presumably there is something about human societies as ordered by *yi* (and we would want to add, *li*) that goes beyond bee hives or antelope herds, but Xunzi's explanation of what this might be is less than immediately illuminating. He points to hierarchical divisions. More literally, the word translated as "hierarchical divisions", *fen*, means apportioning or dividing up. Particularly unclear is just how *fen* gets us from the kinds of groupings we see among animals to something that is not only uniquely human, but that can account for our ability to dominate other animals as the most precious of beings. All we are told is that again all this has something to do with *yi*.

Mencian Moral Psychology Meets Xunzi's Anthropology

To see how the rest of the picture might look, I want to look briefly at Mencius and his four sprouts (*si duan*). The four sprouts are feelings--lit. *xin*, or heart-minds, or in this context "a heart that feels/thinks....". Each of these is tied by Mencius to a specific virtue. The feelings or sprouts are compassion, shame, modesty or deference, and approval/disapproval, which are tied respectively to *ren*, *yi*, *li* and *zhi*. The precise details need not concern us here, but the basic idea is that having a *xin* with these basic emotional/cognitive capacities allows humans to develop into a kind of being no animal can, one that possesses the corresponding virtues. (As I understand it, animals are not said to have a *xin* in the sense of a heart-mind.) The sprouts serve, then, as a marker of

our humanity. As Mencius forcefully puts it, “whoever is devoid” of these sprouts “is not human.” We can use this I think to fill in Xunzi’s picture by allowing the four sprouts to serve as a more detailed answer to the question of what gets us from (mere) animal intelligence to *yi*: at least some animals have a kind of intelligence or awareness, but all are lacking in the sentiments that provide the basis of *yi* as understood by Xunzi.

Though corrected if we take things in context, Mencius’ moral psychology is strikingly individualistic in its immediate concerns. Graham highlights this in speaking of Confucianism’s discovery of “subjectivity” in the *Mencius*, but this reading may be tempered if we understand Mencius’ ‘cardinal virtues’ as essentially directed toward socially mediated cooperative behavior. Indeed, the first three of Mencius’ sprouts seems best understood as being oriented to a thoroughly relational virtue. I say this because each sentiment--compassion, shame, and deference--is itself thoroughly other regarding. In any case, it is by focusing on the social nature of the final sprout--the *xin* of approval/disapproval, or more literally affirming (*shi*) and denying (*fei*)--that I hope to bring Mencius and Xunzi into even closer contact. I want to do this by suggesting an affinity between the heart-mind that approves and disapproves, and Xunzi’s appeal to *fen*, or apportioning.

As we’ve seen, each of Mencius’ four sprouts is tied to a corresponding virtue that it can, though does not necessarily, grow into. This raises the question of the difference between the sprout and the virtue, or the gap that must be bridged in the process of moral development: what exactly happens to compassion to turn it into *ren*? Presumably the answer has something to do with cognitive growth--roughly, *ren* is compassion that is more informed by some kind of intelligence and affective maturity

that enables it to be expressed in more effective and appropriate ways. So too then with the movement from the *xin* of *shi* and *fei* to *zhi*. The ability to distinguish by saying yes to this and no to that become wisdom when we have learned what is *properly* *shi*'ed and what is properly *fei*'d. For Mencius, the drawing of distinctions has an inherently normative dimension--it can be done well or poorly.

Though his terminology and his way of lining things up is a little different, Xunzi is saying something similar. What allows humans to form productive societies is, as we've seen, *fen*, or apportioning. But, as we've also noted, neither a communal life or the mere presence of hierarchy is sufficient to distinguish human societies from those of other social animals. What makes the difference is the apportioning is done according to or by way of (*li* and) *yi*. Xunzi's use of *fen* here is of a piece with his more typical stress on drawing distinctions, or *bian*. This capacity is invoked throughout the *Xunzi*, and plays a prominent and essential role in his account of proper naming in the chapter on the Rectification of Names (*Zhengming*). It is also a critical part of some of the more celebrated passages of the Treatise on Heaven chapter that, as we'll see, evoke a particularly stark sense of human exceptionalism. What the passage from the Regulation of Kings chapter we've been considering makes explicit is that like Mencius, Xunzi sees the process of *fen* and *bian* as inherently normative. Not any apportioning or drawing of distinctions will do. It is, in some sense, something that must be done right.

What is it do this right? Or, to be more precise, what kind of standard is Xunzi pointing to in his use of *yi* in this passage? To answer this question I want to consider a further quote from the *Xunzi*, which reads:

What makes humans humans is that they can make distinctions...birds and beasts have fathers and sons among them but not the intimacy of fathers and sons; they have male and female but not the division of male and female. Thus the way of man always involves making distinctions.³

Xunzi is here rehearsing a pervasive theme in the work that bears his name, which is that human goodness is achieved by transforming what is given by nature. What is striking in this passage is the explicit contrast with other animals. While the facts of reproduction guarantee that there will be fathers and sons among animals, Xunzi is claiming that it requires an explicit recognition of these as *roles*, and their refinement in a system of disciplined behavior and affect to create the special bond that human fathers and sons can enjoy. In effect, the idea seems to be that only when humans distinguish conceptually--presumably in language--fathers and son and *apportion duties and obligations accordingly* that the potential richness of the relationship is realized. Apportioning of duties and obligations that allows the richness of this relationship to blossom would, I take it, be apportioning done well. Of course there are other relationships to consider. All would have to have obligations and duties suitably doled out. To this we would also want to add the drawing of distinctions done in proper naming (*zheng ming*). Putting the point more generally, differences exist in nature, but it is up to humans to recognize and to exploit these differences, making them explicit in language and productive in coordinated, cooperative behavior. Animals, lacking *yi* can only act on their desires and brute affections. Animal fathers and sons will interact, but not *as* fathers and sons.

³ Quote in Brook Ziporyn, *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought; Prolegomena to a Study of Li*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2012, pg. 208.

All of this for Xunzi has to do with the disciplining and shaping of natural appetites and feelings to maximize efficacy and allow for maximal and mutual satisfaction of desires. Without the disciplining effects of *yi*, realized in the *li*, human desires and tendencies will tend to work against their need for cooperative behavior. As he puts in the opening passage in the chapter on *Li*:

man is born with desires. If his desires are not satisfied for him, he cannot but seek some means to satisfy them himself. If there are no limits and degrees to his seeking, then he will fall to wrangling with other men. From wrangling comes disorder, and from disorder comes exhaustion. The ancient kings hated such disorder, and therefore they established ritual principles in order to curb it, to train men's desires and to provide for their satisfaction. (92)

Apportioning and drawing appropriate distinctions or according to *yi*, involves subordinating ourselves to the disciplining effects of those varied shared practices that constituted the Ru *li*. This, in the end, is what allows us to separate humans from all else between heaven and earth. Acting according to *li* and *yi* rather than our natural desires allows us not only to master the horses and oxen, but also to order the things of the world themselves:

when Heaven and Earth combine all things are born, when *yin* and *yang* act on each other, all changes are produced, and when nature and conscious activity join together the world is well ordered. Heaven can give birth to creatures but it cannot order them; earth can bear man up but cannot govern him. All creatures of the universe, all who belong to the species of man, must await the sage before they can attain their proper place. (106)

Conclusion

We are now in position to draw some conclusion. The distinguishing mark of humans is our ability, rooted in our psychology, to organize our lives and coordinate our actions according to standards emanating from a distinctly human sense of propriety. Putting this in the broader Confucian context, this distinctively human trait will be expressed in patterns of deference in the context of specific and often familial roles. What would be distinctly human about this is that these relationships would be characterized in terms of and mediated by morally regulated, but also always socially mediated, behavior. That humans can coordinate their behavior in a way that is both self-aware and morally governed rather than, I take it, being driven by merely biological forces is what distinguishes human societies from bee hives or antelope herds. While animals too can be put in their “proper place”--that is, organized according to a proper apportioning--this awaits (like all proper apportioning) the sage, and it seems invariably works to the advantage of humans.

Secondly, though Xunzi’s language certainly suggests his ‘chain of being’ is similar to those offered in *Genesis* or *De Anima*, we need to be careful. If my reading here is right, *yi* is far from a simple power or attribute that might be added to an animal to create a human, something suggested particularly by Watson’s translating *yi* as “a sense of duty.” Rather *yi*, or more precisely apportioning according to *yi*, must be understood as culturally situated and immersed in a network of human relations and practices. It is an array of things that humans do that separate them that from other animals as the third part of the triad with *Tian* and *Di*. Though I cannot begin to argue it here, we must also be careful with the others traits named by Xunzi in the passage

quoted about, namely *qi*, life (*sheng*) and knowledge (*zhi*). With these too the terseness of the text suggests these are simple traits or powers, but a proper rendering would have to stress their thoroughly relational character as well.

Lastly, though Xunzi's language of a triad of Heaven, Earth, and Man as well as his almost cavalier talk of human domination of other animals clearly warrants the label "human exceptionalism" as I've defined it here, I think in the end nothing in the underlying picture requires commitments that should worry a modern naturalist. The raw materials of *yi* are things like a distinctive affective psychology, language, and cognitive abilities of fairly familiar sorts. It may be that elements of all of these are found in other animals. It's worth noting in this connection that the the primatologist Franz de Waal has argued as much about our moral psychology with an explicit reference to Mencius' four sprouts. Nonetheless, collectively and in the proper cultural context--one that enables us to follow in the foot prints of the sages--they allow us to become something more, something of special value. If it sounds a bit grandiose to suppose humans are the most precious things in the world, we can perhaps imagine Xunzi responding that the evidence is all around us.

Dennis Arjo
Johnson County Community College
Presented at ASDP National Meeting
Phoenix AZ
March 2013

