

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—Rene 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 reassuringly sharp line between humans and machines, and *a fortiori*, between humans and other animals. “After the error”, he writes, “of those who deny the existence of God...there is nothing which leads feeble minds more readily astray from the straight path of virtue than to imagine that the soul of animals is of the same nature as our own.”¹

Though he was responding to some distinctly modern worries, Descartes was also forcefully affirming 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 faculties. This view, which I’ll follow others in calling *human exceptionalism*, has had a long history in Western thought, running from the *Imago Dei* of Jewish and Christian theology through more scientific claims about the uniqueness of human language and cognition. 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 now frequently bolstered with appeals to evolutionary theory.

¹ Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe, (London: Penguin Books), 1968, 76.

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. Nor are claims to human uniqueness. 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 on a more even plane, classical Chinese thought typically sees important and profound differences between humans and other animals. Moreover, these differences are taken to have normative import, with humans being ranked as ‘higher’ beings. For a human to reduce herself to the level of 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* 人性), 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. Their respective views about what make us human, I will be arguing, are in fact complementary.

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. The claim “human beings are unique” can be understood in ways that render it 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 humans have traits shared with no other animals. This is trivial in the sense of being both obviously true and uninteresting. 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 biological traits 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 animal². 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 *interestingly* unique—we would be unique in the same sense elephants are.

To make the claim substantive, humans need to be unique in ways elephants are not, and this seems to require we find something that takes us out of the biological realm 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. *Genesis*' depicts 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. 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: "Intellectual creatures

² 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 affect the point at hand.

alone...are made to God's image."³ 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 it lets us share in a feature of the divine no other kind of biological trait (like a trunk) could allow. Elephants remain animals through and through; reason makes us something more.

This 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 phenotypic bells and whistles found nowhere else in nature. Rather the idea remains that we are something more than animals. In *De Anima*, Aristotle deploys a motif that resonates with the first creation story in *Genesis* and which leads him to a similar rendering of human uniqueness. Aristotle also 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 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 these as well but having a sensitive soul also enjoy 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 which grants to them access to the forms and so true nature of things.

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Electronic Edition: Coyote Canyon Press), 2010, Ia q.93a2. pg. 447.

Challenges to Human Exceptionalism

However rendered, HE 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.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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 as any supposed uniquely human characteristics—including rationality—has analogues or precedence in other species:

Denying that other animals are rational involves positing a sharp break between humans and the members of other species—it is to say we humans have characteristics that are found nowhere else in nature, not even in an attenuated form...But in the light of evolutionary theory, this would be altogether fantastic.

Evolutionary theory leads us to expect continuities, not sharp breaks.⁶

If recognizing a special moral worth enjoyed only by humans depends on our cognitive uniqueness, Rachels conclude, it is doubtful that we are worthy of any such thing.

⁴ James Rachels, *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1990.

⁵ Rachels, *Created From Animals*, 165.

⁶ Rachels, *Created from Animals*, 165-166.

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 traditional but 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* (王制 *Wang Zhi*), Xunzi give us what A. C. Graham, Chad Hansen, and Robert Eno all dub a “chain of being.” In Eric Hutton’s translation the passage goes like this:

Fire and water have *qi* [氣]but are without life [生 *sheng*]. Grass and trees have life but are without awareness [知 *zhi*]. Birds and beasts have awareness but are without *yi* [義]. Humans have *qi* and life and awareness and, moreover they have *yi*. And so they are the most precious [貴 *gui*] things under Heaven [天 *Tian*].⁷

Xunzi it seems 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*, suggesting both life and the power of generation, and to get to (non-human) animals we add *zhi*, suggesting some measure of awareness and intelligence, rather like Aristotle’s ordering of the different kinds of souls. Then we get to *yi*, which is typically translated as “righteousness” or “appropriateness.” The context suggest this is a further at-

⁷ *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated by Eric Hutton, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 2014, 76.

tribute or capacity, and it is here that the critic of HE will object, supposing that once again we have a picture granting humans a doubtful something above and beyond the normal run of things, in this case something connected somehow--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*. But the familiar claims to discontinuity between humans and animals returns with *yi*. So what exactly does Xunzi mean by *yi* here as a marker of humanity?

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 oxen or as fast as horses, but oxen and horses are used by them. How is this so? I say it is because humans are able to form communities while the animals cannot. Why are humans able to form communities? It is because of social divisions. [分 *fen*] How can social divisions be put into practice? I say it is because of *yi*. And so if they use *yi* in order to make social divisions, then they will be harmonized. If they are harmonious, then they will be unified. If they are unified, then they will have more force. If they have more force, then they will be strong. If they are strong then they will be able to overcome the animals. And so they can get to live in homes and palaces.⁸

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

⁸ Hutton, *Xunzi*, (76)

But all this raises as many questions as it answers. As Xunzi surely knows, humans are not the only social animal, or the only ones with social hierarchies of some sort, or the only animals that live in generally harmonious groups. Presumably there is something about human communities as ordered by *yi* (and *li* (禮), ritual propriety, which Xunzi frequently conjoins with *yi*) that goes beyond bee hives or antelope herds, but Xunzi's explanation of what this might be, and how it is constitutive of humanity, is less than immediately illuminating. He points to *fen*, "social divisions", or more literally apportioning, dividing up, or the assigning of roles. Particularly unclear, however, is just how *fen* gets us from the kinds of groupings we see among animals to something that is not only uniquely human and accounts for our ability to dominate other animals, but which allows us to do so as *gui*--the most precious of beings. All we are told is that again all this has something to do with *yi*, which is hardly satisfying. As Chad Hansen has argued, it can look as though Xunzi is celebrating the brute imposition of order as a *ethical* achievement, without indicating in what sense there is any morality involved in humans' collective increase in strength. As Hansen puts it, it can seem as though "Xunzi takes for granted that humans *rightly* dominate [other] animals."⁹ The appeal to *yi* looks stipulative, and if there are competing regimes of social order possible, Xunzi's fondness for *Confucian* political regimes and Confucian patterns of social organization looks patently question begging: "we look in vain for any argument for this [preference]. We find only an expression of Xunzi's faith that Confucius' *li* are better" than alternative.¹⁰

⁹ Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 315.

¹⁰ Hansen, *Daoist History*, 317,

There is a further challenge raised when we try to situate this passage in the broader philosophical picture on offer in the *Xunzi*, particularly its famed claims about the badness of human nature and, more to the point here, the artificiality of human goodness. According to Xunzi, a person's goodness (人之善 *ren zhi shan*) is the result of their having been educated and disciplined according to *yi* and *li*. But these, we are told in turn, were invented by the ancient sage kings and are not a part of our original endowment. And so we get Xunzi's insistence that human goodness is by way of *wei* (偽), or the artifactual, the result of "deliberate" or "conscious" effort. The difficulty is plain: if *yi* is an human invention, how can it also be what distinguishes humans from non-human animals and the rest of the natural order? Were humans mere animals before the sage kings invented *li* and *yi*? This seems ruled out the Xunzi's insistence that the sage kings have the same nature as the rest of us. If without *li* and *yi* we are not human, then neither were the sage kings before they invented *li* and *yi*. In which case it is difficult, as numerous commentators have noted, to see how they could have invented *li* and *yi* in the first place.¹¹

Mencian Moral Psychology Meets Xunzi's Anthropology

To begin working towards some answers to these many questions I want to look briefly at Mencius and his doctrine of the four sprouts (四端 *siduan*) of virtue introduced in Book 2A. The four sprouts are feelings, each of which is tied by Mencius to a specific virtue. The feelings are compassion, shame, modesty or deference, and approval/disapproval, which are tied respectively to *ren*, *yi*, *li* and *zhi*. This essential endowment

¹¹ For a recent treatment of this puzzle, see Shenyang Li, "Xunzi on the Origin of Goodness: A New Interpretation", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Supplement to Vol. 38, 2011, 46-63.

is where Mencius finds the line separating humans and other animals. The basic idea is that having a *xin* with these basic emotional and cognitive capacities allows humans to develop into a kind of being no animal can develop into, 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 by pointing to what we can become—those lacking the sprouts, Mencius bluntly states, is not human.

Though corrected if we take things in context, Mencius' moral psychology is highly individualistic in its immediate concerns, but this impression may be tempered if we understand Mencius' "cardinal virtues" as ultimately directed toward socially mediated, cooperative behavior. Indeed, the first three of Mencius' sprouts seem best understood as being oriented to a thoroughly relational virtue. I say this because each sentiment--compassion, shame, and deference--is itself 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 (是 *shi*) and denying (非 *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 have seen, each of Mencius' four sprouts is tied to a corresponding virtue that it can grow into. Importantly, however, there is no guarantee that this will happen. Despite his reputation for being an optimist about human nature, Mencius in fact harbors no illusions about either the extent of human wickedness nor the gap that can grow between our original goodness and our eventual character, a space which can be as dramatic as that between the verdant and lush *nature* of Ox Mountain and its current barren and lifeless state. 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 more richly informed by cognitive and affective maturity so that it is expressed in more effective, appropriate, and extensive 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 becomes wisdom when we have learned what is *properly shi’d* and what is *properly fei’d*. The drawing of distinctions has an inherently normative dimension--it can be done well or poorly, and the goodness of human nature is our initial orientation in the direction of conformity to this norm.

What norm? Here Mencius faces a problem similar to Xunzi’s, and again we can use Hansen’s less than charitable readings of Confucian texts to press the point. As read by Hansen, Mencius has no ready answer to the question of why we should count the *xin*’s natural tendencies towards the Confucian virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and the like as good and proper rather than, as a Mohist might argue, something to be overcome in the service of universal love, or as just one of any number of natural tendencies tied to the organs of the body with an equal claim on goodness, as a Daoist might insist. As Hansen puts it, “[e]ven if [Mencius is] right that Confucianism is written in everyone’s genetic code...[w]e can still ask whether we should not try to modify or change this natural programming.”¹² The problem is compounded when we add Mencius’ insistence that a proper upbringing and education—meaning a proper Confucian upbringing and education—is what makes the difference between our preserving and losing our

¹² Hansen, *Daoist History*, 168.

original goodness. By what non-question begging standard is the Confucian *junzi* (君子), or exemplary person, the uniquely appropriate outgrowth of our development?

This is where I think Mencius and Xunzi can help each other out. Specifically I will argue two things. First, putting aside the question of normativity, Mencius' moral psychology can show how *yi*, and *fen* done according to *yi*, can be both a distinctive and unique feature of human beings—and so in that sense “natural”—and also something which exists and develops always in the context of cultural practices—and so in that sense “artifactual.” Secondly, putting aside the moral psychology, Xunzi's extensive remarks about the transformative effects of *li* and *yi* suggest a normative standard which points beyond existing practices, or those favored by Mencius and Xunzi. *Pace* Hansen, Xunzi—and with his help, Mencius—can do better than offer a foot stomping insistence on the ways of the Ru.

Taking these in order, consider the nature of human musicality. Musical traditions of some sort seem to be a human universal, and there are plausible if less than definitive accounts of its likely biological and evolutionary origins on offer.¹³ At the same time, musical expression is always mediated by culture. We never simply create or participate in the production of music full stop. It is always music of a particular cultural time and place whose forms reflect shared and historically shaped practices. In one sense, then, music is “natural”, but in another sense it is thoroughly cultural. Indeed, it is one example of just why insisting on a final and definitive distinction between what is “natural” and “artificial”—in the sense of “artifactual”—is often pointless. For certain

¹³ See for example, Edward H. Hagen and Gregory A. Bryant, 2003, “Music and Dance as a coalition signaling system”, *Human Nature*: Vol. 14:1, 21-51.

purposes focusing on the biological origins of musicality may be more illuminating than looking at cultural influences, while for others the opposite is true. But to try to insist on the absolute priority of either is to misunderstand music.

Something similar is going on with something like *yi* or *shi/fei* in Mencius. Roughly, the social environment is to the sprouts what good soil and water is to barley: it is the necessary context in which the virtues take tangible form. A *junzi* is *yi* only in living well according to the standards of her cultural setting, assuming those standards themselves are *yi*—more on that shortly. More precisely, the *junzi* is *yi* only in her practice of *li*, which itself is always the *li* of a specific cultural moment. And of course, this is all something the *junzi* needed to learn. *Yi* is artifactual in the way music is while still tracing back to our *ming* (命), or native endowment. This helps us answer some of the questions Xunzi left us. Xunzi need not be read as say *yi* exists prior to and so guides the proper apportioning that allows for human community and cooperation like a utopian blueprint. Rather, *yi* is simply the human ability to apportion well as realized in social practices in the way human musicality is the ability to make music as realized in specific musical traditions.

This leaves us, though, with our second question, which is how either Mencius or Xunzi can justify their allegiance to the Ruist *Dao*. What is it to apportion well? Until we can answer this we have no basis on which to judge the Confucian way as best. As we saw, for Mencius this points to a worry that he is committing something along the lines of Is/Ought Fallacy; for Xunzi it points to the worry that he is conflating right and might. Here I think some further comments by Xunzi point to the way out.

The Transformative Power of Yi and Li

According to Xunzi what allows humans to form productive societies is, as we have seen, *fen*, or apportioning. But, as we have 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 how the apportioning is done. Xunzi's use of *fen* here is of a piece with his more typical stress on drawing distinctions, or *bian* (辨). 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" (正名 *Zhengming*). It is also a critical part of some of the more celebrated passages of the "Treatise on Heaven" (天論) 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 well, and something that can only be done by humans.

What, then, is it do this well? Or, to be more precise, what kind of standard is Xunzi pointing to? To answer this question I want to consider a well known passage quote from chapter on *Li* (禮論 *Li Lun*) which reads:

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impover-

ished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and *yi* in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose.¹⁴

This passage stresses order, and the increased productive power that comes with ordering or disciplining desires. Some commentators suggest this is Xunzi's highest court of appeal: the sage kings 'invented' *yi* and *li* so as to decrease the kinds of social disorder that lead to hungry and so contentious people.¹⁵ But to stop here is to risk conceding the point to Hansen. The increased productive power of cooperative societies is not in obvious sense a *moral* advance. Given the enormous destructive potential of coordinated human behavior we certainly need more to justify Xunzi's use of *gui* to describe humans.

Consider, however, this passage from the chapter "Against Physiognomy" (非相 *Fei Xiang*):

The birds and beasts have fathers and sons but not the intimate relationship of father and son. They have the male sex and the female sex but no differentiation between male and female. And so for human ways, none is without distinctions. Of distinctions, none are greater than social divisions, and of social divisions,

¹⁴ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 201.

¹⁵ See Li, "Xunzi on the Origin of Goodness" for an example.

none...are greater than rituals, and of rituals, none are greater than those of the sage kings.¹⁶

Xunzi is here rehearsing a pervasive theme in the work that bears his name, which is that human goodness is achieved by *transforming*—as opposed to merely cultivating—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--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 and 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 most 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.

Apportioning and drawing appropriate distinctions according to *yi* is what leads to sons deferring to fathers despite their immediate desires. More generally these dis-

¹⁶ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 35.

tinctions lead us to subordinate ourselves to the disciplining effects of those role governed shared practices that constitute the *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 unite, then the myriad creatures are born. When *yin* and *yang* interact with each other, then changes and transformations arise. When human nature and deliberate effort unite, then all under Heaven becomes ordered. For Heaven can give birth to creatures but it cannot enforce distinctions among creatures. Earth can support people, but not order people. In the world, all members of the myriad things and the human race must await the sage, and only then will they be appropriately divided up.¹⁷

Conclusion

We are now in position to draw some conclusions. On my reading, according to Xunzi 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 and socially organized behavior. That humans can coordinate their behavior in a way that is both self-aware and morally governed rather than being driven by merely

¹⁷ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 210. This passage is from *Li Lun* chapter.

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. 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 from other animals as the third part of the triad with Heaven and Earth. Though I cannot 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 contemporary 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 is 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.¹⁸ 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.

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¹⁸ See Franz de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2009.