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Joseph Emmanuel D. Sta. Maria

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The Philosophy of Mencius as a Way of Life: *A Rapport between Mencian Confucianism and Pierre Hadot's Conception of Philosophy*

Joseph Sta. Maria*

Abstract

This article shows how Pierre Hadot's idea of philosophy as a way of life can be applied to Confucian philosophy. Specifically I will show how the philosophy of the Confucian thinker Mencius has two characteristics that are indicative of a philosophy that is a way of life. For Hadot, Ancient Greco-Roman philosophical schools were mainly concerned, not with philosophical discourse, but with changing their students' way of living. Based on Mencius' own words, it can be inferred that he also believed that his philosophizing was mainly about transforming people, and that he treated philosophical discourse as ancillary to this. Furthermore, Hadot believed that "spiritual exercises" were employed by Ancient Greco-Roman philosophical schools to precisely help transform the lives of their aspirants. He divides these spiritual exercises into two phases. The first is "Concentration of the I" where the aspirant ceases to identify with his conventional and vicious self. This leads to the second phase, namely, "Expansion of the I" where the aspirant becomes free to identify with the whole of reality. I suggest that spiritual exercises, or something similar, can also be seen in Mencius' teachings. In particular, Mencius' activity of "reflection and extension" can be considered a kind of "Concentration of the I," whereas his intimation of attaining unity with Heaven and the world through cultivating *qi*, can be understood as a kind of "Expansion of the I."

Keywords: Mencius, Pierre Hadot, Spiritual Exercises, Confucianism

* Joseph Sta. Maria is an Instructor of Philosophy at the Ateneo De Manila University, Philippines. His areas of interest include Classical Chinese Philosophy, Comparative Philosophy, and Virtue Ethics. E-mail: jestamaria@ateneo.edu

I. Introduction

Pierre Hadot is known for advocating that “philosophy,” as it was practiced during ancient Greek and Roman times, should be understood mainly as a way of life rather than merely the production of philosophical discourse. In antiquity, to adopt a philosophy or to become part of a philosophical school is an “existential option which demands from the individual a total change of lifestyle, a conversion of one’s entire being, and ultimately a certain desire to be and live in a certain way” (Hadot 2002, 3). This process of conversion and the practices for bringing it about are what Hadot calls “spiritual exercises” (2002, 6). Now Classical Chinese philosophy has also been considered by scholars as more of a way of life than an academic activity. For instance, in Fung Yu-Lan’s classic *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, it is stated that:

Chinese philosophers were all of them different grades of Socrates. . . . His [the Chinese Philosopher] philosophy required that he live it; he himself its vehicle. . . . It was his business to school himself continually and persistently to that pure experience in which selfishness and egocentricity were transcended, so that he would be one with the universe. (Fung 1997, 10)

It is not surprising then that some of these scholars have already applied Hadot’s ideas in analysing Chinese philosophical writings (Stalnaker 2006; Møllgaard 2007). Indeed Hadot (2002, 112, 206) himself more than once cites from the *Zhuangzi*, a Daoist philosophical text, in describing spiritual exercises. I intend to continue this dialogue between Hadot and Classical Chinese philosophy by showing that the philosophy of the Confucian thinker Mencius broadly resonates with two of Hadot’s ideas about philosophy as a way of life. These two ideas are (1) the relationship between philosophy and philosophical discourse, and (2) spiritual exercises as consisting of the two consecutive steps of “Concentration of the I” and “Expansion of the I.”

This article will thus proceed as follows: I shall first discuss the relationship between philosophy and philosophical discourse, as

articulated in Hadot's conception of philosophy as a way of life. This shall be followed by an explanation of spiritual exercises and the two aforesaid steps of Concentration and Expansion of the I. After this, I will discuss Mencius' philosophy and show how it has features that resonate with Hadot's ideas. I will also show how, despite fitting into the conception of philosophy as a way of life, Mencius' philosophy still has its own peculiar character compared to the Ancient Greco-Roman philosophies that Hadot discusses. I will then conclude with a brief consideration on how exploring philosophy as a way of life can be significant for philosophers in this current time.

II. Philosophy and Philosophical Discourse

Hadot defines philosophical discourse as “discursive thought’ expressed in written or oral language” (2002, 4–5). Examples of these include the systematic articulation of a philosopher's thought, and “dialectical” works such as the record of a dialogue or debate between philosophers. Whatever forms philosophical discourses might take, Hadot insists that in antiquity these were ultimately at the service of philosophy as a way of life. Because of the contemporary understanding of philosophy as an academic field concerned with theoretical issues, there is a temptation to recast ancient philosophy as something similar. As Hadot says:

A profound difference exists between the representations which the ancients made of *philosophia* and the representation which is usually made of philosophy today—at least in the case of the image of it which is presented to students, because of the exigencies of university teaching. They get the impression that all the philosophers they study strove in turn to invent, each in an original way, a new construction, systematic and abstract, intended somehow or other to explain the universe. . . . These theories—which one could call “general philosophy”—give rise, in almost all systems, to doctrines or criticisms of morality which, as it were, draw the consequences, both for individuals and for society, of the general principles of the system, and thus invite people to carry out a specific choice of life and adopt

a certain mode of behavior. The problem of knowing whether this choice of life will be efficacious is utterly secondary and accessory; it doesn't enter into the perspective of philosophical discourse. (2002, 2)

The current understanding of the “process” of philosophizing is that a philosopher would first come up with his systematic philosophical theory (or discourse). This would then have practical or ethical corollaries which would help people to live life accordingly. However, it was not essential to the “philosophy” that this theory be lived out. In other words, what was considered “philosophy” was basically the theory or discourse itself. Hadot claims, however, that this was not the case in ancient philosophy. For him, ancient philosophy was understood primarily as a way of life that was meant to bring about a holistic transformation of the person (2002, 3). The different philosophical schools in antiquity therefore were precisely embodiments of different ways of living. To be sure, these schools had their own set of philosophical discourses and these were an essential part of their philosophizing. Ultimately however, these discourses were secondary in that they were meant to support the way of life that a school practiced (2002, 3). Such support can be in the form of motivating students by justifying this very way of life. This can be seen for instance in the Stoic school. For the Stoics, philosophical discourse consists of physics, ethics, and logic (2002, 28). “Physics” describes the place of human beings in the cosmos or the grand scheme of things. This will have corollaries that pertain to how human beings should live and relate to each other. Such corollaries are thus laid out in the “ethics” part of philosophical discourse. Finally, logic defines the “rules of reasoning” that explain and validate the previous two parts (2002, 176). All these parts are meant to be a theoretical justification for the Stoic way of life, which in turn ultimately serves to give assurance and inspiration for the aspirant who endeavors to live out that way of life (2002, 175–176). Philosophical discourse can also serve as instructions or reminders to these aspirants. An example would be the use of maxims in the Epicurean School, one of which goes as follows: “The gods are not to be feared, Death is not to be dreaded; What is good is easy to

acquire, What is bad is easy to bear” (2002, 123). For Hadot, these maxims allow easy access to the core doctrines of a philosophical school because they are concise and are easy to memorize (2002, 123). Through use of these, aspirants can conveniently remind and galvanize themselves when it comes to living out their philosophy.

Furthermore, the notion that in antiquity living out philosophy was primary and philosophical discourse secondary was reflected by how ancient philosophers often criticized those people who were skilled at the latter but did not pay attention to the former. For instance, Diogenes Laertius records Polemon, one of the heads of Plato’s Academy, as saying:

We should exercise ourselves with facts and not with dialectical speculations; otherwise, like a man who has imbibed some little handbook on harmony but never practiced, we may be admired for our ability to pose questions, but will be at variance with ourselves in the ordering of our lives. (Laertius 2018, 213)

The upshot of this was that philosophical discourses themselves, especially those Hadot understood as spiritual exercises, were not expected to be as systematically coherent as their contemporary counterparts (Hadot 1995, 9, 105). This was particularly important for Hadot because scholars of ancient philosophical texts like himself often had a deprecatory view of their object of study since these did not match up to the systematic rigor of present-day philosophy (1995, 19). A paradigmatic example would be the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. The early translators of the *Meditations* often considered it as a fragment or a “mutilated” extant of a more organized ethical work written by the Stoic emperor (1995, 10). This was because the *Meditations*, although in some places exhibiting systematic arguments, was for the most part lacking in cohesion. In Hadot’s own words, its “sentences seem to follow one another without order, with the randomness of the impressions and states of soul of the emperor-philosopher” (1995, 10). Now this would be truly lamentable if the *Meditations* was *meant* to be a systematic treatise. However, as Hadot says, the principal purpose of philosophical discourse was not

to systematically relay data but “to produce a certain psychic effect in the reader,” that is to say, it was meant to produce in the reader certain attitudes that would support him in living the way of life he had chosen (1995, 19). The “disjointed” passages in the *Meditations* are meant to do just that by being a daily reminder to Aurelius of his Stoic principles.

Now one philosopher of antiquity that appears to defy Hadot’s claims is Aristotle. Aristotle’s emphasis on theoretical knowledge, as well as his numerous systematic theoretical writings, seems to paint him as someone for whom philosophy is the production of discourse. Hadot, however, believes that Aristotle’s philosophy can still be understood as mainly a transformative way of life, albeit a “theoretical” one (2002, 80–81). This theoretical life had for its goal the contemplation (*theoria*) of the divine and immutable first causes. The activities that Aristotle’s school engaged in were dedicated to achieving this goal. Such activities included the methodical study of nature, the enhancement of this study through dialectic discussion with colleagues, and the recording of the fruits of the study (87–88). Now these activities did not just fill a person with information. Rather, these also inculcated in aspirants certain attitudes that would make them more conducive for contemplation. An example would be the attitude of “disinterestedness” or objectivity that resulted from the attempt to study nature without personal preconceptions, as well as rational discussion with others. This objectivity in turn allowed the aspirant to detach from his conventional biases and look at reality in a clearer way (85–86). More directly, the study of nature made the aspirant conducive to contemplation because by appreciating the beauty of natural things, he can similarly gain an appreciation of the beauty of the first causes that produce or move them (83–84). However, in order to be good at studying nature, and consequently contemplation, it was not enough that one simply received the information relayed by philosophical discourse. Rather, one had to *experience* doing the study. As Aristotle says:

One might . . . ask why it is that a lad may become a mathematician, but not a philosopher or natural scientist. Probably it is because the

former subjects deal with abstractions, whereas the first principles of the two latter are grasped only as a result of experience; and the young repeat the doctrines of these without actually believing in them. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a12; Aristotle [1961] 2004, 156)

Experience was also necessary, and philosophical discourse insufficient, when it came to the secondary goal of the Aristotelian way of life, namely, living virtuously (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b4–5; Aristotle [1961] 2004, 277). As a final point of consideration, philosophical discourse was also insufficient in being the main purpose of the Aristotelian way of life because the former was a discursive activity while contemplation was non-discursive (Hadot 2002, 88).¹ Aristotle believed however that humans could not engage in contemplation permanently, and thus had to fall back on “lesser” activities such as what his school practiced. Thus, these lesser activities, including philosophical discourse, would still be part of the Aristotelian way of life—although not its most important part.

III. Spiritual Exercises: Concentration and Expansion of the “I”

The above-mentioned examples of short sayings, the *Meditations*, and even Aristotelian study, illustrate how philosophical discourse could serve as “spiritual exercises” for the philosophical aspirant. As mentioned above, spiritual exercises, or *askesis* in Ancient Greek, are those practices that are meant to bring about a transformation in the aspirant from her original state toward the ideal one posited by her school. Hadot uses the term “spiritual” to indicate that such exercises are meant to engage and change the whole person’s “psychism” which arguably means not only the person’s mind but her emotions, dispositions, and indeed her entire self (1995, 82). “Spiritual” also signifies the final goal of these exercises which, for Hadot, is for one to be elevated “to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he replaces himself with the perspective of the Whole” (1995, 82). What

¹ See Nathan R. Colaner (2015). Colaner shows how in *On the Soul* I.4 408b18–31, Aristotle distinguishes between contemplation and discursive thought.

this apparently means is that through undergoing spiritual exercises, the philosophical aspirant achieves a kind of unity with the universe which then allows her to see and value things precisely from the “point of view” of the cosmos. The activities that fall under spiritual exercise are many, examples being “research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*) . . . meditations (*meletai*), therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things . . . and the accomplishment of duties” (Hadot 1995, 84). Despite this variety, the process of spiritual exercise can be divided into two broad steps. The first is “Concentration of the I” which eventually leads to the second, namely, “Expansion of the I.” Let me begin with the first.

Hadot describes the “Concentration of the I” as “the movement by which the ‘I’ concentrates itself upon itself and discovers that it is not what it had thought. It ceases to be conflated with the objects to which it had become attached” (2002, 190). In other words, this phase is where the aspirant detaches from his conventional, and often vicious, likes and dislikes. As such “Concentration of the I” often involved exercises wherein the aspirant denies himself pleasures that he has been habituated to. For instance, Platonic askesis “consisted of renouncing the pleasures of the flesh and adopting a specific dietary regime” (190). The Cynic askesis on the other hand “advocated enduring hunger, cold, and insults, as well as eliminating all luxury, comfort, and artifices of civilization, in order to cultivate independence and stamina” (190). Besides these activities that had to do with the body, askesis also heavily involved the mind. Such mental exercises included the continuous recollection of and meditation on precisely the principles which remind the aspirant that he should not attach himself to his base desires. Such principles might be in the form of a concise maxim as already shown above. It might also be articulated in a more elaborate way such as Marcus Aurelius’ description of the repulsiveness of the conventional pleasures of food, clothing, and sex, as seen in his *Meditations*:

This is the carcass of a fish; this of a bird; and this of a hog. And again more generally; This phalernum, this excellent highly commended

wine, is but the bare juice of an ordinary grape. This purple robe, but sheep's hairs, dyed with the blood of shellfish. So for coitus, it is but the attrition of an ordinary base entrail, and the excretion of a little vile snivel, with a certain kind of convulsion. (Aurelius 1800, 79–80)

The purpose of this graphic depiction is to engage the emotions and imagination of the aspirant and not just his understanding. In this way, the aspirant is indeed transformed in a holistic fashion. As Hadot says (1995, 85): “We must also associate our imagination and affectivity with the training of our thought. Here, we must bring into play all the psychagogic techniques and rhetorical methods of amplification. We must formulate the rule of life to ourselves in the most striking and concrete way.” When it comes to the Aristotelian school, the collaborative and dialectic study of nature may also be understood as *askesis* in the sense that one is led outside of one's own personal biases towards a more objective view of reality.

This more objective or universal view is then what the “Concentration of the I” should eventually lead to. That is to say, the “Expansion of the I” is precisely when the self achieves “the perspective of the whole” mentioned above. Having detached from his conventional biases and desires, the aspirant now becomes free to grasp the totality of the universe and his relation to it. This then leads to the sense of becoming *one* with the universe or of seeing things from the universal point of view. Intimations of “Expansion of the I” can be seen from what Aristotle says in *Parts of Animals*:

There is a story which tells how some visitors once wished to meet Heracleitus [*sic*], and when they entered and saw him in the kitchen, warming himself at the stove, they hesitated; but Heracleitus said, “Come in; don't be afraid; there are gods even here.” In like manner, we ought not to hesitate nor to be abashed, but boldly to enter upon our researches concerning animals of every sort and kind, knowing that in not one of them is Nature or Beauty lacking. (Aristotle 1937, 101)

The context of this passage is that Aristotle is responding to a claim that the study of animals will involve exploring unattractive things since some animals appear repulsive to humans. Aristotle's reply is

that the student with a truly philosophic spirit will see that beauty is in all animals because he will realize that even the meanest of them are nature's works of art and, ultimately, the effect of the divine first causes. In other words, because such a student has transcended his own conventionally human point of view, he will be able to see things from a universal perspective. And this perspective precisely shows that the presence and beauty of the divine can be found even in the seemingly ugliest of animals, just like how Heraclitus saw the gods in all things (Hadot 2002, 85–86). This universal perspective is also indicated in the *Theaetetus* where Socrates describes the philosopher's mind as being "borne in all directions . . . 'both below the earth,' and measuring the surface of the earth, and 'above the sky,' studying the stars, and investigating the universal nature of everything that is, each in its entirety" (*Theaetetus* 173e–174a; Plato 1921, 121). In the *Republic* too, Socrates describes the philosophical person as seeking "integrity and wholeness in all things human and divine" (*Republic* 486a; Plato [1935] 1942, 9).

The Stoics and Epicureans also write in like terms. Lucretius (1910, 29) describes Epicurus as one who was able to "burst through the close-set bolts upon the door of nature," and to pass "far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traverse . . . the boundless whole." Lucretius (1910, 107) describes his own philosophical experience in the same manner, saying, "The terrors of the mind fly away, the walls of the world part asunder, I see things moving on through all the void . . . nature is made so clear and manifest, laid bare to sight on every side." On the other hand, Marcus Aurelius reminds himself of this ideal of unity with the universe in his *Meditations*: "Let this then be thy first ground, that thou art part of that universe, which is governed by nature. Then secondly, that to those parts that are of the same kind and nature as thou art, thou hast relation of kindred" (Aurelius 1800, 69). Interestingly, a consequence of this unity is improvement of moral relations towards others. As Aurelius says:

As then I bear in mind that I am a part of such an [*sic*] universe, I shall not be displeased with anything that happens. And as I have relation of kindred to those parts that are of the same kind and

nature that I am, so I shall be careful to do nothing that is prejudicial to the community, but in all my deliberations shall they that are of my kind ever be; and the common good, that, which all my intentions and resolutions shall drive unto, as that which is contrary unto it, I shall by all means endeavour to prevent and avoid. (Aurelius 1800, 70)

This squares with Hadot's understanding that philosophy as a way of life also aims to perfect our relations with our fellow human beings, and that this perfection "culminates in love and respect for others" (2002, 220). Indeed, Hadot even believes that the motivation behind choosing schools of philosophy is ultimately "the love of mankind" (220). This "social" motivation also helps give context to the spiritual exercises themselves in that these are not really done by the philosophical aspirants alone. Rather, these are facilitated to them by their teachers who in turn see their vocation as including the task of bettering their fellow human beings precisely because of the philosophers' love of mankind (220).

IV. Mencius' Philosophy as a Way of Life

1. *Philosophical Background*

Mencius (372–289 BC) is widely regarded as the philosophical successor of Confucius who both defended and enhanced the latter's thought. Perhaps a brief description of Confucius' philosophy is appropriate then before continuing. Confucius (551–479 BC) lived during the "Spring and Autumn" period of Ancient China. This was an age where the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC) was declining in political power. Real control over China no longer belonged to the king but to the feudal lords and ministers who gradually usurped power from him. One way this usurpation manifested was through their appropriation of ritual activities that were meant only for the king.² More seriously however, were the frequent wars that the feudal

² Confucius would often criticize these acts of appropriation. See *Analects* 3.1, 3.2, 3.7; Confucius (2003, 17–18).

states waged against each other in hopes of gaining more territory and power. Many would perish and be reduced to destitution because of this constant belligerence. In light of this cultural and moral decay, Confucius proposed his own ethical vision—indeed his own *dao* (道) or “Way” of life—that would hopefully rejuvenate society. This vision mainly aimed for development of moral virtues foremost of which was *ren* (仁), which can be understood as goodness or benevolence (Confucius 2003, 238). There are in turn two means to cultivate these virtues. The first is by practicing such virtues in the family setting. For Confucius, the family is where one first experiences and learns virtuous behavior (*Analects* 1.1; Confucius 2003, 1). Thus it is by being consistent in one’s virtuous treatment of one’s family that one might become a moral being. The second means of cultivating virtue is by devoting one’s self to the formative elements of traditional Zhou culture (Slingerland 2009, 117–120). This specifically means reading and reflecting on texts traditionally regarded as resources for moral education, and by learning proper ritual conduct. Unfortunately, despite his attempts, Confucius was not able to get himself employed by those in power and thus he could not bring about his vision. Still his teachings and aspirations lived on in his disciples and would ultimately be passed on to Mencius.

Mencius however, who lived more than a century after Confucius, faced a quite different challenge than that of the latter. Aside from the chaos still being brought about by the Zhou’s decline, Mencius also had to contend with other schools of philosophy which had developed after Confucius’ death (*Mencius* 3B9.9–9.10; Mencius 2008, 85). These schools questioned the legitimacy of the Confucian Way in many respects. For the sake of brevity, let me cite only one of their most pressing criticisms, namely, the necessity of Confucian rituals for human flourishing. One school of philosophy, Mohism, criticized Confucian rituals as a waste of resources and manpower. For instance, Confucius promoted the traditional observance of a three-year mourning period after the death of one’s parents (*Analects* 17.21; Confucius 2003, 209–210). For Confucius this was the ritually appropriate display of the virtue of filial piety. The Mohists however argued that such a practice leads to incredible unproductivity and that it is

ultimately detrimental to the well-being of the community (Fraser 2009, 149). Another school of philosophy, Yangism, indirectly put into question Confucian rituals through its theory that humans are naturally egoistic (*Mencius* 7A26; Mencius 2008, 178). For the Yangists, what is most natural for a human being is to preserve his own body. As such, other-regarding attitudes, like the Confucian virtues, should be shunned. This of course entailed that the entire Confucian program of moral development, including performance of traditional rituals, are “unnatural” and thus should not be carried out.

It was in the face of these threats that Mencius articulated the philosophical idea he is most famous for, namely, that human nature is good (*Mencius* 6A6; Mencius 2008, 149–150). By this he meant that, contrary to the Yangists, humans have in their hearts natural other-regarding feelings such as compassion and respect. These feelings, along with human nature itself, are given to man by Heaven, the supreme cosmic and normative power which Mencius sometimes equated with the world (*Mencius* 2B1; Mencius 2008, 50). To show that humans have these other-regarding feelings naturally, Mencius posed his famous thought experiment of a child about to fall in a well (*Mencius* 2A6.3; Mencius 2008, 46). For Mencius, anyone who sees such a child would surely feel a sense of alarm and compassion. And these feelings would not be prompted by calculated, self-serving motives such as wanting praise for saving the child or annoyance at the child’s cries should he fall. Rather, the feelings would be spontaneous and would intend the child’s well-being itself. It was this idea of human nature’s goodness that Mencius utilized to defend the Confucian Way. For him, the other-regarding feelings, although indicating the goodness of human nature, were not yet its full actualization. He compared these feelings to sprouts that needed further cultivation in order to “grow” into moral virtues such as benevolence (*Mencius* 2A6.5–6.7; Mencius 2008, 46–47). And the means to cultivate them was precisely the Confucian Way. So for example, all human beings have indeed the natural feeling of compassion. However, because it is just a feeling it can be inconsistent and the person experiencing the feeling might also not be able to express it in the proper manner. The Confucian Way then could help

develop these feelings into virtues by galvanizing a person to habitually engage in compassionate or caring acts, beginning with those whom he already cares for, such as his family. Through this, the feeling of compassion will mature into the primary Confucian virtue of benevolence. Moreover, by educating a person in traditional ritual forms, Confucianism provides the proper, culturally-approved manner in which one could express these feelings. It was in this way then that Mencius defended Confucian rituals, that is to say, these served as a means to develop and express the moral capacities of human nature. Thus they were worth investing and participating in, despite the high material cost they might entail.

2. Philosophical Discourse in Mencius

Let me now proceed to how Mencius' philosophy appears to fit with Hadot's conception of philosophy as a way of life. As mentioned above, one of the characteristics of Ancient Greco-Roman philosophy which indicates that it is a way of life, is that it aims primarily at transforming a person and only secondarily at philosophical discourse. Does Mencius' philosophizing have a similar characteristic? I believe so, and this can be seen in what Steven Geisz (2008, 191–194) considers to be Mencius' "strategic-pragmatic" view of language. For Geisz, this means that Mencius' use of language "treats truth and descriptive adequacy as secondary to the shaping of his audience's behavior *by any means available*—so long as these means are consistent with the overall Confucian *dao* he is promoting" (2008, 192). Geisz' hypothesis stems from two bases. One is the opinion of certain contemporary scholars that Classical Chinese philosophy "held a conception of language that saw it as having an overriding function of regulating behavior" (Geisz 2008, 191). This is a corollary of another commonly agreed characteristic of Classical Chinese philosophy, namely, its emphasis on the practical/ethical (Slingerland 2003, 3). The second and more significant basis is Mencius' own words. There are several instances where what Mencius says hints or indicates that his view of language is indeed strategic-pragmatic. One example is his awareness of his own task. When it was made known

to him that he was considered as someone “fond of [philosophical] disputation,” Mencius passionately replies:

How can I be fond of disputation? I simply cannot do otherwise. . . . If the Ways of Yang Zhu and Mozi [the founders of Yangism and Mohism respectively] do not cease, and the Way of Kongzi [Confucius] is not made evident, then evil doctrines will dupe the people and obstruct benevolence and righteousness. . . . Because I fear this, I preserve the Way of the former sages, fend off Yang Zhu and Mozi, and get rid of specious words, so that evil doctrines will be unable to arise. If they arise in one’s heart, they are harmful in one’s activities. If they arise in one’s activities, they are harmful in governing. . . . How could I be fond of disputation? I simply cannot do otherwise.³ (*Mencius* 3B9.1–9.14; Mencius 2008, 83–86)

Here Mencius explicitly says that his main goal is to promote the Confucian Way and that this is the reason why he engages in debate with the other philosophical schools. In other words, what is most important for him is the *way people live* and how such ways-of-life might be transformed, for better or for worse. Philosophical discourse was contingent on this primary goal and was not meant to be engaged in for its own sake.

Perhaps a more explicit indication of Mencius’ use of strategic-pragmatic language is when he talks about how the morally accomplished person or “gentleman” should speak (Geisz 2008, 199–201). Mencius says:

The mouth in relation to flavors, the eyes in relation to sights, the ears in relation to notes, the nose in relation to odors, the four limbs in relation to comfort—these are matters of human nature, but they are also fated. Nonetheless, a gentleman does not refer to them as “human nature.” Benevolence between father and son, righteousness between ruler and minister, propriety between guest and host . . . these are fated, but they also involve human nature. Nonetheless, a

³ 予豈好辯哉? 予不得已也 . . . 楊墨之道不息, 孔子之道不著, 是邪說誣民, 充塞仁義也 . . . 吾為此懼, 閑先聖之道, 距楊墨, 放淫辭, 邪說者不得作。作於其心, 害於其事; 作於其事, 害於其政 . . . 豈好辯哉? 予不得已也。

gentleman does not refer to them as “fated.”⁴ (*Mencius* 7B24.1–4.2; Mencius 2008, 189)

To understand this passage, a closer look at the concepts of “nature (*xing* 性)” and “fate (*ming* 命)” is needed. Mencius’ idea of nature can already be gleaned from what he says above about the other-regarding feelings of human beings since these feelings are merely his more specific description of human nature. Again, these feelings are inherent in human beings but can be further developed into virtues through participation in the Confucian Way. Thus nature for Mencius can be understood as something inherent that can be further cultivated or perfected through human agency. As for fate, Mencius has this to say: “When no one extends to it, yet it is reached—this is fate”⁵ (*Mencius* 5A6.2; Mencius 2008, 125). This means that fate is something that is achieved even without the intervention of human agency, that is to say, it is something inevitable. In the above passage, what Mencius seems to be saying is that both a human being’s sensuous and moral inclinations are natural (meaning they are inherent but can be further cultivated) and are fated (meaning they will inevitably arise at one point). However, in order to urge people to live according to the Confucian Way, it is not sensuous inclinations that should be cultivated but moral ones. Therefore, the gentleman should not speak of moral inclinations as if they are fated and require no effort to bring about. Conversely, he should not call sensuous inclinations natural, lest the idea arise that these inclinations should be the ones to be cultivated.⁶ This meaning of the passage then suggests two things about Mencius. First is that he is consciously painting an inaccurate picture of human nature whenever he talks about it as being good by virtue of possessing the four sprouts. This is because he knows that humans also have non-moral feelings or inclinations that are just as natural. The second is that the reason behind this inaccurate portrayal is his belief that motivating people to follow the

⁴ 口之於味也，目之於色也，耳之於聲也，鼻之於臭也，四肢之於安佚也，性也，有命焉，君子不謂性也。仁之於父子也，義之於君臣也，禮之於賓主也，智之於賢者也，聖人之於天道也，命也，有性焉，君子不謂命也。

⁵ 莫之致而至者，命也。

⁶ See also Geisz (2008, 199–200) and Mencius (2008, 189–190).

Confucian way is more important than giving a faithful philosophical anthropology. In other words, for Mencius, living out a philosophy is primary while philosophical discourse is secondary.

One last area where Mencius' strategic-pragmatic use of language can be inferred is from his very manner of debating with rival philosophers. An example would be Mencius' disputation with Gaozi (*Mencius* 6A1.1–4.5; Mencius 2008, 143–147). This debate is especially significant because this is where Mencius' theory of the goodness of human nature appears prominently. However, modern scholars have expressed their disappointment in how this most distinctive idea of Mencian philosophy should be defended by the philosopher himself in such a dismal way (Hansen 1992, 154; Waley 1939, 68). Indeed, just as Ancient Greco-Roman philosophy might be criticized by contemporary thinkers for lack of being systematic and logically consistent, current scholars of Chinese thought have also criticized Mencius for his apparently incompetent argumentation. For one thing, both Mencius and Gaozi in talking about human nature mostly use analogies. According to Arthur Waley, however, such analogies are irrelevant, "most of which can be used to disprove what they are intended to prove" (1939, 68). Human nature is, for instance, compared to water. For Gaozi, human nature is ethically neutral and can be made either good or bad depending on external influence. This is like water which has no inherent direction but can be made to flow either right or left depending on the path that is carved for it. However, Mencius' response is that water has an inherent direction, namely downwards, and that human nature's tendency towards goodness is like this downward tendency. Although Mencius might score points at being witty enough to use his opponent's metaphor to his own advantage, ultimately the response obviously does not "prove" that human nature is good since it is all based on (irrelevant) analogy. For Geisz though, Mencius might not have really been aiming at giving a robust argument for the goodness of human nature. Rather, he might simply have wanted his audience to consider and be inspired by the idea that human nature is good—and indeed his audience will likely be led to do so since Mencius appears as the "winner" of the debate (Geisz 2008, 208). Something similar can apply to the aforesaid

thought experiment on the child falling into a well. As Geisz states, although Mencius says that everyone would naturally experience the feeling of compassion and alarm upon seeing the child, he does not actually give reasons to support that claim (2008, 209–210). In other words, Mencius *merely asserts* that all humans are naturally compassionate without arguing for it. Again it might be inferred that what Mencius really intended is for people to simply consider the idea and be galvanized by it. Indeed, perhaps Mencius intended the thought experiment to serve a similar purpose to that of the Stoic maxims, namely, a way for aspirants to be reminded of the goal of their philosophy, which in the case of Confucianism is living compassionately and benevolently.

3. Spiritual Exercise in Mencius

As mentioned above, spiritual exercises are the means to attain the ideal state posited by the philosophical schools, and these exercises can be divided into the two phases of Concentration and Expansion of the I. Mencius also has his “means” for one to be transformed more into the Confucian ideal. Specifically, Mencius proposes a practice that might be called “reflection and extension” in order to develop the natural moral potential of the human being. I believe that this practice resonates with the “Concentration of the I” that Hadot speaks of as the first phase of spiritual exercises. On the other hand, Mencius also speaks of how the effect of this reflection and extension (and practicing the Confucian Way in general) leads to a state of greater unity with the universe. I believe this parallels Hadot’s “Expansion of the I.” Let me begin first with “reflection and extension.” Perhaps one of the clearest instances where this practice can be seen is the story of Mencius’ dialogue with King Xuan concerning an ox (*Mencius* 1A7.3–7.13; Mencius 2008, 7–11). I will start with that part of the story which portrays “reflection.” Mencius meets King Xuan and the latter asks whether he has what it takes to become caring towards his people and in that way become a true king. The king asks this because he does not himself believe he can become this kind of person, considering that he has many self-

serving vices such as fondness for belligerence, sexual pleasure, and material wealth. Mencius, however, believes that the king indeed has what it takes to become a caring person. The king asks how, and Mencius replies by telling him about an incident that he has heard wherein the king supposedly spared an ox about to be ritually sacrificed, and instead substituted it for a lamb. Mencius asks if this incident is true and the king answers in the affirmative. Mencius then replies that this is proof that the king's heart has what it takes to become caring since this shows that it, as with the hearts of all human beings, has the natural feeling of compassion. Mencius also says that that the explanation given by other people for the king sparing the ox—namely that the king did it out of stinginess—is false. This makes the king realize that he himself did not know why he spared the ox. This, in turn, prompts him to recall and re-examine the incident so that he could know what indeed his motivation was. After a moment of introspection, he agrees with Mencius that indeed he spared the ox out of compassion. He then praises Mencius for helping him understand his heart.

In this dialogue, Mencius leads King Xuan to precisely “reflect” on an instance where he showed compassion. This entails remembering the instance but also examining it in such a way that the one who reflects might attain some moral insight about it which he did not have previously. In fact, the insight that the king gains is that he is not someone whose feelings and desires only correspond to base pleasures like sensuality and wealth. Rather, he also has the “heart” or moral feeling of compassion (Slingerland 2003, 142). This fits with Hadot's description of “Concentration of the I” which again is “the movement by which the ‘I’ concentrates itself upon itself and discovers that it is not what it had thought” (2002, 190). Moreover, the king has also arguably realized that this feeling of compassion is most natural to him. This is because, through reflecting, the king realizes that his feeling of compassion was so spontaneous that he did not even know that such a feeling was the motive behind his sparing of the ox (Slingerland 2003, 143). In other words, he discovers that his feeling of compassion is something inherent or natural. This can then galvanize the king to develop this natural moral feeling and also

inspire him to distance himself from his immoral inclinations, since now he has become aware that there is more to his nature than these inclinations. This, again, fits with Hadot's description of "Concentration of the I," where the self "ceases to be conflated with the objects to which it had become attached" (2002, 190).

The dialogue however is not yet done. The question remains as to how the king can develop this natural moral feeling. This is where the notion of "extension" comes in. After praising Mencius for helping him discover his heart, King Xuan then asks how this would suffice to become a true king who cares for his subjects. Mencius, who by now seems to be a philosophical mentor facilitating *askesis* to his student, replies by giving analogies. He compares the king's ability to show compassion to an ox but not his people, to someone who claims to be able to lift 500 pounds but not a feather, and also to someone who claims to see the tip of an autumn hair but not a wagon of firewood. Mencius then claims that in all these cases the failure to do something stems not from lack of ability but from unwillingness. The king then asks how one can distinguish from these two. Mencius replies by saying that tucking Mount Tai under one's arm and leaping over the North Sea is something one is truly unable to do. However, collecting kindling for an elderly person is something one is able to do and thus one who claims to be unable to do it is really just unwilling. Mencius then says that the king's unwillingness to be caring to his people is analogous to this latter case. Here we see that Mencius employs both logical reasoning and exaggerated imagery (carrying a mountain, jumping over the sea) to convince the king that he is indeed capable of exercising compassion to his people and thus become a true king. This can be related to what Hadot (1995, 85) mentioned above on how spiritual exercises should use "all the psychagogic techniques and rhetorical methods of amplification" in effecting transformation. Finally Mencius says:

Treat your elders as elders, and extend it to the elders of others; treat your young ones as young ones, and extend it to the young ones of others, and you can turn the world in the palm of your hand. The *Odes* say, "He set an example for his little woman, It extended to

his brothers, and so he controlled his clan and state.” This means that he simply took this feeling and applied it to that. Hence, if one extends one’s kindness, it will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas. If one does not extend one’s kindness, one will lack the wherewithal to care for one’s wife and children. That in which the ancients greatly exceeded others was no other than this. They were simply good at extending what they did. In the present case your kindness is sufficient to reach animals, but the effects do not reach the commoners. Why is this case alone different?⁷ (*Mencius* 1A7.12; Mencius 2008, 11)

Here we see Mencius suggests a way of proceeding in which the king can more easily cultivate his care for others. This is by using his care for those whom he already loves (or finds easy to love) as an analogy for caring for others. Indeed, this is arguably what Mencius has been doing all along in making the king reflect on the ox incident. In other words, Mencius wants the king to reflect on those instances where he felt care, and through this reflection, galvanize himself (cognitively and affectively) into, precisely, extending this care to those whom he has not yet learned to care for. Through this method, one can habituate oneself in virtue and thus becomes less identified with one’s previous conventional (and vicious) state. This, again, can be considered as part of “Concentration of the I.”

There is also an element in Mencius’ philosophy that corresponds to the “Expansion of the I.” Again, this expansion is the outcome of living out the practices included in the “Concentration of the I,” and it entails gaining a sense of unity with the universe. For Mencius, unity with the universe or Heaven seems to be the ultimate outcome of understanding and exercising the moral nature of the heart. This is hinted when he says that the gentleman or morally accomplished person “flows with Heaven above and Earth below”⁸ (*Mencius* 7A13.3; Mencius 2008, 174). Now the reason for this is that,

⁷ 老吾老，以及人之老；幼吾幼，以及人之幼。天下可運於掌。《詩》云：『刑于寡妻，至于兄弟，以御于家邦。』言舉斯心加諸彼而已。故推恩足以保四海，不推恩無以保妻子。古之人所以大過人者無他焉，善推其所為而已矣。今恩足以及禽獸，而功不至於百姓者，獨何與？

⁸ 上下與天地同流。

as said above, human nature and its moral feelings are given by Heaven. Thus by cultivating this nature one aligns with Heaven's will and by extension the way of the universe. Mencius more explicitly states this when he says:

To fully fathom one's heart is to understand nature. To understand one's nature is to understand Heaven. To preserve one's heart and nourish one's nature is the way to serve Heaven. To not become conflicted over the length of one's life but to cultivate oneself and await one's fate is the way to take one's stand on fate.⁹ (*Mencius* 7A1.1-1.3; Mencius 2008, 171)

Here Mencius portrays that a person's ideal state is in thoroughly understanding and activating his nature, which simultaneously means being cognitively and volitionally united with Heaven, the force that guides the universe. Since one is united with that which guides everything, one need not worry even about death.

Perhaps Mencius' most elaborate statement that implies "Expansion of the I" is when he discusses his "floodlike *qi*" to his disciple Gongsun Chou. It is best to cite the entire dialogue:

Gongsun Chou next asked, "May I ask wherein you excel, Master?" Mencius replied, "I understand doctrines. I am good at cultivating my floodlike *qi*. Gongsun Chou continued, "May I ask what is meant by 'floodlike *qi*'?" Mencius replied, "It is difficult to explain. It is a *qi* that is supremely great and supremely unyielding. If one cultivates it with uprightness and does not harm it, it will fill up the space between Heaven and Earth. . . . It is produced by accumulated righteousness. It cannot be obtained by a seizure of righteousness. If some of one's actions leave one's heart unsatisfied, it will starve.¹⁰ (*Mencius* 2A11-14; Mencius 2008, 38-39)

What Mencius means has been the subject of much discussion among interpreters. The concept of "*qi*" itself might prove difficult to under-

⁹ 盡其心者，知其性也。知其性，則知天矣。存其心，養其性，所以事天也。殀壽不貳，修身以俟之，所以立命也。

¹⁰ 敢問夫子惡乎長？曰：我知言，我善養吾浩然之氣。敢問何謂浩然之氣？曰：難言也。其為氣也，至大至剛，以直養而無害，則塞于天地之間。 . . . 是集義所生者，非義襲而取之也。行有不慊於心，則餒矣。

stand for those outside of East Asian culture. Among English translations it has been described variously as “ether,” “material force,” and “psychophysical stuff” (Mencius 2008, xxxviii). Indeed *qi* has been understood differently by Chinese philosophers themselves depending on the time in which they lived. According to Bryan Van Norden, at least in Mencius’ era, *qi* was understood as “a kind of fluid, found in the atmosphere and in the human body, closely connected to the kind and intensity of one’s emotional reaction” (Mencius 2008, xxxviii). Perhaps a simple way of understanding *qi* is to consider it the equivalent of “air” in the common saying “There is tension in the air.” This example indicates the reciprocal relationship between *qi* and emotion. Similar to how a tense air can both be caused by *and cause*, strong emotions, *qi* is also something that is produced and produces emotion (Mencius 2008, xxxviii–xxxix). In Mencius’ quote above, he implies that the “floodlike *qi*” is produced by the satisfaction that comes with doing righteous deeds. Eventually, if further cultivated, this *qi* would permeate all the world. This can be understood to mean that living out the Confucian Way, through cultivation of the nascent moral feeling by way of “reflection and extension,” would ultimately lead to a feeling of oneness with the universe. This process must be continuous and the Confucian aspirant must be unflagging in living a righteous life according to his philosophy. Still the reward in the end appears worth the undertaking since one will be able to experience a supreme, mystical, kind of joy in being united to all. This can be seen when Mencius says, “All the 10,000 things are there in me. There is no greater joy than to find, on self-examination, that I am true to myself”¹¹ (Mencius 7A4.1; Mencius 2003, 146).

V. Mencius’ Distinctiveness

Despite fitting into Hadot’s conception of philosophy as a way of life, there are still features of Mencius’ philosophy that distinguishes it from its Ancient Greco-Roman counterparts. One such feature is

¹¹ 萬物皆備於我矣。反身而誠，樂莫大焉。

its “other-orientedness.” By “other-orientedness,” I simply mean that Mencius’ philosophy chiefly aims to lead people towards enhancing the well-being of others. This can be seen in the highest value of the Mencian Way, namely, *ren* or benevolence, which in turn is a virtue of being good *to others*. This is unlike some schools of Ancient Greco-Roman philosophy which tend to ultimately aim at individual well-being, like personal tranquility (Long [1974] 1986, 4).¹² This difference has implications for the spiritual exercises of these philosophies and how they are understood. For instance, Stoic askesis includes detachment from material pleasure as could be seen in the above example of Aurelius’ *Meditations*. This is in the service of attaining the goal in Stoicism which is the aforesaid tranquillity. In other words, the Stoic must detach himself from external goods so that he will be unperturbed by their possible loss and therefore have indestructible inner tranquility (Aurelius 2007, 130). On the other hand, Mencius also speaks about reducing desires for material pleasure. However this is not because it ultimately impedes one’s personal tranquility but because excessively entertaining these desires distracts a person from cultivating oneself to be benevolent (*Mencius* 6A14–15.2; Mencius 2008, 155–156). Mencius would on occasion even encourage people to enjoy material goods as long as they share these with the less-fortunate (*Mencius* 1A2.1–2.3; Mencius 2008, 2–3).

Another differentiating feature between Mencius and some Ancient Greco-Roman philosophies would be the kind of knowledge that they ultimately strove for. For some schools in antiquity, the knowledge that is most sought for is that of immaterial, immutable, universal entities, such as the forms in the case of Platonism. On the

¹² This does not necessarily contradict Hadot’s claim above that philosophers were motivated by “love of mankind” because the goal of a philosophy can be distinct from what motivates a person to pursue it. For instance, although Stoicism may have as a goal one’s individual tranquility, the Stoic aspirant might pursue Stoicism so that he can teach others how to attain this tranquility, out of love for them. This also need not go against Hadot’s other claim that living out Ancient Greco-Roman philosophies “culminates in love and respect for others” because this can be an effect of the philosophy’s main goal. For example, attaining Stoic tranquility might lead to a more enhanced love of neighbor because one is free from needless anxieties that hamper one’s care for others.

other hand, followers of Mencius would have likely prized a sort of empathic practical wisdom that allowed them to respond with proper benevolence in a given situation. Again, this difference shows in the spiritual exercises of the respective philosophies. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates talks about what is arguably a spiritual exercise, namely, “purification.” He says:

The lovers of knowledge, then, I say, perceive that philosophy . . . encourages it gently and tries to set it free, pointing out that the eyes and the ears and the other senses are full of deceit, and urging it to withdraw from these, except in so far as their use is unavoidable, and exhorting it to collect and concentrate itself within itself, and to trust nothing except itself and its own abstract thought of abstract existence; and to believe that there is no truth in that which it sees by other means . . . since everything of that kind is visible and apprehended by the senses, whereas the soul itself sees that which is invisible. . . . Now the soul of the true philosopher believes that it must not resist this deliverance, and therefore it stands aloof from pleasures and lusts and griefs and fears. (*Phaedo* 82d–83b; Plato [1914] 2005, 289)

Here it can be inferred that purification is an activity where the aspirant attempts to bar from his consciousness all sensory data in order to focus more on non-sensory objects or concepts. He also detaches himself from any dispositions related to sensory objects so that he is indifferent from the “lusts and griefs and fears” that these objects might cause him. The purpose of this purification is to allow the soul to ultimately behold the non-sensory essences or forms of things. In contrast to Platonic purification, the Mencian exercise of “reflection” very much utilizes sensory data in the act of reflective remembering. King Xuan in recollecting the scene where he showed compassion to the ox would of course recount the scene’s sensory properties. Also, in contrast to the Platonic aspirant who detaches not only from the sensory data but also from the dispositions or emotions associated with it, King Xuan would likely rekindle the feeling of compassion that he felt during that scene because the emotion is triggered by the scene and is part of it. Furthermore, unlike purification, the practice

of reflection aims to build in King Xuan the ability, not to see immaterial essences, but to respond to future cases that require compassion since by repeatedly remembering one scenario where he showed compassion, he might realize how other scenarios are similar to it.¹³ Thus the exercise of reflection ultimately contributes to the above-mentioned empathic practical wisdom valued by the Mencian Way.

Related to this, another difference between Mencius' philosophy and that of its more theoretical Greco-Roman counterparts is that, for the latter, one way of "Expanding the I" is through scientific study of the universe. By doing this the philosopher is led to transcend the smallness of his humanity and enlarge himself by seeing things from the universal point of view. The abovementioned description of the philosopher in the *Theaetetus*, as well as Aristotle's account of the study of animals, already implies this. Another example is the Stoic Seneca's defence of physics. He says:

"[The philosopher's mind] watches the rising and the setting of the stars, and their differing and harmonious paths; it observes where each star first reveals its light to earth, where its zenith . . . is, to what point it descends. . . . To look into all this, to learn about it, to brood over it—is this not to transcend one's mortality and be registered with a higher status? 'What use will that be to you?' you say. If nothing else, at least this: I shall know that everything is puny when I have measured god." (Seneca 2010, 138–139)

In contrast, studying the cosmos as means to expand one's self seems to be absent from Mencius' thought. For him, it is by accumulating righteous deeds that one's *qi* expands to fill the world. Again, Mencius is not precise in describing this process but if a little speculation is allowed, this is how I think it goes: As the Mencian aspirant becomes more successful in following Heaven by practicing virtue, he becomes more familiar or attuned precisely to the ways of Heaven. However, since Heaven's order permeates the world, then this leads also to a familiarity with the world itself. To use an analogy, and one that is

¹³ See Ivanhoe (2002, 221–236).

inspired by Mencius,¹⁴ imagine a person who has just been newly introduced to a dance. This person will initially feel unfamiliar and even alienated from the dance and his fellow dancers. But as he practices the dance more, his familiarity with it increases. This sense of familiarity then gives him a feeling of confidence and of being “at home” with the dance and his fellow dancers. This feeling in turn encourages him towards further mastering the dance. Eventually, he might achieve such a high appreciation and mastery of it, that whenever he dances, he no longer experiences any incongruence between his self on the one hand, and his fellow dancers and the dance itself on the other. In a manner of speaking, he has become “one” with them. This, in turn, might be similar to experience of the Mencian aspirant. The more he follows the ways of Heaven, the more he attains a familiarity with it and all things. This feeling of familiarity then produces the “air” or *qi* of being at home with the cosmos. Nonetheless, this air is not just a product of the feeling of familiarity. Rather, it also produces such a feeling, which in turn encourages the aspirant to further alignment with the ways of Heaven. This process ultimately culminates in the experience of being one with all things. In summary, the Mencian “Expansion of the I” is distinct from its Ancient Greco-Roman counterparts because it is not brought about by attaining scientific knowledge of the universe. Rather, it seems to be the fruit of a practical and affective knowledge which might be the product, not just of being habituated in the normative ways of Heaven, but of actually enjoying such ways.

VI. Conclusion

In this article I have discussed how Mencius’ philosophy can be considered a way of life according to Pierre Hadot’s conception. That is to say, Mencius’ philosophy can be understood as a manner

¹⁴ *Mencius* 4A27; Mencius (2008, 101). Mencius says: “If one delights in them [i.e., the virtues], then they grow. If they grow, then how can they be stopped? If they cannot be stopped, then one does not notice one’s feet dancing to them, one’s hands swaying to them.” 樂則生矣; 生則惡可已也, 惡可已, 則不知足之蹈之、手之舞之。

of living that can holistically transform a person toward achieving unity with reality, or at the least, one's fellow human beings. Due to humanity's current predicament, where more than ever people have become polarized along racial, social, and cultural lines, perhaps it is high time for something like Mencius' philosophy to be practiced as a way of life. At the least, perhaps some version of Mencian spiritual exercise, where one is cultivated to become more empathic toward others, might be conceptualized and made into a practice. And perhaps it is not only the Mencian way of life that requires reviving. The other ancient schools of philosophy can also provide guidance and comfort in these challenging times. After all, in these days where the prospect of returning to a normal way of life has become tenuous due to the pandemic, it seems that people could use Stoic tranquility to ease their anxieties and give them focus. To be sure, contemporary religions might also be able to provide what these philosophies purport to. Yet it is also true that not all people today have religious faith so that ancient philosophies might indeed still fill a need. But who will revive these ways of life from the dustbin of history? I believe that the most appropriate ones to do it are precisely those who are likely to have knowledge of them, that is to say, the philosophers. In other words, perhaps it is apropos for present-day philosophers to now return to what could likely have been the original meaning of their vocation.

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