The Concept of Moral Responsibility in Mencius' Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to answer the question "Should Mencius' view on moral responsibility be accepted by human society for the formation of moral development of human being?" [1] The purpose of this paper is to show that to be a good society, moral developments are not only necessary for developing one's own character but are also for the character formation of others. This research paper will attempt to solve the problem why Mencius' view on Moral Responsibility can be accepted as an appropriate idea for the formation of moral development of human beings.[2] The hypothetical solution will be that moral developments are dependent on not only self-cultivation but also necessary for moral education and self-moral intelligence.[3] This hypothetical solution will be proved by descriptive method[4] to represent the facts of which collected from literature review on Mencius philosophy and will be evaluated by the principle of fairness.[5] This research paper will contribute to cultivate a peaceful society develop moral cultivation and moral formations which are not only necessity but also essential factors in the human environment.[6]

Keywords: moral development, environmental conditions, self-cultivation, moral responsibility

Introduction

Man is a social animal. He lives in social groups, in communities and in society. Man cannot live, without society. Man is biologically and psychologically equipped to live in groups, in society. Society has become an essential condition for human life to arise and to continue. The essential fact is that man always belongs to a society, a group of one kind or the other, and without it, he cannot exit.

Man is by nature, not perfect. In order to be good, one needs to coach himself. To possess good morality is the paramount important aspect of man in any society. Moreover, mutual trust and respect are essential factors to live together in any civilized community. No society can flourish without a basic moral code.

Nowadays, material objects are rapidly developing. To be a sustainable development, material and mental developments are needed to go hand in hand. So, moral responsibility is an essential factor for human society. This research paper is an attempt to study the concept of moral responsibility in the view of Mencius. This view on moral responsibility will be focused as a main theme but the literature survey and other data collection will be primarily based on ancient Chinese philosophy.

Confucian ethics is not an action-based ethical theory but a virtue-based one. If "moral responsibility" is defined in a much broader sense and connected with character development and moral duty as well, indisputably, Confucian ethics provides a rich account of moral responsibility. The difference of a virtue-based theory from an action-based theory

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[1] Research Question
[2] Research Problem
[3] Hypothetical Solution
[4] Research Method
[5] Research principle
[6] Contribution

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might suggest that it requires a different theory of moral responsibility, but there is no reason to deny it in such a theory. Mencius' ethics does address those excusing conditions for moral failure in character. The purpose of this paper is to show that to be a good society, moral developments are not only responsible for one's own character but are also at least partly responsible for the character formation of others.

Research Question

Everyone wants to be a morally good person. But because of the lack of necessary environment for moral development, one might be a moral failure. A good society is necessary for being a good person. In order to be a good society, moral developments are not only necessary for one's own character but also for the character formation of others. Hence "Should Mencius' view on moral responsibility be accepted by human society for the formation of moral development of human beings?" is the research question. When we discuss Mencius' moral responsibility, first and foremost we need to study the meaning of morality, responsibility and moral responsibility.

What is 'morality'?

Morality comes from the Latin word "mores" meaning 'customs or manners', for that reason, morality lays down not only the rules and regulations of human conduct but also the ideal patterns of human character in its original meaning of the West. Morals are the prevailing standards of behavior that enable people to live cooperatively in groups. "Moral" refers to what societies sanction as right and wrong.

The most fundamental problem of ethics is what is good or bad, and what is right or wrong. One's moral standards and ideals are often in conflict with others. Many apparent conflicts in moral judgements are explained when one discovers how the judgment came to be formed.

Most people follow moral and societal guidelines. For the benefit of society, sometimes people require to sacrifice their own short-term interests. But morality, in general, is not fixed. Morality reflects the unique values of a particular group over a period of time. Historically, morality has been closely connected to religious traditions, but today its significance is equally important to the secular world. For example, businesses and government agencies have codes of ethics those employees are expected to follow.

Some philosophers make a distinction between morals and ethics. But, when talking about personal beliefs, behaviors, or principles, many people use the term moral and ethics interchangeably. So, it can be understood that morals are the principles that guide individual conduct within society. And, while morals may change over time, they remain the standards.

What is 'responsibility'?

People have social responsibilities that those things for which they are accountable; failure to discharge a responsibility renders one liable to some censure or penalty. A job, or profession, or social role will be partly defined in terms of the responsibilities it involves. The extent of responsibility not just for oneself but for others is a central topic for political and ethical theory. Understanding the nature of our causal responsibility for our own thoughts, natures, and actions is the main problem in any theory of action.

What is 'moral responsibility'?

There are different theories concerning the moral responsibility. In philosophy, moral responsibility is the morality worthy of praise and blame for one's acting or failing to act in

accordance with one's moral obligations. Deciding what counts as "morally obligatory" is a principle concern of ethics. Philosophers refer to people who have moral responsibility for an action as moral agents. Agents have the capability to reflect upon their situation, to form intentions about how they will act, and then to carry out that action.

Furthermore, moral responsibility is not the same as legal responsibility. A person is legally responsible for an event when a legal system is liable to penalize that person for that event. Although it may often be the case that when a person is morally responsible for an act, they are also legally responsible for it. The two states do not always coincide.

Human Nature in Mencius' Philosophy

Mencius is a classical Chinese Philosopher. Mencius was a native of the state of Tsou, in the present southern part of Shantung province in East China. He was linked with Confucius through his study under a disciple of Tzu-ssu, who in turn was Confucius' grandson. Mencius represents the idealistic wing of Confucianism. He was a professional teacher, like Confucius, having studied under the pupil of the grandson of Confucius. Confucius spoke very much about *jen* (human-heartedness), made a sharp distinction between *yi* (righteous-ness) and *li* (profit).

According to Mencius, there were, in his time, three other theories besides his own on this subject. The first was that human nature is neither good nor bad. The second was that human nature can be either good or bad and the third was that the nature of some men is good, and that of others is bad. The first of these theories was held by Kao Tzu, a philosopher who was contemporary with Mencius.

Mencius is well known for his philosophy of goodness of human nature. He is probably the single most influential philosopher in the Chinese tradition, in that an interpretation of his thought became the basis of the civil service examinations in China in the fourteenth century.

To understand Mencius' view on moral responsibility, we first need to discuss his famous theory that human nature is originally good. Mencius' concept of moral responsibility is based on his view of human nature.

According to Mencius, human beings are inclined to be virtuous just as water is disposed to flow downward. All human beings have the four beginnings or innate seeds of virtues: the feeling of commiseration, the feeling of shame and dislike, the feeling of deference and compliance, and the heart of right and wrong. The mind-and-heart of commiseration is the seed of benevolence. The mind-and-heart of shame and dislike is the seed of righteousness. The mind-and-heart of deference and compliance is the seed of propriety. And the mind-and-heart of right and wrong is the seed of wisdom. These four seeds are four kinds of senses or feelings. Human nature has these four seeds and they distinguish human beings from other living creatures. If they are properly grown, the person will become virtuous, just as a seed of a tree will become a tree if it is properly nurtured.

Although Mencius says that human nature is good, but that does not mean that everyone is born is with perfect wisdom. Instead, it means that everyone has some seed of virtue is innate to moral perfection. Everyone can be 'Yaon and Shun' in terms of human moral potential. "I am the wise are the same". However, being able to have a wise life is not the same as becoming tritely wide. It can be said that everyone has seed of virtue. The quality of virtue does not mean that these seeds can actually grow. Human nature does not make an individual naturally or virtuous. According to Mencius, moral development is a long and

varied process. Good seeds need to grow. One must have his or her seeds of virtues, i.e., his or her four beginnings or four feelings, properly nurtured to become a virtuous agent.[7]

Mencius' issue of moral responsibility arises within this context. If it is essential to make the seeds of virtues grow for moral development, what, then, is responsible for their growth? In the next topic, such question will be discussed in some detail.

Moral Development in Mencius Philosophy

There are two fundamental factors for the formation of moral development in Mencius' philosophy. They are (i) external or environment conditions and (ii) self-effort or self-cultivation. According to Mencius, whether one's good nature can be properly grown is dependent on both external and internal conditions. External conditions are economic, political and social environments and the internal conditions are the agent's self-attention and self-effort. As well as, the absence of self-attention or cultivation and the absence of a suitable environment are two factors responsible for the failure of the innate good nature of human beings to develop. Although the second one is up to the individual's effort, the first one is not. If one's failure in moral development is due to an external condition that is out of one's control, one can not be responsible for it. Therefore, necessary external conditions for moral development are also essential for moral responsibility.

According to Mencius, the individual cannot determine whether those external conditions for moral development can be met. Whether one can be responsible for his or her morality is not totally up to oneself. In this aspect, Mencius would agree with those contemporary Western philosophers such as Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel who believe that morality is subject to luck, and moral life is not free from external contingency.[8]

For Mencius, human nature is the same for everyone, but different people can behave differently in different external situation. In the good years, most young people behave well and in bad years one avoids evil. Such differences in behavior are due to environmental differences unlike human nature. The same point is illustrated by the metaphor of Niu Mountain.

> The trees of Niu Mountain were once beautiful. But can the mountain be regarded any longer as beautiful since, being on the border of a big state, the trees have been hewed down with axes and hatchets? Still, with the rest given them by the days and nights, and nourishment provided them by the rains and the dew, they were not without buds and sprouts springing forth. But then the cattle and the sheep pastured upon them once and again. That is why the mountain looks so bald. When people see that it is so bald, they think that there was never any timber on the mountain. Is this the true nature of the mountain? Is there not [also] a heart of humanity and righteousness originally existing in man? The way in which he loses his originally good mind is like the way in which trees are hewed down with axes and hatchets. [9]

The metaphor of Mt Niu shows that man is good by nature, but by external force man can become worse and worse. The mountain cannot be restored to its originally beauty without the change of environment due to the influence of external debris. To maintain the original natural beauty of the mountain, some external conditions need to be maintained. In the same way, to develop and preserve good human nature economic, social and political environment is very important. The environment is very important to maintain and develop

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[7]See Jiang, Xinyan, Mencius on *Human nature and Courage, "Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 24: P 265-269
[8] See Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck" P 20-40
[9]See Chan, Wing-Tsit (trans. and complied), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, P 56

good human nature. "Therefore everything will grow with proper nourishment and care, otherwise, everything will be decays.

For Mencius, humans could not survive without the necessary environmental conditions. Extreme poverty will force people to do whatever it takes to survive. Therefore, Mencius strongly believes that corrupt rulers and those who commit crimes due to extreme poverty resulting from injustice should not be blamed. Mencius also suggests that, it is the authorities who are responsible for bringing people to such a miserable life.

Mencius might not allow that for the sake of survival, who have committed crimes are completely free from responsibility for their wrong doing and character, but he is clearly saying that the ruler's failure to provide for their people's necessities of life is mainly responsible for those people's wrong doing. We may clearly see, Mencius believes that such unfortunate people are morally excused for their crimes, and the punishment imposed on them is unfair.

For Mencius, the most effective way to improve one's morals is to eliminate situations that encourage people to do bad things. In addition, the most effective way to get ethically responsible agent is through appropriate moral education that is better than legal punishment. But in practice, Mencius did not advocate the abolishing of legal penalties. And he seems not to believe that punishment is the most efficient way to stop crimes and develop morals. First, punishing criminals for the necessities of life will not stop them from committing crimes. As long as their needs are not met, they will continue to commit crime. Second, for those who commit crimes due to the weakness in their character, punishment cannot make them morally good but encourages sophisticated selfishness. They will not commit a crime when they believe that they can be caught, but they will whenever they think they can get away with it. This is in line with Confucius' following remarks:

> Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by law and punishment, and they will avoid wrong doing but will have no sense of honor and shame. .[10]

According to Mencius, those who are constantly working to survive in extreme poverty have the same human nature as other and have the potential to be moral sages, but their moral condition does not develop because of their poor living conditions. Therefore, they are objects of love and pity but not of blame. In the *Mencius* philosophy, there are many passages which show Mencius' deep sympathy for the working poor, as well as great anger against corrupt rulers.

However, for Mencius, extreme poverty was not the only external force that caused a person to lose one's good nature and becomes immoral. Mencius clearly accepts the moral relevance of socialization. Sometimes, socially corrupting can hider one's moral development to such an extent that one becomes morally blind or unavoidably embraces mistaken values. For example, if a person is surrounded by evil people all the time and has never had a chance to understand what a morally good person is, it will be impossible for him or her to know what is right and what is wrong. Just as to learn a language one's needs to have a proper language environment and a good social environment. The following passage from the *Mencius'* illustrate this point.

> If a child is placed among evil people all the time, there is no way for him or her to distinguish what is right from what is wrong and become a morally good person. In Susan Wolf's words, in such a situation, the child cannot have "a sane deep self.[11]

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[10]See Chan, Wing-Tsit: Ibid, P 22
[11]see Wolf Susan "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility, P 53-54

By "a sane deep self" refers to a person who has the ability to know right from wrong and therefore enables the agent to correct and improve himself or herself. Whether one can have a sane deep self is not up to oneself, but as long as one has a sane deep self, one is a responsible agent. Therefore, Wolf believes that one who has sane deep self may not be endless responsible for ourselves in the sense that we did not create ourselves from nothing, but one is morally responsible for oneself, because one is able to understand and appreciate right and wrong, and to change one's characters and one's actions accordingly. So one may say that a sane deep self is a necessary condition for being morally responsible, and one who has insane self is not responsible for oneself. Such a theory is completely agree with Mencius' view that some human beings are not responsible for their moral failure because they grew up in extreme poverty and bad upbringing are influences that they are incapable of improving their moral excellence.

For the above reason Mencius was very cared about social and political affair of the people because he was concerned about the influence of the environment on the moral development of a person. He advocated social change because he believed the best strategy for promoting morality in society was to win over a ruler who would provide the environment needed for moral development.

From the discussion above, in Mencius' ethics, the excusing condition for moral failure is the lack of a good economic environment or at least a poor a social environment for moral development. Basically, when people do not have an economic or social environment for their moral development, they are not responsible for their moral failure. If so, who is responsible, or at least primarily responsible for it? Logically, authorized persons have a responsibility to create or change people's economic or social environments. To release moral responsibility from those who lack the external conditions necessary for moral development and to put heavy moral responsibility on the elite, such as rulers and intellectuals, that are more responsible than others for the wellbeing of society and people's moral development are two indispensable sides of Mencius' theory of moral responsibility. Moreover rulers and intellectuals, are more responsible for the welfare of society and moral development of people.

As we studied earlier, developing good character requires at least good environment and self-effort. Rulers and intellectuals in general do not have a problem in attaining a minimally good environment (economically and socially). Then, self-cultivation is the major issue for their moral development. It can be said that an important characteristic of Mencius' ethics is the emphasis on self-cultivation. At least given a good environment, it is one's responsibility for maintaining and developing one's good nature and building on moral development. The growth of the goodness in one's nature requires one's constant self-effort. But if one's nature is disposed to virtue and if one has a minimally good environment then why does moral development require so much self-effort? The reason is that there is another factor that contribute to immorality. For those who have the least environmental conditions for the satisfaction of moral development, the main way to develop good morals is to cultivate their four seeds of morality so much that the lower part becomes minimal. Therefore, to be virtuous, one needs to build up the subline part of one's nature and transcend the lower part. Given similar environments, the reason why some people become moral but some do not is that they do not cultivate their inner selves to the same degree. So in *Ancient Chinese Philosophy*; Mencius said the following:

> Those who follow the greater qualities in their nature become great men and those who follow
> the smaller qualities in their nature become small men. …If we first build up the nobler part of

our nature, then the inferior part cannot overcome it. It is simply this that makes a man great.[12]

According to Mencius, proper environment and education are essential for development of good character. But once the goodness in one's nature has been well developed, and one's character has formed, one will be able to transcend the environment. The better one's good nature the less influential the environment will be. Therefore, when one's reaches a high moral perfection, no environment can adversely affect his moral character. So Mencius says "Only educated man can have steady heart without a livelihood". In addition, the virtuous agent can strengthen morals by overcoming and changing the bad environment. So Mencius said:

> When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent.[13]

Clearly, according to Mencius, a truly virtuous person would consider a very difficult situation and a bad environment as a way to test and strengthen his character. In general, Mencius does not deny the adverse environments impede moral development. Nevertheless, the adverse effect of the environments on virtuous agents do not have much effect on other people. Furthermore, virtuous agents can turn the negative environmental forces into positive ones to increase moral cultivation.

Results and Findings

In this research process, the research finding is that Mencius' view on moral responsibility should be accepted by human society for the formation of moral development of human being. The conception of moral responsibility in Mencius' view is that moral developments are depends on not only self-cultivation but also moral education and self-moral intelligence. Various views on the concept of moral responsibility can be found as an ethical concept.

Mencius discusses that his theory of moral responsibility finds that, there are two necessary factors for the formation of moral development which are environmental conditions and self-cultivation or self-effort. Also, a good environment is required for one to obtain sound moral beliefs and good character.

Furthermore, one not only can overcome badly environmental influences but also can convert the environment once one's morality and character are established. Moreover authorized persons have a great moral responsibility for building up a good society and producing more responsible agents. Therefore the ruling class has to practice as benevolent government and teach intellectuals to take the responsibility for the world according to Mencius. It is an important factor for rulers to build a peaceful society.

For Mencius, a truly virtuous person is already to take great responsible for the world. In other word it can be said moral responsibility as wisdom. If there is no wisdom, then there is also no moral. According to Mencius, moral responsibility is a human virtue. Virtue is a state of the human mind. What moral responsibility is depends upon human consideration.

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[12] see Chan, Wing-Tsit (trans), P 59
[13] see Chan, Wing-Tsit (trans), P 78

Conclusion

When we study the concept of moral responsibility in Mencius' philosophy, we found that self-cultivation is the foundation of the fulfillment of moral responsibility. Chinese culture is a culture of responsibility. It means that everyone, because of his or her social role, is different from others. It emphasizes the responsibilities of the states and the world as a whole. On the other hand, each person has a responsibility to build a good society. An old Chinese saying expressed this idea that "everyone is responsible for the fate of his or her country."

Therefore one's moral responsibility requires understanding one's social context. There is a close relation between one's responsibility and one's social role. Moreover, as parents have a great responsibility for the moral development and wellbeing of their children, and rulers have a great responsibility for the moral development and wellbeing of their people. If rulers fail to take on these responsibilities, they are to blame for their morals. With regard to the social role of intellectuals, their role is to educate the least ruling class and common people to be virtuous. These include establishing good code of conduct and providing direct or indirect support to good government. If they fail to do so, they are morally responsible. These responsibilities of rulers and intellectuals are not just for the past and present, but for the future.

Nowadays, humankind has been seriously polluted in heart, thoughts, views, spirit and body, thus leading to the appearance of many strange illnesses. The root cause of illness and disease can be caused by many kinds of various pollutions. If one's body and mind are pure one will not easily fall ill or easily grow old. Not to become easily ill or grow old fast, can be taken as happiness good fortune. To attain this goal, one only needs to practice mental cultivation and cultural-understanding.

In the present age information technology, technological changes take place so rapidly that the traditional thought and social patterns of man are upturned. In this way man lacks the knowledge of personal mental factor and is vague about human reality. The imbalance between material and spiritual development is the cause of gross confusion and dilemmas faced by the modern world and the man in that world. Material wealth alone cannot bring peace and happiness to man.

Mencius sees the danger of "moral-collapse" in individual and also in society. So they have made great effort, in their preaching to promote a humane, just and harmonious personality by focusing on morality. By promoting each person's morality, one can build up a happy, peaceful and harmonious society. Society is seen as a network of interlinking relationship which is held together by the performance of duties relative to each other.

Thus, in general, in Mencius' ethics, the influence of the environment on moral development, and the emphasis on responsibility coexist without any opposition. At the same time, Mencius believed both that all human beings have the same moral potential and that at least some environmental conditions are essential for moral development, there is no inconsistency for Mencius to hold both that all people are morally equal and that, practically, not all people have the same degree of moral responsibility for their moral development. So to minimize the inequality of this responsibility among people, improvements in economic, political, and social conditions must be made. Furthermore, those who will bringing about such changes in society are not only responsible for their own cultivation, but also for the world.

In Buddhism, the Buddha preached that man is self-reliant and believes in the Law of *Kamma.* Man is responsible for everything he does, good or bad. Therefore, no matter what

the circumstances, we must work hard to overcome them. That is why, self-effort is more important than good external circumstances to improve one's morals. However to improve one morality, moral cultivation and moral formation are essential factors. To distinguish right or wrong and good or bad, moral education are needed. Finally one is morally responsible for one's moral failure. Moreover everyone has responsible to be a peaceful society. If each and every individual is moral development, the world we live in which will become peaceful. That is why, moral development is important for all human being.

Acknowledgements

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