[Review of:] Fonder la morale / François Jullien

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In this essay, the title of which could be rendered in English as *Grounding morals—Mencius’s dialogue with an Enlightenment philosopher*, the Paris-based sinologist François Jullien contrasts views on the foundations of morals in the *Mencius* and in Western philosophy, this latter tradition represented mainly by Kant and Rousseau. Whatever opinion may be formed on the subject of comparatism, Jullien’s essays are relevant in two respects: through the analysis of a well-chosen Chinese theme, he manages to capture fundamental aspects of Chinese thought; and as a result, he challenges important philosophical presuppositions implicit in our tradition. *Fonder la morale* is in both respects no exception.

Jullien is without doubt one of the leading, but also one of the most controversial figures in French sinology: a prolific writer, he writes too quickly according to some of his critics. He deals with vast questions, favours broad approaches, is not afraid of putting forward bold generalisations; rather than an exposition of Mencius’s philosophy, he offers a somewhat daring reconstruction of it. *Fonder la morale*, like Jullien’s previous essays, is almost devoid of the customary scholarly apparatus: no bibliography, very few annotations, only a couple of direct translations; nothing on the man Mencius, nothing on his work. For some of Jullien’s harshest critics, his method is not “scientific”, and his essays do not belong to sinology proper. It must be remembered, however, that this is

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the result of a deliberate choice. Jullien favours a direct dialogue between Chinese and Western thought, without lengthy disquisitions about possible differences in historical contexts or social backgrounds. As he once said, it is sometimes necessary to "escape history". As a result, Jullien keeps himself at some distance from his object, and his essays are as much a reflection on sinology as sinology proper—if his undertaking had to be distinguished from more common sinological approaches, it could perhaps be labelled "macro-sinology".

Jullien is the promoter of a better understanding of Chinese thought by Western philosophers. His intended reader is probably more the philosopher of the West than the professional sinologist, and perhaps he fears that too much sinological technique would alienate non-specialized readers. As a matter of fact, his books are widely read in French cultured circles. The essay reviewed here was awarded the Jean-Jacques Rousseau prize at the Geneva International Book Fair in 1996, and Jullien has been the acting president of the "Collège international de philosophie" (Paris). In a period when classical philosophy is remarkably fashionable in France, Jullien unquestionably acts as a link between professional philosophy and sinology.

In Europe, until late Middle Ages, morality was grounded on religion. But from the Renaissance onwards, authors such as Machiavelli or Montaigne questioned its universality and purity (p. 18). Grounding morals on itself, beyond the diversity of customs, became an urgent task: Rousseau tried to found morals on the sentiment of compassion (p. 29), whereas Kant insisted that moral principles are transcendental laws stemming from human reason (pp. 43 ff.). However, these attempts were to be undermined by later thinkers who considered morals as a means of oppression, or as the mere exteriorization of psychological processes: as a result, according to Jullien, morals are nowadays met with scepticism. Jullien's objective is to reopen the debate, not to find a definitive solution to this difficult problem, but only, through the mediation of the Chinese tradition, to "extricate" it (p. 8): sinology is used here as a method; what is more, a favoured method, because China dealt with the question of the foundation of morality independently of any foreign influence—China represents the "most radical case of possible otherness" (p. 25).

Otherness, perhaps, but in the present instance, Jullien is struck by the convergence of thinking between Mencius and
Rousseau, who both consider compassion to be an indication, and even the basis, of morality (p. 30). But while Rousseau fails to explain how the individual, locked up in himself, can transcend his subjectivity, and experience somebody else’s feelings, Mencius is not faced with this problem: for the ancient Chinese, a person’s suffering is a stimulation upon the flux of existence, and compassion is the quasi-mechanical counter-reaction to this stimulation (cf. the notion of gantong 感通). An emotion is but a moment in essentially interactive, intersubjective relationships within the flow of life. With these ideas underlying his philosophy, Mencius does not even feel prompted to ask how a person can step out of himself and feel compassion for others because, essentially, compassion happens “between” people (p. 41).

According to Kant, morality, in order to be universal and disinterested, must be an a priori obligation grounded in the principles of reason. Against Kant’s reservations about the contingency of feelings, Mencius could oppose the argument that compassion is the outward manifestation of something more substantial—namely, a morality deeply rooted in man’s conscience: compassion is the “protruding tip”, or “extremity” (duan 端) of the virtue of humanity, and only humanity, when fully “deployed”, can lay claim to purity and necessity (p. 51).

This of course depends on a confirmation: that good elements exist at the bottom of every heart, in other words, that human nature is basically good. According to Mencius, goodness is present right at the beginning, but only as a potential (p. 59). All human beings are endowed with what Mencius describes as the four “sprouts”; only some manage to nurture this potential into actuality. These innate moral sprouts that we all are endowed with are the “Way of Heaven” immanent in the heart of every individual. Fully aware of the moral principles immanent in his heart, the Sage accordingly gains access to transcendence—to the Way of Heaven (p. 66). For Mencius (as well as for Kant), moral consciousness enables us to understand the nature of Heaven (p. 202). In other words, morality is also a cognitive process.

But if man is naturally good, how is it that he turned bad? Mencius explains evil as the unawareness of one’s original nature, morality consisting of reversing the trend and going after one’s lost original consciousness (p. 83). While Christian dogma emphasizes that our condition as fallen angels is a collective and necessary burden, for the Chinese thinker, the “fall” is a personal event: it is everyone’s personal responsibility to recover this lost nature (p. 88).
About the attributes of morality, Mencius does not say much: since everyone is endowed with good propensities, once one has found them in the bottom of his heart, one will automatically behave correctly, and no detailed catalogue of regulations will be of any help (p. 90). The Chinese sage *spontaneously* takes the proper course of action. In Western thought, morals are viewed in terms of choice, of free will, of causality: man is endowed with “the consciousness of his causality in regard to his actions” (p. 139). Mencius views morality as a matter of potential and actualization, not in terms of causality, choice or action; as a consequence, he does not encounter connected questions such as evil, sin, temptation—these ideas require the notion of a free will. Jullien recalls that the, for us, self-evident notion of will could be the mere product of our cultural history (p. 120). In the same way, the Chinese sage does not see his influence on others in terms of causality: instead of exerting a direct pressure on others, he sets up a favourable environment in which the desired effects will happen spontaneously (p. 129).

This consistent vision has a reverse side. Because of its presuppositions, Western philosophy had to elaborate on such ideas as liberty, will, guilt: as a result, European thinkers developed a fascinating reflection on subjectivity (p. 115). Chinese thought, on the contrary, remained fundamentally “without vertigo”, it was never a “feast of thought” (p. 126).

An important question remains to be addressed, namely, the problem of happiness, or, to be more precise, of happiness as a reward for virtuous behaviour (p. 151). Mencius considers that morality must be rewarded in this world (p. 153): be it at the political or the individual level, one is always the source of one’s misfortune in this life. If my virtuous conduct is not rewarded, the purity of my motives may be in question.

If virtue is rewarded, it is because virtue has dynamic effects: my morality tends to influence others. Jullien reminds us of the two meanings of the word: “virtue” as moral quality, and “virtue” as power, as the way of obtaining. In the Western tradition, the two meanings have been radically separated; in ancient China, they are not distinguished (p. 156). Mencius even goes so far as to say that a moral prince’s success would be ineluctable, especially in times of crisis and universal disorder, because all oppressed people under heaven would flock to him in the hope of a better life (p. 171). In spite of appearances, Mencius’s main preoccupation is also the preservation of power (p. 168): in other words,
Mencius's philosophy reconciles Kantian virtue with Machiavelli's virtù.

In this world, however, it so happens that the greatest sages themselves are not rewarded for their morality (p. 184). Consequently, in other parts of his work, Mencius has no choice but to adopt a more fatalistic attitude: while it is everybody's responsibility to behave in accordance with moral values, happiness and success in the world are not within one's power. In some passages, Mencius, like the Greek Stoics, goes so far as to equate happiness with virtue: morality is in itself a source of contentment (p. 191).

Jullien's ambition to address fundamental questions must be saluted. And, to be sure, Jullien is not deterred by difficulty: to address a problem like the foundations of morals, what is more in two different traditions, and to be able to deal with it intelligently in two hundred compact pages, is no small achievement. Sinology of course needs translations, annotations and detailed studies; but it also demands broader perspectives, more ambitious constructions, and in this respect, Fonder la morale is a very stimulating work.

One of the most interesting questions raised in Fonder la morale is the problem of the respective status of Western and Chinese philosophies. Jullien does not address this question directly; in fact, it is in a footnote (p. 126) that his most explicit thought on the subject is to be found: "[Chinese thought] frustrates certain philosophical expectations—at the same time making the [Western] philosophical quest appear an aberration." The idea is provocative (even if we assume that Jullien is playing with the different meanings of the word "aberration"); unfortunately, he does not elaborate further. But it is clear that, according to Jullien, some of Mencius's views on the subject of morality are more coherent than those of his Western counterparts; thus, key notions of Western philosophy, such as will (volition), or liberty, might be nothing more but the contingent "product of a cultural history" (p. 18, p. 120). In other passages, however, Jullien seems to withdraw from this somewhat risky ground, flatly stating that "the two perspectives, the Chinese one and the European one, each throw light on a different aspect" of reality.

Fonder la morale, as I said, is a very stimulating essay. Like in previous studies, however, Jullien is guilty of some generalizations, simplifications and omissions, which may well be the conse-
sequence of a deliberate choice, but are in some cases unfortunate. For instance, I doubt that the non-specialized reader would be deterred by greater attention on the part of Jullien to the man Mencius, to the troubled times in which he lived and their influence on his thought, to his interlocutors, and to his work—especially to the possibility that the Mencius was not wholly written by Mencius himself. A more serious drawback is the fact that the lack of references and quotations does not enable the uninitiated reader to separate what belongs to Mencius and what belongs to Jullien. Jullien mixes short quotations or loose paraphrasing with commentaries or interpretations which in general do not misrepresent Mencius’s thought, but are not to be found explicitly in it. He rightly wishes to “throw light on the Mencius from the outside” (p. 26), and in fact, many of his commentaries are illuminating; but he should have stated explicitly who is saying what. On pages 37 ff., for instance, Jullien introduces the reader to the fundamental Chinese notion of interaction, without mentioning that no true discussion of interaction (nor the equivalent expression gantong) is found in the Mencius. In other words, Jullien offers more a reconstruction of Mencius’s thought than an exposition of it, but he neglects to say so, which is unfortunate in an essay intended as a dialogue between Mencius and some Western thinkers.

Also, some important notions might have deserved a better treatment, for instance the concept of “Heaven”, tian. This notion is familiar to sinologists, but non-specialized readers would have benefitted from knowing that tian is a very polysemic word. Jullien hints at this in his essay, but a more systematic approach would have been useful. In the same way, a methodical exposition of the notion of conscience in the Mencius would have spared the non-specialized reader the inconvenience of apparently unreconcilable assertions: “This notion of conscience is one of the main theoretical innovations in the Mencius; it matches perfectly well the Rousseauistic conception.” (p. 50)—“[The] expression of a voice of conscience [...] can definitively not be found in the Mencius.” (p. 53) Concerning the relationships between mercy and morals in Mencius’s philosophy, Jullien appears to hesitate between two positions: compassion is at the origin of morality, it underpins the Confucian virtue of humanity, ren (p. 30); or compassion does “not in itself constitute morality”, but is only “the extremity of it”, “an indication of our moral conscience” (p. 49). A more thorough discussion of the notion of “extremity”
(duan) would have helped to show that these stances are not mutually exclusive.

I remain unconvinced by several of Jullien's assertions, which in my opinion are hasty or cursory:

"[Mencius] is the first [Chinese thinker] to have given an explicit formulation to the moral thinking of the Chinese" (p. 25). This assertion is questionable, because there is not only one moral thought to be found in ancient China: Mohists or Taoists had their own views on the subject, and parts of the *Mozi*, to mention only this work, were composed more than one century before Mencius's time.

"[...] ancient China did not think of bad government in terms of a tyranny to overturn, but rather of a disorder to repair" (p. 137). This idea does not stand up to close scrutiny: for instance, rebels overthrowing the short-lived Qin dynasty held specific and tangible grievances against its rulers, and early Han dynasty thinkers explained the fall of that dynasty as an immediate consequence of excessive severity and oppression.

Jullien insists on several occasions that Chinese morality is "not prescriptive" (p. 15, p. 88, p. 93). One is tempted to ask if this non-prescriptive morality is not an ideal, fitting only the sage, who has not damaged his genuine nature and is therefore capable of spontaneously behaving correctly. For ordinary people (among them the princes Mencius tries to convert to his ideas) markers such as rules or standards do not seem to be dispensable. Rites and rituals must of course be mentioned in this context, and rites definitively are highly prescriptive in ancient China. Jullien very aptly states that rites are "a social formalization of morality" (p. 106), but he does not emphasize their importance in the moral conditioning process he otherwise describes so well. As we can read in the *Analects*: "If you do not learn rites, [your person] cannot be established" (16.13).

Jullien asserts that there are no categories of liberty, free-will (volition), or sin in ancient Chinese thought. Regarding sin, he could be right, even if it could be argued that Mohists and popular religion shared a belief in punishing and rewarding divinities, or held that Heaven disliked us doing wrong, in ways sometimes reminiscent of Western conceptions. With liberty, we are on more shaky ground: even if Chinese thinkers did not theorize a lot about it, and probably never viewed it as a prerequisite for morality, the fact remains that freedom is an important theme in early Taoism and in mythology, and that
some passages of the *Zhuangzi* can probably be understood as a defence of personal freedom against the omnipotence of political authority.

Jullien’s claim that there is no notion of will or free-will in ancient Chinese thought (p. 118-122) is perhaps true up to a point, but it is too dogmatic. After all, we can see that some of the princes harangued in the *Mencius*, before deciding to follow his advice or (more often) to ignore it, weigh reasons and arguments, or “ponder” their own intentions (cf. 1A.7). Elsewhere he says to a prince: “If you desire to put [my principles] into practice...”. Is this concession only polite tribute to his royal interlocutor? Or does this recognition of a “desire” suggest something else, something more profound, closer to “our” notion of free will? Besides, it could also be asked whether ethical choices are essentially distinct from “strategic” choices; Jullien touches upon this subject (he mentions Nietzsche), but he does not go deeply into it, which is unfortunate, because his assertion that China did not oppose the sage to the strategist (p. 91) offered a good starting point for discussion. Actually, as far as will or free-will are concerned, the opposition is perhaps less between China and the West, than between the sage, who does not have to choose between alternatives because his conduct is spontaneously correct, and the average man whose heavenly nature is damaged, and who therefore must weigh alternatives before taking action.

Jullien considers the case of *zhi* 志 as a possible Chinese equivalent to will, but he discards it eventually, judging it too vague (p. 121); the word, however, appears about 50 times in the *Mencius*, and very often (cf. for instance 2A.2) confronts us with difficult problems of interpretation; in some passages it seems to be a precise philosophical notion (cf. 2A.2). At any rate, this concept probably calls for more discussion than the few sentences Jullien devotes to it. Conversely, it could be argued that the Western vision of will is not very precise either, that not only did Western thinkers not agree about its nature or definition (p. 119), but, more important, that some of them even questioned volition (Mill), deeming it an artificial notion, without utility (Ryle).

Speaking of Western philosophy, Jullien’s reading of Kant’s philosophy might be excessively influenced by the Schopenhauerian criticism of it (see pp. 45 ff.); and while Jullien estimates that the question of the foundation of morals has reached a dead end, he cannot be ignorant of the fact that since Rousseau and
Kant, or even Nietzsche or Freud, much has been written on this topic; thinkers such as Lévinas or Jankélévitch could have been called upon at this point—to say nothing of scholars belonging to fields at the margins of philosophy, such as anthropology, sociology, or even economy.

In point of fact, the reservations expressed here meet criticisms made by others in connection with Jullien’s previous essays. *Fonder la morale* suffers from sweeping generalizations, from occasional hastiness, and from a lack of historical perspective; it certainly does not go deeply enough into such a difficult question as the foundations of morals. But, unfortunate though these shortcomings are, Jullien offers an imaginative and coherent reconstruction of Mencius’s thought; above all, he succeeds in showing the relevance of Chinese thought to a revaluation of some of our self-evident philosophical categories. In conclusion, *Fonder la morale* will probably not “extricate” the question of the foundations of morals, but it makes for thought-provoking reading, and is a valuable contribution to the field of comparative philosophy.

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