

BOOK REVIEW

Franklin Perkins. 2014. *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane: The Problem of Evil in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014, 295pp., ISBN: 9780253011725.

Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane is a genuine contribution to the field of Chinese philosophy. By engaging in a kind of “rooted global philosophy,” Franklin Perkins addresses issues inherent to early Chinese texts in a way that renders them meaningful for contemporary philosophers.¹ Perkins facilitates a cross-cultural dialogue between those in early China and those concerned with the problem of evil in European history. In doing this, Perkins not only demonstrates a grasp of the major primary texts and the relevant secondary literature, but he also demonstrates a breadth of knowledge that extends into contemporary Chinese thought, as well as into recently unearthed Chinese manuscripts and countless figures in the Western philosophical tradition.

Heaven and Earth is comparable to A.C. Graham’s *Disputers of the Tao* (Open Court, 1989) and Benjamin Schwartz’s *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Harvard, 1985). However, *Heaven and Earth* is an improvement over these books in several respects. Besides incorporating scholarship written since the publication of *Disputers* and *The World of Thought*, Perkins also presents a more nuanced account of the comparative enterprise. The introduction and first chapter (roughly 50 pages altogether) provide an effective explanation for how to do comparative philosophy. In this light, *Heaven and Earth* is similar to Stephen Angle’s *Sagehood* (Oxford, 2009), or Aaron Stalnaker’s *Overcoming Our Evil* (Georgetown, 2006) in that it serves as a model for the project of situating Chinese philosophy in a global context (hence the term “rooted global philosophy”).

In this review, I will provide a brief outline of *Heaven and Earth*, and then demonstrate one way that Perkins’ work has proven fruitful for me in rethinking aspects of early Chinese thought. More specifically, I will engage Perkins’ reading of *Mengzi* 2B13 to show the depth and incisiveness of Perkins’ scholarship, but also to show how it stimulates further conversation on 2B13.

The introduction to *Heaven and Earth* largely explains Perkins’ approach to Chinese philosophy, and the first chapter situates Chinese texts within broader discourses of the problem of evil. The remaining chapters each focus on one text or thinker with the exception of the second chapter, which focuses on the *Mozi* and the *Analects*. Chapter three examines the *Daodejing*, chapter four looks at

¹ Perkins borrows this term from Stephen Angle as noted on page 227 n. 2.

the *Mengzi*, and chapters five and six investigate the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi*, respectively. Finally, a brief conclusion summarizes the main themes of each chapter. *Heaven and Earth* also includes over 40 pages of endnotes that enrich the main body of the book. Perkins' reading of these early texts is subtle and persuasive. He writes in a manner accessible to non-specialists of Chinese thought, but with an awareness of the current issues in the field that makes each chapter worthy of the attention of specialists.

Perkins' discussion of *Mengzi* 2B13 occurs in chapter four, as part of approximately 20 passages from the text that Perkins discusses in detail. It is, however, one of the more important passages for Perkins' reading of the text. The only passage that appears more often in the book than 2B13 is 2A6—the most well-known passage of the *Mengzi*.

Mengzi 2B13 is set in the context of Mengzi leaving the state of Qi after failing to persuade its ruler to adopt the Confucian Way. Perkins translates the passage as follows:

When Mengzi left Qi, on the road Chong Yu asked, “Master, you look displeased. I heard from you the other day that gentlemen do not reproach heaven and do not blame other people.”

Mengzi responded, “That was one time; this is another time. Every five hundred years a true king must arise, and in between there must be one famous in that generation. From the Zhou on it has been over seven hundred years. According to that count, it has passed; examining it by the time, it can be done. It is just that heaven does not yet desire peace and order in the world. If it desired peace and order in the world, in today's age, who is there other than I? How could I be displeased?”

Mengzi 2B13 is central to Perkins' explanation of the problem of evil in the *Mengzi*. This passage, according to Perkins, expresses a “potentially agnostic relationship between heaven and human beings” (123). In other words, 2B13 problematizes the relationship between humanity and heaven because, on the one hand, human beings derive their nature (*xing* 性) from heaven, but, on the other hand, heaven directs “a world that moves indifferently between good and bad” (128). Perkins resolves this tension with a “tragic” reading of the text.² In more

² On page 116 Perkins states that *Mengzi* is “closest to something like a tragic worldview.” In a later chapter, Perkins succinctly states, “We do not have to stretch Mengzi too far to say that the tragic lies in the fact that we care what happens to human beings at the same time we recognize heaven does not” (181). Contrast this with John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (SUNY, 1999), 63: “Like all cultures, the Chinese face mistakes, sickness, hunger, and death; but that does not prompt them to ask whether Heaven owes them something better. Without a philosophy of suffering, tragedy just does not get started in Chinese religions.”

detail he explains,

The heaven-derived *xing* of human beings leads us to humaneness even though heaven itself is not humane, just as the *xing* of Ox Mountain leads it to grow trees even though heaven itself is not wooded. In shifting the relevant ground for human action from heaven to our own nature, Mengzi makes the purposes of heaven irrelevant. The move from generic patterns of nature to the specific tendencies of kinds of things leaves Mengzi with a view that necessitates conflict. Barley naturally strives to grow, even though other things naturally strive against it. Human beings strive to bring peace and order to the world, even though other things and even the cycles of history strive against them. This striving against heaven's own cycles does not entail a rejection of heaven, because heaven itself generates these strivings. This kind of struggle is the very nature of life (149).

In this light, 2B13 provides a description of the disjuncture between heaven and humanity, and 2A6 (in combination with other passages such as 6A8 and 7A1) demonstrates the unity between the two.

In making his argument as it relates to 2B13, Perkins relies on the work of contemporary scholars such as Philip Ivanhoe, Michael Puett, Chen Ning, Lee Yearley, James Behuniak, Yang Bojun, and Chen Daqi. He also relies on traditional commentators such as Jiao Xun, Zhao Qi, and Zhao You, as well as relying on translators including James Legge, D.C. Lau, and Bryan Van Norden (225 n. 14–20). Throughout *Heaven and Earth* Perkins' analysis is anything but cursory.

In interpreting 2B13, Perkins recognizes that two lines are particularly problematic. He translates these lines as “That was one time; this is another time (*Ciyishi, Biyishiye* 彼一時，此一時也)” and “How could I be displeased (*Wuheweibuyuzai* 吾何為不豫哉)?” These lines are problematic because the first suggests that Mengzi justifies reproaching or resenting heaven (*yuantian* 怨天) on the basis that his current circumstance is different from a previous circumstance where he warned his disciples about reproaching heaven, while the second line suggests that Mengzi is pleased with his circumstances and therefore does not in fact resent heaven. The issue, as such, is reconciling these two lines. Perkins advocates what we might call an “anger-to-acceptance” view. He explains, “Perhaps Mengzi starts out to justify his discontent, but as he talks through it, his feelings become more ambivalent” (124). Perkins continues, “Mengzi initially responds to Chong Yu's comment by saying now is not the moment for resignation, but as he reflects he realizes that it is, in fact, time to get beyond anger and move toward acceptance” (125). In this view, Mengzi talks himself out of his initial feelings of resentment and takes comfort in the fact that

“in the long run inhumanity never succeeds” (118).

Perkins, himself, seems a little ambivalent about the anger-to-acceptance interpretation of 2B13, suggesting that “[we] should still not entirely dismiss the possibility that Mengzi is complaining” (124). He then quotes Chen Daqi, who compared the circumstance in 2B13 with resenting one’s parents—normally a child would not resent his or her parents, but if a parent commits a significant misdeed, he ought to reproach them. Chen states, “Heaven not yet wishing peace and order in the world—this is a big mistake, not a small mistake” (124). As such, Mengzi is warranted in reproaching heaven.

Perkins also stresses that similar to Shun’s “angry longing (*yuanmu* 怨慕)” for his parent’s affection in 5A1, Mengzi is filled with “anxious concern for the people” in the world (125), and therefore his anger does not stem from personal harm. In the end, while Perkins suggests that “the Ru would avoid a theoretical answer” to the tension between resentment and resignation, he ends up with a modified form of the anger-to-acceptance view where Mengzi’s resentment is justified inasmuch as Mengzi “laments not his own suffering but that of other people” (124), but by the end of 2B13 he “resigns” to the fact that it is time to “move toward acceptance.”

Perkins provides a thought-provoking reading of 2B13. I would like to complicate this reading by focusing more closely on Chen Daqi’s reference to “big mistakes (*daguo* 大過),” and on an alternative reading of the last line of 2B13.

In speaking about “big mistakes” in the context of resenting one’s parents, Chen is referring to *Mengzi* 6B3. In 6B3, Gongsun Chou, a disciple of Mengzi, asks about a poem entitled “Xiaopan,” which was apparently a widely known poem among educated groups of the time. In the poem, Yijiu (c. 781 BCE–720 BCE), the oldest son of the king, describes his feelings when his father chose a younger son to be the heir to the throne. Given the practice of passing the throne on to the oldest son, Yijiu is quite disappointed with his father’s decision. Gongsun Chou asks Mengzi about the poem because other people were criticizing it on the basis that Yijiu expresses resentment (*yuan* 怨). Mengzi justifies resentment as follows:

Let’s say that there was man who encountered a person from the state of Yue. This person from Yue grabbed a bow and arrow and shot at him. Later, the man would be able to recount the experience with great verbosity and laughter for no other reason than the fact that this person was not closely related to him. However, if his older brother were to take up a bow and arrow and shoot at him, he would recount the story while crying with his head hung low. [This] is for no other reason than his close relation with his brother. The resentment in the “Xiaopan” poem is [a result of] family members being closely related to

each other. Humaneness occurs when family members are [truly] close to each other.

Gongsun Chou then goes on to ask about the lack of resentment in another poem, entitled “Kaifeng.” Mengzi responds,

In the “Kaifeng” poem, the faults of the parent are minor; [whereas] in the “Xiaopan” poem, the faults of the parent are major (親之過大). To be without resentment when [one’s] parent’s faults are major is to [consider one’s parents] too distantly related. To be resentful when [one’s] parent’s faults are minor is to be easily provoked. [Considering them] too distantly related is unfilial; and being easily provoked is also unfilial.

In 6B3, resentment is not only justified in circumstances where one’s family members commit great offenses, but a lack of resentment in these circumstances is a sign that one is not truly filial. Resentment is also tied with affection for family members (*qinqin* 親親) and humaneness (*ren* 仁)—some of the more fundamental Confucian values.

Interestingly, the examples provided in 6B3 are not directly related to an anxious concern for others. Instead they are offenses of a more personal nature—if our brother were to attempt to take our life, for instance, we ought to feel resentful. In short, there are circumstances where *yuan* 怨 is appropriate and circumstances where it is inappropriate. When those we are close with offer up harm in place of care, we ought to feel resentment.

One way to square this affirmation of resentment with broader condemnations of resentment in early Confucian literature is to understand the passages that endorse *yuan* 怨 as endorsing a kind of authenticity where our initial reactions to situations serve to signify the depth of our relationships with others involved in those situations. In other words, *yuan* 怨 is a genuine reaction to major offenses inflicted upon us by our family members. To fail to be *yuan* 怨 is to fail to be attentive to the significance of these relations. At the same time, however, this feeling of resentment should not extend too far. The filial son does not “hate (*yuanhen* 怨恨)” his parents or heaven. In this sense, while we should allow the initial sentiment of *yuan* 怨 to inform our responses to these situations, we should not let this sentiment extend to the point of hatred. Sentiments such as resentment, therefore, are not to be suppressed since they are a part of sincere relationships, but at the same time neither are they to be spurred on to the point of excess.³

³ For more on *yuan* 怨, see Michael D. K. Ing. 2014. “Mengzi Lun Ziwo de Cuiruoxing” <孟子>论自我的脆弱性 (“Mengzi on the Vulnerabilities of the Self”), in *Mengzi Yu Zouluwenhua Guojixueshu yantaohui* 孟子与邹鲁文化国际学术研讨会 (*An International Symposium on Mengzi and Zou-Lu Culture*). Zoucheng, China.

The problem with what we might call the “justified resentment” reading of 2B13 is making sense of the last line—吾何為不豫哉, which Perkins took as “How could I be displeased?” If Mengzi is truly justifying his resentment, how is he then pleased with his situation? Perkins nicely summarizes the various interpretations of this particular line. I would like to recommend, however, an alternative interpretation that takes Mengzi as playing on the semantic ambiguity of the term *yu* 豫. In other words, *yu* 豫 can mean something like “pleasure” or “comfort.” But it can also mean “to be prepared.” So when Chong Yu says that Mengzi seems *buyu* 不豫, he is asking why Mengzi seems displeased. However, when Mengzi uses the same term in the final line of the passage, he uses it to mean “not prepared.” As such, the final line of the passage can be rendered, “How am I not prepared?” In this reading, Mengzi justifies his resentment on the basis that heaven has committed a significant infraction in not seeking to order the world. Mengzi is available, ready to create order; however, similar to Yijiu, he is not chosen. Mengzi, therefore, laments his misfortune. In doing this he, of course, recognizes that Chong Yu asks why he seems displeased, but he takes *buyu* 不豫 as “not prepared” to make a point that warrants his resentment. His response, in short, is sardonic.

Mengzi also makes use of the indeterminate aspects of language in 2B8 where he is asked whether the state of Yan ought to be attacked—he takes advantage of the passive language construction in not saying exactly *who* ought to attack Yan. Mengzi adopts other rhetorical strategies throughout 2B (see, for instance, 2B2, 2B3, and 2B5) in order to win arguments with his interlocutors (and he justifies his participation in debate, or *bian* 辯, in 3B9).⁴

Reading 2B13 in terms of justified resentment challenges Perkins modified version of the anger-to-acceptance reading, but creates a more seamless reading of the passage that actually supports Perkins’ tragic reading of *Mengzi* by depicting Mengzi’s consternation with heaven’s “major fault” rather than his resignation to heaven’s way.

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⁴ Zhuangzi does something similar in the “Qiushui” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* to win an argument about fish by playing on the ambiguity of *an* 安; and the opening passage of the *Daodejing* can be read as playing on the various meanings of *dao* 道 and *ming* 名.